

# SYNODALITY IN EVERY DIOCESE

**Brendan Daly** discusses the *Final Report of the first Synod assembly* and the synodal processes we can expect our local bishops to initiate.



THE FIRST STAGE of the Synod on Synodality in Rome has been completed. The focus now moves to the local churches and how they continue the process, before the second and final stage of the Synod in Rome next year.

## Participants, Dynamics and Process Changed

There is no doubt that the Synod of Bishops has changed dramatically. In the past lay people have spoken to the bishops, but they were not fully participating as voting members as they were this year. Photographs of the Synod in action in past decades show mostly bishops speaking to an audience of nearly all bishops and cardinals. Previously, delegates had an eight minute slot allotted to them and they spoke while everyone sat in

the Audience Hall and listened. After seven minutes there was a warning bell that time was almost up. If someone kept on talking overtime, his microphone was turned off.

This year's photographs were of circular tables of about 10 women and men participants — bishops, lay people, priests and religious — discussing issues and listening to one another. The dynamics and the process have clearly changed. The teaching and proclaiming Church is now listening to what individuals in the groups have to contribute.

## Church Is Registering the Changed World

There is no doubt that the world is changing. The West is in decline and many now question the right of Americans and Europeans to tell

others how to live. Similarly, there is a change within the Church. The West is no longer seen as the future of the Church. The Church is much more global and the perception of problems in the world is not just seen through Western eyes.

In New Zealand we live in a very particular context and social milieu — it's not the norm. Like everyone else in the world we face questions, concerns and issues. We're in a digital world. In this context we still must find meaning and purpose in our lives.

## LGBTQ Missing in Final Report

There have been many criticisms of the Synod and its Final Report. One criticism concerned the removal of the word "LGBTQ" from the final statement. The Final Report instead stated, "In different ways people who

feel marginalised or excluded from the Church because of their marriage status, identity or sexuality also ask to be heard and accompanied." Apparently, the removal of the word "LGBTQ" related to some members of the Synod from the global south having negative experiences with the word "LGBTQ" being used as part of conditions to receive foreign aid from Western countries.

### **Polygamy in Africa to Be Addressed**

On the other hand, "polygamy" was added to the Final Report because polygamy is a challenge for the Church in Africa. The Final Report included a paragraph on the issue of "promoting theological and pastoral discernment" as well as the pastoral care for people who are in polygamous unions but drawn to the Catholic Faith. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states polygamy is contrary to the moral law but notes that Christians who have previously lived in polygamous unions have a grave obligation in justice to honour the obligations they have contracted in regard to former wives and children.

### **Concern for Oriental Churches**

There are 23 Oriental Churches in full communion with the Catholic Church. The Final Report was concerned about the situation of many of these Oriental Christians and calls for a permanent Council of Patriarchs and Archbishops of the Eastern Catholic Churches to advise the Holy Father.

### **Women in the Church**

There is no doubt that one of the very notable results from the Synod concerns the role of women. Women's involvement in the Church is based on baptism. The Final Report states: "It is urgent to ensure that, wherever possible, women can participate in decision-making processes and assume roles of responsibility in pastoral care and ministry." The addition of the word "urgent" strengthens this part of the Final Report.

The Synod delegates thought women should have substantial roles in ministry, but it was recognised that the roles and ministries would

vary in different parts of the world. There was wide support for women as deacons, without addressing women's ordination as deacons or installation in the ministry of deacons.

### **Canon Law Changes Needed**

It is my opinion that there is a need to change some canon law especially canon 129. Diocesan Pastoral Councils and Parish Councils and Finance Committees need to be made obligatory. Far too many parishes do not have parish councils and consultation with parishioners is too often only minimal.

Processes need to change so that, for example, amalgamating two or more parishes would require consultation with lay bodies such as diocesan pastoral councils and parish councils, rather than the legal requirement now only being consultation with the Council of Priests.

Change is needed in canon law so that it is clearly stated that women can actually participate as judges in all canonical processes at all levels in the Church. All members of the Church are called to be missionary disciples on the basis of baptism.

### **Legal Structures for Transparency and Accountability**

We also need legal structures and processes so that there is transparency and accountability in the Church. The lack of accountability and transparency is demonstrated time after time as the Church continues to struggle to address the sexual abuse crisis. Bishops and religious superiors in different countries do not seem able to learn from what has gone wrong elsewhere in the world.

There is a need for division of powers so that judicial, legislative and executive powers are separated. One person ought not to be "judge, jury and executioner". We should not be surprised that there are problems when the bishop is the one imposing

penalties, while canon law requires him to have a brotherly concern for his guilty priest (c 384) and care for his lay victim (c 383).

### **Liturgical Language to Relate to the People**

The Final Report recognises the necessity of making liturgical language more understandable and related to the culture of the faithful in each country. There is a recognition of the need for episcopal conferences to be entrusted with a wider responsibility in this regard.

### **Synodality Process Paramount**

For Pope Francis, the Synod was not just about the hot-button topics. The Final Report makes mention of a number of these issues including gender identity, sexual orientation, end-of-life issues, difficult marriage situations and ethical problems associated with artificial intelligence. These are all major issues for societies and countries around the world as well as being major issues within the Catholic Church. But for Pope Francis the Synod was always about the synodal process, which he hoped would overcome divisions in the Church and recommit us to the mission of Jesus. The challenge is to grow and to be one in Jesus Christ.

### **Local Bishops to Act Now**

It is clear from the Final Report that a lot depends on the local diocesan bishop. The Final Report states: "The conviction with which the bishop himself adopts a synodal approach and the style by which he exercises authority will influence decisively how priests and deacons, lay men and women and those in consecrated life participate in the synodal process ... The bishop is called to be an example of synodality for all."

The process of synodality really starts at the end of the Synod. ❖

Image by AI/Shutterstock.com

**Brendan Daly** teaches canon law at Te Kupenga Catholic Theological College. He is a Judicial Vicar of the Tribunal for New Zealand and author of *Canon Law in Action* (2015).

