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Assembly or Synod?

– *some theological considerations*

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Various groups and constituencies in the Church in Ireland have been engaging with the issue of renewal for several decades. This has taken many forms, for example, extensive projects in adult faith formation, assemblies and chapters of religious women and men, diocesan assemblies of clergy and more recently, listening exercises among many dioceses, representing all members of the Church. There have been numerous other groups of people passionate about renewal who have been meeting and discussing ways forward. Despite all of the energy and enthusiasm involved the need for serious renewal remains. It is time now to consider how greater accountability might be introduced so that the Church, at all levels, would harness more wisely the diminishing resources at its disposal. Here, some considerations are offered, which might contribute to that end.¹

PREVIOUS ASSEMBLIES

There is a well-known wisdom among those involved with group dynamics that the more often one attempts to put a plan into action without taking the process to completion the more one drains the energy of the participants. There is a certain fatigue factor in the Church in Ireland at the moment, caused not just by the avalanche of scandals, but also by years of dialogue and inertia. In retrospect, two issues that may have contributed to the failure of these various efforts at renewal are:

- many of the processes used in these assemblies did not engage in real discernment – there was an over reliance on novel and

1. A more extensive exploration of this topic is to be found in my article 'Processes for Communal Discernment: Diocesan Synods and Assemblies', *The Jurist* 71 (2011), 77-90.

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untested group dynamic theories, which in some instances were inimical to Gospel values;

- there was no juridical obligation on the bishops to ensure that the decisions arrived at would be implemented. Before another serious round of meetings or assemblies is put in place, there is need to give serious consideration to the processes to be used and to the juridical status of the decisions reached. Without these being carefully considered, we may end up retarding rather than facilitating renewal. Unless the bishops become actively involved in supporting the implementation of concrete renewal projects, the projects are doomed to failure. Sometimes, bishops claim helplessness in this regard. However, their implementation of child protection measures is proof of their ability to effect change when they are committed to it. At this time, other dimensions of pastoral renewal are as urgent for the good of the Church. These demand their full, active support.

There are further concerns voiced that seem to impede action on the part of leadership and those suspicious of change. There is the claim that any serious renewal must begin with a spiritual renewal. There is almost an implicit presumption that those calling for action are merely activists and are not seriously grounded in deep personal prayer and reflection. Conversely, a piety, no matter how sincere, practised by those engaged in active ministry that does not issue in some building up of the community is, at best, dubious (cf. James 2:17). Then there is the fear that a renewal mandated by the leadership alone will not be accepted. This is true, only if the leadership does not engage in genuine consultative and cooperative processes with those being led. It is possible to address both of these concerns by taking on board the synodal nature of the Church and processes of communal discernment.

A SYNOD OR AN ASSEMBLY

In recent years it has been recognised that the Church is characterised by synodality. This can be expressed in the convocation of formal synods or assemblies, diocesan or national. As Giles Routhier has observed, a formal synod is not necessarily always an expression of the synodality of the Church, nor is synodality confined to the convocation of formal synods.² Obviously, from a juridical perspective synods and assemblies are different realities.

2. See comments by Giles Routhier, 'Amérique du Nord. Pratiques synodales au Canada', in Alberto Melloni et Silvia Scatena (Eds.), *Synods and Synodality: Theology, History, Canon Law and Ecumenism in new contact. International Colloquium Bruges 2003* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005), 345-346.

The composition, procedures and competencies of a synod are carefully circumscribed by canon law.³ Assemblies, on the other hand, are a much looser structure, less defined by law and their decisions are not binding. Nevertheless, the *Instruction on Diocesan Synods* (1997), does suggest that the principles governing synods should also in general govern other diocesan assemblies.⁴ Here it may be useful to explore the Church's official position on synods to see if it may benefit the current renewal agenda.

The Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops describes the diocesan synod as 'a consultative gathering or assembly, convoked and chaired by the Bishop, to which priests and other faithful of the particular Church are called ... so as to help the Bishop in his task of leading the diocesan community'.⁵ In summary, the same document states: '[I]t is an act of episcopal governance and an event of communion'.⁶ It is a means for assisting the bishop in advancing 'the good of the whole diocesan community'.⁷ Already, these statements with their emphasis on the role of the bishop could easily obscure the fact that a synod or a diocesan assembly is not simply the affair of the bishop but is an event that expresses the true nature of the local Church, one of whose characteristics is synodality.

In the first instance, synodality expresses in a concrete way, that the Church is a communion of persons, who are called into relationship with one another and ultimately with the Triune God. All who are members of the Church are equal in their dignity, although their roles may vary. Thus the bishop has a particular role in that he re-presents the Gospel and the apostolic faith to the local Church. He is also situated in the midst of this community and carries out his ministry in a way that is collaborative and complementary to the contributions of all the baptised and other ordained ministers.

Vatican II emphasised the fact that the bishop has a responsibility to listen carefully to his presbyters and all the faithful so that he can be more effective in promoting their welfare, encouraging their collaboration, building up the Church and so giving glory to God.⁸ Bishops are recommended to initiate and promote dialogue

3. Canons 460-468.

4. Congregation for Bishops and Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, *Instruction on Diocesan Synods*, text in *Origins* Oct 27, 1997.

5. Congregation for Bishops, *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, ([ET], Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004), 184.

6. Ibid.

7. CIC, 460.

8. *Lumen gentium* 27.

with their presbyters and all the baptised, so that they might carry on the mission of the Church in a way that is suitably adapted to the needs and circumstances of their time and place.⁹ The presbyters in their parishes, too, are urged to adopt an attentive disposition towards those in their care, so that they can recognise the signs of the times and support their parishioners in making the most appropriate responses in the situation. Presbyters are strongly encouraged to notice the gifts of the laity, to ensure that these are well used and coordinated for the good of all and to be confident in trusting the ability of the faithful to take the initiative in pastoral action.¹⁰ The Council in its various documents shows that the life, ministry and well-being of the Church is not the sole responsibility of any one person or group but is a corporate task, where various members have their own particular roles to play. These foundational principles established in the conciliar documents are also reflected in the Code.

The 1983 Code states that the membership of the synod is to include 'priests and other Christian faithful of a particular church'.¹¹ The previous Code had restricted membership to the clergy, as had been the custom for the greater part of the Church's history.¹² This immediately signals a very significant change in the nature of the consultations and deliberations that occur in the synod. It is a forum in which there is a greater representation of all the people of the diocese, their needs and concerns, their insights and wisdom, their aptitudes and willingness to contribute to the building up of the Body of Christ. This inclusiveness confirms a greater appreciation for the nature of the Church as a communion of all its members and it also gives a specific opportunity for the faithful to exercise rights and duties ascribed to them earlier in the Code whereby they are to be facilitated in building up the Body of Christ (c. 208), promoting the growth of the Church (c.210), making known their spiritual needs (c.212) and expressing their opinions on matters pertaining to the life of the Church (c.212). It provides a balance in the hierarchical structuring of the Church and ensures that the episcopal governance is enriched by the serious contributions and cooperation of all the baptised. It witnesses to the fact that the ministry in the Church is an organic function and not a polarised or divisive reality.¹³

9. *Christus Dominus*, 13, 16 and 30.

10. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 9.

11. Canon 460.

12. See James A. Coriden, 'The Diocesan Synod: An Instrument for Renewal for the Local Church', *The Jurist*, 34 (1974), 68-93.

13. See John p. Beal, 'The Exercise of the Power of Governance by Lay People: State of the Question', *The Jurist* 55 (1995), 1-92.

The convocation of a synod or an assembly is not left solely to the discretion of the bishop; he is obliged to consult his presbyteral council before doing so, although he is not bound by their counsel. This obligation, however, highlights something of the structuring of the local Church as governed by the bishop in collaboration with his presbyterium. During the revision of the Code consideration was given to obliging the bishop to consult the diocesan pastoral council, but this was rejected on the understanding that the synod was an act of governance of the diocese and therefore exceeded the competence of the pastoral council.¹⁴ While the bishop may not have the duty to consult the pastoral council, he still has the right to do so and prudence demands no less. Furthermore, it is to be understood that in forming his decision to convoke a synod or an assembly the bishop will listen to all the members of his Church as they make known their concerns in various forums. The level of interest shown recently by the meeting in Dublin is certainly indicative of an interest in and commitment to renewal on the part of a very significant number of the Church's membership.

One of the important factors in weighing the value of a synod over an assembly is that the synod has the force of law behind it in a way that an assembly does not. The legislative force of a synod ensures that the wisdom of the participants is respectfully heard and incorporated into the synodal decrees. Then the bishop and the members of the local Church are bound by them. Too often, the decisions of assemblies, while they may have been pastorally very useful, have been allowed to lie idle because they were not guaranteed by any legislative force. In the ideal world, one should not have to appeal to the force of law to ensure the pursuit of the good, but on occasion it may be the only recourse one has to see the good achieved. Again, one need only look at what has happened in the area of child protection; without the support of legislation, it is hard to see significant change having taken place in many instances.

When one reviews the work that has been done for the best part of forty years now, it is hard not to be disillusioned by the lack of renewal one would have expected as a result. It is hard, too, not to be apprehensive that without very supportive structures the current efforts might perish on the same rocks. Unless there are agreed and structured instruments of accountability in place for all concerned, including the bishops, then it will be difficult to hold people responsible for the implementation of the desired renewal.

14. See Giorgio Corbellini's commentary on the Diocesan Synod in *Navarre Commentary on the Code*, 1047.

Apart from theological or canonical considerations, there is a significant number of the Church's membership, including clergy, who will not be moved towards any renewal unless the encouragement of the local bishop is forthcoming. His role at this point is critical. The bishop does not even have to instigate the movement, but once it has begun he can by action, or more often inaction, determine the outcome.

PROCESSES OF DISCERNMENT

Although the Code does not use the word 'discernment' in its canons on diocesan synods, *The Instruction on Diocesan Synods* speaks of the bishop exercising a role of discernment during the synod. It states: '[H]aving heard the members of the Synod, his will be the duty of discernment of the various opinions expressed ...'.¹⁵ Again at the conclusion of the synod the bishop is to make another act of discernment, now 'seeking to discern the will of the Spirit' so that the decrees or decisions are 'not the imposition of an arbitrary will'.¹⁶ This suggests a more serious act of discernment. However, it is noteworthy that in all of the discussion about synods and assemblies little attention is paid to a process of discernment as such.

Discernment has always been esteemed in the Christian community not merely as part of the virtue of prudence but as one of the direct gifts of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ Generally, it is thought of as an individual activity but it can also be a communal activity, providing a vital dimension to the synodal process.

According to Ladislav Örsy, 'communal discernment in its best

and purest form is the articulation of a contemplative insight into the working of God's grace in a community'.¹⁸ It is a contemplative insight because it depends less on human effort and more on God's gracious gift: 'it is the discovery of God's plan for the community through the light of faith infused into the minds of the members'.¹⁹ It is a communal process where the community as such judges where God is calling it to be at this time. It 'engages simultaneously and interactively all or a representative group of a community functioning as a community'.²⁰

While in modern times attention to processes of discernment tend to be associated with those in the Ignatian tradition, it is an approach that has a long history in the Church, whether one takes the Council of Jerusalem, later councils or the early monastic communities. However, Ignatius of Loyola paid more attention to discernment and did more to systematize it than anyone else. Foundational for communal discernment, is the '*Deliberatio primum patrum*', the discernment process developed by Ignatius and his early companions as they struggled with the decision whether to establish a fully constituted religious community or not. The main features of the communal discernment process, as proposed by Ignatius, can provide us with some pointers for diocesan synods or assemblies.

A basic presupposition for discernment, according to Ignatius, is that God speaks to human persons and communities in and through the circumstances of time and place. It is here that they must choose the course of action that best responds to God's word. A dialectic is set up, then, between God's word in Scripture and the word which God is addressing to persons here and now. The insight arrived at as a result is more than intellectual knowledge; it is a kind of 'felt-knowledge', involving the intellect and the senses.²¹ The process involves prayer, gathering of data and the making of a decision which is approved by the competent authority.

THE PLACE OF PRAYER IN DISCERNMENT

Prayer is essential for authentic discernment, so that those involved will be as free as possible from 'self-seeking, prejudice or fixations caused by insecurity', allowing the light of Christ to shine on all the issues for consideration.²² The purpose is primar-

15. *Instruction* 1.2

16. *Ibid.*

17. Some useful and general articles on discernment are: Benedicta Ward, 'Discernment: A Rare Bird', *The Way Supplement* 64 (1989), 10-18; 'Towards a Theology of Discernment', *Ibid.*, 129-140. On communal discernment: John Carroll Futrell, SJ, 'Ignatian Discernment', *Studies in Jesuit Spirituality* 2 (1970), 47-88; 'Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience', *Studies in Jesuit Spirituality* 4 (1972) 159-192; Ladislav Örsy, 'Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment', *Studies in Jesuit Spirituality*, 2 (1970) 129-176; Jules Toner, SJ, 'A Method of Communal Discernment', *Studies in Jesuit Spirituality* 3 (1971), 121-152; Howard J. Gray, 'Foundations', *The Way Supplement* 85 (1996), 7-16; Andrew Hamilton, 'Correct Weight for Communal Discernment', *Ibid.*, 17-27; Virginia Varley, 'Fostering the Process of Discerning Together', *Ibid.*, 84-97. Also: David Lonsdale, *Listening to the Music of the spirit: the art of discernment* (Notre Dame Press, 1992); Jules Toner, A Commentary on St Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits (St. Louis, 1992); *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision-making* (St. Louis, 1991). More generally, Luke T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) and Mark McIntosh (New York: Herder and Herder, 2004).

18. 'Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment', 134.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Jules Toner, 'A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will', 125.

21. See John C. Futrell, 'Ignatian Discernment', 56-57.

22. *Ibid.* 60.

ily to achieve true freedom, not a divine revelation about what to do but an attitude of genuine openness to the work of the Spirit. This needs to be accompanied by a faith conviction that God can lead persons to their proper goal and a willingness to do it once it has been revealed to them.

GATHERING THE DATA

All the possible evidence relevant to the pastoral agenda must be gathered and analysed in a respectful manner, so that this too can be reflected upon in prayer. The listening that is critical to the work of a synod or assembly, then, needs to hear others and what the Spirit may be saying to them in the depths of their prayer. 'In the individual's search for God's will, it is not the intellectually excellent, the learned or the astute, who are necessarily capable of success. It is rather the pure of heart'.²³ It is why the rule of St. Benedict counsels that the youngest should speak first, because God often uses the least likely as instruments of the Divine word and also by speaking first they are not intimidated by the ideas of their seniors. Furthermore, the Spirit works in all members but in a way that is organic, building up the whole body.

The disposition adopted as the group reviews the data is also significant and can be approached in a way that is sensitive to the work of the Spirit. Commentators note that dialogue rather than debate is the more appropriate approach in this stage of the process. In a debate, which is the normal parliamentary way of proceeding, one side attempts to persuade the other, usually from a predetermined perspective and with a view to convincing, or indeed vanquishing, the other side. This is hardly an appropriate way for a group of people attempting to hear what God, through the Spirit, is saying to them, in reaching the truth of the matter.

THE FINAL CONFIRMATION

Finally, there is need for confirmation of the judgment reached in response to God's word. Internally, those making the final judgment should experience a profound inner peace and contentment, manifested in a deeper faith, hope and love and a willingness to carry out the decision reached. Unless a decision taken is confirmed by just authority justly exercised then it cannot be claimed as following the plan of God. Obviously, in the case of a diocesan assembly or synod the approval of the bishop is essential. It is clear that this is an organic activity of the Church – there are no monopolies.

CONCLUSION

Reflection on the synodality of the Church and on processes of genuine communal discernment could be fruitful at this time of crisis for the Church in Ireland. The fact that a whole diocese with its bishop engages in a process of communal discernment, whether in a synod or an assembly, strengthens the reality of the Church as a communion and allows all to have a genuine sense of belonging within a living body. It can also have the effect of liberating all the baptised and the bishop from some of their own narrow angles of vision and to see the Kingdom of God as much broader and more dynamic than they had experienced it to date. It can have the advantage of generating a renewed sense of responsibility by all the faithful for the mission and well-being of their local Church. When the bishop engages seriously in a diocesan process of discernment, then, he is not simply availing himself of counsel, which in itself is a prudent thing to do,²⁴ he is exercising a role of genuine service in the local Church by empowering its members to explore and assume their rightful roles and responsibilities in building up the Body of Christ. Very importantly, he is also putting in place a real basis for accountability.

It may well be that a serious discernment process in a synod or assembly, whether diocesan or national, may yield no clear direction at the moment. This does not mean that the exercise is fruitless. In fact, it may have achieved a far more significant outcome in giving the members a real sense of belonging to the Church. It may harness the obvious energy that is there and bring all who care for the Church into greater unity and sense of common purpose.

23. Jules Toner, 'A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will', 135.

24. See George B. Wilson, SJ., 'Wise Consultation by Leaders', *Human Development*, 14 (1993), 7-10.