



**The Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2021-2024
For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission**

The Second Assembly: Wednesday October 2 - Sunday October 27.

As Pope Francis has made clear on many occasions, the long synodal journey which the whole Church is undertaking, and which will continue at the local level once the second assembly of the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops has concluded, should not be understood as a pathway to a new Church: rather it is a pathway to a renewed Church which rediscovers the central importance of baptism as the foundation of our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ, and as the principle of our fundamental dignity and equality as members of the Church. We are all baptised into Christ, all equally members of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, and all sharers in the priestly, prophetic and royal identity and mission which Christ has given to his Church. We are all, individually and collectively, entrusted with the responsibility to ensure that the *“Church, in Christ, is (and is experienced to be) in the nature of a sacrament - a sign and an instrument, that is, - of communion with God and of unity among all people”* (cf. Lumen Gentium 1). And, of course, precisely because Jesus, in himself, is the great sign and instrument of the communion between God and humanity, and through his death and resurrection the sign and instrument of unity among all people, we are, through our baptism, commissioned and empowered to be, as part of the Body of Christ (the Church), the sign and instrument of the ongoing presence and action of Christ in our own time and place.

From our own local diocesan perspective, as for the Church generally, it is important to remind ourselves that the “we” of which I speak above encompasses every baptised Catholic who forms part of the Catholic community. It is this fundamental truth, which we all know intellectually, which the pope is inviting us to reflect on deeply and help to bring alive in our own local and very specific contexts: in our parish, in our school, in our friendship group, in our family, in our neighbourhood, in our diocese, and in our wider society. There are no first and second class members of the Church: *we are all one in Christ Jesus* (Gal 3:28).

Arising from this profound but often obscured truth, a fundamental question arises for each baptised person to ask: how can I, in the concrete reality of my own life and circumstances, play my part in keeping alive and effective the presence of Jesus Christ in that part of the world and Church in which I find myself? And because each Christian, and certainly each Catholic Christian, is by very definition a member of the Church which is the **community** of the disciples of Christ, the question really becomes a “we” question rather than an “I” question: how can “I”, as part of the “we”, play my part, in communion of spirit and action with my brothers and sisters in the faith?

The present Synod has been considering this fundamental question, very conscious that the members of the Synod are themselves a small part of a much greater “we” - the “we” of the whole Catholic community spread across the face of the earth. Pope Francis has been very insistent that the work of the Synod cannot happen in isolation. The Synod members have been invited to see themselves as part of an organic process of consultation, reflection, discussion and discernment in which each phase of the Synodal journey, beginning with the initial, world-wide consultation of the People of God, represents a further step in an ever-deepening discernment which will culminate in the drafting of a final document. This document, which will gather the fruits of the whole Synodal journey, will be offered to the Pope for his consideration, discernment and decision.



The nature and contents of the final synodal document are, therefore, in no way predetermined. Rather they will be the outcome of the considerations and conclusions of the Synod itself. It is important to stress that, whatever the outcomes, they will be offered to the Holy Father in a spirit of freedom and trust, fully respecting the right and duty of the Holy Father to make whatever decisions he believes are right and proper for the good of the Church at this time as it seeks to be faithful to its Lord.

While the Synod is of vital importance for every Catholic, it represents for us as priests and bishops, together with our deacons, an opportunity and an obligation to prayerfully evaluate our own approach to our ministry in terms of this synodal understanding of the Church. How are we to exercise our own particular ministry in the Church which fully recognises that it is the *whole Church*, and not just the ordained, (or the ordained together with the religious, or the ordained and religious together with those who exercise particular formal positions in the Church), to which the mission of the Church is entrusted?

As I reflect on this, I believe that something Pope St John Paul 11 once said might offer us a useful starting point. In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the pope's Apostolic Exhortation published in 1992 after the Synod of Bishops of the previous year, he made the following statement:

The ministry of the priest is entirely on behalf of the Church; it aims at promoting the exercise of the common priesthood of the entire People of God (PDF 16).

While this statement must be read in its wider context, the linking of the ministerial priesthood with the common priesthood of all the faithful (which includes, of course, deacons, priests and bishops) is significant. It invites us to reflect on the meaning of the "common priesthood" which is a sharing in the one priesthood of Christ. How does our life and ministry promote this universal priesthood of the whole Church? And this question, in turn, invites reflection on the Christian understanding of priesthood. This understanding, while linked to the ancient Jewish priesthood, is to be understood fundamentally in relation to the theological insight, explicit in the Letter to the Hebrews but implicit across the whole of the New Testament tradition, that there is only one priest, Jesus Christ, who embodies in himself the three-fold and inter-connected Jewish tradition of "priest, prophet and king". It is this one, unique priesthood which Jesus shares with the whole priestly people of God and, within that people, with bishops and priests in a particular way. As Pope John Paul 11 remarks, "*reference to Christ is thus the absolutely necessary key for understanding the reality of priesthood*" (PDV 12). This is true of the identity of the whole Church as a "priestly people" and true of those who, within the community of the Church, are ordained for priestly service as bishops and priests, with the deacons who assist them.

A reflection such as the one I am offering you now is not the place for a prolonged treatment of the theology of priesthood as it is expressed in the Catholic tradition. Suffice it to say that at its heart the priesthood of Jesus is to be found in his readiness to offer himself fully, finally and without reserve, as a sacrifice of love for the sake of God's people. "*It (my blood) will be shed for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins*". Any and all sharing in the one priesthood of Christ will be a sharing in that attitude of mind and heart which led Jesus to offer himself in sacrifice for others: this is the vocation of every Christian, it is the "gift" and "power" given through the sacrament of baptism, and it is the way in which every Christian is called and commissioned to make concrete his or her "priestliness".

Each Christian will live out this priestliness in the concrete realities of his or her own situation. Most Christians will live it out in the context of marriage, which is a priestly vocation precisely because marriage makes real and concrete the selfless and self-giving love of Christ for his Church: husbands and wives offer the gift of their lives to each other in love. Parents do the same for their children, in this way manifesting the priestly nature of the vocation of parenthood. But these two intimately-related vocations make clear something that is true for all of us: that we are all called to make of our lives a generous gift of love and self-giving to others in all the ways that



are open to us. And, of course, it is this impulse, this “sensus fidelium” so deeply inserted into the Christian identity, which makes the Church a truly missionary community of disciples: a truly priestly community.

Within the Christian community, formed and animated by the Spirit of Christ, the Lord has given us the gift of the ministry of priests and bishops, supported by the ministry of deacons. This is the three-fold structure of ordained ministry with which we are so familiar and which we believe is divinely-ordained. We have an ordained ministry not simply because we need some kind of leadership structure and some kind of organising principle, and the ordained ministry gradually emerged as the best model available, but because God has determined that the Church, to be faithful to its identity and mission, needs this ministry. Bishops and priests, together with the deacons, stand within the community as a powerful and concrete sign and reminder that the Church must look beyond itself and its own resources to the Christ who is the one true head and source of life for the Church. The ordained ministry thus has a “sacramental” function in the very structure of the Church: it signifies that Christ remains, and is recognised to be, the head, shepherd and spouse of his Church. As the Catechism reminds us, sacraments are “*perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature. By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify*” (CCC1084). This is fundamentally true of the seven sacraments of the Church: it is, analogously, true of the ordained ministry itself which makes *present efficaciously* the presence of Christ, specifically in his capacity as head, shepherd and spouse.

This is the vocation of the priest and bishop: not to be the head of the Church but to be the sacramental sign pointing us to Christ the head; not to be the shepherd of the Church but to be the sacramental sign pointing us to Christ the Good Shepherd; not to be the spouse of the Church but to be the sacramental sign of Christ the spouse of the bride whom he loves. Without this sacramental sign the Church could easily forget that it depends fully on Christ and his grace, rather than on its own collective “wisdom” and its own resources. Without this efficacious sacramental sign, the Church, as the community of Christ’s disciples, would be incapable of being the priestly community Christ has created it to be.

Pope St John Paul 11 captures all this very well when, in his 1990 Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, he writes as follows:

The priesthood of priests and bishops, as well as the ministry of deacons, is “for” the laity, and precisely for this reason it possesses a “ministerial” character, that is to say, one of “service”. Moreover, it highlights the “baptismal priesthood,” the priesthood common to all the faithful. It highlights this priesthood and at the same time helps it to be realised in the sacramental life.

It is worth considering here that the sacramental ministry of priests and bishops, which in our Catholic tradition has assumed such a central role in the life and ministry of the ordained, is precisely the way in which God has determined to equip and empower all disciples of Jesus to live out their priestly vocation of total self-giving for the life of God’s people. Such a vocation is beyond the natural capacity of human beings: we need the power of God’s grace to enable us to be what, without that grace, we cannot hope to be. The ministerial priesthood of priests and bishops expressed, not exclusively but certainly most fully, in our sacramental ministry, indeed “*highlights the priesthood common to all the faithful and helps it to be realised*”.

The significance and prominence of the ordained ministry in the life of the Church is, therefore, a precious gift. This gift, and its prominence, carries with it, however, a very real danger for us. We can so easily fall into the trap of thinking that **we** are the heads, shepherds and spouses of the Lord’s Church: that **I** am the head of **my** parish (when, of course, it is Christ who is the head of the parish, which is his) or that **I**, and not Christ, am the shepherd of **my** diocese (which in reality is not mine but the Lord’s). This is one of the gateways to that “clericalism” which has emerged as



such a concern in Pope Francis's reflections and in so many of the submissions to the Synod from all corners of the Church. We forget that we are not masters, but servants, and that, in their engagement with us, our people are meant to encounter *not those who lay heavy burdens on people's shoulders and then don't lift a finger to help them* (cf. Matt 23:4) but living images of the one who is *the face of the Father's mercy* (Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 2015).

This reflection invites us to consider the way in which we make Christ present to the particular community which has been entrusted to us. It is important to recall often that it is **his** way we are called to follow, **his** truth we are called to proclaim, and **his** life we are called to live and share (cf. John 14:6). When we fall into the trap of uncritically presupposing that our way (or our truth or our life) is fully in harmony with his, we run the risk of replacing fidelity with clericalism. We are no longer embodying the spirit of Saint John the Baptist (*he must grow greater, and I must grow smaller* cf. John 3:30), but rather the very opposite: he grows smaller as I grow greater. Surely none of us entered a seminary or religious congregation with the aim of diminishing or obscuring the truth and beauty of who Christ is - but each of us must have the courage and humility to ask if perhaps, in all kinds of different ways, this has at times been a tragic feature of our life and ministry.

Genuine humility, of course, recognises the truth - and the truth is that many of us, much of the time, live our diaconal and priestly lives with extraordinary generosity, self-sacrifice, fidelity and integrity. We do our best to be as available as possible to our people, not only when they come to find us in the presbytery or after Mass on the weekends, but also when we are called to the local hospital, aged care facility or nursing home, when we make that extra effort to be present in the local Catholic schools, and when we encounter our people in the local shopping centre. At our best, we are ready to leave our meal unfinished if someone has an urgent need for us, or to give up part of our day-off to lead a funeral, even when the deceased person or the family members have not been regular church-goers or perhaps do not technically belong to the parish. We try our best to be men of prayer, conscientious preparers of our homilies, just and compassionate employers of our staff, and willing supporters of our brothers in the ordained ministry. We certainly do all we can to be faithful to our commitment to treat others with respect and dignity and never to use or abuse others in any way. This generous self-giving to our people is our way of living our participation in the "common priesthood of all the faithful" and it is also the way in which our sacramental ministry and our way of life form a coherent whole.

None of us get all this right all of the time - but the vast majority of us do our best and remain faithful even when tiredness, discouragement, lack of resources and even direct opposition can threaten to overwhelm us.

Underpinning this complex reality of our lives as ordained ministers is the mystery of God's choice. "*You did not choose me,*" Jesus said to his disciples at the Last Supper, "*I chose you*" (John 15:16). This is as true for us as it was for the first disciples. And what Paul once wrote in relation to this mystery of divine vocation can be a source of courage for us when we confront our own limitations and failures:

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong (1 Cor 1:27).

But, of course, we must remember that God chooses us for a purpose. "*I chose you,*" said Jesus, "*and I commissioned you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last*" (John 15:16).

In a very real sense, the present Synod is a moment of grace for us, ordained ministers in the Lord's Church, because it is an invitation coming from the Bishop of Rome as *the visible source of the Church's unity* (cf. CCC 882), to reflect deeply on just what kind of fruit the Lord is looking for us to bear. In our local context, which for most of us means our parish community, what the Lord seems to be asking of us is that we dedicate ourselves to the task of helping our people to understand, to embrace and to realise in practice their fundamental call to be, in the words of Pope Francis, "missionary disciples": people who embody, radiate and share the joy of the gospel with



Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth

others; disciples who, as sharers in the priesthood of Christ, make of their lives a gift of generous and self-sacrificing love for others; and people who strive to do this in whatever ways are open to them in their individual circumstances. And because we are leaders of a community of disciples, and not dictators over “inferiors” whom the Lord has entrusted to our care, we will consider carefully how to generously and humbly invite all those who are willing and able to share the joy and the burden of Christian leadership to join with us in a common mission. This is an essential element of a synodal approach to our life and ministry as leaders of our local communities.

As priests and bishops, supported by our deacons, we are therefore called to place all our energies at the service of our brothers and sisters in the faith, animating, enabling and encouraging their, and our, exercise of the priesthood of the faithful, that priesthood which, because it is a sharing in Christ’s unique priesthood, calls us to “break our bodies” and “spill our blood” - that is, to give all that we are and have - *so that others might have life and have it more abundantly* (cf. John 10:10).

This is an exciting vision of the Church, both universally and at the local level of diocese and parish: it is one which I would invite you all to reflect on and embrace. There will be many challenges ahead, possibly some missteps along the way, and many options to consider, both at the local and diocesan level. Pope Francis has invited the whole Church to continue to walk this synodal path. I would like to think that we can do so together, sustaining, supporting and encouraging each other. Through the initiative of Pope Francis *may God who has begun this good work in us bring it to fulfilment* (cf. Ordination Rite of bishops, priests and deacons).

Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB

21 September 2024

Feast of Saint Matthew, Apostle.