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Book Review: The Synodal Pathway: When Rhetoric Meets Reality

Reviewed by Angela McCarthy

Conway, Eamonn, Eugene Duffy, and Mary McDaid, eds. *The Synodal Pathway: When Rhetoric Meets Reality*. Dublin: Columba Books, 2022. 220 p.

While the Catholic Church has used synods for a very long time, the way in which Pope Francis has focussed on this particular process to renew the vision of Vatican II and to move the Church towards a more missionary stance, has given great hope to some and fearfulness to others so until the journey to the October 2023 Synod in Rome has been completed the understanding of the process and the possible results will not be fully understood.

Section 1. Chapters 1-7, lays the foundations for synodality. In Chapter 1 Conway recounts the history and meaning of Synod and synodality. While in the past Roman Synods have often been 'carefully contrived' (23), Pope Francis has found a way of removing them from the hierarchical clutches of those who wish to hold power. Pope Francis also differs in that he does not see a Eurocentric Church as being most important but the global Church where all peoples are represented and he 'is convinced that this style of governance is essential to the Church and is precisely that to which God is calling it in the twenty-first century' (25).

Chapter 2, by Austen Ivereigh, biographer of Pope Francis, presents the Pope's clear vision of what it means to be a synodal Church. Deeply formed by the synodal processes in Latin America, what Francis seeks is a global synodal process that will lead to reform with each Church making it their own. Chapter 3 (Rafael Luciani and Serena Noceti) emphasises again the process as being the key development. Understanding 'the *People of God* as the *basic active and communal subject* of the whole Church and thus giving priority to evangelization ... rather than to sacramentalization, which is reserved to the ministers' (53), which emphasises that the baptism into the priesthood of Christ is superior to the power of those who baptize. L and N also reaffirm the aspects of *Lumen Gentium* that Pope Francis reiterates when the entire body of the faithful are one, they cannot err in matters of belief (56). Pope Francis sees that happening in the process of synodality and it needs much more unpacking.

Chapter 4 (Nathalie Becquart smcj) looks specifically at clericalism and the call to shared ministry within the Church. The abuse crisis in the Church is definitively connected to clericalism and as Pope Francis affirmed, it has to be addressed by the whole People of God where power is shared by all the faithful in the service of all (63). B reminds us that 'relationships of respect and mutuality between men and women, between people and our plant go hand in hand' (77). In Chapter 5, Jos Moons SJ adds more definition to the process of discernment and the roll of the Holy Spirit. The process is one of discernment and that cannot be done alone as it needs the 'purification brought about by sharing questions, suggestions, exploration' (88).

This is further developed by Jessie Rogers in Chapter 6 in reference to the early Church.

In Chapter 7 Gerry O'Hanlon SJ more thoroughly unlocks the concept from LG of *sensus fidei*. O'H states that because 'the sense of faith can also be accompanied by elements of erroneous human opinion, there is often need for considerable time, patience and respect until a conclusive discernment is arrived at, with the faithful at large, bishops and theologians all having their respective roles to play' (103). This is critical to the process of discernment in synodality.

Section 2 dwells on the practice of synodality. Three of the chapters reflect on the experience of the Irish, German and Australian Church in walking the synodal pathway.

Chapter 10 (141-152) written by Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB, President of the Council, summarises the process of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia. C describes the origins of the initial decision taken by the Bishops of Australia and the reasons for it. It was delayed because of the Royal Commission into child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and then the Plenary Council responded directly to this crisis, among other pressing issues within the Church in Australia. The initial question, which took three days to discern, was 'what do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?' (144). This was echoed later in the Irish Catholic Church's announcement in 2021 of a Synodal Pathway: 'What does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time?' (11). COVID-19 delayed the Council and meant that the first of the two assemblies was held online. In the second assembly in July 2022, there was a serious disruption in the middle of the week about the role of women and men in the Church and the resolution, driven by the Holy Spirit, changed the course of the Council and was fruitful. I was a member of the Plenary Council, and it was a true experience of synodality in every aspect and the pinnacle of my experience of Church. It will not solve all the problems, but it opened us to active discernment as *People of God* with the support and presence of the Holy Spirit.

The final two chapters by Nuala O'Loan and Patrick Treacy deal with the practical and legal matters that arise. Levels of accountability and transparency have to be addressed for the Church to regain credibility.

This is an important book and of benefit to the Church and the wider global community as we move towards the Synod in October 2023. It must resound with the 'inviolable dignity of peoples and of the function of authority as service' (49).