

The October 2023 Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

A Church Bearing Witness to God through our Relationships

Interview with Mons. Brendan Leahy

The Bishop of Limerick in Ireland shared with us some considerations and impressions of his experience during the work of the first session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in the Vatican from 4 to 29 October. The Synod on Synodality has not ended and the invitation for the coming year is to actively participate in the life of the Church and build relationships of communion in one's environment and so be instruments of the Kingdom of God.

Gratitude and Responsibility

Bishop Leahy, in the Letter sent to the People of God at the end of October, the experience of the Synodal Assembly was described as "beautiful, rich, a blessed time lived in deep communio" with the whole Church. What was it like for you?

For me it was a privilege, a gift. I felt it strongly, particularly on the first day when we were all in the hall and in the prayer the pope referred to the fact that we were gathered with the risen Jesus among us. I had read so many times about how this presence is at work in the Councils - the Church Fathers also spoke of this - but to live an actual experience of synodality is something else. I was moved to find myself together with more than 400 people from all over the world to receive the gift of being in the presence of Jesus in that moment of extraordinary grace in the Paul VI Hall, in the presence of the pope, and all of us gathered around the Word 'enthroned' during the opening rite, with the icon of Our Lady always in front of us, and all enveloped by the evocative sculpture of the Risen Christ that dominated the synod space. For this I felt great gratitude to God and certainly also a great responsibility.

It has been said that the Assembly was in many ways an unprecedented experience based on "conversations in the Spirit"¹. Do you think that this style of listening and discernment can spread to the ordinary life of the Church? And with what consequences?

During the four weeks we were gathered in groups of eleven people: bishops, lay people, men and women with specific topics to be addressed. Each person could say what they felt deeply about the topic and everyone listened, doing a first and then a second round of inputs interspersed with moments of silence and prayer. This is certainly a very useful methodology and I believe the Church will benefit greatly from it. Obviously, it is not the only method. The important thing is that we all try to listen to each other well so that the voice of the Holy Spirit can emerge: this is what we must now propose to all the particular Churches. For example, in our pastoral councils we often look for a method to enable us to live a moment of sharing that is different from a simple business meeting. Conversations in the Spirit, but also other methods, can facilitate this supernatural way, I would say, of deepening the topics to be addressed at various levels of Church life.

People on the move, at the service of God's Kingdom

Which model of Church was proposed and hoped for by the work of the Assembly?

Certainly, on the one hand, the historical Church, the one founded by Jesus. But I believe that today, with a particular sensitivity, the Church is seen as the people of God on a journey. This has been emphasized a lot. It means that we are not a static reality, we are not closed in on ourselves, but we are an instrument of the Kingdom of God that is advancing. We must therefore be very faithful to the church founded by Jesus, but knowing that the Kingdom of God becomes history in every age and also in ours. In our time, where dynamism, relationships, intersubjectivity and, in very painful circumstances, also a great desire for peace and reconciliation among peoples are very much emphasized, this People emerges as the Church seeking to understand day by day how to be instruments of the Kingdom of God.

One truth, expressed in varied ways

The Assembly recognized the existing reciprocity between ecumenism and synodality, repeatedly stressed by Pope Francis. From the point of view of dialogue and the search for unity among Christians, what perspectives may open up from this synodal conversion of the Catholic Church?

The theme of ecumenism came up a lot in this Synod. The presence of fraternal delegates, that is, people from other Churches, was a great treasure because they were able to illuminate with their tradition a perspective or perhaps even bring a correction of what we thought of their Churches.

Pope Francis likes to say that unity happens as we journey together. And we have found ourselves precisely on this path where the truth, I would say, embraced us. The truth in itself is one: it is Jesus. But this one truth can be experienced in so many ways, because we

are all different. I am convinced that this one truth, in the future, will come out more and more in its richness and variety, but also more and more "one". And we have been able to glimpse this in some way through the various "words" spoken in the one "word" of the Risen One among us, so I believe that the Synod has given us more light on how to move forward.

In particular, a few points have emerged. For example, the importance of so-called mixed or interdenominational marriages where the spouses are, in a certain sense, a privileged laboratory of ecumenism because inherent in the sacrament of marriage that they live there is a particular experience of the ecumenical domestic Church.

The lay profile of the Church

Is there one aspect among the many addressed by the Assembly that is particularly close to your heart that you would like to highlight?

There were so many themes, perhaps too many, so it is difficult to point out this or that one, because they were all important. Undoubtedly, what is closest to my heart is the fundamental theme, that is, synodality itself: how does this journeying together as Church work?

We are already Church, it is not that we have to build it, the Church is always a gift. The question is how we can ever better welcome this gift of Jesus, which even contains the richness of Trinitarian life, the three divine Persons who love one another. This is a richness and we must increasingly understand how to express this in our relationships. The pope's recent words are striking: "In the reality we call 'synodality,' we can locate the point at which the Trinity mysteriously but really converges in history." For me, this is the fundamental theme of the Synod: how to be, in our relationships, the space that allows God to radiate ever more clearly in today's world, both at the level of ecclesiastical structures, beginning with parish and diocesan councils, but also at the level of the family, of neighborhood, and it applies also to the relationships that people who attend the Church establish then in their worlds of work, education, the economy etc. This seems fundamental to me: how do we Christians relate in such a way that the light of the Holy Spirit reaches these worlds through our relationships? This lay profile of the Church is an aspect that, perhaps, we could have emphasized a little more in the Synod.

In this dark hour of the world...

The proceedings took place as the world witnessed unprecedented violence flare up in Israel and Palestine, without even mentioning the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, as well as elsewhere. You also prayed for migrants during the Synodal Assembly. How have you felt challenged by the pain and evil that oppresses humanity?

Yes, prayer was indeed a striking feature of this Synod. We could not be unaware of what was happening in the world. We prayed a lot and we also heard testimonies of people from war zones. We are living in a very dark hour. At our Synodal Assembly, it is not that we could only think about ourselves as a Church and how to relate to each other, although this is very important. Synodality urges us to relate as a Church to others, as instruments of peace and justice.

Are you satisfied with the Final Document of the Assembly?

Yes, it is essential to clarify right away that we are only at the conclusion of the first session of the Synod and that there will be the second one next year. Some people seeing the document will say, "But in short, they haven't concluded much," because in fact it is a work in progress, we have to move forward and there are so many open issues that we need to reflect more on during the year. Not so much to repeat the exercise that has already been done, but rather, this time, to reflect further on specific topics and some open avenues, with the help of theologians and experts as well...

An ongoing journey that impacts us all

So, how can all of us treasure this Synod and contribute to the implementation of what the Holy Spirit has done and bringing the Church to understand?

As I said, certainly the "conversations in the Spirit" is a methodology that we can all implement in our own spheres. We must be careful, however, not to reduce the Synod to this or that technique. In the end, the Synod is an expression of what the Second Vatican Council wanted to emphasize, namely that the Church is communion and mission. Therefore, every time we set out to build communion or to be in communion and mission, this is a contribution to the synodal dynamic.

I was struck by the fact that the pope brought out during the synod a document on St. Therese of Lisieux where it says that we have to trust that God will lead us to love. That I think is the central aspect: to remember that God is leading the Church forward, and it's up to all of us to have that trust. One bishop said to me, "Of course, trust in God and trust in Mary who accompanies us." I think synodality has to do with this presence of Mary who also wants to be a model of the Church as a people on the way. Mary teaches us the true spirit of synodality.

A bishop from the United States told me about a large gathering in his diocese where he spoke and said, "One of the themes of the synod is participation. There is communion, there is mission, but there is also participation in the Church. We have to be careful about the way we relate to the Church. Often it becomes a demand for services: we go to Mass on Sunday in that church because the schedule suits us, or in another one because there is a good preacher or because it is closer. Instead, it is important that we feel that we are participants in the community and that we are not just service users." Later, a woman

approached him and told him that his words had caused a conversion in her because she had never thought she should be a participant in the community.

The Synod wanted to provoke throughout the world a conversion to a more dynamic and participatory Church and in this sense more missionary. So, this is perhaps also a time to review our way of relating to the Church. I was struck by the fact that the great theologian of the Second Vatican Council, Yves Congar, used a phrase from the Gospel of Matthew to summarize the teaching of the Council, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20). At the Synod Assembly, a bishop from Brazil spoke about the Kingdom of God among us. I think this is also important, because synodality wants us to be instruments of the Kingdom of God among us. We can all contribute to this where we are, even if we are not directly engaged in a synodal process. In the family, in our communities or in our Movement, in our parishes, in our religious Order, we can all be active participants in this reality in our midst.

Edited by Adriana Masotti

- 1 Cf. the presentation of the method of "spiritual conversation" in n. 19 of *Ekklesía* (2023-2) on pp. 51-52. In the *Instrumentum laboris* and the Synod itself, the terminology "conversation in the Spirit" was adopted because it was considered more appropriate and precise.