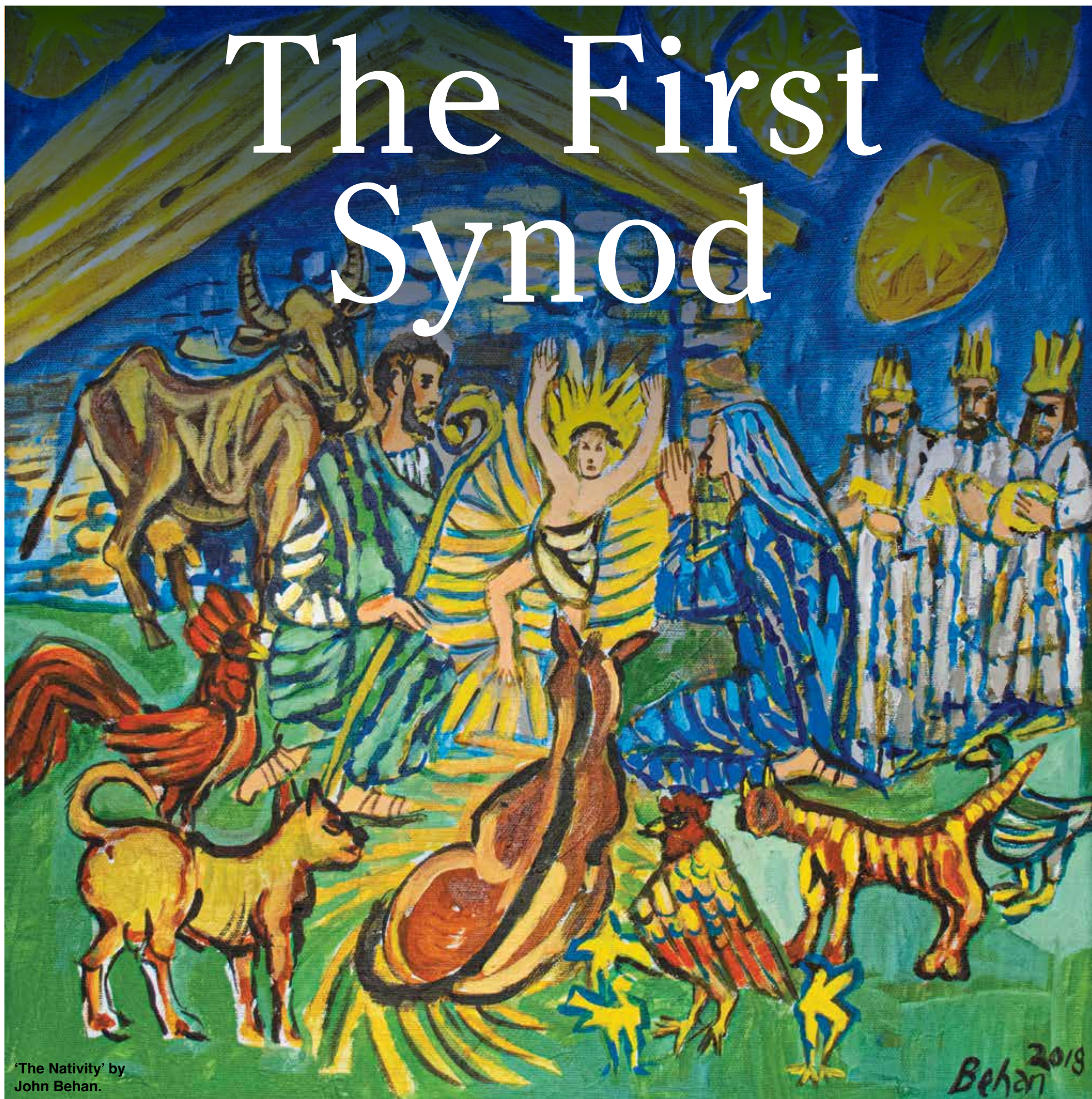




# The First Synod



'The Nativity' by John Behan.

Inside: Fr Eamonn Conway: The Church needs to urgently undergo a change of heart | The women who preached in the Church | Fr Joe McDonald: Let's live the real crib this Christmas | Uncomfortably dispelling scriptural myths with Peter Keenan | Understanding the Synod's Continental Phase | A timeline of where we've been on our synodal journey and where we're going in 2023 – and much more...



# The riddle of the five kings!

## Fr Joe McDonald



**A**h look at the baby Jesus! So cute? I love the animals. Even the way the cow and the donkey are looking at the baby. And the statues. Virgin Mary blue. Venerable Joseph. Swaddling clothes. Holy straw. Time to take a fresh piece to replace last year's still stuck behind the Sacred Heart picture.

Our cribs are pretty anti-septic. Neat predictability. Yes they do the job. Whatever that means.

How we look at the crib this year may be telling in terms of how we look at the Church in these synodal days. These days of 'building hope!'

Will we once again adopt observer status and look at the familiar and nostalgic story of our childhood from a distance?

Will this year's crib visit come and go quicker than the turkey and with less impact than the Brussel sprouts?

No blood sweat or tears, no dung, or if there is, it's sweet

smelling. Do we do to the crib, what we do to the cross? When was the last time the stench of Calvary besieged your nostrils, the cries of death from that city dump seep through your ears down into your heart and soul? When did you last sit with the utter shame and complete loneliness and abandonment of Calvary?

Maybe we do the same to Jesus himself?

Have you made Jesus into your own image and likeness?

Is your Jesus cute, cuddly and cosy?

Meek and mild. Or maybe you belong to the other shower?

Maybe your Jesus is a first cousin of the grim reaper? Maybe your Jesus makes Voldemort look like a welcome dinner guest?

### Reality

The reality is, most of us, including the so called holy, maybe especially the holy, have very little grasp of the



Former Lord Mayor of Dublin Alison Gilliland at the Launch of last year's real-life Christmas crib at the Mansion House. Current Green Party Lord Mayor Caroline Conroy recently stepped in to ban the annual tradition.

reality of Jesus. A good start would be to let go of the half-baked, anaemic Jesus that we have little more than a nodding acquaintance with. Then we have the chance to begin the exhilarating adventure of immersing ourselves in the real Jesus and begin to experience the most profound change in our lives.

What stops us? Is it that we resist knowing Jesus? Individually or as community? Is it weariness or wariness? Unfortunately I think it's worse than that. There may well be a wilful intention to keep the real Jesus under wraps? Better leave him there in the swaddling clothes. This Jesus is just too much! Too hot to handle. Too subversive. They all eventually run away.

If we as a faith community, the Church, were to seriously live the gift of the Christ-child at Christmas it would bring us into a much more uneasy relationship with the state - and indeed popular culture. We can't really have that. It's just too messy. Too unpredictable.

The truth is, deep down we know that if we were to seriously live the crib this Christmas we would welcome many more Ukrainians, and others, and there would be room for them and they, and we, would have a Christmas of profound joy.

### Back to the crib

Could it be that the real clue to many of these questions lies in the kings?

The riddle of the five kings goes something like this: How many kings are there in the crib?

Traditionally we have the three that make the headlines: Gaspar, Balthazar and Melchior.

Of course their presents whilst spectacular and each

with their own significance, are outshone by the presence of another king. This king is lying in the manger. He is the servant king.

Visitors, even important ones, go home. Eliot hints these visitors went home changed. Changed by the nativity. Unlike us. Sterile. A cold coming they had of it. Defrosted. Warmed by the encounter.

**“The reality is, most of us, including the so called holy, maybe especially the holy, have very little grasp of the reality of Jesus”**

The fifth king does not want to be seen. Do we want to see him? He is hiding in the background, there in the corner. Just over Mary's shoulder, barely visible, the bleak furtive menace. Thanatos, Voldemort, Beelzebub

or in this manifestation, the dysfunctional madly paranoid Herod. He represents the ever present threat in the life of Jesus from womb to tomb. It is the threat that you and I live with. Yes it has the epic moments of Gethsemane and Calvary but in fact for most of us, it presents as less of a drumroll, and more of a corrosive rust. Unless we consciously embrace the Holy Spirit, the only real answer to the malevolent force, then the negative narrative wears us down. Yes it may find its crescendo in war, disease and famine but it works covertly and effectively in our workplace, our home and eventually it takes a hold in our hearts.

### Where's your hope father? You call yourself a priest?

So where's my hope? In the Church? Yes, well maybe, though to some degree the jury is still out on that. In the "Building Hope" initiative here in the Dublin diocese - it certainly looks promising.

My hope is rooted in Jesus. My hope is the crib. In the infant, vulnerable to menace, and yet emerging as the light of the world. My hope is on the cross. Ultimately my hope is in the empty tomb.

Maybe this year we'll take time to stare, to gaze, to pray the crib. In the retelling of it to children let's not bleach away its meaning. Age appropriate does not necessitate dilution. Maybe we could be a little less worried about political correctness. These days people say granny passed. Passed what? Her driving test? Wind? No granny died, and that's ok, she has gone to meet God. She will meet others she loved. God will welcome her and be good to her.

The poverty, pain and suffering in the Jesus story, including the ever menacing presence of 'the bad guy' does not change the fact that we are proclaiming good news. Evil, though present, does not prevail.

**i** Fr Joe McDonald is a priest of the Archdiocese of Dublin.



The modern Christmas scene in Ireland.

## Inside this issue

- **Fr Joe McDonald: Let's live the real crib this Christmas**
- **Synodality: What should we expect from it in 2023?**
- **The women who preached**
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- **Uncomfortably dispelling scriptural myths with Peter Keenan**
- **Let's drop the nativity story as child's play! (or sex and violence at Christmas!)**

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# Don't miss the poetry of the dirty animal filled crib

## Garry O'Sullivan

EDITOR@SYNODALTIMES.COM

PUBLISHER'S COMMENT



One-year-old Grace Le O'Sullivan enjoys the nativity scene in Holy Cross Church in Dundrum, Co. Dublin. Photo: Chai Brady

The Lord Mayor of Dublin has expunged the grittiness of the live crib by excluding animals and has opted for a more bleached Disney like winter wonderland scene. I'm sure it will be a great draw. But we like gritty in *The Synodal Times* and that's why our Christmas issue is a deep dive into the incarnation and all the grittiness of humanity which Jesus embraced. Fr Joe McDonald writes that the real Jesus is often too much for us. "There may well be a wilful intention to keep the real Jesus under wraps? Better leave him there in the swaddling clothes. This Jesus is just too much! Too hot to handle. Too subversive." Fr Joe adds: "If we as a faith community, the Church, were to seriously live the gift of the Christ-child at Christmas it would bring us into a much more uneasy relationship with the state and indeed popular culture. We can't really have that. It's just too messy. Too unpredictable. The truth is, deep down we know that if we were to seriously live the crib this Christmas we would welcome many more Ukrainians, and others, and there would be room for them and they, and we, would have a Christmas of profound joy".

### Hellfire and brimstone

Not too long ago we heard of parishioners walking out of a church because of the 'hellfire and brimstone' homily aimed at homosexuals. In fact, worldwide Catholics have complained about the poor quality in general of Sunday homilies. In an extract from an amazing new book called *'Catholic Women Preach-Raising Voices, Renewing the Church'*, Barbara E. Reid, OP, reminds us that the first person commissioned to preach that Jesus had risen was Mary Magdalene, often described as an apostle to the Apostles, almost like a super-

apostle! Christine Schenk, CSJ preaches on the nativity from her perspective as a midwife and a woman. She asks where's the midwife in the Nativity scene? "No one seriously thinks that Joseph, as devoted as he was, actually delivered this baby, do we?" The writer of the Gospel of Luke was clearly a man she says.

**“Not too long ago we heard of parishioners walking out of a Church because of the ‘hellfire and brimstone’ homily aimed at homosexuals”**

Diarmuid O'Murchu MSC takes up this theme and writes that despite what is written in the Gospel of John, it's unlikely that Mary was left on her own to give birth with only Joseph and the animals. "Despite the fact that John's Gospel asserts that Jesus came to his own and his own received him (Jn.1:11), not the contrary was probably the truth. Even if Jesus was born out of wedlock, which is how people would have understood the event in the real world of that time. Jewish hospitality was such that Joseph, and members of Joseph's family would ensure that she gave birth in a safe place, with the attendant medical and human supports that would have been available."

He goes on to say that the animals in the crib may be based in fact. "Therefore, in all probability Jesus was not born in a shepherd's cave, but in a house provided by Joseph or by his close friends. In the social context of that time, normally everybody slept in one room, yet visitors, including unexpected ones were always accommodated. They would have been put in the downstairs section where the animals were also

housed. Therefore, portraying Jesus in a crib surrounded by animals like a donkey, a cow, some sheep, may well be factually accurate."

Fr O'Murchu calls on us, while making Christmas special for our kids, not to neglect the call to us as adults to understand the call to have an adult Christian faith. "Let's not forget, however, that this infant figure of our Christian faith is the outcome of a birthing universe, destined to give birth to a new world of Gospel liberation and empowerment. Central to that project are people who live out their faith in committed adult allegiance. While we continue to celebrate with our children, let's hope that this Christmas will also help to awaken, and reinforce, the call to adult discipleship, so urgently needed in the church and world of our time."

Peter Keenan discusses the way we should understand myth and not get caught up in what is literally true or not. "The purpose of myth" he writes "is not to provide information. It is to invite people to embrace truths that are as invisible as music yet as positive as sound, to paraphrase Emily Dickinson in a very different context. When, every year, we pray before nativity scenes, believers are participating in a powerful ritual reflecting the positive sounds of that first and invisible Silent Night. Christians know

the Christmas story to be true, not because it conforms to a check-list of historical data but because of its power to transform lives."

### Invitation

Biblical Scholar Sean Goan takes a look at the Gospel of St Matthew and shows how Matthew invites his readers "to consider how God works through all the circumstances of life, even the most unpromising, to bring about his purposes. This is precisely what will happen in the adult life of Jesus who will pay the ultimate price for challenging people to recognise that what God wants is mercy not sacrifice".

He concludes: "This Christmas as we continue on the synodal path, Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus is a reminder to us that we

are part of a long history of people who had to set aside their certainties in order to recognise how God is at work among them. This narrative is not child's play – it is in fact a serious call to grow up!"

**“Peter Keenan discusses the way we should understand myth and not get caught up in what is literally true or not”**

And finally, Aidan Matthews riffs on the theme of Mary and how over the centuries the real woman has been so often eclipsed by the Madonna. Luke, he

writes, does justice to the real Mary. "But Luke, a bridesmaid among best men, is immersed in the mystery of Mary, which is why early Christian folklore came to believe he had painted her true likeness in the very first icon." He adds: "I have told my daughters about this daughter of Sarah, the Mother of God, and they are telling theirs. Faith in the female line may be more reliable: closer to Mary because closer to Martha, to the bloodshed and breastmilk of bodily life".

And there we are, back to bodies and incarnation. Enjoy the clean crisp winter wonderlands this Christmas but remember that God is in the human stuff, the 'smell of the sheep' as Pope Francis likes to call it. Emmanuel, God is with us.

Happy Christmas.

## Don't miss our January edition!

### Featuring:

- **Quotes from around the Catholic world - the faithful tell us what they want to see from the Church going forward**
- **Report from National Study of Catholic Priests in US finds only 24% have confidence in bishop**
- **How Ireland's famous figures channel peace in their lives**
- **10 pastoral reforms the Church must undertake**
- **In search of clarity: Young people and the Church - what is going on? A pastoral coordinator offers reflections**



# Whither synodality in 2023?

**Fr Gerry O'Hanlon SJ**



What Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich has called 'an ecclesial dialogue without precedent in the history of the Church' will enter a new phase in 2023. Hollerich is the General Rapporteur of the Assembly of Bishops and others who will gather in Rome in October 2023 – and again in October 2024 – to discern the fruits of the world-wide consultation which has been going on since 2021. This is the ambitious project of synodality: will it work?

**“There will come of course a point where speaking and listening have to lead to the kind of discernment that issues in decisions”**

Common global trends have emerged, among them: a focus on young people, the role of women, the desire to welcome marginalised groups in the church, a critique of clericalism and a desire to foster co-responsibility, a culture of encounter and a real opening in faith to the presence of the Holy Spirit. The global south is likely to encourage the global north to be more explicit in confronting issues of social and ecological justice. This commonality, albeit with diverse emphases according to specific locations, is heartening: despite the enormous cultural differences the Church has found a unified voice, testifying to the new Pentecost which Pope Francis spoke about in his visit to Ireland, the blending of the cacophony of Babel into the harmony of a unity with diversity.

And this was evident in the Irish experience of synodality: the Athlone event of last June 18, 2022 was an unforgettable experience for up to 200 representatives gathered in an upper room of the Sheraton Hotel, and afterwards in thanksgiving and praise at the 6th century monastic site of Clonmacnoise. In the acknowledged shadow of clerical child sexual abuse,

and with the open and respectful naming of a litany of negatives about the Irish Church, there was nonetheless, and predominantly, a sense of 'going deeper', an experience of the joy and peace that comes in the context of open speech and generous listening when 'walking along the way', as the two disciples did on the road to Emmaus.

## Catholicism

But, as critics rightly point out, the numbers involved (in Ireland and worldwide) are small. Is this really representative of Catholicism? Well, Jesus did not stress huge numbers (where two or three are gathered...), the gospels often distinguish between the 12, the disciples and 'the crowd', and when a small group is filled with the Spirit it can imbue the world with enormous hope and love. Do the critics really imagine (when all surveys show to the contrary) that a larger group would have different views on, for example, the role of women and controversial teaching on gender and sexuality? And, most importantly of all, if you are one of those who did not join in the process over the last 18 months, please consider doing so now – the invitation is for all, and the only conditions are a willingness to abide by the ground rules of open speech and patient and generous listening.

There will come of course a point where speaking and listening have to lead to the kind of discernment that issues in decisions. Sometimes (as in the stress in Ireland on adult faith formation and lay ministry) that can be relatively organic and unproblematic. At other times (as in the move by Pope Francis to open up more generous access to Eucharist for the divorced and remarried) it can cause a greater stir, and we need time to see if the new way is being 'received' by the sense of the faithful. Such, of course, was the process surrounding the monumental decision to allow Gentiles to be baptised without being circumcised in the early Church, decided by the first formal synod known as the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), and requiring years of



Church delegates come together at the news conference for the launch of the Synod's Continental Document at the Vatican in October.

preparation and ratification.

We may be reaching such a point around the role of women in the Church today. I think with the global expression of the sense of faith of the faithful expressed in the Document for the Continental Stage (October, 2022), any bishop – including Irish bishops of course – when answering questions in the public forum about the possible ordination of women, might find it useful to reconsider what it is appropriate to say.

**“There was an attempt made in the 1990s to silence any discussion about female ordination and to reaffirm the teaching that such ordination was beyond the authority and power of the Church”**

A bishop will, of course, take very seriously his role of being the authoritative leader in his diocese of teaching in fidelity to the scriptures and tradition, as well as taking on board the 'signs of the times' and the

'sense of the faithful'. There was an attempt made in the 1990s to silence any discussion about female ordination and to reaffirm the teaching that such ordination was beyond the authority and power of the Church. The Pontifical Biblical Commission in the 1970s (which included such luminaries as Raymond Brown and Carlo Martini) came to a different (unpublished at the time) conclusion, so it was curious to note the Magisterium taking this view.

## Divergence

Now, however, I propose that already at this point in the synodal pathway, it is clear that there is a significant divergence on this issue between official Church teaching and 'the sense of the faithful' in many, though not all, parts of the world. When this happens there are well-known means within Catholic theology and teaching to resolve the impasse, including a recourse to the rich tapestry of theological opinion which, as well as providing arguments in favour of the current teaching, also offers alternative views. At such a transitional moment, I suggest it is perfectly in line for any orthodox bishop in the public forum to wonder aloud whether this is, after all, not an 'open question',

and to seek guidance from the Universal Church in its discernment – as the Irish Church did in its National Synthesis with regard to the role of women in general.

**“There has been a real quality of quiet consolation for those who have taken part in the Irish experience of synodality to date, which is echoed in global reports”**

Our culture prizes authenticity: when a bishop is asked about questions like this on the national airways and answers by merely reasserting current teaching with a generalised reference to 'scripture and tradition', something jars, there is a perception of a lack of authenticity, an ostrich-like denial of what is in front of all our faces, and this becomes an obstacle to mission. We need to reconsider. This is clearly what the Pope himself is doing in establishing a second commission on the possibility of the female diaconate, opening the way to a transitional phase which requires a new approach.

That kind of discernment runs the risk, of course, of causing conflict and division.

It needs then to be rooted in what unites us, the encounter with Jesus Christ which Pope Francis never tires of speaking, an encounter which provides us with the Spirit who knows how to gift us with a unity that is characterised by diversity. Within this kind of community of faith we will be less inclined to look to the Church for certainty on all matters in its teaching, we will more easily recognise the different degrees of authority adhering to the hierarchy of truths proposed by the Magisterium, and we will more confidently assert the intrinsic role of the 'sense of faith of the faithful' in forming and receiving Church teaching.

## Consolation

There has been a real quality of quiet consolation for those who have taken part in the Irish experience of synodality to date, which is echoed in global reports. Our church is being renewed and reformed. It would be wonderful if more of us joined in the journey, if we succeeded in reaching out better to marginalised groups, and if our concerns gradually move beyond intra-Church issues outwards to our wider world.

**i** Gerry O'Hanlon, SJ (member of the Synodal Steering Committee, writing in a personal capacity).



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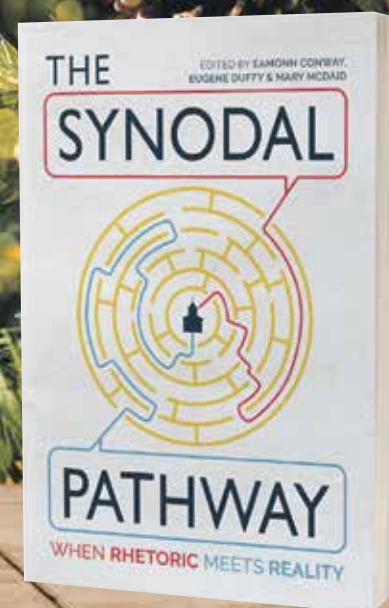


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# A Church that urgently needs to undergo a change of heart



Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, president of the Italian bishops' conference, appearing somewhat distressed, during a news conference in Rome May in 2022, after members of the conference approved an audit of their child protection policies and a study of clerical sexual abuse in the country.

Turning hearts of stone to hearts of flesh must become the Church's main objective and it starts with synodality

## Professor Eamonn Conway



In October, the Synod of Bishops published the Working Document for the Continental Stage of the Synod 2021-2024. This provides the framework for the second stage of the synodal process. At present the Document should be under discussion in every diocese and Catholic organisation around the world. Then, beginning in January 2023, a series of meetings will take place across the continents to discuss the text as well as any feedback from the discussions currently underway. The outcomes from these discussions will shape the agenda for the Assembly of Bishops in Rome in October 2023.

Reading the Document, which accurately reflects

syntheses received from almost every local Church throughout the world, it is evident that the damage to the Church's mission and credibility globally, resulting from various kinds of abuse within the Church, is incalculable.

The Document catalogues five forms of abuse: spiritual, sexual, economic, abuse of authority, and abuse of conscience. It also links sexual violence with the abuse of power in the Church, noting that "clericalism in all its forms was frequently associated with hurt and abuse of power by participants in the process". The Bishops of England and Wales, in their submission, also linked the way power is exercised in the Catholic Church to the

devastating impact of clerical sexual abuse on the victims.

The legacy of abuse "is an open wound that continues to inflict pain on victims and survivors, on their families, and on their communities", the Document reports, citing the Australian submission which states that, "There was a strong urgency to acknowledge the horror and damage, and to strengthen efforts to safeguard the vulnerable, repair damage to the moral authority of the Church and rebuild trust".

The Document goes on to note that, "Careful and painful reflection on the legacy of abuse has led many synod groups to call for a cultural change in the Church with a view to greater transparency, accountability, and

co-responsibility".

The Australian Church's synodal process became in effect a response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017). Significantly, the first decree following the conclusion of their Synodal Plenary Council is on reconciliation and the healing of wounds. Similarly, the German Synodal Way is a reaction to a four-year long university-based research project undertaken into sexual violence in the Catholic Church in that country. After its findings were published in 2018, the late Fr Bernd Hagenkord SJ said, the Catholic Church in Germany was "staring into the abyss".

### From gestures to genuine conversion of heart

The word 'abuse' occurs nineteen times in the Irish Bishops' submission. It also links sexual abuse to the abuse of power in all its forms. The bishops call for a process of journeying with victims as well as for healing, penance and atonement. These are all necessary. But are they enough? We

are familiar with the Ash Wednesday reading: "Rend your hearts and not your clothing" (Joel 2:13). Tearing one's garments is a gesture of contrition recorded in the Old Testament, along with shaving one's head, throwing dust on oneself and wearing sackcloth. However, what matters, as Jesus often reminded the Scribes and the Pharisees, is not obsequious gestures but a conversion of heart. So the question is, how do we avoid settling for mere gestures, of little value in themselves, and instead undergo a genuine change of heart? How can we get beyond the rhetoric of synodality, to the reality of personal and institutional transformation to which the Holy Spirit is calling us?

### Compensating for immaturity through power abuse

As we look back at decades of revelations of abuse by clergy and religious, it is mind-boggling that seemingly devout men could go to mass each day, say their prayers, and present themselves publicly as men of God, and, all the while,

be plotting and perpetrating life-altering acts of sexual violence against vulnerable children entrusted to their care. However unpalatable it may be to do so, we need to consider carefully and to learn from this phenomenon. We need to acknowledge that the same disparity between espoused beliefs and concrete actions, what psychologists call 'cognitive dissonance', could still afflict those of us who exercise authority of whatever kind and at whatever level in the Church today.

### “Many priests are tired of the Pope's criticism of clericalism and find it dispiriting”

Immense resources have been put into ensuring that the door to sexual violence within the Church is shut as tightly as possible. Other pathways to the abuse of power, however, may still lie open and be unguarded. Twenty years ago, Marie Keenan showed that clerical abusers 'came off the page' in terms of unresolved issues





A sphere where more lay voices are needed: Bishop of Kerry Ray Browne launches Catholic Schools Week in Holy Family National School Rathmore, Co. Kerry.

relating to conflict, authority and power. Is it still possible that some in authority in the Church can seek to compensate for personal immaturity or feelings of inadequacy by dominant and controlling behaviour without being challenged? Is it possible for such people to hide the gratification of their desire for power over others behind a facade of concern for the wellbeing of the Church, just as abusers, and those who covered up abuse, did in the past? If the suffering of victims is to be taken seriously and the Church's credibility restored, we need to give this possibility serious consideration.

### Clericalism as power differentiation

Many priests are tired of the Pope's criticism of clericalism and find it dispiriting. But by clericalism he doesn't mean a healthy and supportive camaraderie or fraternity among priests. Clericalism, which Pope Francis considers to be one of the greatest evils afflicting the Church's mission, has to do with a power differentiation between clergy and laity; the protection of the privileges and power of priests at the expense of the distinctive charisms and gifts of the entire people of God. Pope Francis sees clericalism as an evil in which the laity are often complicit by being inappropriately deferential to priests and bishops. Such deference, of course, is appealing to clergy who dislike having their authority questioned.

Speaking recently to graduates of Maynooth Pontifical University, Archbishop Eamon Martin said of the Irish synodal pathway: "There are clear calls for greater transparency and participation in decision making and for more accountability within our parish and diocesan church structures". Archbishop

Martin's reiteration of these calls is welcome. Synodality, if genuinely operative, will make itself felt in how as Church we celebrate liturgy, run our schools, look after our finances, prepare people for the sacraments, enable and empower our pastoral and finance councils and so on.

### Not just involving those "on side"

However, cognitive dissonance, the disparity between what we claim to believe and how we concretely act, often hides in broad daylight. It is operative, for instance, when we see only compliant clergy or clericalised laity being appointed to advisory boards or commissions within the Church. It is at work when the principal criterion for appointability to such bodies, enquired about discretely behind the scenes, is whether the appointee is considered to be "on side". This translates as meaning, "unlikely to challenge those in authority and the *status quo*". Pope Francis has spoken of lay people's complicity in clericalism: "many of the laity are on their knees asking to be clericalised, because it is more comfortable".

### “It is at work when the processes and criteria for appointments to Church positions and bodies are transparent and accountable”

Synodality, on the other hand, is at work when different criteria apply. Firstly, it is at work when the question being asked is if the person being considered for appointment will have the courage to speak with 'boldness,' the *parrhesia* of which Pope Francis speaks, that is, speak plainly and frankly,

and without holding back out of fear of disagreement or of criticism. Secondly, it is at work when the appointee is sought after because it is known that he or she will listen openly, honestly and with humility, and with the capacity to hear not just the words being spoken but also to get to the heart of what is being said, discerning this under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, and most fundamentally, it is at work when the processes and criteria for appointments to Church positions and bodies are transparent and accountable.

### Appointing laity to Church bodies

A ready-to-hand test of genuine commitment to synodality in the Church is the role assigned by Church authorities to the laity in the administration of the Church's finances and properties. We rarely find clergy with competence in such matters, while such expertise is readily found among the laity. In recent years, trusts that own and manage Church assets and finances have been obliged to become civilly registered charities subject to Company and Charities legislation.

The names of charity trustees are published on Church websites as well as on the websites of the Company Registration Office and the Charities Regulator. There, we can see that many Irish dioceses make good use of the gifts and charisms of the laity by appointing experienced professionals to governance roles on these bodies. Others, however, still manifest a tight clerical stranglehold, where the bishop and senior clerics loyal to him are clearly in control even though there may be one or two laity appointed for the sake of appearances. Where this is the case, one has to presume a *de facto* lack of any genuine commitment to synodality, regardless of the rhetoric.

## “One area of Church governance where courageous and independent lay Catholic voices are urgently needed is in regard to the divestment of Catholic schools and colleges”

Such situations may pose a problem in civil law, however, because charity trustees are required by legislation to act independently, placing their loyalty to the purposes of the charity above loyalty, say, to the bishop of a diocese. However, this is a particular problem for priests who are also Vicars General and Episcopal Vicars, and as such likely to be appointed to the boards of diocesan Trusts. The reason why is that, according to Canon Law, such clergy "are never to act contrary to the intention and mind of the diocesan bishop" (Can. 480). So, Vicars General and Episcopal Vicars are in the invidious position of being prohibited by Canon Law from doing what they are required to by Civil Law. Ironically, by insisting on charity trustees acting independently, the law of the land reflects the spirit of synodality better than the law of the Church.

### The voice of the laity in making decisions about Catholic Education

One area of Church governance where courageous and independent lay Catholic voices are urgently needed is in regard to the divestment of Catholic schools and colleges. Writing in *The Irish Times* last month, Breda O'Brien surmised that the abuse scandals of recent decades may have left Irish bishops too demoralised to resist on their own undue pressure to divest our educational institutions whether such pressure is brought to bear by the State or by interest groups locally.

### “In many other countries there is no problem with the public funding of religious-run schools, colleges and universities”

It is generally agreed that some divestment of Church-owned schools and colleges is inevitable. It might also be desirable, not only because several of our educational institutions are already secularised in practice, but also because those that remain under Catholic patronage could, as part of a negotiated settlement, adopt policies and curricula that accord with Church teaching and be

free to live out their Catholicity authentically.

### Safeguarding

The concern, however, is that no such negotiated settlement seems to be in place. Meanwhile, valuable Church-owned institutions and properties, worth hundreds of millions when added together, are being handed over without any evident safeguarding of resources for the mission of the Church in Catholic education into the future. In many other countries there is no problem with the public funding of religious-run schools, colleges and universities. It is not unreasonable to negotiate for the same in Ireland. Instead, however, what is being allowed to happen has been compared, not without some justification, to the dissolution of the monasteries and the confiscation of

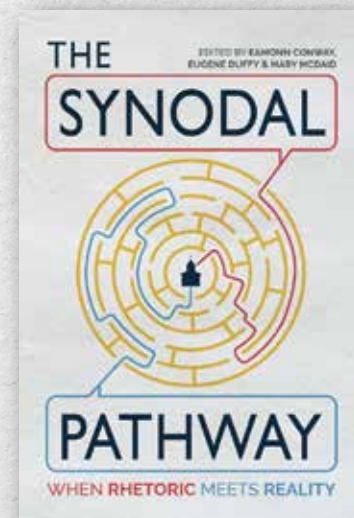
Church properties in the sixteenth century.

Would it not be worthwhile, therefore, for the Church in Ireland to put synodality into practice by convening a special synodal-type assembly to discern a future for Catholic education at all three levels, primary, secondary and tertiary, pending which, the further divestment of educational property and resources would be put on hold? Is this not one obvious area of concern for the future of the Catholic Church in Ireland where the charisms and gifts of the laity urgently need to be empowered and drawn upon?

**i** Father Eamonn Conway is a priest of the Tuam archdiocese and Professor of Integral Human Development at the University of Notre Dame Australia.

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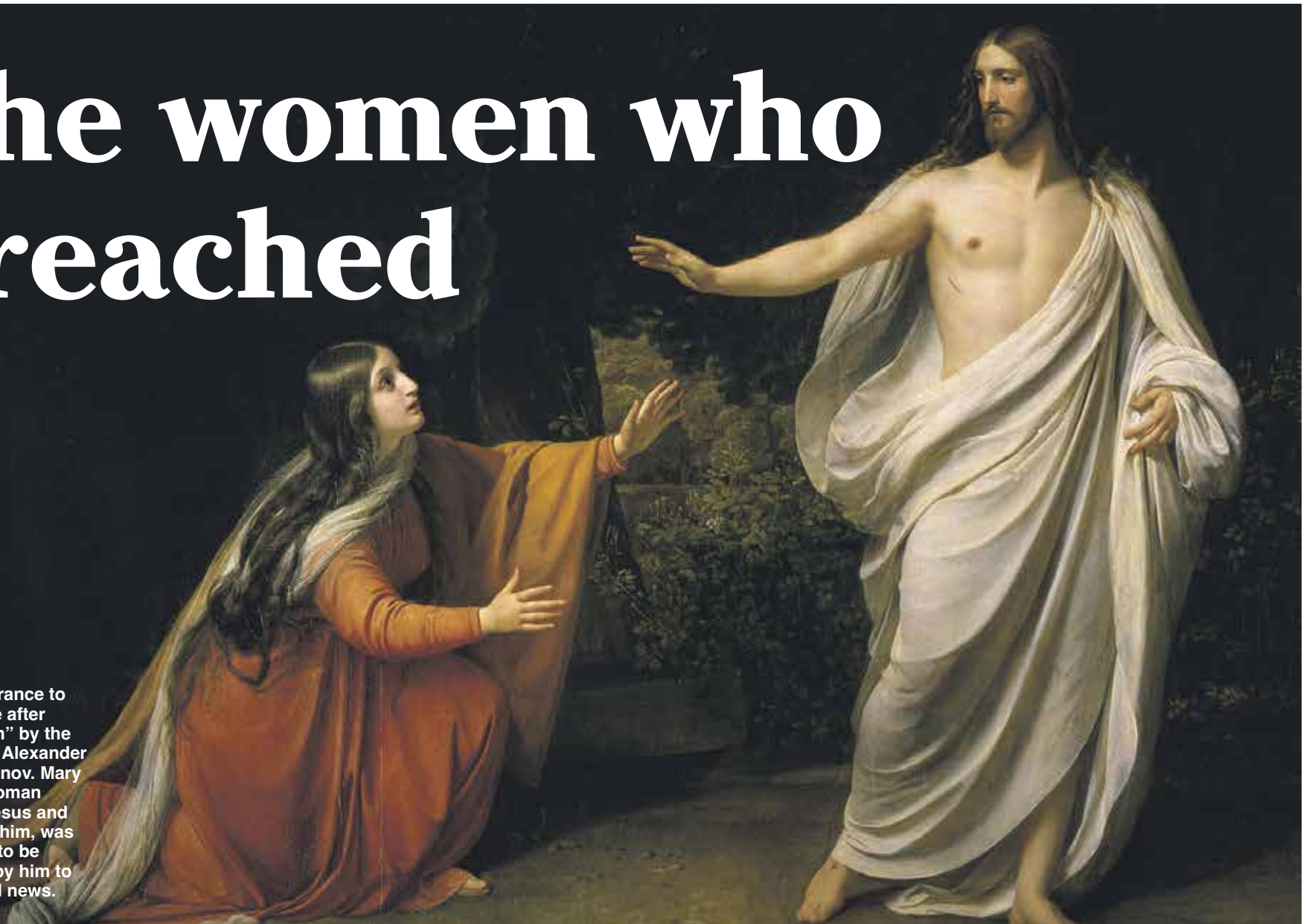
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# The women who preached

“Christ’s Appearance to Mary Magdalene after the Resurrection” by the Russian painter Alexander Andreyevich Ivanov. Mary Magdalene, a woman who followed Jesus and ministered with him, was among the first to be commissioned by him to preach the good news.



## Barbara E. Reid, OP



Among all the various ministries, there is none more crucial than the ministry of the word. Jesus began his mission by preaching the good news (Mark 1:14–15; Luke 4:16–18), and he sent the first apostles to do the same (Luke 9:2). At Pentecost, the first thing that happens to the Spirit-filled followers of Jesus is that they begin to speak in all different languages about God’s deeds of power (Acts 2:1–11). And when Paul lists the various ministries, first and foremost are apostles, prophets, and teachers (1 Cor 12:28).

### Traditions

The New Testament and other early Christian traditions give us abundant evidence of women who were preachers, teachers, prophets, and evangelists in the early days of the Jesus movement. Luke’s Gospel opens with prophetic women preaching powerfully liberating

words. Mary, the mother of Jesus, praises God for past saving deeds and proclaims the way toward peace and well-being for all (Luke 1:46–55).

Her Magnificat is still recited and sung daily by Christians worldwide. Elizabeth proclaims that there is blessedness in the most difficult of circumstances (Luke 1:39–45) and that God’s delight is in taking away affliction (1:25). And at the circumcision and naming of her son, her proclamation of God’s grace (the literal meaning of her son’s name is “grace of God”) has the effect of bringing her husband to fuller faith, enabling him to speak again and to praise God.

Not only that, but Elizabeth’s words cause all those present and people all throughout the hill country of Judea to marvel at God’s mighty deeds (Luke 1:59–66). The prophet Anna, who kept vigil in the temple for eighty-four years, con-

tinuously preached hope to all who were looking for redemption (Luke 2:36–38).

Mary Magdalene and the other Galilean women who followed Jesus and ministered with him were the first to be commissioned by him to preach the good news (Matt 28:1–10; John 20:1–2, 11–18). The Samaritan woman preached to her townspeople, who came to believe in Jesus because of her word (John 4:39). In Orthodox tradition, she is named Photina, “Enlightened One”, and is said to be “equal to the apostles”.

**“Devotion to her became widespread throughout Asia Minor and Egypt, particularly among women, who saw her as a model of empowerment”**

Junia, a relative of Paul, was “prominent among the apostles”, presumably preaching far and wide, as did Paul, and for which she pays the price of imprisonment with him (Rom 16:7). Phoebe, *diakonos* of the church of Cenchreae, would undoubtedly have overseen and shared in the preaching to and evangelising of this harbour community at

the port of Corinth (Rom 16:1–3).

Prisca, along with her husband Aquila, must have herself been a prominent preacher and teacher, as she explained more accurately the way of God to Apollos, an eloquent preacher from Alexandria (Acts 18:26). Euodia and Syntyche worked mightily alongside Paul in evangelising at Philippi (Phil 4:2–3). While neither their names nor the content of their proclamations are preserved, Philip’s four daughters were prophets (Acts 21:9), as were a number of Corinthian women (1 Cor 11:5).

### Preachers

Extracanonical traditions preserve the memory of women itinerant preachers such as Thecla and Nino. The *Acts of Thecla*, for example, written in Asia Minor in the late second century, tells of how Thecla, a rich aristocratic woman from Iconium, renounced her family, fortune, and fiancé to join Paul in his apostolic mission, preaching to both men and women.

Devotion to her became widespread throughout Asia Minor and Egypt, particularly among women, who saw her as a model of empowerment. Another woman venerated in the

Orthodox Church as “equal of the apostles” is Nino or Nina.

Juvenal, the first patriarch of Jerusalem (451–458), gave her a cross and commissioned her to evangelise wherever she might go. She made her way to Georgia (ancient Iberia), making converts of all who heard her preaching, including Queen Nana, and eventually King Mirian, who declared Christianity the official religion.

**“As you listen with the ear of your heart to the wisdom of women, may you, too, be emboldened to preach the word with persistence at all times and in all ways”**

Just as these early women followers of Jesus took to heart his commission to preach the good news, so women have continued to do throughout Christian history. Women disciples know that our charism to preach is grounded in our baptism and confirmation. Gifted further with theological education, pastoral experience, and a listening heart, we can do no less than share

this gift as widely as we can. While inadequate interpretations of scripture and patriarchal understandings of the order of creation and of ecclesial structures currently continue to restrict women’s ability to exercise the preaching ministry, the Spirit always finds a way for the word to be preached.

These preachers represent a vast array of communities of believers of diverse races, geographic areas, economic strata, sexual orientations, and cultures. And whether physical or spiritual mothers, each does as Pope Francis urges in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “the Church . . . preaches in the same way that a mother speaks to her child. . . . Just as all of us like to be spoken to in our mother tongue, so too, in the Faith we like to be spoken to in our ‘mother culture’ . . . and our heart is better disposed to listen”. As you listen with the ear of your heart to the wisdom of women, may you, too, be emboldened to preach the word with persistence at all times and in all ways.

**i** This is an extract from the book *Catholic Women Preach – Raising Voices, Renewing the Church, a collection of homilies by women*. Published by Orbis Books and reproduced with kind permission.



# The Nativity of the Lord - How are we labouring?

## Christine Schenk, CSJ



**“W**hile they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger. Because there was no room for them at the inn.” - Luke 2:6-7

In reflecting on this beloved Christmas story, two things stand out for me. The first is the reality that the pregnant Mary and her husband Joseph had very little power or control over their own circumstances. What expectant parents would ever travel to a distant village, away from family and friends, when their firstborn child was due at any moment?

**“I wonder how many refugee families from Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, or Yemen find themselves in similarly desperate circumstances this very night”**

Only a family that had no choice but to comply with the demands of an oppressive, occupying government and a complicit religious leadership, both demanding exorbitant civil and temple taxes - despite the subsistence level standard of living for most in Palestine.

And then there is the matter of accommodations. No Holiday Inn here. No welcoming concierge. No room service - only a shelter for animals; only socially unacceptable shepherds (socially unacceptable because they smelled like the sheep they tended, possibly sheep the temple priests used for sacrifice).

The picture Luke paints is that of a low-income family on the margins of society, desperately seeking shelter so that Mary could labour and give birth protected from the elements.

I wonder how many refugee families from Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, or Yemen find themselves in similarly desperate circumstances this very night.

The second thing that stands out for me is how easily the Lukan author glides over the messy realities of labour and birth. We hear a lot about the politics requiring Joseph to register in his hometown, about the shepherds keeping watch, and about heavenly hosts of angels celebrating. All the good stuff. Of the actual birth we learn only the basics: It was time. The baby was born. We wrapped the baby

in blankets. And that's pretty much it, folks.

If ever you wondered about who wrote Luke's Gospel, I think we can be pretty sure of one thing at least - this Gospel has to have been written by a man.

So, since I'm the one who gets to reflect on this story, I want to fill in the picture and include some things a woman might remember if she were the one telling the story about a birth that changed the course of history.

### Nativity scenes

As a nurse midwife myself, I've always been a little upset that no one ever includes the midwife in our Nativity scenes. We always find Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, shepherds, angels and royal wisdom figures—we find donkeys, cows, sheep, sometimes Santa Claus and every so often a little drummer boy - but do we ever find a midwife? No! Why not?

No one seriously thinks that Joseph, as devoted as he was, actually delivered this baby, do we?

In first-century Palestine, it would have been inconceivable for a woman to give birth without the care and comfort of other women, and in particular the care of women the French call *sages-femmes* - wise women - the French word for midwives.

Even though Mary and Joseph were far from home, hospitality was pretty much the prime directive for the people of Palestine who were not far removed from their own desert wandering days. So I'm guessing the innkeeper, or more probably his wife, saw Mary's plight and sent for the wise women of Bethlehem to come and tend to her.

Since Mary was a first-time mom, there were no guarantees that she would emerge from her ordeal alive. Scholars estimate that maternal mortality rates were as high as 35 percent in the first century. Everyone would have known cousins, wives, sisters, aunts, and neighbours who had died in childbirth.

And while Mary and Joseph may have been more optimistic than most - given biblical accounts of the reassuring mystical experiences surrounding Mary's pregnancy - this would still have been a very scary time for both of them.

As a midwife telling the story, I'd surmise that Mary's labour probably began en route to Bethlehem. For first pregnancies, pre-labour with irregular contractions can easily last several



Displaced children copy notes from a chalkboard during a class session at the Ukpm Internally Displaced People's Camp in Nigeria's Benue State.

**“My midwife's question for each of us tonight is to ask in what way are we labouring, like Mary, to birth God's abiding love into a world so much in need of it?”**

days, with the regular contractions of latent - or early - labour lasting as long as twenty-two hours.

**“Mary laboured long and well to birth a child who would be all about God's love everlasting”**

Christmas cards aside, we don't really know that Mary was riding a donkey; in fact, walking would have helped her labour progress. In Luke's story, Mary was probably well into her labour before finally finding shelter. When active labour arrived at last, surely the midwives had also arrived to help Mary manage her rapid, excruciatingly painful contractions and to show Joseph just how to support her as she began the arduous effort of pushing the newborn Jesus into a waiting world and, more immediately, into the midwives' waiting arms.

We won't dwell on Mary's anguished cries, her sweat, her

blood, or her tears - but I can tell you that when that baby Jesus appeared at last, there was no need for chanting angels, because the joy and wonder reflected in Mary and Joseph's faces shone more brightly than any guiding star.

From a midwife's point of view, all that heavenly host stuff is afterglow.

The long-awaited child is born, Mary is safe, and Joseph is as proud and relieved as any new dad trying not to faint over the intensity of watching his wonder woman wife give birth.

### God's love

Mary laboured long and well to birth a child who would be all about God's love everlasting. When he was old enough, she would teach him the tenets of Judaism - summed up in her Magnificat hymn about a God who fills the hungry with good things and raises up the lowly.

Her boy-child would become a man of peace who would die a

violent death even as he laboured mightily himself to bring forth her Magnificat - God's justice-reign in the face of hatred.

My midwife's question for each of us is to ask in what way are we labouring, like Mary, to birth God's abiding love into a world so much in need of it?

In what way are we, like Joseph, supporting the efforts of all who labour on behalf of the marginalised - refugees, immigrants, the homeless, poor, or victims of sex-trafficking?

In what way are we, like the midwives, supporting our powerful birthing God, who longs for right relationship and protection of a mother earth that, in fact, gave birth to us all?

**📖** This is an extract from the book *Catholic Women Preach - Raising Voices, Renewing the Church, a collection of homilies by women. Published by Orbis Books and reproduced with kind permission.*



# An ecclesial donnybrook: The synodal pathway – What can we expect?

‘As the term synodal pathway suggests, the imagery of pilgrimage is key to grasping the significance of what the Church is trying to accomplish.’

Fr Doug Klein and parishioners are seen walking what was a 24-mile leg of a 100-mile pilgrimage through rural Buena Vista County, Iowa, US.

## Paschal Scallon CM



I am writing this reflection just after Halloween and the feast of All Saints, and the feast of All Souls – the faithful departed. And soon to follow comes the feast of All the Saints of Ireland. Against the backdrop of a pending Synod, I have a sense that a gathering of the extended family has been convened urgently and soon the aunts and uncles and grandparents are going to want an explanation for what has been going on and why the family is in such straits. It feels like we are on the verge of a great row and we are getting nervous.

This apprehension is not helped following reaction across the country to a recent homily which gave a vigorous airing to an understanding of Church teaching many people do not accept. One has to be concerned that no matter what is published or uttered on a matter of faith, Church, religion or morals, there will be bitter and divisive things said in response. Everything takes on a particular frisson in the context of pending legislation dealing with incitement to hatred.

The reaction to Fr Seán Sheehy's homily in Listowel, has served to clarify something I have been trying to articulate for some

time. The synodal pathway, which has excited interest in some quarters since it was launched last year is going to be a tougher experience than we may have imagined it will be.

### Experience

Why? Why won't the exercise of synodality be the irenic experience much of the coverage of the process so far suggests? The obvious answers have been well rehearsed: there is so much at stake; there is so much hurt and there is the perception that there is so much that has still to be resolved between the teaching of the Church and the actual experience of Catholics everywhere. We may be anxious too, in spite of how determined we feel, that attempts to resolve what is

frustrating and outraging us will be destructive.

We remain determined, though, because it is also true that we have faith, we have hope and we are impelled by love, which in the current environment expresses itself in our concern that everyone is made feel they are welcome in the Church, that because we are children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, no one in this 'family' is to be ostracised. We can only meaningfully address the issues that challenge us, after all, if we are prepared to be in each other's company.

Our experience of family has changed but it remains central. Families, and society generally have grown in appreciation that each of us is a person in whom lies the basis of all we are to each other relationally. The human person is the basis of family, society and Church and in the Christian perspective the human person has eternal value.

Family is more flexible today than we may have accepted in the past and this corresponds to a perception of wider society also. The global character of contem-

porary life challenges traditional perceptions of nationality and ethnicity for example. The phenomenon of migration compels humanity as a whole to reimagine its certainties.

**“Why won't the exercise of synodality be the irenic experience of the process so far suggests?”**

Furthermore, migration stirs a 'memory' in people with any awareness of our faith story. We remember we are a migratory people, a pilgrim people ourselves and always have been.

One of the profoundest changes in perception and attitude in the Church in the last century was to have surrendered the Tridentine emphasis of the church as the city on the hill, a perfect society, above and remote from temporal life, with little to say except to call the world to repentance.

Calling the world to repentance remains an important part of the mission of the Church but in returning to the scriptural insight of being a pilgrim people, the Church also acknowledges how 'forgiving' the experience of meeting Christ must be. In adversity we need encouragement.

### Lead

Jesus himself takes his lead from those who preceded him. From its earliest understanding of itself, Israel defined itself as a people, travelling from brokenness and slavery in Egypt into integrity and liberty in a promised land. This journey, from waste land to a promised land, is a symbolic representation of the whole of creation in which God takes all that was dark and chaotic and breathes life into it.

Christians see themselves as pilgrims too, part of the family of Israel, moving steadily towards the fulfilment of the promise that we might all live in the peace or *Shalom* of God.

Like Christ the Church must enfold the insights of Christian faith. If Christ is the incarnate word of God, walking the road with people in all their experiences in life, then the disciples of Christ must be the incarnate word in their own time. This is an approach fraught with risk and that risk is precisely the same as Christ himself took. We risk mutual incomprehension, tension and even rejection. In his willingness to be with people many considered difficult or

**“Families, and society generally have grown in appreciation that each of us is a person in whom lies the basis of all we are to each other relationally”**





The forgiving nature of experiencing Christ.

the implications for personal use of various resources, not simply because of the needs of the environment itself but so that people who have been left with nothing, when others have taken practically everything, will have something.

### Conclusion

A sense that things are in flux is not necessarily a crisis. We are familiar with the adage from Hebrews, 'We have not here a lasting city' (Heb 13:14). It is, though, a reminder to be attentive and to be open to what is happening and to take on one's own share of that responsibility.

### “Like Christ the Church must en flesh the insights of Christian faith”

For those who sense that synodality is a breakthrough and for those who sense it is part of the continuing unravelling of everything, there will be, if I may borrow a phrase, 'joy and hope... grief and anguish' for everyone. The Church and we who are the Church, that is, the institution and the 1.3 billion people who make up this pilgrimage, have recognised for generations now that, by definition, we are never static. Whatever the underlying unity of our faith across the generations, in the 1960s, at the time of the Second Vatican Council, Catholics and Catholicism were not in the same 'place' as in the 1800s. Nor was nineteenth century Catholicism in the same place it had been a century earlier. Since the 1960s the world in which we live and in which we seek to evangelise has changed again. The landscapes on this pilgrimage change all the time. We move through them in awe and apprehension, looking back along the road we have come and looking forward. The Lord is leading us away and ahead. Having been here for a while, the mission is to go on and that can be hard to live with but we cannot stay and be bound by the present.

even untouchable, however, Jesus shows how the Church must be.

### Suggests

As the term synodal pathway suggests, the imagery of pilgrimage is key to grasping the significance of what the Church is trying to accomplish. But, if we genuinely appreciate what pilgrimage or the implications of being part of a caravan on this scale entails, we must surely realise this is going to be a long and exhausting journey and even when we think we have come to the end, we will only have passed another stage on the route. Our personal or sectional sense of place and achievement will be compressed into the perspective of a wider horizon awaiting us further on.

### “As the term synodal pathway suggests, the imagery of pilgrimage is key to grasping the significance of what the church is trying to accomplish”

In the spiritual life, we approach the Lord in all sorts of ways. Our individuality, our being unique – each of us – is part of the foundation on which the Lord will build a communion. Like figures in the scriptures, we can be sincere, humble, faith-filled, contrite, hopeful and striving to live in the love we see and experience in God. But, we can also be calculating, over-confident and complacent, comforting ourselves with the idea that the boundless mercy of God can surely accommodate us who, even if our virtue is less than heroic, neither are our vices that dreadful. We tell ourselves our virtue may be modest but our sins are venial. 'Easy does it,' as it were.

We are the people who keep the caravan between the hedges.

This complacency is also key, I think, to what we will make of the synodal pathway because often in discussion perceptions and interpretations confer a weight on opinions which appear to say matters are closed. In our sense that we are sincere and have immersed ourselves in the processes of discernment that seek to renew the life of the Church, we may not be prepared for or willing to listen to the equally sincere voice saying something contrary to our own views. Our complacency risks confusing the good of the Church with how we imagine the Church might do better.

Precisely because the experience of being on pilgrimage, of being unsure of even our most

basic needs, of having, as Jesus said, nowhere to lay our heads, is so unsettling, there is no room for complacency. In actual terms, the experience of the synodal pathway will challenge what we hope for. Our own images of God and the Church will be tested for traces of the idolatrous tendencies we all have to fix both in ways that conform to what we want.

### Tested

This will be tested when the issues that were to the fore in the National Synthesis Document which was published in August will be examined in wider discussion involving the Church in other parts of the world. How ready are we to see what we have had to say con-

tend with the parsing and editing others will bring to the process?

Discipleship at any time needs to be examined in all its elements. These include receptivity to the word of God and to the teaching of the Church as well as liturgy and ministry, hierarchy and leadership and more fundamentally, the care of those in poverty and illness, and concern and action on behalf of people in bondage. In good conscience we may be led to accept that our stewardship of the environment is an article of faith every bit as serious as others. If our being 'in a state of grace' is measurable against a reappraisal of the virtues of generosity and temperance in opposition to avarice and unbridled consumption of material goods, imagine



The developments of another form of pilgrimage: Pope Francis celebrates a Mass to open the listening process that leads up to the assembly of the world Synod of Bishops in 2023, in St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican.



The Francis pontificate is itself the fruit of a synodal process (the Latin American Bishops 2007 assembly at Aparecida, Brazil) and the implementation and reinvigoration of synodality is one of its central aims, writes Dr Austen Ivereigh.

A few months after his election in March 2013, Pope Francis recalled Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini's dream of a synodal Church, noting how long and difficult the cardinal knew the path to it would be. Francis said he wanted to proceed 'gently, but firmly and tenaciously' down that route. He has been true to his word. The Francis pontificate has seen a springtime of synodality and its corollary, collegiality, as vital instruments for the keeping alive the experience of the Second Vatican Council.

Focusing firstly on regenerating the institution of the Synod of Bishops in Rome, established by Pope Paul VI in 1965 after centuries of disuse, Francis has regenerated it as an authentic mechanism of ecclesial discernment actively involving the people of God, while using the four synodal assemblies held in Rome in October (2014, 2015, 2018 and 2019) to teach and inspire the rest of the Church to do the same.

The Synod of Bishops in 2023 and 2024 will be the most significant and far-reaching ecclesial event since the Second Vatican Council, embedding the Council permanently in the dynamic life of the Church, obviating, perhaps, the need for a future ecumenical council.

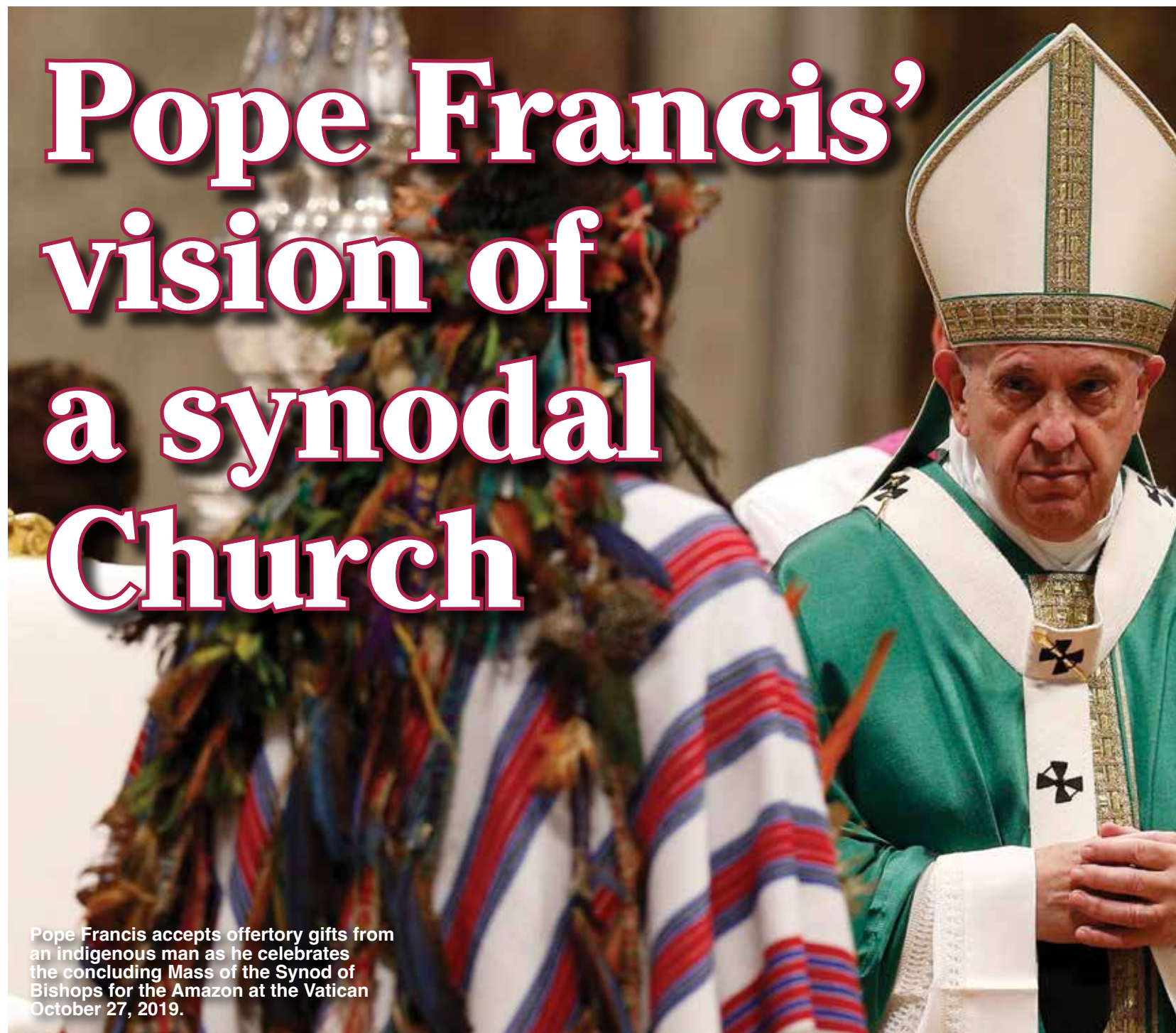
**“His concern is above all to recapture the charismatic, dynamic and popular element of the early councils of the Church”**

Francis' stress on synodality has opened a new stage of the reception of Vatican II, marking the end of a thirty-year hegemony of communion ecclesiology following the synod of 1985 in which the full implications of the people of God in *Lumen Gentium* were downplayed by a papacy nervous of a hermeneutic of rupture. Synodality, for Francis, is the expression of the Church as polyhedron and inverted pyramid implied by *Lumen Gentium*, in which the people of God – the members of the Church, equal in dignity – are served by the hierarchy concerned for their *salus animarum*, their salvation and well-being, and are emboldened to go out in service of humanity.

Synodality, in Francis' regenerative conception, allows for the full ecclesiological consequences of the Church as the people of God, and is inextricably bound up with a call for a missionary, centrifugal Church, *ex natura ad extra*, in which ordinary believers take responsibility for evangelising our world as missionary disciples.

#### New season

This new season of synodality has not been short of cold winds and surprise frosts. The two Rome synods on the family, of October 2014 and October 2015 especially, triggered intense debate and stirred powerful latent phobias across the conservative Catholic world that the Church was



Pope Francis accepts offertory gifts from an indigenous man as he celebrates the concluding Mass of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon at the Vatican October 27, 2019.

# Pope Francis' vision of a synodal Church

renouncing its commitment to the indissolubility of marriage. Although this was deeply untrue (both the synod final report and the post-synod exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* were focused on almost every page on enabling the Church to better help people to live indissolubility), the hysteria reflected in media reports distorted its reception, pushing many suspicious conservatives into a state of semi-schism and making discernment all but impossible.

The Amazonian synod of October 2019 also led to baseless accusations promoted by conservative Catholic media that paganism and syncretism had penetrated Catholicism in the guise of inculturation, vividly illustrating what in *Let Us Dream* the Pope calls 'the isolated conscience'. Francis' response to the Synod in his February 2020 exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*, was more likely to dismay progressives convinced that the majority vote at the synod

in favour of ordaining married men and women deacons gave the Pope the legitimacy he needed to proceed with those reforms. When he chose not to implement the majority synod vote in favour of both measures, he was accused of caving to conservative pressure.

**“This new season of synodality has not been short of cold winds and surprise frosts”**

A second challenge has been a 'functionalist' hermeneutic, especially in those Churches – both Australia and Germany are examples – recovering from devastating sex abuse crises that have thrown into doubt the Church's governance structures. The German *Synodal Way* is specifically in response to the devastating "MHG Study" of September 2018 conducted by an interdiscipli-

nary consortium commissioned by the German bishops' conference, which reviewed case files of Catholic clergy over many decades.

Tensions are no surprise: Francis is asking the Church to embrace a *modus vivendi et operandi* that lies at the heart of its very self yet with which it has become deeply unfamiliar. Even the task of reuniting in assembly, and in participating actively in the evangelising mission, is an experience alien to most of the faithful. Francis' repeated warnings against functionalism and focus on governance questions in synodal processes, and his insistence on the primacy of the Spirit – that is, in Church reform, there is no good that can be accomplished without the mediation of the Spirit – has led even supportive voices to question whether Francis' understanding of synodality is more akin to the rarified practices of superiors of religious orders than to bishops.

#### Concern

Yet in reality, his concern is above all to recapture the charismatic, dynamic and popular element of the early councils of the Church, an element best expressed in both the Jesuit tradition of apostolic discernment in common and in Latin America's history of general conferences since the 1950s. The Council of Jerusalem described in *Acts of the Apostles* chapter 15 involves the participation of 'the apostles, the elders, and the whole Church' (Acts 15:22) and ends with St Peter telling the assembly: 'It has seemed to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Acts 15:28). Both elements are key: the assembly of the people, and the prompting of the Spirit. In going to the heart of Francis' understanding of synodality, I want to argue for the importance of these two elements which, because they are often overlooked or downplayed in some European and American discussions of this topic, can lead to serious misreadings by both progressive and conservative Catholics.

The Latin American Episcopate's General Conference at Aparecida, Brazil, in May 2007, was prepared over many years by hundreds of 'mini synods' across the continent and became the deepest signs-of-the-times discernment undertaken by the Church in any part of the world

**“Synodality, in Francis' regenerative conception, allows for the full ecclesiological consequences of the Church as the people of God”**





describes vividly in *Let Us Dream* as 'overflow'.

### Tension

This action is one that is felt above all in contexts of tension and disagreement when the parties involved choose not to pursue by means of power the triumph of their own point of view, but rather agree to maintain in tension different views in expectation of an 'overflow' that will transcend the existing polarities, resolving them on a higher plane.

What Francis seeks to bring about in the global Church through the 2021-2023 global synodal process is not, in other words, a Latin-American program of reform, but the process that led to that reform, which each Church is called to make its own. It is a process that involves a return to the Church's own roots: apostolic discernment in common, rooted in the experience of the people of God, focused on mission and evangelisation. The synodal path, says Francis, begins in every Christian community, from the bottom up. It is not so much a program to be carried out or a decision to take but above all 'a style to incarnate', that is, 'dialogue, discussion, research – but with the Spirit'.

The style of Aparecida is missionary in outlook, reading the spirits in the light of the signs of the times, and involving and oriented to the whole people of God, rather than elite groups. 'Synodality starts with hearing from the whole people of God,' Francis says in *Let Us Dream*, adding: 'A Church that teaches must be firstly a Church that listens.' As Cardinal Mario Grech, the synod secretary general, put it to the Irish bishops, 'synodality is not just a methodological choice, but the mode of being of a church which wants to go out in mission'.

### “For Bergoglio, there is no true synodality without the action of the Spirit, which is detected in the movements, in consolations and desolations”

The centre (Church leadership) opens to the periphery and allows itself to be affected and changed by what it sees. Then it moves to discernment: why is it this way? What is God's will for this situation? What needs to change (a) in the world, to conform it to Christ and God's Kingdom, and (b) in the Church, in order to enable that change? The clarity gained in the discernment then guides the proposals for concrete action that conclude the synodal process.

For the Church to fail to embrace synodality is to submit to worldliness. Fear of change and contamination and a deep sense of threat have led the Church over time to abandon trust in the Spirit of the Assembly in favour of juridicism, moralism and rationalism, ironically emulating the modernity it claims to resist. This command-and-control Catholicism in turn provokes a search for reforms that borrow more from parliamentary systems than the Church's own tradition.

Both the conservative and progressive mindsets are inimical to synodality. For conservatives, the

## “Yet progressives have too often misinterpreted this more dynamic synodality under Francis”

primary preoccupation is not discerning God's will in the face of pastoral need but the need to stand up for the truth of the Catholic faith without compromise in the face of the threat of change. A Synod in this thinking can never be more than a means of designing new reiterations of timeless truths and condemning fresh errors, even claiming that this *modus operandi* is 'pastoral' because it guides people in the way of truth.

Francis's four synods have created a dynamic of ecclesial discernment that, as the family Synod followed by *Amoris Laetitia* showed, is clearly able to develop doctrine and the means of its application through a process that begins with consulting the faithful and involves the people of God at every stage. Seen through the conservative prism, this dynamic synodality raises fears of a Trojan horse concealing a plan to unravel tradition and to compromise with modernity – the very fear that led to synodality dying out in the Latin Catholic Church.

### Misinterpretation

Yet progressives have too often misinterpreted this more dynamic synodality under Francis as a reform of the Church's teaching and structures as its primary objective. The hermeneutic assumption here needs to be exposed. Where for the conservative, the hermeneutic is driven by fear of change, the progressive hermeneutic is frustrated with Church traditions and teachings, which are seen as *per se* unjust and an obstacle to evangelisation because they are antithetical to modernity. Thus, the primary task of a synod in the progressive view is to dismantle those structures in order to make the Church more acceptable.

A synod is not a parliament or a committee of inquiry in which experts debate and discuss solutions to problems, but an act of collective discernment that opens the Church to the action of the Spirit. Yet

both conservatives and progressives – feeding and at times fed by the media – framed the Synod as 'about' the Communion question, as if it had been called to resolve it.

At the conclusion of all the synods, Francis has given an address in which he surveys the ways in which the Spirit had unmasked intentions. With this in mind, synodal discernment risks being sidetracked by traditionalists concerned with the defense of doctrine against perceived threats, or by progressives anxious to change the 'unjust' structures of the Church and it has been hard to persuade progressives that the real question for the Pope after a synod is not whether this or that reform is good or what the Pope thinks but whether it is what the Spirit is asking of the Church at this time.

### “A synod is not a parliament or a committee of inquiry in which experts debate and discuss solutions to problems”

A synod creates a new kind of harmony, in which what is good and valid on all sides is preserved in a new vision that transcends the parties in disagreement. It is hard work, requiring patience and commitment, holding in tension contrary views ('contrapositions') without allowing them to fall into contradiction and polarisation, and having an expectation of resolution 'by overflow' (*desborde*). In this way, the tensions in the body become not the cause of division but fruitful, leading to new ways of seeing, especially in a crisis.

Like a good spiritual director, Francis in *Let Us Dream* makes clear the attitudes synodality demands to keep us open to the Spirit's action while warning us against the temptations that close us off from it. One is

to seek a false peace, an irenic avoidance of tension, a dishonest refusal to face the reality of conflict. Another is simplistic binary thinking that turns contrapositions into contradictions. In both cases, the Spirit is denied the freedom to act.

Typically, disappointment of an outcome reveals a pre-existing agenda: 'you come wanting to achieve something, and when you didn't get it, you feel deflated', a sign that 'you remain trapped within your desires, rather than allowing yourself to be touched by the grace on offer'. For Francis, the Spirit moves, above all, in the body of the people, acting to form the 'union of hearts and minds', a reconciled diversity that gives birth to fraternity.

The alchemy of a synod open to the Spirit allows participants to enter into reciprocity with others and with God. To fall into contradiction and polarisation is to withdraw from the reality of creation, into the lesser reality of our own ideas, to reject reciprocity in favour of the winter palaces of our own individual perceptions. Reality is discerned, says Francis, while ideas are debated. Parliaments debate ideas, synods demand discernment. To hear the Spirit in the assembly is to be healed of the illusion of my self-righteousness and self-enclosure. It is to make fraternity possible.

A Church that embraces synodality in this way can be 'like a standard lifted up among the nations', Francis said in his 2015 speech, adding: 'let us cherish the dream that a rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and of the function of authority as service will also be able to help civil society to be built up in justice and fraternity'. But for the Church to raise that standard, it must first embrace its own self: it must become synodal, to hear the Spirit in the Assembly. That remains the great task not just for Francis but, increasingly, for the whole Church in the twenty-first century.



Pope Francis speaks as Maltese Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, looks on during a meeting with representatives of bishops' conferences from around the world at the Vatican.

in recent decades. It resulted in an extraordinary 'Pentecost' moment that invigorated the Latin-American Church's understanding of its mission in the contemporary era, whose concluding document was written under the supervision of then Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

The great notes of the Francis era – a merciful, joyful, Spirit-filled Catholicism that captivates by offering the experience of the encounter with Christ; an outward-facing Church of service rooted in the people of God; a determination to reform in response to the ongoing conversion of a Church responding to the Spirit – were all first struck at Aparecida in the form of a coherent, symphonic whole.

### Influence

The influence of the vision of the Aparecida document (DA) on the Francis pontificate is by now commonplace, not least because of its obvious influence on his programmatic 2013 exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. Yet few have noted the way the Aparecida process has profoundly shaped Francis's pontificate.

For Bergoglio, there is no true synodality without the action of the Spirit, which is detected in the movements, in consolations and desolations, and above all in the action he



# A synodal Church gives new impetus to religious brothers today



Pope Francis receives applause during an audience with participants in the general chapter of the Order of Discalced Carmelites September 2021, in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican.

## Dr Martin Kenneally



**A** 2015 Vatican document along with the words of Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti* point to the need to take a fresh look at the relevance of brotherhood (and sisterhood) for humanity. Against the backdrop of our emerging post-Covid world, we face the challenges of climate change, war and an energy crisis. Providentially, the Church is embracing the synodal path. In this context, it is perhaps timely to look afresh at the relevance of the vocation of the religious brother in the Church and world today.

One of the highlights of Pope Francis' visit to Ireland in August 2018 was his visit to the Capuchin Day Centre in Dublin's inner city. There, on a daily basis, Brother Kevin Crowley, a freeman of the city, and his team of helpers provide parcels

of food, cooked meals, a space to dine and chat for hundreds of people in need of a helping hand or social companionship. Br Kevin has now returned to his native Cork. However, the work continues. The centre offers the, 'All are welcome. No questions asked' kind-of-hospitality. Pope Francis seemed very at home among a team of sisters and brothers in solidarity with those most in need.

In his encyclical, *Fratelli*

*Tutti*, Pope Francis draws on the inspiration of his namesake, St Francis of Assisi to inspire the world at this time of crisis. The document, along with the fraternal witness of Francis himself, points to an opportunity for the whole Church to take a fresh look at the need for all to live as 'brothers' (and 'sisters') in order for humanity to flourish in our post-Covid and divided world. For religious brothers, Francis' vision brings into relief the gift that their vocation of brotherhood has to offer the world at a time of unprecedented crisis and at a time when the future of our common home (planet Earth) is under threat.

### Vocation, prayer, community and service

We, religious brothers, live in community, pray together daily, and exercise a ministry of service in line with the charism of the founder. Some of us choose to join communities wholly made up of brothers. Others choose to join communities whose members include both brothers and brother priests living and working together for the mission of the Church.

Religious brotherhood, lived authentically, continues to impact so many lives for the better. And it does not go unnoticed. A fitting tribute to one such brother

can be found in the pages of *The Tablet* two years ago (17 October 2020). BBC foreign correspondent and award-winning journalist, Fergal Keane, writes movingly of the inspiration and mentoring that his teacher, Presentation Brother Jerome Kelly provided in his life from his teenage years to adulthood, in his native Cork.

### Identity and Mission

A wonderful affirmation of the brother's vocation can be found in a document entitled *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church* published by the Congregation for Institutes of Conse-

crated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL, Feast of St Francis, October 4th, 2015). This document will reward any reader, but especially those who are committed to brotherhood in spirit and/or in practice as a vocational pathway.

**“One of the highlights of Pope Francis' visit to Ireland in August 2018 was his visit to the Capuchin Day Centre”**

It reminds us that from the early centuries of Christianity, the consecrated life has been composed predominantly of lay members – women and men who yearned to live the Gospel in a radical way. It celebrates the way in which “the title of brother/sister underlies the common dignity and fundamental equality of all believers”. It affirms the vocation of the religious brother as one who “rep-

**“In his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis draws on the inspiration of his namesake, St Francis of Assisi to inspire the world at this time of crisis”**



resents a significant way of being in the ecclesial community, in which he is the *prophetic memory* of Jesus-Brother ....” Moreover, the document sees the presence of the vocation of the religious brother in the Church as calling the whole Church community to a greater sense of brotherhood and sisterhood.

**“The vocation of the brother is part of the answer that God gives to the absence of brotherhood which is wounding the world today”**

Pope Francis has spoken of the need for the Church not to be self-referential but to be present among people, especially the wounded and suffering people as one would be present in a field hospital. In this regard, the vocation of the brother can be seen to extend beyond the boundaries of the Church. In fact, in the view of the *CICLSAL document*, “the vocation of the brother is part of the answer that God gives to the absence of brotherhood which is wounding the world today”.

**“We, religious brothers, live in community, pray together daily, and exercise a ministry of service in line with the charism of the founder”**

Drawing on the words of Pope Francis, the document from *CICLSAL* continues: “Brotherhood ... is the pearl that religious brothers cultivate with special care. In this way they are for the Church community, a prophetic memory of its origin and an encouragement to return to it”.

**Pope Francis’ high regard for brothers**

The *CICLSAL* document also appeals to bishops and priests to encourage and promote knowledge and appreciation of the vocation of the religious brother in the local Churches. It asks that they promote this vocation especially in youth ministry. This might be one further concrete step in advancing Pope Francis’ dream for a more fraternal Church.

From what we know Francis has a high regard for religious brothers. In an interview with Fr. Antonio Spadaro SJ, the Pope was asked of his experience of brothers in the Society of Jesus and of how those with



Members of the Franciscan Brothers of Brooklyn, New York, hold candles during a Mass marking the feast of St Francis of Assisi at Franciscan-run St. Anthony’s High School in South Huntington, New York October 4, 2022.

the vocation to be brother could be attracted to the society. His reply is enlightening:

“My experience with the brothers has always been very positive. The brothers I lived with during my time as a student were wise men, very wise [...] And I think this has to be preserved – the wisdom, that special quality of wisdom that comes from being a brother”.

At the conclusion of *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis cites the example of Blessed Charles de Foucauld who “made a journey of transformation towards feeling a brother to all”. The Pope recalls how, “Blessed Charles ... expressed his desire to feel himself a brother to every human being and asked a friend to ‘pray to God that I truly be the brother of all’. Yet only by identifying with the least did he come at last to be the brother of all. May God inspire that dream in each one of us”.

**A special witness in a Church embracing the synodal path**

It has been said that if the message of *Laudato Si* is that “Everything is connected”, the message of *Fratelli Tutti* is that “Everyone is connected”. The vocation of the religious brother has a particular witness and contribution to offer in this regard, as the Church now embraces synodality. Now is the time for a fresh assess-

ment of the gift and witness of authentic religious brotherhood in a co-responsible Church of sisters and brothers. To be truly a Church of missionary disciples, we need constantly to refocus on Jesus, our brother and friend, and on the core gospel values of sisterhood, brotherhood, service, closeness to those made poor and care of the earth.

**“From what we know Francis has a high regard for religious brothers”**

**Invitation**

I invited young men who are seeking a deeper spiritual meaning and challenge in life to consider the vocation of the religious brother. I invite all in the Church to look at this vocation again. It has something important to offer in building a renewed synodal Church of sisters and brothers, the ‘field hospital’ Church so needed in our suffering world today.

**i** Dr Martin Kenneally is a Presentation Brother and is Director of the LEAF (Leadership Education and Formation) Project in Cork.

He accompanies young adults on their faith, vocation and discernment journeys.

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# An Institutional Failure?

Rafael Luciani, a theologian based in America, describes how synodality has become the most effective antidote to clericalism – a practice he feels has consistently arrested collaborative growth and justice in the institution.

A crowd is assembled in St Peter's Square in October 2022.

Today, we find ourselves at a crossroads. We are experiencing a crisis in the transmission of the faith, a crisis caused by the continued existence of a *clerical institutional model*. We are still dealing with “a clerical and authoritarian Church that is torn apart by the conflict between groups with a renewed awareness and traditional groups with their established structures”. In this context, we must ask, What must be reformed? Several diverse factors are at the root of the present crisis, and they must be considered as a whole, not in isolation.

Long before the Council, Yves Congar expressed that the crisis in which we find ourselves is “that of a particular Christian civilisation, a certain Christian world, a certain Christian mentality - ultimately, a crisis of sociological structures that represent, not Christian reality, but rather a

certain concrete expression of the way things are done”. Therefore, any process of reform must begin by distinguishing between that which is permanent and that which is always subject to reform.

### Eternal

As the visionary Dominican theologian explained: “Christianity is eternal, but the forms in which it is expressed and currently embodied in Christian civilisation, the actual organisation of its apostolic life, the universal and local administrative structure of the Church, even the celebration of worship and certain elements of the Christian philosophy of man and of society - all these in great part are linked to history and conditioned by a given stage of development. To desire to ascribe the value and the permanence of all these things to Christianity itself would mean absolutising what is actually relative. This

is a kind of idolatry related to the mistake of relativising what is absolute....I want to clarify the distinction and the connection between what is permanently valuable and what by its nature can become obsolete”.

“In 1972, Muñoz warned that ‘the clerical institution is one of the great structural obstacles to discovering the Gospel’”

Congar was referring to a model of institutionality that needed to be reformed because it had created and empowered an ecclesial culture and an institutional way of proceeding characterised by clericalism.

In his work *Nueva conciencia de la Iglesia en América Latina* [New awareness of

the Church in Latin America], written after the Council, one of Latin America's most important ecclesialologists, Ronaldo Muñoz, stressed the Council's call for reform not only of ecclesial mentalities but also of ecclesial structures.

In 1972, Muñoz warned that “the clerical institution is one of the great structural obstacles to discovering the Gospel”. Because he understood the clericalisation of the institution as a systemic problem, he proposed that the Church should “reform its internal relations and institutions”. If the institution's historical form—theological-cultural model—is the means by which the memory of the Faith is (or is not) communicated in each epoch, then the Church is always in need of reform. The call made by these two theologians to reform a clericalised institutional model of the Church speak to the current circumstances.

### Clericalism and ecclesial power

Today, various international studies have confirmed the diagnosis and analysis of these two great theologians from very different continents, concluding that the Church has a systemic problem. Two recent studies shed light on our reflection: (a) the *Final Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, which was set up by the Australian government to study the period 1950 to 2017; and (b) the report on “Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests, Deacons, and Male Religious in the Area of the German Bishops' Conference between 1946 and 2014”, commissioned by the German Bishop's Conference and published in 2018. The Australian report declared:

“If one had to isolate one single factor that has contributed

to the toxic response of Catholic Church leaders to victims of sexual abuse it would be clericalism.... Clericalism is a virus that has infected the Church, or any church, whereby it is believed that the churchmen, the priests, the bishops, are in some form or way sacred and above ordinary people, and because of this sacredness, because of their importance, they must be held as more important and be more protected’.

Both these studies, undertaken by interdisciplinary teams, agree that the problem of clericalism has to do with the conception and the exercise of power and authority in the Church.

The Australian commission states, “The deepest questions to be addressed at all levels in the Church are around the malaise of clericalism with its misunderstanding of power and authority and the specialness of ordination”. Such a





version and the root of many evils in the Church. We must humbly ask to be forgiven for them, and we must above all create the conditions not to repeat them”.

Among the factors contributing to the consolidation of an ecclesial clerical culture are the theology of ordained ministry, the present ecclesiological model, the exercise of power and leadership in the hierarchy, celibacy and the culture of secrecy, the theology of forgiveness, and the work environment in ecclesial structures.

All these factors share a common element that lies at the base of the problem: “The relation between power and impotence in the clerical and hierarchical system of the Catholic Church, along with the idea of an ontological change at ordination”. The Pope uses a very forceful expression: “the complex of being chosen”. He is referring to the origin of what he calls the “pathology of ecclesial power”.

Clericalism develops and flourishes in the formation houses of seminarians, and male and women religious. It extends to the parishes and the laity and is strengthened with lifestyles that are not in accord with the prophetic dimension of ecclesial ministry. Francis criticises those who understand the call to priesthood or religious life in terms of a deformed theology of “being chosen”.

### Theology

According to such a theology, God separates certain persons from the world and grants them a higher status with respect to other members of the Church. In this way ordained ministry and the clerical institution are sacralised; “priestly service is confused with priestly power.... Ministry is understood not as service but as promotion to the altar”.

The German report also recognises that “clericalism denotes a hierarchical, authoritarian system that can lead priests to adopt a dominating attitude in relating to non-ordained individuals because they occupy a superior position by virtue of their ministry and ordination”. It is possible, therefore, to speak of a whole clerical culture in which priests form part of an institutional model that is monarchical in practice and socially stratified. The very nature of such a structure has created a “clerical aristocracy” that is expressed in lifestyles and clothing as well as in relations of power and obedience that are graded and never horizontal.

A study published in Latin America by CEPROME (Center for Interdisciplinary Research and Formation for the Protection of Minors in Mexico) corroborates this finding. It maintains that in the Church’s present institutional crisis “clericalism is an important element to consider in trying to understand both the distor-

## “What must be reformed? Several diverse factors are at the root of the present crisis, and they must be considered as a whole, not in isolation”

tion of the power exercised over persons by the cleric who is called to serve and, at the institutional level, the distortion of the power exercised by the hierarchy over the people of God”.

### The systemic problem of an ecclesiological model

We are faced with an ecclesial culture that needs reform; we are dealing with a “state of things”, not simply individual actions or isolated instances of abuse in the exercise of power. And since it is an ecclesial culture, it affects everything and everybody in the Church because “there are attitudinal, behavioral, and institutional dimensions to the phenomenon of clericalism”.

In other words: Clericalism arises from both personal and social dynamics, is expressed in various cultural forms, and often is reinforced by institutional structures. Among its chief manifestations are an authoritarian style of ministerial leadership, a rigidly hierarchical worldview, and a virtual identification of the holiness and grace of the Church with the clerical state and, thereby, with the cleric himself.

Theologian Eamonn Conway argues that this situation forces us to consider the possibility of “institutional failure”. The problems concern not only

organisational forms and technical procedures in the Church, which are mentioned also in a study commissioned by the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, but above all an *ecclesiological model* whose theological and cultural bases are in crisis, making it clear that the ecclesial structure “has a problem with power”.

### “Theologian Eamonn Conway argues that this situation forces us to consider the possibility of ‘institutional failure’”

Jörg Fegert and Michael Kölch assert that these problems cannot be attributed to the bad conduct of individuals, something that can be corrected; rather, we are faced with the failure of the Church’s present *institutional form*. Thus, as the German bishops point out, “the failure of the institution that does not protect victims” is directly related to the abuse of power in the Church, specifically sexual abuse.

Consequently, if “the problem is systemic and [exists] in every part of the Catholic Church at the international level”, if it adheres to a Constantinian ecclesiology that defines an ontologically une-

qual society, and if it “gives rise to a dual model of Church in which the Church of the clergy is superior and more ‘holy’ when compared with the Church of the laity”, then the question is this: How do we build a new institutional model that is not clericalised? The answer necessarily involves the conversion of the hierarchical institution.

In accordance with the spirit and the letter of Vatican II, this means situating collegiality and primacy within the people of God, not vice versa, with the objective of forging a new ecclesial way of proceeding that implies the conversion of mentalities and the reform of structures.

The Spanish Benedictine Luis Duch used to speak of the need to recover structures of acceptance that can mediate human relations and forge creative links between past, present, and future.

### Community

Regarding the Church, however, Ronaldo Muñoz stressed that it needs to become a community of free and open persons who cooperate responsibly: “The Church should be a community in which all unite in solidarity and participate actively in an attitude of ongoing searching and self-criticism. At all levels there should be structures of participation for lay people, religious, and priests and the possibility of choosing the representatives and leaders.

The hierarchy should consult the laity regarding their pastoral decisions and their declarations. The hierarchy should trust more in the maturity of the laity, especially working-class folk, and should recognise in practice the autonomy of initiative and movement that corresponds to the laity in temporal affairs. The priests, religious, and active laity of the local church should participate in the naming of the bishop”.

In this beautiful, though challenging description of *ecclesiality*, we can find the emergence of a synodal Church. Latin America’s ecclesial reception of the Second Vatican Council took place originally in 1968 at Medellín, the Second Latin American Episcopal Conference, which proclaimed the Church as the people of God in the midst of all the peoples of this earth (LG 13), truly a *Church of churches* (LG 23).

**i** Rafael Luciani is a Lay Venezuelan theologian, appointed as Expert of the Theological Commission of the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops, Expert of CELAM (Latin American Bishops’ Council) and Member of the Theological Advisory Team of the Presidency of CLAR (Latin American Confederation of Religious man and women).

Taken with kind permission from Rafael Luciani’s book, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church*, printed by Paulist Press.



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diagnosis agrees closely with the analysis that Pope Francis has been making.

### “Various international studies have confirmed the diagnosis and analysis of these two great theologians from very different continents”

During his apostolic journey to Mozambique and Madagascar, Francis told the Jesuits, “Clericalism is a true perversion in the Church.... Clericalism condemns, separates, frustrates, and despises the people of God”. And he told the Synod of Bishops in 2018, “It is necessary to overcome decisively the plague of clericalism.... Clericalism is a per-



# Leadership, inclusion, and participation

A synodal Church is a participatory and co-responsible Church, writes

**Veronica J. Rop**



**W**hen opening the Synod on Synodality, Pope Francis noted that “by walking together, and together reflecting on the journey made, the Church will be able to learn from what it will experience which processes can help it to live communion, to achieve participation and to open itself to mission”.

For the Church in Africa, where most people are used to walking together either to the marketplace, pasture, or farm or simply on a journey, the term synodality evokes vivid experiences. It is in walking together that relationships are built and strengthened. Strangers are discovered to be a long-distant relatives and family members. Those who get tired along the way are encouraged, supported, and guided to continue the journey.

**“Synodal leadership ensures that participation in discernment and decision-making processes is not left to a few since the Spirit is the one leading us all”**

With the above background, co-responsibility as a way of leadership in synodality means leading with others to go far and achieve much. It is listening carefully and respectfully to the experiences and ideas of each person or group, regardless of their age, gender, education, socioeconomic status, tribe, or position in the Church.

Synodal leadership ensures that participation in discernment and decision-making processes is not left to a few since the Spirit is the one leading us all. Therefore, the spirit of inclusion, which ensures the active participation of the marginalised, women, youth, and people with various challenges and their families is integral to synodality.

Numerous examples from the scriptures have shown that leadership, participation, and inclusion go hand in hand and keep changing even as people listen, discern, and follow the direction of the Spirit. One such example is Moses leading the people of Israel from Egypt, the land of slavery, to Canaan, the Promised Land. Moses led God's people alongside his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam (cf. Num 12:15-16; Josh 8:30-35).

Others who led with Moses

were the judges (cf. Ex 18:25-26), the priests or Levites (cf. Num 1:50-51) and the elders (cf. Num 11:16-17, 24-30). From the start, Moses ensured that women (Miriam), children, and even foreigners (cf. Josh 8:33-35) were part of his leadership team. What made Moses a successful leader was his ability to lead with others by carefully listening to and incorporating their experiences and ideas in his leadership.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, will always remain the ideal model of synodality. She embraced co-responsibility by accepting to be the mother of our saviour and part of her son's ministry, i.e., at his birth, ministry, death, and even after his resurrection (cf. Lk 1:38, 45, 8:21, 11:28; Acts 1:13-14).

This means that inviting women to take active part in synodality is not something foreign. Women have always played a crucial role in God's salvific plan. They still bring their unique gifts, talents, and perspectives that the Church needs.

In his incarnation, life, works, teachings, passion, death, and resurrection, Jesus revealed to us what leadership, participation, and inclusion entail. He showed God's love for the oppressed and those marginalised by communities, society, and religion by touching lepers, eating with sinners, allowing prostitutes to touch him, and engaging with women (cf. Jn 4:27).

A demonstration of this leadership is in the encounter between Jesus and the samaritan woman. Jesus as a leader par excellence did away with societal and religious customs to honour the dignity of the samaritan woman and included her in his ministry (Jn 4:1-42).

## Opportunity

Synodality then is an opportunity for those active in the Church to seek the excluded and marginalised and listen to them, without judging, to hear what the Spirit is saying and use their experiences and ideas to strengthen the body of Christ. Synodality is an occasion to restore people to the Church by listening to their stories and being open to how, what, and where the Spirit is leading the Church to.

Jesus incorporated his disciples in his ministry of proclaiming the good news of the reign of God. He invited his disciples to participate in the feeding of the 5,000 people. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, is presented as participating by identifying a boy in the crowd: “There's a little boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish”.

As was his custom, Jesus gave the disciples the opportunity to



Just like Jesus invited his disciples to participate in the feeding of 5,000 people, the Church is called upon to reach out to the masses and realise that every person, idea, and perspective matters.

do the work themselves while he encouraged them. Moreover, the presence of the little boy brings to attention the challenge of inclusion and how what might be considered of little importance might be the game changer or key in a synodal process. Every person, idea, and perspective matters.

**“Thus, discernment and prayer - listening to one another and adhering to the teaching and the spirit of Jesus active in the Church - is important”**

Employing various ethical means is crucial to hearing what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Using all forms of media, especially social media, to share synodal proceedings as well as to enable engagement from a wider and diverse audience will be enriching.

This requires going beyond prejudices, stereotypes, and positions of power to listening and giving every person a chance to join the walk again and feel included. We all have a moral obligation as the family of God to listen to

the many Christians who may be polygamous, divorced, single parents, former priests and religious, and those who have a different sexual orientation, to fully participate in the Church.

Thus, discernment and prayer - listening to one another and adhering to the teaching and the spirit of Jesus active in the Church - is important. Inclusion plays a crucial role here, and Jesus' example is key. The relationship between co-responsible leadership and participation is clearly brought out in Jesus' ministry of inclusion, where he incorporated sinners into his ministry such as the woman who anointed him with perfumed oil (Lk 7:37-47) and the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:3-11).

Mary Magdalene is identified as being among the women who accompanied and ministered to Jesus (Lk 8:2-3). Again, Jesus called Matthew or Levi, a tax collector who was considered a sinner by virtue of his profession. On account of his calling, many other tax collectors and sinners found a saviour in the person of Jesus (Mt 9:9-13; Mk 2:13-17; Lk 5:27-32).

## Jesus' ministry

In fact many of the periphery of society such as the lepers (Lk 5:13-16), the deaf (Mk 7:31-37), the blind man (Lk 18:35-42; Mt 20:29-34), the sick man lowered

through the roof by friends (Lk 5:17-39), and even the non-Jewish woman whose daughter was healed by Jesus (Mt 15:21-28) all found places in Jesus' ministry.

**“Mary Magdalene is identified as being among the women who accompanied and ministered to Jesus (Lk 8:2-3)”**

Synodality is a moment to remind ourselves that as the baptised, we are all called in our shared leadership, prophetic, and priestly roles to actively get involved in making the reign of God a reality. Synodality is a time to allow the Spirit to breathe new life into our lived experiences just as the Spirit did during the life of Jesus and in the early Christian community to promote teamwork and co-responsibility of all the faithful.

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# Ecumenism and Synodality



Pope Francis greets Anglican Archbishop Bernard Ntahoturi, director of the Anglican Centre in Rome and the archbishop of Canterbury's personal representative to the Holy See, during his general audience in St Peter's Square at the Vatican.

The dialogue between Christians of different confessions, united by one baptism, has a special place in the synodal journey, writes

**Anthony Egan SJ.**



**A**s we prepare for the Synod on Synodality, it is worth reflecting on its ecumenical dimension. The theme of ecumenism is peppered throughout the preparatory texts and most notably in the 2018 International Theological Commission's *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (hereafter ITC) but also referred to in the Preparatory Document (PD) and the *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality (VM). Here I shall attempt to analyse them through a series of theological proposals.

## Ecumenism is an essential part of Catholic renewal

Ecumenism is the search for Christian unity through ongoing dialogue between churches (over teaching and practice) to heal the divisions between Christians. Vatican II (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 1964) called such divisions scandalous and needing healing. Although the process has been difficult, considerable steps have been made toward reunion. In *Ut unum sint* (1995), John Paul II insisted that the process

should continue.

In recent years, a new approach to the process called receptive ecumenism has encouraged the idea of receiving and celebrating the various spiritual gifts different Christian traditions can offer one another. Catholics have come to see the value of preaching and the word through interactions with Protestants who know and love scripture as well as the beauty of joyous worship from Pentecostalism. Protestants can and have increasingly come to see the importance of the Eucharist or Mass in building Christian community.

## “A similar thing happens in dialogue between Christians and non-Christian religions”

The preliminary texts for the Synod welcome the ecumenical “journey involving the whole people of God,” a journey of conversion of heart “in order to demolish the walls ... which have separated Christians” (ITC, n. 115). They state that the goal of ecumenism

is “to discover, share and rejoice in the many riches that unite us as” (ibid.). These are gifts that are to be shared, a central theme of receptive ecumenism.

A similar thing happens in dialogue between Christians and non-Christian religions. The inter-faith dialogue seeks not to convert each other but to understand and respect each other's Faith and discover points where persons of faith (and anyone of good will) can work together for the good of everyone.

## We can learn much from other Christian churches

Synodality has happened from Jesus' first disciples to the present as Magesa mentions in his essay. Such a process of prayerful decision making together happened in the early Church on local, regional, and international levels. It remains central to leadership in the Orthodox churches, which continue following “the tradition of the [Early Church] Fathers, particularly on the level of patriarchal [i.e., diocesan] and metropolitan [i.e., regional] Synods” (ITC, n. 31). In various forms (noted in ITC, n. 36), it is practiced in Anglican and Protestant churches.

The Anglican Church describes itself as run by synods and led by bishops. In some Anglican churches such as the Church of England, key decisions have to gain the majority support of all three houses (bishops, clergy, and

laity) to be implemented. Members of these houses have to be elected by their constituents.

Internationally, the Faith and Order (doctrine and worship) Commission of the World Council of Churches affirms that guided by the Spirit, the whole Church is “synodal/conciliar, at all levels of [Church] life” (ITC, n. 117). This does not mean that all churches approach synodality in the same way, nor should we assume that our forthcoming synod will have voting, democratic “houses” like the Anglicans or any other model.

## “People sharing what they believe and how they live what they believe will help everyone learn more and deepen their faith”

What it means is that we can and should talk with and draw on the experience not only of our common past but also on the experiences - good and bad - of fellow Christians for whom the process is more common. And we will be speaking of our experiences of faith with each other so we will see how what we are taught by the Church ties into how we live our faith.

## This synodal process has ecumenical implications

Though the synodal process may seem strange to many of us, perhaps even sounding quite “Protestant,” given the way the Church is inviting everyone to participate (cf. VM, 2.1), even this is subject to certain limitations and this too has ecumenical implications.

Significantly in the ITC text, there is an implication that our model of synodality has certain limitations (ITC, n. 117). The traditional Catholic understanding distinguishes between the general power (or charisma) of the *sensus fidei* (sense of the faithful) guided by the Holy Spirit and the specific knowledge, gifts, and skills of priests, bishops, and those who teach theology. Not everyone in the Church has the same knowledge of the Faith though all should try to improve their knowledge. We must also remember that some basic, common things such as the Creed cannot simply be changed though there might be space for new ways of looking at them. People sharing what they believe and how they live what they believe will help everyone learn more and deepen their faith.

When churches engage in ecumenical dialogue, church leaders and theologians often come to see that the same thing they

all believe can be said differently and still be true or done in a new way, a way that makes our Faith stronger.

But from the preparation documents (especially the PD and VM), we see that the synodality process will go beyond this kind of dialogue of experts, embracing too the *sensus fidei* of all Catholics. Hopefully, we will also listen to the *sensus fidei* of other ordinary Christians too.

It is worth noting here that ecumenism is possibly the strongest among ordinary people; Catholics and non-Catholics share workplaces and friendships and are very often parts of the same family. This experience will hopefully be shared at the Synod whether by lay Catholics or even non-Catholic guests. At least, one hopes we will hear what it's like for some families splitting up to go to different churches on Sunday mornings.

## Ecumenism is a picture of what the synod seeks for the Church

Though not widely discussed in the preliminary documents, ecumenism is in some ways a picture of what the Synod seeks for the Church

Just as ecumenism is walking and working and talking together to find what Christians have in common, in the walking and working and talking (particularly over problems we share such as poverty and injustice), we come together more than we think. In the past, synodality is familiar practice in non-Catholic churches like the Anglican Church. We have learnt and are still learning from this.

If the Synod's goal of giving everyone a voice and reaching out even to ex-Catholics is to be achieved fully, it is even a kind of ecumenism with ourselves. We should embrace the practice and wisdom of receptive ecumenism to speak to each other as Catholics about matters facing us as Catholics and to seek reconciliation in a Church that is, whether we like it or not, often very divided within itself. We should not expect quick and easy solutions; ecumenical dialogue has taught us that agreement is often slow and difficult. But the spirit of openness, of receiving and enjoying the gifts and insights of each other, may help us as Catholics to better walk, work and talk together.

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# Christmas: Birthing possibilities for both child and adult



## Diarmuid O'Murchu MSC



**A**s the Carol proclaims: Christmas is indeed the most wonderful time of the year. It is a time for joviality, family celebration, and a revival of religious fervour. And despite the decline of religion in the western world, the Christmas crib adorns many a public space, symbolising a birthing of new life, and an awakening sense of hope in our endarkened world.

The central message is about the birthing of God in our world,

the God of unconditional love, coming close to the people and inviting us, too, to birth forth a world that will offer greater joy and hope to all God's creation.

### A celebration of inclusive hospitality

Families welcome loved ones coming home for Christmas, often from places far away. Despite the fact that John's Gospel asserts that Jesus came to his own and his own received him not (Jn.1:11),

the contrary was probably the truth. Even if Jesus was born out of wedlock, which is how people would have understood the event in the real world of that time, Jewish hospitality was such that Joseph, and members of Joseph's family would ensure that she gave birth in a safe place, with the attendant medical and human supports that would have been available.

Therefore, in all probability Jesus was not born in a shepherd's cave, but in a house provided by Joseph or by his close friends. In the social context of that time, normally everybody slept in one room, yet visitors, including unexpected ones were always accommodated. They would have been put in the downstairs section where the animals were also housed. Therefore, portraying Jesus in a crib surrounded

by animals like a donkey, a cow, some sheep, may well be factually accurate.

**“For a growing body of adult Christians today, this is an understanding of our Faith that is rapidly losing all sense of credibility”**

The crib also describes a scene of two groups extending a special welcome to the newly arrived infant-God: Shepherds, and Wise Men (erroneously described as kings). Shepherds played an important role as sheep minders, and yet were viewed in a rather negative light, often regarded as social outcasts and in some cases

considered ritually impure; their inclusion in the crib provides an unambiguous declaration that a new era of radical inclusivity is about to begin.

Similarly with the Wise Men, probably best described as soothsayers, specialising in reading the stars to guide humans through their earthly journey in a variety of different ways. They would have been viewed at the time with a mixture of awe and strangeness. In the crib they symbolise inclusivity of cosmic wisdom, stretching the new born wisdom far beyond the traditional view of the one who came mainly (if not exclusively) to save sinful humanity.

Humans, young and old, animals, shepherds, soothsayers, and even angels are all together in this amazing horizon of original hospitality and a radical inclusiv-





A woman carries a branch trimmed from the Christmas tree during its positioning in St Peter's Square at the Vatican.

An Iraqi woman, dressed as Santa Claus, distributes gifts to displaced children at Baharka camp in Irbil, Iraq.

ity that was largely unheard of in the world - then or now!

### The birthing breakthrough

According to the prevailing understanding in the Christian tradition, Christmas marks the commemoration of the birth of Jesus, God's first entry into our human world, the beginnings of salvation for sinful humans. And a reminder of the God who will come again at the end of time to judge the world and bring the reign of sin to an end.

For a growing body of adult Christians today, this is an understanding of our Faith that is rapidly losing all sense of credibility. It is perceived to be too narrowly human (as if nothing else in creation matters to God), too negative (what about the goodness of God visible in so many features of creation), and too reductionistic (in terms of the God who has been in

work in creation for billions of years, in accordance with the time frames of modern science).

The Christmas story lends itself to several deeper meanings, beyond the literal interpretation of both the Gospels and the inherited Christmas story. Let's begin with the statement: The virgin will give birth (Matt.1:23 - compare with Is.7:14). Matthew bases his assertion on a text from the book of Isaiah, and applies it to Mary alleging that her pregnancy has been made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. In Isaiah, the Hebrew word employed is *almah*, not *betula* which would mean virgin in a literal biological sense.

**“Christmas is very much a season for children, with the focus on Santa Claus and the childlike fascination of the child in the crib”**

*Almah* has a totally different meaning, and needs to be understood in mystical, archetypal terms rather than literally. It denotes a young woman fertile and potentially creative to give birth to stars, galaxies, planets, animals, humans, and everything else in creation. The virgin is a

symbol of divine creativity across the entire web of life, but also includes the normal human process of sexual reproduction and the birthing power of women in particular.

“Conceived by the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 1:20) is another grossly misunderstood statement. Since the Spirit is the wellspring of all creative energy in the universe, every process of coming to birth, human and non-human alike, is the work of the Holy Spirit. In the human realm, the Holy Spirit is central to every act of love-making, and to every human pregnancy and birth process.

Therefore, the Christmas narrative invites and challenges us to take birthing seriously as a primary way in which God works in our world. The great mystic Meister Eckhardt one time asked: “What does God do all day long?” And he adds: “God lies on a maternity bed giving birth all days long.” If Christian theology had adopted the metaphor of God as a Great Birther, rather than as a Ruling King, we would have a very different theology today, and a very different understanding of our Faith as a Christian people.

### From Jesus the child to the adult Jesus

Christmas is very much a season for children, with the focus on

Santa Claus and the childlike fascination of the child in the crib. In a world where so many children are undernourished and abused, and brutalised by violence and so many forms of oppression, we can be rightly proud of how we make Christmas so special for children. However, there is a shadow-side to this focus on the child, one that has done considerable damage to our faith as adult believers.

**“The infant of the Christmas crib needs the tender care which everybody deserves, child and adult alike”**

Over the centuries, in Christianity (and in other religions too), the ideal disciple and believer has been admonished to trust God, and rely on God with childlike simplicity, and by implication to behave accordingly in how we live out our Faith as adults. The good Christian therefore, was commended and admired for being humble, loyal, obedient, and subservient to God and to God's representatives on Earth. For much of the history of Christianity, therefore, passive obedience was considered to be a supreme virtue.

This is quite a distortion, and a disturbing departure, from

the vision and mission of Jesus as outlined in the Gospels. The Gospel vision of the Kingdom of God, the Sermon on the Mount, the liberating and empowering strategy of the parable and miracle stories, all point to an adult Jesus inviting adult people into proactive adult discipleship. There is no room in this vision for the kind of co-dependency (childlike passivity) that has been so often preached and taught in the name of Jesus. To the contrary, all Christians are called forth as friends, not servants, to be co-disciples with Jesus in co-creating a better world marked by love, justice, liberation, and empowerment.

### Integrating the adult in our celebration of Christmas

While we love our children and make Christmas special for them, let's not forget the adult believer, for too long condemned to childlike co-dependency. The infant of the Christmas crib needs the tender care which everybody deserves, child and adult alike. Let's not forget, however, that this infant figure of our Christian faith is the outcome of a birthing universe, destined to give birth to a new world of Gospel liberation and empowerment. Central to that project are people who live out their faith in committed adult allegiance. While we continue to celebrate with our children, let's hope that this Christmas will also help to awaken, and reinforce, the call to adult discipleship, so urgently needed in the church and world of our time.

**“While we love our children and make Christmas special for them, let's not forget the adult believer, for too long condemned to childlike co-dependency”**



## Peter Keenan

‘Humility’ was not in the repertoire of Herod the Great’s personality traits. By any standards, he was a homicidal maniac, but the one ‘crime’ he did not commit is the mythical Massacre of the Innocents (Matthew 2:16–18).

The term ‘myth’ has frequently been employed by academics in their study of the Infancy Narratives, which lies partly behind Chapter 4’s ‘Divine Heroes’, but if ‘myth’ signifies fictions that cannot be taken seriously it fails to communicate the richness of the concept, leading to superficial judgements about religious narratives.

Myth, properly experienced, is a source of spiritual transformation, and unless an event like Jesus’ birth, with all the mythical trappings surrounding it – the angelic chorus and the story of the murder of toddlers, for instance – cannot be liberated from the confines of a specific time and place, and brought into the life of Christians living in a world after Copernicus and Darwin, it will deservedly perish.

The purpose of myth is not to provide information. It is to invite people to embrace truths that are as invisible as music yet as positive as sound, to paraphrase Emily Dickinson in a very different context.

When, every year, we pray before nativity scenes, believers are participating in a powerful ritual reflecting the positive sounds of that first and *invisible* Silent Night. Christians know the Christmas story to be true, not because it conforms to a checklist of historical data but because of its power to transform lives.

**“Thomas’ legendary account of William’s murder presents him as a Christian martyr who worked miracles”**

We impoverish the wonder of religion when it is reduced to ‘argument’ and ‘theology’. Arguments, no matter how erudite, seldom change people. Only stories, not legend or dogma, have the power to address ‘the better angels of our nature’, as Jesus and Abraham Lincoln knew so well, because they give us the hope of a future redeemed from the terrors of the past.

Religious mythology is not to be identified with legends or fairy tales, which are clearly not factual, but they typically serve a didactic purpose. Myth and story, however, availing of the analogical and oblique nature of religious language, communicate truths of enduring significance.

One medieval legend, with a definite purpose obliquely reflecting the myth-midrash of Herod’s Murder of the Innocents, comes from the Tyrol in modern Austria. It tells of ‘little Catholic children being kidnapped by Jews so that they could be murdered in one of the services held in the synagogue’.

The legend is typical of many circulating at the time, the most

# Better to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son

‘Down with the Jews, they kill innocent children!’ – Norwich, England, 1144 and Limerick, Ireland, 1904/5



A painting of the Massacre of the Innocents by Peter Paul Rubens.

infamous one concerning William of Norwich, who was twelve years old when he disappeared a few days after Easter 1144. He was known to the city’s Jewish community. His slain and mutilated body was found by a nun and a forester. Thomas of Monmouth, a Benedictine monk, writing ten years later, produced ‘evidence’ that ‘the Jews abducted William for demonic ritual purposes, subjecting him to the cruellest of tortures and a slow, agonising death’.

His mother, according to Thomas, unwittingly gave the child to ‘a Jew’, for which she was paid three (silver) shillings, a clear allusion to Judas’ supposed betrayal of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (*DJJ* argues that Judas did not betray Jesus, and that the claim is a midrash on 1 Corinthians 11:23–24).

### Martyr

Thomas’ legendary account of William’s murder presents him as a Christian martyr who worked miracles, and ‘the key to appreciating his death lay in the murderous guilt of the Jews’, who ‘scourged and crucified William, just as the Jews of Judaea had scourged and crucified Jesus’.

‘Blood’ is a theme common to these grotesque fantasies, where the purpose of ‘demonic rituals’ is to extract and drink children’s blood, clearly parodying the Last Supper. Thomas argued further that one of the reasons why the Jews targeted William was because his innocence made him more susceptible to their ‘financial avarice’.

Most historians agree that the Norwich ritual murder libel of 1144

was ‘the first of its kind in Medieval Europe’, providing a template for ‘many similar accusations that would come in its wake’.

Early in the thirteenth century an Austrian poet wrote:

*In every year it happens still  
The Jews Christ’s Passion offer,  
When a Christian boy they kill.*

The Catholic Encyclopaedia renounces the preposterous claims of ritual murder, but it then proceeds with the extraordinary observation that Jews may have murdered ‘some of these victims’ because of their *odium fidei*, that is, Jewish hatred of Christianity. What ‘victims’? There were no child victims of ritual murder, but countless Jews have been murdered by hateful Christians.

The legend almost certainly had a long oral tradition prior to its literary representations in the twelfth century, which soon spread throughout Europe, and that oral tradition is related to a misunderstanding of the story about King Herod killing ‘the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or younger’ (Matthew 2:16).

### Anti-Semitism

Ireland has been almost entirely free of overt anti-Semitism, with one major exception: The Limerick Boycott of 1904/5. One night in January 1904, a large mob converged on the homes and businesses of the small number of Jews residing in Limerick. The mob had come directly from a gathering of the Archconfraternity of the Holy Family, at which, supported by referencing libels and slanders of ritual murder, and naming so-called ‘martyr victims’ (‘William’ probably

had a mention), a sermon had been given by a Redemptorist priest, John Creagh, in which he asserted:

- that the Jews, because of their ‘financial avarice’, were responsible for enslaving the people of Limerick to usury;
- that they murdered *the Christ*;
- that the citizens of Limerick must immediately boycott Jewish businesses.

**“Herod certainly murdered three of them and possibly more, in addition to having his favourite wife of ten, Mariamne, strangled”**

A week later, Creagh (d. 1947) repeated the same allegations, this time exhorting the confraternity members not to resort to violence. Early the following year, a reporter from *The Jewish Chronicle* visited Limerick, where he witnessed Jews being attacked ‘right and left’, with some having to run for their lives. He reported organised protests, with the mob yelling ‘Down with the Jews, they kill innocent children’.

Creagh exploited and inflamed the consequences of the Dreyfus Affair (1894–99) and the appalling Kishinev Pogrom of 1903 in Russia, which occasioned a massive surge to the West of Eastern European Jews. It is a mercy that, unlike at Kishinev, there were no fatalities in Limerick.

These crimes were fuelled by the rise of late nineteenth-century racial anti-Semitism and Creagh had tapped into a religious and histori-

cal sewer, reflecting the opprobrious *Teaching of Contempt*, typified by Thomas of Monmouth’s lies. The William Legend that had originated in twelfth-century Norwich erupted again in twentieth-century Limerick, and probably had its remote origins in a first-century midrash about Jesus as the ‘new Moses’, written about eighty years after Herod’s death.

Herod the Great was recognised by Rome as ‘King of the Jews’ in 40 BCE, gaining full control of his territories three years later (37). ‘Herod’ means ‘sprung from a hero’. There is little doubt that history does not judge Herod to be heroic. Of his many children, Herod certainly murdered three of them and possibly more, in addition to having his favourite wife of ten, Mariamne, strangled. For good measure, Herod also executed Alexandra (his mother-in-law), her brother and Mariamne’s grandfather and brother, and countless others (garrotting and burning to death were the preferred means of dispatching his victims).

### Safe

Pigs, however, were safe from Herod’s murderous reach, as demonstrated by Caesar Augustus’ sardonic quip, ‘Better to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son’, knowing that Herod – a Jew – would abstain from pork.

It is little wonder that people have no difficulty believing Herod to have murdered children, but he is entirely innocent of the ‘crime’. There was no Massacre of the Innocents. The purpose of the story is to draw a parallel between Pharaoh’s (probably unhistorical) efforts to kill the infant



Moses and Jesus as the 'new Moses', who will ultimately meet a violent end. It has nothing to do with the Herod of history, who is deservedly famed for his extensive building programme, in particular the extension to the Temple – probably the most splendid building of the ancient world.

**“Matthew is telling us that the shadow of Roman imperial dominance, present at Jesus’ birth, would not be allowed to triumph by his death”**

Matthew has constructed the story as a parallelism between Moses the Great and Jesus the Greater, illustrated also by their manner of escape: for Moses, it is *away* from Egypt; for Jesus it is *into* Egypt. In other words, the place of past oppression and despair for Moses becomes a centre of hope and refuge for Jesus.

This hope motif is intended for Matthew’s readers, and he communicates it employing a brilliant narrative device when the Magi reach Jerusalem, having them ask, ‘Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?’ (2:2b). Herod then inquires of his advisers where the Messiah is to be born (2:4), and in this context ‘Messiah’ is a synonym for ‘King of the Jews’. This second title is not employed again until the *Passion Narratives*, where it figures three times, typically when Pilate asks, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ (27:11).

The background is the year 40 BCE when Mark Antony and Octavian contrived to make Herod ‘King of the Jews’, and its use in this *Infancy Narrative* is intended as an overture to the gospel, culminating on Calvary, when the inscription ‘King of the Jews’ is placed at the head of the cross (27:37). Its role as the gospel’s bookend is a reminder that the objective of the Roman-appointed Herod who sought to kill Jesus was finally achieved by another Roman, Pilate.

Matthew is telling us that the shadow of Roman imperial dominance, present at Jesus’ birth, would not be allowed to triumph by his death, which explains the words attributed to the (Gentile) centurion at the foot of the cross, ‘Truly, this man was God’s son’ (27:54).

Whoever wrote Matthew’s Gospel would also have made a superb thriller writer, dropping brilliant indicators like bookends, headers and footers into the plot.

The Massacre of the Innocents and almost all of the material in the *Passion Narratives* are not recorded history, but rather exercises in retrospective theology, and this is also how we should understand Rachel’s voice raised in Ramah, wailing and weeping for her children (2:18). It is used as a fulfilment citation, from *Jeremiah 31:15*, to indicate that Herod’s putative slaughter of children was fore-ordained, but it has additional symbolic importance.

Ramah is where 600 years earlier the Babylonians had kept their Jewish captives prior to deportation to Mesopotamia (587/6). Matthew’s purpose is to establish a midrashic association between the two occurrences, the point being that Jesus’ temporary exile in Egypt will eventually result in a better outcome for his people than the disaster occasioned by the Babylonian Exile (of course, Matthew had no way of knowing that, 2,000 years later, millions of Jesus’ people would perish in the Holocaust).

### Homeland

The Babylonian Exile came to an end in 539 BCE, when Cyrus, King of Persia, permitted the Jews to return to their homeland. (Of interest is the likelihood that the exiles brought back with them, derived from Zoroastrianism, beliefs about resurrection from the dead.)

Another fulfilment citation is the one that attests to the *Flight into Egypt*: ‘Out of Egypt, I have called my son’ (Hosea 11:1). Raymond Brown observes that the verse referred originally to the Exodus from Egypt, and Matthew interpreted it in relation to Jesus, ‘who relives in his own life the history of that people’. Geza



Vermes notes that the *Flight into Egypt* presents us with an Exodus in reverse, providing the circumstances whereby Jesus can return to Israel, in fulfilment of the Hosea citation.

As with ‘prophecy’, there is a problem with ‘fulfilment citations’. The difficulty is that they are presented in terms of Jesus alone being able to fulfil them, typified by the misattribution of Greek Isaiah 7:14, discussed earlier.

**“Whoever wrote Matthew’s Gospel would also have made a superb thriller writer, dropping brilliant indicators like bookends, headers and footers into the plot”**

Matthew and other New Testament writers employ this methodology, which in essentials is an exercise in midrashic selectivism, critiqued by Paula Fredriksen:

- Matthew in particular is engaged in an exercise of ‘theological appropriation’, meaning that his use of citation/proof-texts suggest

implicitly ‘the incompleteness of Judaism’, which soon thereafter led to the popular ‘Christian’ belief that Jesus had abrogated his ancestral faith – nothing could be further from the historical truth.

- This Gospel has chosen selected quotations, chiefly from Isaiah, Jeremiah and the Minor Prophets (Micah, for instance). They are notoriously ambiguous and replete with metaphors.
- The remainder of the Hebrew Bible, however, does not lend itself so easily to such interpretations, the consequence being that all of Scripture’s teachings become focused on *Jesus the Christ* and only those texts considered to support this ‘identification’ are deemed of relevance.

### Observations

Fredriksen’s observations matter because they highlight a problem that besets Christianity to this day – its implicit and sometimes explicit assumption that first-century Judaism rejected Jesus as the ‘Promised One’. It did no such thing, for a variety of reasons, and not least because the historical Jesus almost certainly made no such claim on his own behalf, no more than Judaism when

he was alive subscribed to belief in a divine Messianic figure.

Jesus died a loyal son of the covenant and it is therefore wholly inappropriate to accuse Jews of a failure to recognise ‘their Messiah’, an accusation that has had disastrous consequences for the ancestors of *Jesus the Jew*, culminating in the abomination that is the Holocaust.

By the early second century, however, when emerging (Gentile) Christianity began to interpret literally Herod’s Massacre of the Innocents, it had unwittingly cast the die for a developing hostile relationship between Judaism and Christianity, typified by some of the Apocryphal gospels, including those pertaining to Jesus’ childhood:

“When a Jew saw what Jesus had done, while playing with friends at a stream, he went to Joseph and complained that his son, having turned soft clay into twelve sparrows, had profaned the Sabbath”.

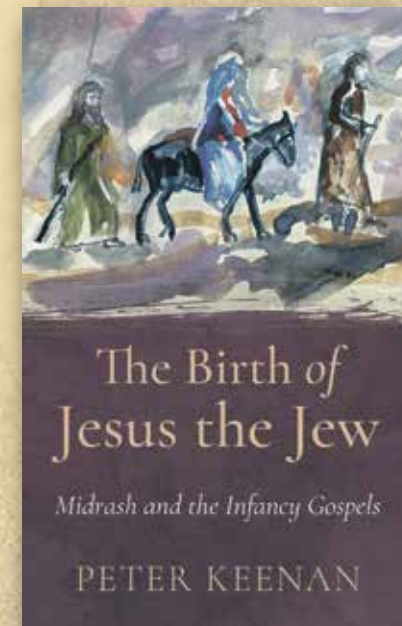
**i** Peter Keenan is the author of *The Birth of Jesus the Jew: No Star of Bethlehem. Midrash and the Infancy Gospels published by Columba books*. His next book, *The Death of Jesus the Jew will be published in early 2023*.

# The Perfect Christmas Reflection

## The Birth of Jesus the Jew

A short introduction on how the Jewish literary genre of ‘Midrash’ has shaped the infancy stories in the canonical Gospels. Peter Keenan argues that these important testimonies are not ‘historical’ in the way we understand the term, but rather theological - for example Jesus was most certainly born in Nazareth, not Bethlehem.

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# THE SYNODAL TIMES

## Needs Your Support



### An Appeal from Our Editor

The Catholic publishing world got shocking news recently when it was announced that after 100 years of providing quality journalism about the church, Catholic News Service (CNS) would be closed. Diocesan newspapers in America are also cutting back or closing. This comes at a time when ironically the US Catholic Church has completed its synthesis report for Rome and is reporting that synodality is a source of renewal in the American church. American Catholics want more synodality and more communications. Irish Catholics have said the same and so have so many other churches internationally.

*The Synodal Times* is a monthly newspaper committed to its mission of keeping the flame of synodality alive and the vision of a church where all get to participate and have their voices heard become a norm, here and around the world.

We are also committed to providing excellent adult faith development in response to the very clear call from every diocese in Ireland, and many in other countries, for faith development. Often it is lamented that we live in a secular culture and yet focus group after focus group shows Catholics hungering for knowledge and instruction in how to grow in their faith.

We need your support to hire young reporters who are interested in good Catholic journalism, to continue to commission theologians and scripture scholars to write for us, and to ensure that our paper in digital and print format is widely distributed.

Pope Francis has said that synodality (participation of all) is the way God wants his church to develop in the third millennium.

Let's work together - become a supporter today.

With Gratitude

**Garry O'Sullivan**  
Editor and Publisher

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# Let's drop the nativity story as child's play! (or sex and violence at Christmas!)

## Sean Goan



The first Christmas story to be written was probably Matthew's. It would be fair to say that the evangelist (whoever he was) would be very surprised at how his work features in the lives of today's Christians. The notion of the nativity play would certainly have been alien to him and the idea that his narrative, full as it is of sex and violence, political scheming and duplicity would have misty eyed parents tearing up as their children stumble their way through the troubled beginning of the life of Jesus of Nazareth would no doubt leave him gobsmacked and wondering what had happened to his story!

So maybe it's time to rescue the narrative – cut it adrift from the primary school pageant and let Matthew talk to us as adults about what was in his mind when he set about putting pen to papyrus for his first readers. At the outset it is essential to take on board the fact that the four evangelists were not historians in our modern sense of the word. They were primarily persuaders! That assertion makes some people nervous and they respond with, “so you mean it didn't happen?” The answer to that is that we must understand that the gospels and indeed all of Scripture requires that we recognise that the authors are human beings of their time using their skills and talents and the literary techniques at their disposal to communicate a message. There is no magic here just a human process in which people of faith respond to what is going around them believing in the guiding inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Their way of presenting the truth is not limited to the reporting of facts!

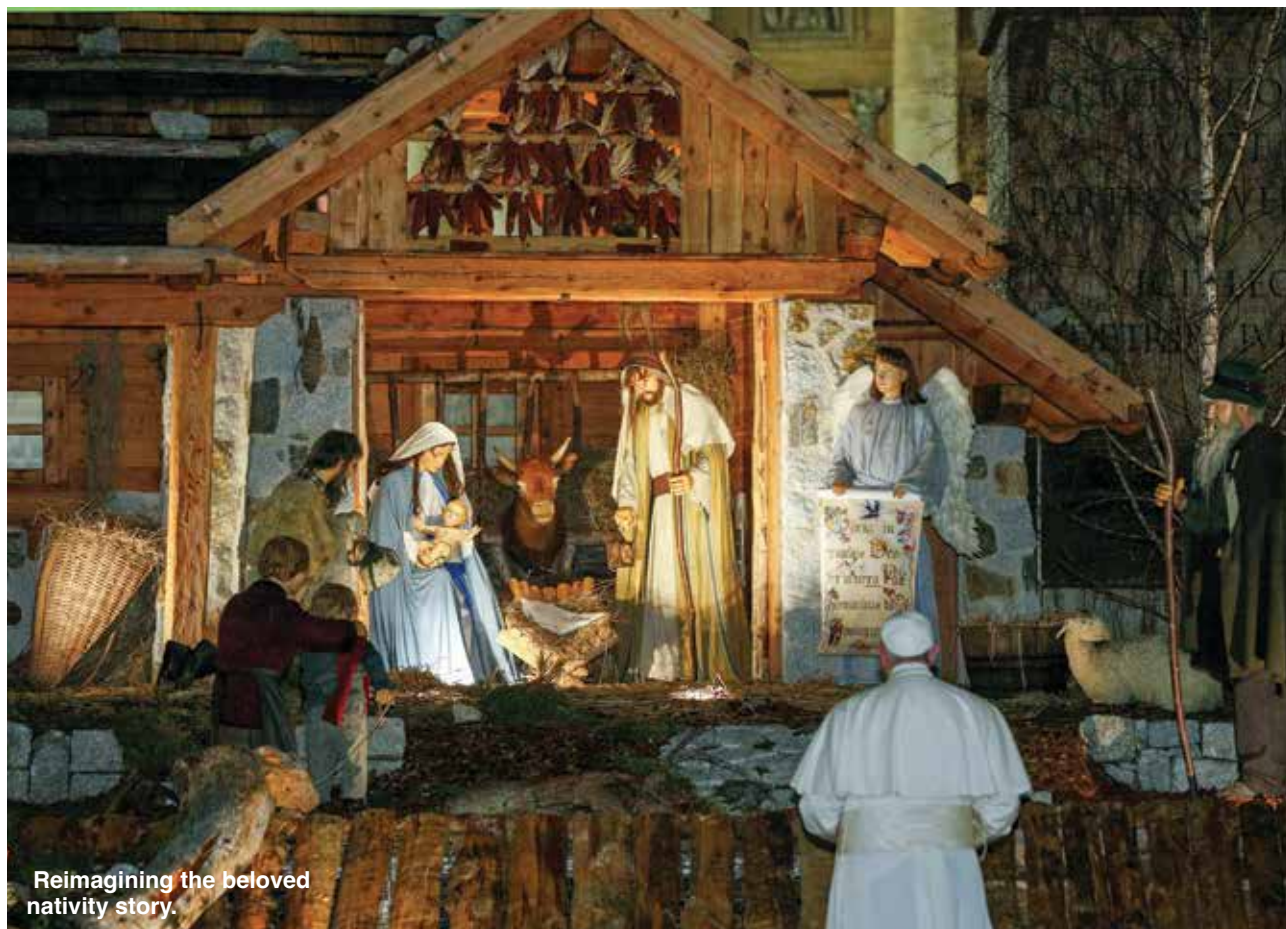
### Agreement

So, what do we know about Matthew and his audience? There is general agreement among scholars that Matthew wrote his account of the life of Jesus after becoming familiar with what Mark had written. Mark's was a short story that made no mention of the nativity. He focused on Jesus' adult life and his mission to proclaim the reign of God. Mark wrote the story based on the traditions he

had received, both oral and written and he pulled those traditions together into a narrative that would help his readers to come to terms with the outcome of Jesus' life – the fact that this person whom they proclaim as God's anointed (messiah) died alone and screaming on a cross! This was the strange paradox for the first communities of Christians that amounted to a scandal for their contemporaries. How can you speak of God being at work through somebody whose life ends in rejection and apparent failure?

**“With this opening story Matthew is inviting his readers to consider how God works through all the circumstances of life”**

Matthew's Christians felt this question in a particularly acute way. They were probably part of a community living in the large and important city of Antioch. They were mostly Jews who had come to faith in Christ but now they are under pressure because their fellow Jews are challenging their assertions about Jesus, who he was and what he has done. Indeed, these Jewish Christians are being branded as heretics, leading others astray by daring to assert that a crucified rabbi from Galilee could possibly be the Messiah and the fulfilment of Jewish hopes. They are also in breach of the traditions of their people by associating with Gentiles (non Jews) and welcoming them into their community. We have here all the ingredients for a crisis of faith. What if this is true? What if Jesus is just



Reimagining the beloved nativity story.

another deluded Jew who fell foul of the Jewish and Roman authorities? This is the scenario Matthew addresses. He writes his story using sources both oral and written (one of which is the Gospel of Mark) and he sets about affirming the faith his community has embraced by demonstrating how Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection, is truly Emmanuel (God with us). Matthew shows how God has gone beyond their wildest imaginings by demonstrating that Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God is the perfect embodiment of the loving mercy that lies at the heart of their Jewish traditions.

### Birth story

So how does Matthew do that? He begins with a birth story but from the outset shows that the birth of this child is to be understood against the backdrop of the deeply troubled history of the chosen people. The first verses of his Good News begin with a genealogy.

The TV phenomenon “Who do you think you are” shows that even today we are fascinated by who came before us and how their story might impinge on ours. So, in this very structured account of Jesus' ancestors, Matthew reminds his alert adult readers that their history as a chosen people is full of scandal. His mention of four women in a list that is usually peopled only by men immediately challenges them to realise that God works through all the choices people make. These women are all outsiders and yet they are crucial to the story of the chosen people and how God is at work in and through human weakness. He then connects the birth of Jesus to this genealogy by another scandal. A betrothed woman is pregnant but not by her chosen husband! Yet her child is the one who will save his people from their sins, he is the Emmanuel spoken of in the prophets. At his birth, as in the stories of other great

heroes of the time (Alexander the Great, Augustus Caesar) a sign in the heavens is an indicator that this is no ordinary child. This sign brings seekers of wisdom who are not Jewish to pay homage, a pointer to what is to come decades later when the Gentiles join the church.

**“What do we know about Matthew and his audience?”**

Controversially the Jewish authorities represented by King Herod and the scribes are not disposed to welcome this child and so his life is in danger from the beginning. Indeed, dreadful violence is visited on the innocent as it will be on Jesus and his followers in subsequent generations. Yet the child and his family are guided through the turmoil to live in Nazareth in Galilee where years later he will begin his scandalous mission.

### Invitation

With this opening story Matthew is inviting his readers to consider how God works through all the circumstances of life, even the most unpromising, to bring about his purposes. This is precisely what will happen in the adult life of Jesus who will pay the ultimate price for challenging people to recognise that what God wants is mercy not sacrifice (Matt 9:13). Jesus' work of teaching, healing and reaching out to the margins goes to the core of who God is and does so in a way that challenges our certainties and calls us to think again about what it means to live by faith. In every generation we are called to respond to the times in which we live and to recognise that God, through the Spirit of the risen Christ, is inviting us to trust that he is with us as we seek new ways of witnessing to the power of the Gospel.

This Christmas as we continue on the synodal path Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus is a reminder to us that we are part of a long history of people who had to set aside their certainties in order to recognise how God is at work among them. This narrative is not child's play – it is in fact a serious call to grow up!

**1** Sean Goan is Coordinator of Spiritan Mission Ireland. He taught and was chaplain in Blackrock College. Active in adult faith-development work, he is a founder-member of Tarsus Scripture School.

**“Maybe it's time to rescue the narrative – cut it adrift from the primary school pageant and let Matthew talk to us as adults about what was in his mind when he set about putting pen to papyrus for his first readers”**



# Glory both on and off the pitch - A journey of faith



Ger Brennan savours Dublin's 2013 All-Ireland victory.

## Gerard Gallagher



**G**er Brennan is a Gaelic footballer of renown, who has won an All-Ireland title with his club St Vincent's and was the resolute Number 6 on the Dublin team which claimed a landmark All-Ireland victory in a sensational late comeback against Kerry in 2011.

As a younger man, he graduated from Maynooth College with undergraduate and master's degrees. He qualified as a schoolteacher, and taught Irish and religion at St Kevin's College, on Ballygall Road in Dublin. In November 2015, he was appointed Gaelic Games Executive at University College Dublin.

From a family of nine, Ger grew up on Dublin's north inner city, just off Dorset Street. For him growing up consisted of a mix of being involved in the local community, going to a local school and an involvement in his local parish of Gardiner Street, a famous Jesuit parish.

"Faith and church was something that was very

normal for me. I was an altar server at Mass, and I attended parish youth clubs, and Music Makers... a youth group where we learned to play music. I even played guitar in the Gardiner Street Gospel Choir. I was engaged with the Church from an early age, going to Mass on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings. The Jesuits had a huge influence on me." Some of his earliest "holy" memories are of going to Mass with his parents.

"If you were bold, you were brought closer to sit with my da! To keep a check on me! I wasn't always sure what was going on, but I valued the silence... the chance to be

still. It was a great tool that my parents instilled in me, going to Mass every Sunday as a family. The church was a place of fun, and offered all the options that the parish had for young people."

**“From a family of nine, Ger grew up on Dublin's north inner city, just off Dorset Street”**

His parents were great supporters of their Jesuit parish. Ger grew up hugely influenced by the local parish and his involvement in it. The parish had many local outreaches to keep young people involved in the community, as the Jesuits were very much involved in the local community.

"Brother Eamon Davis and Tom Phelan SJ had a huge influence on my family. And Brother Tom and Bridie Ash in the Music Makers... the work they did they taught us

more than just holy and secular music, they brought us on trips out of the city... to Mosney (a residential camp) and mountain climbing. I remember lots of real active communal fun. I was part of that life until I was 18, and I played guitar in the gospel choir until my early 20s. I even played in Vicar St, the Olympia and the National Concert Hall with the gospel choir."

### Jesuit influences

Ger attended Belvedere College on a scholarship programme. At Belvedere he played rugby, and football, while keeping up hurling and Gaelic football with St Vincent's GAA club. He admits to having the same struggles with his Faith that many teenagers went through.

At school, through the influence and ethos of the Jesuits, he had learned the lesson of, "trying to be a man for others, to use your talents and be a light in the world and to bring other people with you". These are values embedded by

the founder of the Jesuits, St Ignatius of Loyola. He learned how to integrate one of the Jesuit prayer technics into his life... the Examen. This helps us to look at God in our life, every day.

This helped Ger at times of "spiritual desolation". He never lost his Faith, but he had big questions as he struggled to integrate his maturing faith into a life as a teenage and, subsequently, a young adult. Belvedere also had Social Diversity programme where nearly fifteen percent attending are scholarship children from socially challenged environments.

Padraig Madden, one of the teachers, oversaw this and he was a huge support to Ger. Another positive influence was Fr Jim Culliton who looked after the junior cycle. "In school, what I recall is the sense that you belong, God loves you... and also the Jesuit motto ... *For the greater glory of God* really impacted on me, my understanding that my gifts and talents were for the

service of others. This value has impacted and stayed with me. It instilled in me a sense of justice and fairness."

**“Padraig Madden, one of the teachers, oversaw this and he was a huge support to Ger”**

The school ethos resonated with values his parents had passed on, including that of gratitude. He is grateful for this positive influence. He was also taught not to feel sorry for oneself and be resilient... and just "get on with it". These were family values that he hopes to pass on to his new family.

### Role of sport

Ger comes from a very sporting family, but a family which was predominantly made up of soccer people. His uncle Fran had played for Ireland, and lined out for Shelbourne, Dundalk. The family followed local teams Belvedere FC and Shelbourne, even though Bohemians FC was closer to their home. "There were very few GAA pitches locally," Ger recalls. "Many of my friends went to school in St Vincent's and played with the local club. Others went to

**“Ger comes from a very sporting family, but a family which was predominantly made up of soccer people”**





Jesuit-run Belvedere College in Dublin's north inner city – the site of Ger Brennan's secondary education.

Coláiste Mhuire, just off Parnell Square... and I played a few games for them as a non-registered player too!"

Initially, his Gaelic football career commenced with Na Fianna on Mobhi Road, and it was only later, when he was 15, that he joined St Vincent's. He joined the club – most deeply-rooted in Dublin GAA culture, and famously the home of Dublin legend Kevin Heffernan – because they were so good at underage. "At Na Fianna we got beaten a lot." Though, at the same time, Ger retains fond memories of his early days in the club, and the volunteers who steered him along the right path and saw to it that he had the opportunity to begin an underage career in the famous sky blue of Dublin.

### Digging deeper

Travelling to matches on the team bus, or rooming with different teammates, Ger has always found an opportunity to talk about his Faith. "I was a tough, aggressive player, and I was often asked by other lads on the team, how can you play the way you play and yet you are into God? For me these were opportunities to contextualise what I am about, and make it relevant for the other people I played with.

"Going to Mass, when we travelled around the country with the team, was great and many local priests would welcome us and give us a mention. Each man on the team attended Mass for personal reasons; it was personal choice to attend, there was no pressure on anyone on the team to go."

Conversations on the team bus might gravitate to his work, his study of theol-

ogy, chaplaincy and God. He recalls great conversations about God, Church, and faith. "It was always something I was comfortable talking about. I never imposed my beliefs on anyone. You propose... not impose. It is never about forcing people to believe what I believe."

### “Five minutes before I go out on to the field, I have a moment. I spend that moment in a private prayer of gratitude”

But prayer, to Ger, always helped. He prayed before games, which he says led him to a place of peace. At the same time, Ger stresses that he is not a "Holy Joe", noting that there were times he drifted like any 20-year-old.

He notes that he was in Dingle one weekend on a break. He visited a local church for some personal time and prayed before the Blessed Sacrament, and he remembers being drawn back into a deeper relationship with God. "I remember one Christmas morning we all went to Mass, then visited the graveyard. When we came home I went for a run along the canal, near Croke Park. I knew that this extra bit of training was important, as my nearest competitor on the Dublin team wouldn't be training on Christmas day. This was my determination and sole focus. To be the best in my position!"

### Sacrifice, routine and ritual

Dublin's breakthrough All-Ireland victory in recent times

was crafted by the management team of Pat Gilroy and Mickey Whelan, two other St Vincent's men and close friends. Gilroy and Whelan build a powerful resilience amongst the players in their dressing-room, Ger states. "They instilled in us the value and privilege of representing our county. They reminded us of the huge the sacrifice people around us were also making, to allow us the opportunity of being the best we could be in the Dublin jersey... our families, our work colleagues.

"When we were knackered, we found that we could draw strength from what we were doing.... remind ourselves that what we were doing was a pleasure, even if training was brutally tough on a particular day. In a weird way the brotherhood and fraternity was something amazing, without even winning an All-Ireland."

Not everyone in the Dublin dressing-room followed the same pre-match rituals. Some players listened to music, others went onto the stand to watch the pre-match build up. "I used to listen to Christian music on my playlist on my earphones. That ritual was important to me."

After St Vincent's, also coached by Mickey Whelan at the time, won the All Ireland Club Championship in 2008, Ger went home after the match and had a moment of quiet contemplation. He read from his mother's bible... Psalm 65... "Only in God is my soul at rest". He read that passage for a long time. He then went to the St Vincent's clubhouse in Marino, and let his hair down, celebrating with his teammates.

"We won the club final in Croke Park in 2008, but walking back on to the pitch four years later, in 2011, in front of

80,000 people... that was the culmination of a life's ambition as a Gaelic footballer. To play in front of a full stadium... running out and waiting... the energy is just electric.

"I am full of life, and full of gratitude at a time like that. Five minutes before I go out on to the field, I have a moment. I spend that moment in a private prayer of gratitude. My seat was in the corner of the dressing-room. My mind wanders towards that Jesuit motto, *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam (For the Greater Glory of God)*. I pray for the safety of all players... and pray for no serious injuries! We all shake hands at the end of every game, we all need to walk away from the stadium."

### Inspiration

Later in his career, Ger appeared on television, on the Irish edition of the quiz *Mastermind* and his chosen topic was the Life of Ignatius of Loyola, much to the surprise of other contestants.

Little did they know that Ger has always looks towards St Ignatius of Loyola, not just in prayer, but also as a form of inspiration.

During his college years, he wrote and researched his Thesis on Peter McVerry, the well-known campaigner and Jesuit priest, who is based in Dublin and works with young homeless people. Ger admires people who puts their faith into action. "I've grown up in an all-male world, yet St Therese of Avila, another mystic, appeals to my contemplative life. She helps me tune into the Lord." He deflects success towards, "gratitude for what God has given you in life".

### Giving back

At the end of his school years, Ger Brennan thought he would work towards being an engineer. He was due to go to Columbia on a Jesuit programme. In conversation with some of the other people who were going, it came up about training to be a chaplain. It was an unexpected conversation, which in turn led him to changing his mind and making a leap of faith in a new direction.

"God spoke through them, and more or less told me to change my course. You meet God in people and from people." As a result, his career path took him into teaching, working in chaplaincy, and working for a time with the International Eucharistic Congress in 2012, before taking up his current role in UCD. He is no longer involved in elite sport but it was a huge part of his life, and now remains a central part of his career.

Ger is married with two young children, and he explains how he now wants to help pass on these values he learned and inherited to his young family.

Ger and his wife want to embed a tradition of family prayer, going to church and learning about faith in action. He is still involved in sport on the college campus in UCD. "I often notice some of them have rosary beads, or holy water or scapulars." This can,

he says, lead to a very different conversation. "Some have a prayer and spiritual life, but may have lost the connection to the institutional Church. I am very happy to talk with them about God, about faith and my connection with God... showing young people that God loves them is important."

God can use sports people, as well as "holy people" to connect with others. It is a life skill that he has learned, the ability to accompany young people as he was accompanied in his home parish of Gardiner Street. Sports people can also be signposts for others on the spiritual path.

### “Ger and his wife want to embed a tradition of family prayer, going to church and learning about faith in action”

"I am not perfect, but I am trying hard. I learned that going out onto the field I offered everything to God. Whatever the outcome! You hand over fear and failure to God. This gives a freedom and allows you to express yourself more. I still try to do this today, in my life after elite sport."

Ger is still on the road to nurturing and deepening his relationship with God. He continues to read different spiritual authors. He recalls a story of going to confession on campus in UCD, which provided an opportunity to reflect on his life and seek forgiveness for past wrongs. He confessed that "it gave him a spiritual fix". "Once I tune into God, it is a great station to tune into." When asked for his potential epitaph, he naturally replies, 'AMDG... For the Greater Glory of God!'

**i** Extract from Faith - In Search of Greater Glory in Sport, by Gerard Gallagher. Published by Hero Books. Reproduced with permission. Gerard works with AMRI (Association of Leaders of Missionary and Religious Ireland).



Social activist and campaigner, Fr Peter McVerry SJ, the figure Ger Brennan wrote and researched his thesis on in university.



# End of year timeline: Where we've

## Planting the seeds

**March 2020:** The first step of our synodal journey commenced with the announcement made by Pope Francis on March 7, 2020 that the Church was to undertake a Synod on Synodality commencing in October 2021. The Pope selected "For a synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission" as the theme for the upcoming Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.

**March 2021:** In March 2021 the Irish Bishops' Conference announced a synodal pathway for the Catholic Church in Ireland, leading to the organisation of a national synodal assembly. A five year timeline was envisaged for this work and comprised of two phases:

- A two-year phase of listening and discernment, and;
- A three-year phase of planning and implementation to be followed after the two-year discernment.

**September 2021:** In anticipation of the upcoming Synod on Synodality, the Vatican released a 42-page preparatory document and handbook in September 2021 to be reviewed by all Catholic dioceses in the world before the Synod meetings were convened in dioceses.

Each diocesan bishop appointed a diocesan contact person (team) in preparation for the synodal consultations around the world. These people/teams acted point of reference and liaised with the Episcopal Conference. They were assigned to accompany all the stages of the consultation process in the local Church.

Similarly, each Episcopal Conference (or corresponding body) also appointed a contact person responsible for liaising with both diocesan officials and with the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops.

It was the responsibility of the contact person to ensure the widest participation possible, across a variety of platforms. These included parish-level meetings, inter-parish gatherings, school-based groups, local associa-



Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh, leads delegates on a prayer walk at a pre-synodal assembly in the sixth-century monastic site of Clonmacnoise in Ireland June 18, 2022.

tions, online platforms, special language groupings, and suitable means of reaching those who have been distant from the Church, forging opportunities for diverse groups to listen to one another.

## Growing together: The Diocesan Stage

**October 2021:** The journey officially started both in the Vatican and in the local churches in October 2021, with the official opening with the Holy Father in the Vatican coinciding with the weekend of October 9-10 2021. The official opening in each local Church was on Sunday October 17 2021, with each local diocesan bishop celebrating the same programme.

**October 2021-May 2022:** And with that, Ireland's synodal consultation process had begun. The chief fruits of this stage were the synodal consulta-

tion meetings that happened across the nation's dioceses.

A custom of these meetings was the recitation of the pre-meeting Prayer for the Synod on Synodality, that invoked the Holy Spirit to guide the whole process. Throughout the diocesan phase, the Diocesan Contact Person(s) kept in regular contact with group coordinators of the synodal consultation meetings across the dioceses to monitor progress, provide support where needed, and facilitate the exchange of ideas, best practices, and emerging feedback.

Shortly after these meetings had taken place, the feedback taken from these meetings was distributed online on parish websites (in more technologically astute parishes) or presented to parishioners at their local churches or pastoral council meetings. When all of the parish reports in a diocese had

been collated, Ireland's 26 dioceses released their own diocesan synthesis, which was drawn from the most recurring themes in the respective parishes of each dioceses.

The 26 diocesan synthesis would go on to form the primary submission made by Church in Ireland and these themes were discussed in-full with Ireland's bishops and members of the Church in Ireland's Synodal Steering and Task Group members, which included bishops, men and women religious and members of the laity, at the National Pre-Synodal Assembly at the Sheraton Hotel, Athlone, Co Westmeath on June 18, 2022. The event also included a brief prayer service at the ancient monastic site of Clonmacnoise.

Commenting on the emergent themes of the faithful in Ireland at the event, Bishop of Limerick Brendan Leahy deputy chair of the

Synodal Pathway Steering Committee said that the shared themes across the dioceses included "the continuing importance of faith in people's lives; reflections on the sense of belonging; expressions of how abuse is part of the story of the Church; a call for much greater roles of women at all levels in the future of Church; attention to sexuality, relationships and LGBTQI+ concerns; references to topics such as education and catechesis, youth, family and co-responsible leadership, lay ministry, culture and the impact of Covid-19; as well as to faith formation, clergy and liturgy".

The National Synthesis that formed the Church in Ireland's contribution to the Church's Synod was furnished and officially released by the Steering Committee on August 16, 2022 and reflected on the hitherto discussed themes mentioned in Ireland's dioceses and the Pre-National Synodal Assembly such as: The strong desire for women's involvement in leadership and ministries – ordained and non-ordained, concern around the Church's approach to the LGBTQI+ community and to the hurt experienced by its members and the desire for greater lay involvement and participation.

## Sharing our yields: The Continental Stage

**August 2022:** The second phase of the synodal process began on August 26, 2022 as the Continental Stage was launched by the Vatican.

The main objective of the Continental Stage (the stage we're currently at now) is to combine the National Syntheses reports submitted by each of the nations of the Church and condense these themes into a single Continental Document featuring the diverse responses from the faithful around the world.

As you may have noticed by this point, although the scope of peo-



## STAGE 1

May 2022 – 15 August 2022

9-10  
October  
2021  
Worldwide  
Opening of the  
Synodal Process

Digital Consultation in the  
social media networks -  
Project "The Church listen  
to you"

15  
August  
2022  
Deadline for the  
submission of the  
Syntheses



## STAGE 2

January – March, 2023

27  
October  
2022  
Publication of the  
DOCUMENT FOR THE  
CONTINENTAL STAGE

7 Continental  
Synodal Assemblies

31  
March  
2023  
Deadline for the  
submission of the  
Final Document of  
the 7 Continental  
Assemblies

LOCAL  
CONSULTATION

DIALOGUE AMONG  
THE CHURCHES OF  
A SPECIFIC REGION



# been and where we're going in 2023

ple participating during each stage becomes broader, the method of processing the data remains the same, whether collected in a parish or during the Continental Stage. The key characteristic of the process is the fusion of each document with another larger sample of faithful until the collective voices of the Universal Church situated around the world form part of the Church's official Synod report.

However, the facilitation of the Church in Ireland's synodal process was not without criticism, most surprisingly amongst members of its own hierarchy, as just a few days after the initiation of the Continental Stage, Bishop of Waterford and Lismore Alphonsus Cullinan, described it as "rushed, revealing and disturbing". With this public criticism, Bishop Cullinan became the first and thus far only prelate in Ireland to openly question the efficacy and accuracy of the Church's synodal process in Ireland.

Writing on the Waterford and Lismore diocesan website about the synthesis submitted by the Church in Ireland and the synodal process, Bishop Cullinan described it as "a snap-shot" of where those who attended the parish conversation and listening sessions were at, with no reference to the "poor, sick, homeless and the unborn".

Parish listening sessions were completed "with little time to ensure deep reflection, have meaningful conversations and prayerful consideration of the questions posed", Bishop Cullinan said.

Of the national gathering in Athlone, he said very little had been heard at it on mission and the missionary outreach of the Church. "There was far too much introspection. I have no doubt that the Holy Spirit was in the synodal process, but maybe more in the gaps than in the utterances. I believe that we need to observe where the Church is flourishing in Ireland, where people, espe-

cially the youth, are being formed in character and in the faith."

In speaking out, Bishop Cullinan's comments supported the accusation made by 500 young Irish Catholics the previous month, that asserted that their voices were not listened to and challenged the widespread perception that younger people in the Church want teachings to change (some of whom *The Synodal Times* interviewed in our November edition)

**“With little time to ensure deep reflection, have meaningful conversations and prayerful consideration of the questions posed”**

**September 2022:** Two of the most radical examples of the Synod inducing reform occurred in Germany and Belgium respectively as influenced by will of the faithful's synodal submissions, participants of the controversial German Synodal Way voted to create a Synodal Council that would permanently oversee the Church in Germany, contravening an advance Vatican warning that explicitly stressed no reform be approved at the meetings. All synodal way members will gather again in Frankfurt on March 9-11 for final votes on the initiative's remaining documents.

In Belgium, the bishops hastily moved to develop a liturgy centred around the pastoral care of Catholics who identify as LGBT, which includes a text allowing for a ritual blessing of same-sex couples.

The Flemish bishops' text said that homosexual couples who choose to live "in lasting and faithful union with a partner" deserve "appreciation and support".

The Flemish bishops' document, which repeatedly referred to Pope Francis' 2016 apostolic exhortation, *Amoris laetitia*, issued at the culmi-

nation of another Synod, concluded with a "Prayer for love and fidelity" – which has been widely received as being a liturgy for the blessing of same-sex couples.

The bishops of Flanders said that the three-page document, entitled "Being pastorally close to homosexuals: For a welcoming Church that excludes no one," aims to "structurally anchor [the Church's] pastoral commitment to homosexual persons and couples".

**October 2022:** On the morning of October 16, at the end of the Sunday Angelus, the Holy Father unexpectedly announced that the upcoming 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will be held in two moments. The first from 4th to 29th October 2023, and the second in October 2024, which consequently extended the Synod for another year.

The Pope said there were already many first fruits from the ongoing Synod, but added that more time is needed in order for them to become fully mature. Therefore, the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will also take on a processual dimension, configuring itself as "a journey within the journey" to foster more mature reflection for the greater good of the Church.

On October 27, 2022 the Vatican formally published the document for the Continental Stage. The Document for the Continental Stage (DCS) is the labour of the syntheses received from 112 Bishops' Conferences, including Ireland, following the consultation of the people of God in the diocesan phase of the synodal process.

Two of the contributions to the Church in Ireland's National Synthesis document feature as part of the Vatican's Continental Stage document. These two contributions illuminate the regret that certain Catholics feel when certain communities are absent from the Church and also touch on the rampant consumerism and materialism that permeate contemporary Irish society.

Primate of All-Ireland and President of the Irish Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Eamon Martin, welcomed the publication of the Working Document for the Continental Stage, expressing that he: "Encourages as many people as possible to read the working document. It is good note that the contribution of Ireland's National Synthesis to the universal synodal process has been expressly referenced in today's document. Overall the document gives us

a glimpse of what people from around the universal Church are thinking about their participation in the mission of the Church at the beginning of this third millennium.

"In the coming weeks, dioceses and groups across Ireland will be invited to consider the working document, alongside their original submissions to the Irish Bishops' Conference from earlier this year. It will be interesting to identify those areas of commonality and diversity, as well as to discern more deeply what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church at this time".

## A glimpse into the future

**January - March 2023:** Between January and March, there will be 7 Continental Synodal Assemblies, with the European Assembly taking place in Prague between February 5-12. Each assembly will reflect on the *Working Document* in their regional and continental contexts. The assembly groupings will correspond to existing organisations that bring together episcopal conferences across each continent, such as CELAM in Latin America and FABC in Asia. However, the CCCB and USCCB don't have a similar organization for North America, so Canadian and American delegates will meet in a new "North American Assembly". There will also be a special gathering for representatives from the Middle East and the *sui iuris* Eastern Catholic Churches.

Each Continental Assembly will draft its own Final Document of a maximum of about twenty pages confronting the three questions answered in the synodal meetings from its own specific context. The Final Documents are to be submitted by each Continental Task Force to the Synod Secretariat by March 31, 2023.

The Synod's *instrumentum laboris* will be drafted in June. Each Continental Assembly is called to put in place a discernment process on the DCS that is appropriate to its local context, and draft a Final Document to account for it. The Final Documents of the seven Continental Assemblies will be used as the basis for drafting the *Instrumentum Laboris*.

The *instrumentum laboris* is not an indicator of what the conclusions of the Synod will be, but can give an idea of the general consensus in the Church on the subject of discussion. Pope John Paul II stated that the document was "a sign and builder of communion, [since] it expresses the voice of the Church, and at the same time it fosters an exchange which enriches that voice in the common task."

**October 2023:** After all of the meticulous preparation has been completed, the first session of the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023 will commence in Rome, where the fruits of the faithful's discernment, as reflected in the Working Document submitted for the purpose of the event, will be laid bare and meditated upon by the leaders of the Church.



## STAGE 3



June 2023

INSTRUMENTUM LABORIS

4-29 October 2023

1<sup>ST</sup> SESSION XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops



October 2024

2<sup>ND</sup> SESSION XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops



2025

THE CHURCH CONTINUES TO IMPLEMENT HER SYNODAL DIMENSION





## Searching for coherence in a chorus of voices: Insights from the Church in Australia's Plenary Council with Professor Renée Köhler-Ryan

In 1 Kings, the prophet Elijah listens for the voice of God. He knows that voice when it whispers to him. I thought often of this account during the various phases of the Plenary Council, and especially during the assemblies. On more than one occasion, significant opportunities were ignored in favour of rhetoric of a distinctly secular hue. As Pope Francis calls for an increasingly synodal Church, it is crucial that the trends of society not drown out the quiet voice of God.

After all, there is much at stake for the Church in the way that we represent Christ's Gospel to the world. The Church has a mission, and Christians need to be missionary – not conforming to the whims of the age but bringing the profundity of the Gospel to the times in which we live – witnessing to Christ in every way that we can.

At a moment when society thinks that religious institutions are dangerous or irrelevant, every synodal assembly is an opportunity to find how members of the Church can bring Christ's presence into the world. This requires a certain adeptness at identifying the marginalised in our own Church, in every nation, and in an increasingly globalised society. It demands Christlike imagination to find how we can prayerfully respond to contemporary needs.

**“There is much at stake for the Church in the way that we represent Christ's Gospel to the world”**

Unfortunately, the raised voices of the advantaged can be mistaken as those of the marginalised. If one were to rely on most media accounts, one might readily assume that the plenary council in Australia was mainly about women's rights. The blatant disregard for just how much women constantly contribute to the life of the Church in Australia, institutionally as well as spiritually, was rendered nought beside the issue of female ordination.

### Distraction

This distraction at the centre of the assembly had the effect of taking valuable time and energy away from other issues that are



People participate in the Second Assembly of the Plenary Council of the Australian Catholic Church in Sydney July 6, 2022.

debatably of far more concern to those who seek to live the Gospel in their daily lives.

During the first assembly, the youngest lay Chancellor of a diocese in Australia at the time recounted the story of a local parishioner in his extremely large rural diocese. All this man wanted from the Church, by his own account, was to have regular access to the sacraments, and to have a priest at his side when he died.

### Shortage

However, members did not substantially consider ways to address an almost crippling national shortage of priests and of priestly vocations. When another member raised the point in the second assembly that many of the motions carried demanded resources that rural dioceses simply do not have, it was as though she had not spoken at all.

As elsewhere in the world, the Church in Australia remains in the wake of the horrific discoveries concerning institutional child sexual abuse. As is only just, this was emphasised during both assemblies and in all documentation. The reality, though, that any priest today shoulders the Christ-like burden of being marked with sins that he personally has not committed, was untouched.

The priesthood was apparently reducible to two problems: “clericalism” (left undefined) and female ordination. Each of these depends on thinking of the priesthood in terms of worldly power rather than Christ-like service. A worldly priesthood is not one founded on an Apostolic

Church inspired by God and not of human making. It is then of little wonder that the council mainly ignored the fact that priests are a sign of contradiction in any age, quietly bringing Christ to the unrecognised marginalised – and that we can surely do far more to support them.

Other quiet voices were those of women who are undistracted by the question of whether their rights are being violated by the male priesthood. Those single, married, religious, and consecrated women without whom there would be no Church at all, encountered some extraordinary moments on the assembly floor. A male member in one discernment group refused to recognise as “woman” the only female at the table who did not represent the secular status quo. This was by no means an isolated incident.

### Contribute

Women who were members of the council precisely because of the significant ways in which they contribute to the Church, who did not at the same time advocate for a secular feminist narrative of power, were frequently deliberately silenced. Therewith, opportunities to contribute to the domestic Church by supporting mothers, and to support vocations that could significantly influence a vibrant Church in Australia went by the wayside. The lack of proper recognition of the ways that lay women contribute to the ministries and offices of the Church was certainly demeaning.

Then there are the men both inside and outside the Church

who feel that they have nowhere to go.

It is no wonder that, surrounded by a narrative that to be male is to be “toxic”, they turn to popular gurus such as Jordan Peterson, or to traditionalisms that distort what it means to be a Christian man.

The need for spiritual support for Catholic men was raised many times during the assemblies, but the final documents hardly indicate this point and it was made abundantly clear that while a document on the dignity of women was a non-negotiable, nonesuch was required for men.

**“The lack of proper recognition of the ways that lay women contribute to the ministries and offices of the Church was certainly demeaning”**

More marginalised groups could be identified, beyond those shouting others down. Here I will mention only one more. In Australia, it is evident that our ageing population is increasingly vulnerable. Despite the catastrophic effects of legalised euthanasia in other nations, Australia has gone down the same path. At the same time, investigations into the aged care sector have revealed high levels of neglect. The elderly must have some of the quietest voices among us. Why could we not hear them? Surely we need to raise the question, lest the Church's prophetic voice become incapable of reaching those who

need spiritual and material support.

Judged primarily against secular standards, the Plenary Council in Australia may well have done some good. The institutional Church in Australia is more aware of some of its fault-lines and members of the council at least are better informed about different views on key issues. However, the concerns of the privileged few tended to overwhelm those quiet voices of the most vulnerable in our midst. In the end, at least this member is left asking: has Catholic Social Teaching become the treasure buried underground that will never do any good in the world? Or, can we become a synodal Church that finds the strangers, widows, orphans, and prisoners of our age, and shows them the face of Christ?

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# How do you solve a problem like Maria?

## THE LAST WORD WITH Aidan Mathews



Two years ago, there was an almighty rumpus around the RTE New Year's Eve TV sketch of God the Father as a ghoulish godfather in the matter of Mary's pregnancy. It's not by any means a new joke. There's even a jibe about Jesus' paternity in the Talmud. Rather more recently, in the tabloids, some conscience-stricken secularist thought that teaching the Annunciation narrative to Irish primary school pupils might inhibit them from reporting adult sexual violence by mystifying their strange, endangered minds; while, two millennia farther backwards, the second-century Infancy Gospel of James has the midwife's hand bursting into flames as a punishment for the sheer cheek of her touching Mary's inviolable labia.

### “Luke the evangelist, a Greek and a gentile, is Our Lady's main man in the New Testament”

There are always going to be humourists and head-bangers in God's people, so here's my tuppence worth of either as a roaming Catholic in this, the third sorrowful decade of our national Kulturkampf. I've worn a miraculous medal from Simon Peter monastery on the cliffs of Athos to the Tenderloin's ravines in San Francisco. I've power-showered with it, (the rust is proof), sun-worshipped too (a ghost oval on tanned skin) and made love as well (didn't my own parents produce a platoon of cherubs under a life-size Sacred Heart?). So I have a take on the whole thing which is, I hope, Marian and merry.

Christmas is, of course, more about childbirth than conception, yet the nine months that elapse between March 25th and December 25th in the Roman calendar serve to signal the three surging trimesters of a legendary pregnancy that link the promise of fertility in spring with the consolation of survival in winter. The Nativity narrative is, in that sense, the end-stage of a more prolonged and pagan myth that reads the curve of human experience in the annual cycle of the seasons. So let's leave the winter solstice for the vernal equinox.

Luke the evangelist, a Greek and a gentile, is Our Lady's main man in the New Testament. In the gospels of Mark and Matthew, she's sometimes more of a pest (“Your mother is looking for you!”), and, in John's, she seems to stand for Sion both at Cana and the Cross. “Mother, behold your son” is not about living arrangements for a helpless widow. Whoever wrote the theological Gospel inserts these words in the mouth of the crucified Christ to underscore the genetic bloodline between traditional Judaism and the messianic

cult of Jesus. But Luke, a bridesmaid among best men, is immersed in the mystery of Mary, which is why early Christian folklore came to believe he had painted her true likeness in the very first icon. “No Mary without Ann,” the nuns used to say to the orphaned namesake who raised me in the 1960s, referencing the Virgin's invented mother. In fact, there's no Mary without Luke.

Just like the second annunciation to Joseph in the Gospel of Matthew, Luke's lovely tale isn't shorthand reportage of an historical occurrence. It's a timeless theological fable. Saturated since his birth in the dreadful divine-human encounters of Mediterranean myth, which are animalistic and dehumanising (think Ovid the Divo, with all the bestial atrocities he catalogues so candidly in his *Metamorphoses*), Luke offers instead gentility and courtship as the model of the meeting-place between Mary and God. The only non-Jew among the four evangelists, one who can quote a line in Euripides' *Bacchae* (albeit its recent English translations turn those infamous pricks into mere goads) in his sequel account of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, Luke knows his classical masterpieces by heart, and is, for that matter, their literary equal.

He knows the Hebrew Bible too in the Greek of the Septuagint, and so he counterpoints the fertility of new beginnings in a girl at the menarche to the precursor pregnancies of post-menopausal women of faith in the Israelite legends, with Elizabeth, like her Baptist boy John, as a bridge figure between the two. Yet his emphasis is on Our Lady's courage, not her chastity. In strict historical actuality, Mary's belly will broaden from moon to moon in Taliban territory where unmarried mothers face summary death by stoning. (Lapidation, incidentally, can still be viewed on YouTube videos which enjoy multiple hits.) Licenced or otherwise, pregnancy itself is a co-morbidity in biblical Palestine. The girl from



An icon of Mary and the Christ Child.

Galilee would be lost without Joseph, a co-conspirator. But the Lord likes to send out his disciples in twos.

### Litanies

Luke's Mary, then, is no Diana of the litanies. She is a Venus of the usual. A kink in our incarnational thinking has skewed her heroic ordinariness, literally for ages, and we have to sidestep Latin Mariolatry - Mary as idol and as Isis-figure, more phantasm than prophet - to recover Luther's maid of Nazareth in his meditation on the Magnificat, the prayer Luke himself retrieved from the same Jewish scriptures that illiterate Mary would have listened to in hillbilly Galilee.

But a glance at the masculine fissions of the more drastic Reform churches should also show us, as Erasmus saw in the earliest stages of modernity, that we cannot have the son without the mother. In like manner, the last of the Magi, psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, while himself a vigorous Gnostic, understood that the body of Christ must have a belly button. After all, the physical Jesus was more of a problem for the early churches than the metaphysical Christ.

### “Metaphor is higher than high maths and as sensible as science”

Thus, in the fullness of time, there emerged one of the most beloved motifs in western art: the call and response of the Annunciation motif; *cor ad cor loquitur*, heart speaking to heart, in Cardinal Newman's motto. On tile and tesserae mosaic, on plaster and wooden panel, on fresco and oil canvas, the same scene renews and reiterates an exquisite visual equivalent of prayerful attentiveness in the happy anagram of *silent and listen*.

Nowadays, the surveys show that more people believe in angels than in God, and the shy scholar Cardinal Des Connell, who taught me Plato, did a doctorate on these good go-betweens; so I'm not going to shoot the messengers, still less the message. After all, they are both mediums. In fact, antiquity's conduits are today's couriers, as all images are; and the lot of us live and move and have our being in the shape-shifts of similitude, just as we depend upon Deliveroo cyclists in a Covid curfew. The Brazilian with a pizza in the porch is this evening's Gabriel in gauntlets.

Metaphor is higher than high maths and as sensible as science. The parable of the sower and the seed in the synoptic telling is altogether more seminal, because more subtle, than the élite, coded exposition Jesus afterwards confides to his proto-clericalist circle of those who are entirely in the know. That's why the second council of Nicaea, which roundly authorised human representation in opposition to the inflamed aniconic faction, should be as consequential to us as the first one, which itself fell back on human analogy to figure the Trinity, until the mooting of that mystery became all Greek to everyone. It had largely degenerated into an equilateral triangle, with the



The 15th-century painting *The Nativity of the Virgin*, by Andrea di Bartolo is seen in this undated photo.

third person as the hypotenuse of two right angles, by the time I was catechised.

God, of course, is unimaginable, yet the imagination largely knows its proper place: it's in the here and now, our necessary sensorium, the see-hear-touch-taste-smell of our five senses, our five *sensei*. Mischievous Newman, in a sermon in St. Mary's, Oxford, remarks that even the Trinitarian formula is “greatly inferior to the Divine verities”. We are left, then, to beachcomb the cosmos on the gritty strip of our own lives' slow, eroding coastline, hoping that Newton's pebble - slyly, a *calculus* in Latin - may prop our poetry and our prose as well, making the material matter more and more.

I ponder the person of Mary. I did so as a pupil. I do so as a pensioner. And I pray about her. I say prayers to her. I even love as problematic a petition as the ‘Hail, Holy Queen’, because it tells a huge part of our story, its melodic desolation, so consolingly. I have told my daughters about this daughter of Sarah, the Mother of God, and they are telling theirs. Faith in the female line may be more reliable: closer to Mary because closer to Martha, to the bloodshed and breastmilk of bodily life. I am looking up at a little carving of the Madonna and Child as I tap this sentence on the keyboard. It has a hairline fracture from a house-move, when it was wrapped in newsprint in a tea-chest, but it's still beautiful, perhaps more so.

### Dormition

If the Orthodox image of the Dormition, say, speaks to me in a way the Roman Assumption doesn't, it's because human beings are only fully and finally complete, under the sign of their own species, when they die. Risenness and the Resus ward are not, alas, the same thing. Then again, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is an alien, not an enabling, notion to a Semite-by-descent such as myself, who looks to Abraham and not to Adam as a father in faith,

bypassing the bothersome, binary Eve. This is not, mind you, to disavow the serpent in the legendary garden altogether: my brainstem is as reptilian as any other reader's, and the many sediments of the story of Eden are still being mined for their precious platinum. Instead, it's an attempt to identify the imitative nature of human desire - precisely our lack of originality, our uncontrollable, copycat instincts - as the source of our criminal, eliminating community. Peckish coquettes are not the point. The blame-game is the bull's eye.

### “I mind blasphemy laws, which are the last refuge of the iconoclast, of the heretic for whom the clarity of definition outweighs the charities of wonder”

Even the Enlightenment atheist Denis Diderot said that we should speak to the living as if they were dead and to the dead as if they were living. This is excellent theology, and I practice it. But, when Lucan metaphor deteriorates into mannish doctrinal minutiae, I can't blame the schoolboys (or the teachers) who sneer at it. They miss the point. They miss the poetry. We shouldn't. We mustn't. Besides, I don't mind blasphemy. I mind blasphemy laws, which are the last refuge of the iconoclast, of the heretic for whom the clarity of definition outweighs the charities of wonder. After all, blasphemy was the charge that nailed Jesus.

**i** Aidan Mathews is an Irish poet and dramatist from Dublin.



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