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# All roads lead to... the Synod in Rome: a bit of synodal wisdom

We begin the countdown to the first of two Synod of Bishops assemblies looking at the future of the Catholic Church



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The next six months are likely to be a bumpy road on the way to Rome where the first of two Synod assemblies on the very issue of **synodality** will take place this coming October. This gathering, and a second one in October 2024, are the culmination of the Synodal Path

on which Pope Francis launched the Catholic Church in late 2021.

The various churches around the world have experienced the synodal process in very different ways due to their distinct national and continental characteristics. But there have also been dissimilarities even within the same nation. Important issues that Catholics have been wanting to address for a long time will surface in one way or another at the Synod assembly in Rome. That will be done with differing if not divergent expectations. Catholics in some places are less patient than others. Interestingly, many bishops seem fearful of what Catholics in countries other than their own (especially in Germany) might do in response to the Synod, even more than they fret what might come from Rome during or after the two assemblies. This is a remarkable sign of our ecclesial times.

Synodality relies on rules and procedures that are now in a transitional stage, in the **process** of being established and tried out. The theological and magisterial tradition on synodality is being refashioned under our very eyes. Synodality today cannot be an identical copy of synodality as it was in the early Church. This moment is showing us the plasticity that exists in the ecclesial and ecclesiastical forms of the one subject the Church. This is why the approach to this moment requires an unwritten wisdom for a synodal conversion that has to face a variety of obstacles. Here I intend to propose five of them, in an effort to develop a synodal wisdom. But first a word of caution: we are in for a long haul; synodality will not be a done deal after October 2024.

## First obstacle: polarization

There is real challenge to being a synodal Church in our current climate of hyper-polarization. The two-party mindset has become part of the cultural DNA, where everything is a contest or a choice between two -- and only two -- options that are mutually exclusive and where each side is tempted to excommunicate the other and win over the other.

In the United States, for instance, this has led to the formation of two ecclesial parties that mirror the country's two-party political system - not only in shaping orientations on social and cultural issues, but also in terms of style of communication, of ethics of belonging and relating to the other side. This has created an almost automatic instinct to *talk to* the other side as a group that is different, rather than *talk with* those who -- although they do not

agree with you -- are still part of the same family.

Dismantling this partisan way of understanding synodality is important at a moment in which listening to the voices of the people will have consequences on the representatives to the Synod. Like never before, the members of the Synod assembly will have a sort of ecclesial mandate precisely because the listening period now is so central to the process.

## Second obstacle: synodality as "paperwork Church"

Unfortunately, skeptics often see synodality as just another example of the "paperwork Church"; that is, an exercise that ultimately produces documents that will feed a bureaucratic ecclesiastical apparatus but have no impact (or perhaps a negative one) on the spiritual life of Catholics. This is why it is extremely important to see synodality in the context of the Church as "field hospital", to use Pope Francis' moving image. (I was recently reminded of this on the 40th anniversary of the final episode of the American TV series "MASH" about Army surgeons trying to save lives, while clinging to their own sanity, in a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital during the Korean War)

Synodality is about rediscovering the inter-personal and relational experience of the Christian faith, where healing is never just the application of procedures and protocols but always has a human face. Synodality in the Church as field hospital is an antidote to the temptation of lifeless, contactless Christianity.

## Third obstacle: an unreasonable desire for the spectacular

Synodality is a slow communal and spiritual process that requires patience. It challenges the habits and expectations on our horizon, as well as our ecclesial expectations. We live in a "society of the spectacle", which emphasizes the "groundbreaking event" or the "paradigm shift" at every moment, and where every election is "the most consequential election in our history".

But synodality is not the *drama* that puts the individual at the center, the "homo faber" or maker of Promethean decisions that turn his fortune upside down. Neither is synodality

one more evidence of the theological *tragedy* of modern Catholicism; that is, the impossibility of Church reform, of the inevitable and inescapable fate of decline.

## **Fourth obstacle: risk of getting hung up on structures**

Synodality will certainly have to find a structural way to favor new modes of participation. But it is not only about creating new structures. In some churches, the decision to revive (or give life for the first time to) structures of participation that should exist already -- such as parish and diocesan pastoral councils, for example -- would be a synodal event. In many places, this would be like discovering Vatican II for the first time (or starting a reception of Vatican II that was interrupted many years ago). It would not simply be applying structures that were created almost sixty years ago to today. Rather, it would mean living them in a different way.

## **Fifth obstacle: wanting to decide everything all at once**

This is probably the most difficult and unpopular obstacle of all. There are issues that must be very present in the **synodal process**, like the participation of women in new roles in the life of the Church and the consequences of the abuse crisis. But there are also issues that may be better addressed by postponing them, especially those do not require new legislation or do not rise to the level of doctrinal decisions.

Synodality has a long history in the Christian tradition, but it's a history full of interruptions, detours, and deviations. The current synodal process is, by nature, experimental. If our local communities develop a more synodal way of being, it's an energy that the Church -- that is, the people of God, as well as the institutional Church -- will not give up. There are the synodal moments proper, but there are also "peri-synodal" events that can contribute to the Synod without having to be sanctioned by the hierarchy of the Church.

After the Synod assemblies take place, the Catholic Church is likely to look less monarchical and more synodal. Nonetheless, a hierarchical structure will continue to exist. It is important to remember that the lived experience of many Catholics is not and will not be involved in the synodal process. This is fine: no one should wish for a synodal

Jacobinism. To paraphrase what Pope Francis says about holiness in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, there is also "middle class of synodality". If we were to stake our staying or leaving the Catholic Church on the outcome of this two-year synodal process it would be a mortal risk.

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