New Blackfriars

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Introduction

All the papers in this special issue of *New* Blackfriars were delivered at a theology symposium titled ***Exploring the Synodal Church: Communion Participation and Mission***. The aim of that symposium was to consider Pope Francis's vision of synodality. The symposium was held at St Mary's College, Oscott (Birmingham) on March 11–12, 2022, in conjunction with St Mary's University, London. It featured members of the academic faculty from both Oscott and St Mary's as well as representatives from the Bishops Conference of England and Wales and visiting international experts on the subject.

Pope Francis' vision for a synodal Church was unveiled in an address given on October 9th, 2021, at the start of the currently ongoing Synod on Synodality (2021-2024). In this address the Pope called on the Spirit to guide the Church and give it the grace to listen and discern in 'solidarity with the struggles and aspirations of all humanity'.[1] He also noted that the Synod on Synodality is not a parliament or an opinion poll; it is 'an ecclesial event and its protagonist is the Holy Spirit'.[2]

The Synod on Synodality was preceded by some preliminary groundwork, such as (1) the text of Pope Francis's address to the Bishops in 2015, commemorating fifty years of the inauguration of the Synod of Bishops by Pope Paul VI in 1965, and (2) a 2018 document from the International Theological Commission on *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church.*[3] The 2018 document refers to the continuity of Pope Francis' view of synodality with that of Church Councils operating in the past. The putting into practice of Pope Francis' vision of synodality as it has been experienced since October 2021, goes beyond the ideas in these two documents. The Pope's vision matches what the preparatory document, or *Vademecum*, states to be not a programme of renewal but 'what God expects of the Church of the

[1] Pope Francis, Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synodal Process, October 9, 2021, accessed July 8, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html

[2] Ibid.

[3] Pope Francis, Ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Opening of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015, accessed July 8, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo. html#:~:text=Your%20Eminences%2C,and%20thanksgiving%20to%20the%20Lord.

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third millenium'.[4] Pope Francis's vision here has been described by theologians as manifesting and developing the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council.

The Synod on Synodality is radical in that it wants to listen to bishops of local churches feeding back their picture of the life of faith 'on the ground' in their dioceses while allowing all participants to speak directly to the process. In doing so it enables participants to speak together with their pastors and for this to be an ongoing process in the Church that fosters a deeper 'communion, participation, and mission', which ultimately makes concrete the conciliar ecclesiological vision of the Church as the sacrament of salvation to the world.

Now, in September 2023, the Church is nearing the penultimate stage of what began at the local and diocesan national level (2021-2022) and then moved on to the continental level (2022-2023). At each stage there has been a mutual listening of bishops, priests, laity, and consecrated persons. Some of the key learning points from all the listening phases at a national level in England and Wales have been (1) a need for a more integral formation of the laity in faith and spirituality to foster their participation in the Church at a more co-responsible level, and (2) the need for greater participation of women in decision making. This in turn calls for the Church to update and incorporate opportunities for greater listening to all the faithful into its bodies of governance.

The results of the Continental phase for Europe, highlighted in the document entitled 'Enlarge the space of your tent', showed that similar findings came from every diocese in Europe. Each called for greater participation of all the faithful in the life of the Church. Moreover, drawing on the opening words of Isaiah chapter 54, 'Enlarge the space of your tent' expressed a missionary call for the People of God to expand the Church as a communion, particularly emphasizing the ecumenical and inter-religious calling of the Church noted by Vatican II. It asks the Church to expand by more perfectly becoming 'a refuge for the wounded and broken, not an institution for the perfect'.[5] Similarly, the *Instrumentum Laboris* (a kind of agenda) for the First Session of the Synod assembly, to be held in Rome in October 2023, asks the Bishops to discuss questions that meet this need for a deepening of communion

[4] Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum* (Preparatory document) for the Synod on Synodality, Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches: First Phase [October 2021 – April 2022] in Dioceses and Bishops' Conferences Leading up to the Assembly of Bishops in Synod in October 2023, , September 7, 2021, 15, accessed July 6, 2023, https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html

[5] General Secretariat of the Synod, Working Document for the Continental phase, 'Enlarge the Space of your tent, (Is 54:2)' 39, accessed July 9, 2023, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf

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and participation in the Church to more perfectly embody its mission as sacrament of salvation to the world.[6]

New Blackfriars is pleased at this significant time in the Church's history to offer its readers an issue of the journal which deals specifically with the topic of synodality.

Brian Davies OP

Notes on Contributors

Rev Dr Eamonn Conway is a priest of the Tuam archdiocese (Ireland). He is Professor of Integral Human Development at the School of Philosophy & Theology at the University of Notre Dame Australia and a former Professor of Theology at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick. His most recent publications include an edited volume on *Catholic Education in Detraditionalised Cultural Contexts*, (Special Edition of *Religions* 2021), and (edited with E. Duffy & M. McDaid), *The Synodal Pathway: when Rhetoric meets Reality* (Dublin: Columba Books, March 2022). He was an expert adviser at the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in 2012.

Dr Mary McCaughey gained a doctorate in divinity on the topic of the Church as a Hermeneutical Community in Joseph Ratzinger and Lewis S. Mudge (published with Peter Lang, 2015). For the past fifteen years she has lectured in Ireland and England in systematic theology and published particularly on ecclesiology, the theology of Ratzinger, Mariology, and spirituality. In 2018 she came to Oscott College as a lecturer and is now also serving there as Director of Studies.

Rev Dr Jan Nowotnik is a priest of the Archdiocese of Birmingham currently based in London as the Director of Mission and National Ecumenical Officer at the Secretariat of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. He holds a licence in ecumenical and Interreligious Theology and a doctorate on the topic of the local Church and its relationship to synodality from the *Angelicum*, Rome. He is a member of the John Paul II Institute, based at the *Angelicum,* which works to promote dialogue particularly between Catholics and Jews, but also in the interreligious sphere.

[6] XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission, *Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session (October 2023). https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/06/20/230620e.html

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Dr Jacob Phillips obtained his BA from Heythrop College and his MA and PhD from King's College London. He is an Associate Professor in Theology at St Mary's University, Twickenham, where he is also Director of the Institute of Theology and Liberal Arts. He is the author of numerous theological articles and books including *Mary, Star of the New Evangelisation* (2018), and *Obedience is Freedom* (2022).

Dr Jordan Pullicino has worked in youth and parish ministry as well as retreat work. She has studied at the Angelicum in Rome, and at the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology in Cambridge, for an MA in Pastoral Theology and a PhD in Theology. Her thesis on charismatic testimony examined the ecclesial contribution of testimony as marginal voices and sources of knowledge. She is currently teaching courses in Pastoral Theology and Spirituality at Oscott College.

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