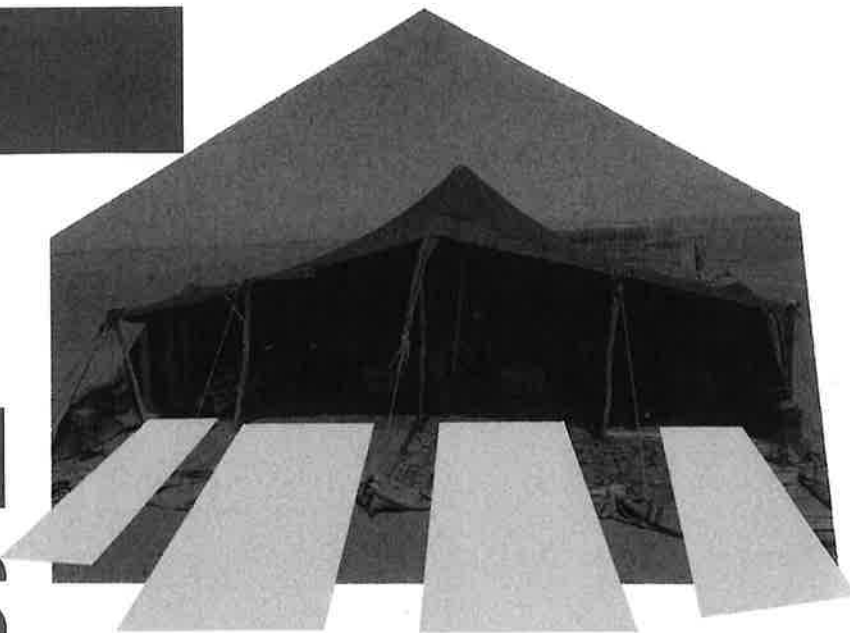


# SYNODALITY AND CHURCH STRUCTURES



**Brendan Daly says that synodality needs the commitment of all in the Church.**

Pope Francis wants the third millennium to be the era of the ecclesiology of synodality. Synodality means the active participation of all members of the Church in its processes of discernment, consultation and cooperation at all levels of decision-making and mission.

The General Secretariat of the Synod published *Enlarge the Space of Your Tent* in October last year. It is the working document for the continental stage of the Synod and is a summary or synthesis of documents sent by conferences of bishops to the apostolic see – including our document from Aotearoa.

The title of official Church documents is taken from the first few words. “Enlarge the space of your tent” indicates that the Church must strive to include everyone. We read: “This tent is a space of communion, a place of participation, and a foundation for mission.” We are to be in communion with our brothers and sisters and our common Father. This communion is expressed in mission.

### **Synodality Flows from Vatican II**

The term “synodality” has not been commonly used in Catholic theology. Vatican II did not use the term “synodality” at all. The closest that Vatican II came to speaking about synodality was “collegiality” between the bishops and the Pope. However, synodality is a more expansive and embracing concept than collegiality. When they were preparing *Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, the Vatican Council fathers decided to insert chapter two, the “People of God”, before the chapters on the hierarchy, the laity and consecrated life. Chapter two teaches that all the faithful together make up the body of Christ because they have all been baptised in Christ. However, although the Council bishops placed the “People of God” first, they did not draw out

the consequences flowing from this for the hierarchy in the next chapter. The reality is that chapters two and three of *Lumen Gentium* stand side-by-side without being integrated with each another.

Throughout his pontificate, Pope Francis has placed the people of God at the centre of the Church and he understands that the hierarchy are in service to the people of God to assist them to fulfil their mission. It is clear from the liturgy for the ordination of a bishop that the bishop does not receive a diocese, but that a diocese receives a bishop who is ordained to serve it.

Synodality captures the Vatican II vision of Church in dialogue and enlightening the whole world (LG 92). The Church is the sign and vehicle for dialogue for the world. We need to create mutual esteem and diversity in the Church. We all contribute to fruitful dialogue whether we are pastors or other members of the faithful.

### **Vatican II Introduced Synods of Bishops**

The Second Vatican Council introduced synods of bishops to the life of the Church and they have been very effective for the universal Church. Since Vatican II synods of bishops have usually met every two years. But Pope Francis understands that synodality is much more than this and believes that the Church must find new ways to live and work in the world using the prayer, advice and experience of all members including the laity at the parish, diocesan and national levels. The problem is that despite the 1983 Code of Canon Law a bishop can still govern his diocese without, for example, having a Diocesan Pastoral Council – a basic structure for the participation of the laity in governance. The whole Church is to be engaged in the process and it is not just a synod of bishops.

## Vision of Synodality for All the Church

Pope Francis said in his address opening the Synod in 2021 that it is "not a parliament or an opinion poll. The synod is an ecclesial event and its protagonist is the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit is not present there will be no synod." All the faithful are to discern and listen to the Spirit as part of the process of synodality.

Soon after his papal election in 2013 Pope Francis expressed his vision of what a renewed Church could be like: "I dream of a 'missionary option', that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open".



## Now Is the Time for Change

Pope Francis believes that this renewal of the Church cannot be deferred. He has stated: "the path of synodality is the path that God expects from the Church of the third millennium." Change in institutions and synodal methodology is needed at all levels of the Church not by producing documents but by opening horizons of hope for the fulfilment of the Church's mission. To that end, *Enlarge the Space of Your Tent* recommended the reform of virtually all ecclesiastical structures.

## Canon Law to Support Synodality

Canon law is a practical expression of the official theology of the Catholic Church, providing order and structuring the Church community. It establishes leadership and authority in parishes and dioceses and the powers held by office holders. It establishes the procedures, consultation and consents that office holders need in order to act. It contains procedures to obtain one's rights; requirements for the celebration of the sacraments; laws for administering parish and diocesan property; penalties for those who commit crimes; and a way for victims to receive justice.

## Commitment of Clergy and People Essential

Canon law must provide the structures and help for the Church community including its leaders to be motivated and formed as a synodal Church. Unfortunately, we know of dioceses without diocesan pastoral councils, some going without for a long time. We know of parishes without parish pastoral councils or parish finance committees. A recent example illustrates the lack of understanding of lay participation. A priest in Australia was told by his bishop to have a parish finance committee. The priest asked a parishioner who was an accountant to be on the parish finance committee. The

accountant said: "I'm sorry but I don't have time to go to any more meetings." The parish priest answered: "Don't worry. There won't be any meetings."

This story illustrates how the structures alone do not bring about synodality. No matter how well institutions are governed by law, if there is no internal commitment to bring synodality to life in them, then the institutions will be ineffective.✠

To read *Enlarge the Space of Your Tent* see: [www.synod](http://www.synod).

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