



NJPN Comment

Working together

Frank Campbell

Pope Francis has expressed a wish that we move towards a 'synodal Church'. We may well recognise 'synod' as a term used for certain meetings of bishops – for instance, the recent synod on 'Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment'. What Francis had in mind was an extension or roll-out of the synodal principle in every level of community activity. He said that the word indicates our 'travelling together on the same road' and on a shared pilgrimage, without distinction of status, precedence, or authority.

Clearly, to move synodality beyond the ranks of the ordained priesthood would generate important questions of authority and discipline for a hierarchical institution like the Catholic Church. Traditionalists may have viewed this as a dangerous and impractical proposal, yet Francis remains convinced that it is possible and necessary to harmonise a synodal way of working with a reformed version of hierarchy in a decentralised Church.

Whereas it may be easy to speak of the '*sensus fidelium*', the primacy of conscience and the spirit-filled assembly of believers, the current reality in the UK is of a Church which is clerically dominated and where lay people by and large do not expect to take faith decisions.

Change may need to come gradually, allowing time for training and the emergence of new attitudes in priests at the same time as lay people may find the confidence to take initiatives and to listen to the promptings of the Spirit.

It seems obvious that parish councils would be a useful place to start reordering things in a synodal mode. Many of the remaining existing parish councils are dysfunctional and lacking dynamism. A new synodal-type council would be in a position to network with other social groups beyond the parish. One hears of schemes for parishes to seek dialogue with 'transition groups' and other justice and peace networks over issues such as ecology and sustainable development.

I do not wish to imply that a more democratic approach to decision making would necessarily make for an end of disagreement or conflict, but the move must be worth trying. The Church would have to consider what interpersonal skills or group-work training needs to be developed in our faith communities.

Frank Campbell is a Justice and Peace activist in Southampton.

**NJPN Annual Conference
'Forgotten People, Forgotten Places' 26-28 July 2019**

<https://www.justice-and-peace.org.uk/conference/>

www.thecatholicuniverse.com