

SYNODALITY – INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Dispatches from the Synod on Synodality
 Convener: Martin Madar, Xavier University
 Moderator: Jakob Rinderknecht, University of the Incarnate Word
 Presenters: Catherine Clifford, Saint Paul University
 Maureen O’Connell, LaSalle University
 Brian Flanagan, New Ways Ministry

The Synod on Synodality, currently underway, is the largest consultative process in the history of the Catholic Church. After the synodal listening on the local and regional levels, all eyes have been on Rome where the first synodal assembly took place last October (2023) and the second one is scheduled for this October (2024). Many see the synodal process as a *kairos* in the life of the church and the most significant event in Catholicism since Vatican II (1962-1965).

This session was the first round of a three-year interest group dedicated to synodality steered by Martin Madar, Jakob Rinderknecht, and Susan Reynolds. The group intends to provide an opportunity for critical assessment of the synodal assemblies of 2023-2024 and to offer a creative contribution of the members of the society to this timely topic.

The panelists were invited for their deep and diverse forms of involvement with the synod and in the promotion of synodality. Catherine Clifford is one of the ten non-episcopal delegates at the synod from North America. Maureen O’Connell is the Director of Synod on Higher Education Engagement for Discerning Deacons. Brian Flanagan is a Senior Fellow at New Ways Ministry who has used synodal methods in his work with LGBTQ+ Catholics.

The session started with each panelist giving short opening remarks regarding their key take-aways from last year’s synodal assembly. Clifford reflected on her experience as a synod participant. She first pointed out the significance of the arrangement in which the synodal assembly took place. Instead of the synod being an auditorium-style speech-making event, the synod members sat at round tables and engaged in synodal listening using the method of a conversation in the Spirit. She stressed the significance of the fact that both episcopal and non-episcopal members (even women) were placed at the same tables. In this connection she pointed out some remarks of Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., who was a retreat master for the synod. He noted that there can be no fruitful conversation between the synod members unless they recognize that they each speak with the authority of a person baptized into Christ, and that there need be no competition between the bishops and the laity. Clifford also reflected on the idea that while synodality is not a theology but a spiritual practice, it does need critical study and reflection, though this is not the entry point of synodality.

Maureen O’Connell reflected on her experience of accompanying young adults in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and beyond in the synodal process. She started by explaining that one concrete result of her work has been the appointment of Julia Oseka, a student at St. Joseph University in Philadelphia, as a synod voting member, which in O’Connell’s mind underscores the efficacy of participating in the synodal processes and is an example of profound change taking place in the church. O’Connell

then informed about four other synodality projects in which she has been involved: SCHEAP (Synodality in Catholic Higher Education), HECoS (Higher Education Coalition on Synodality), Pedagogies for Protagonism, and CENTERS (Catholic Education Network to Engage Rome and Synodality). She concluded by offering five consolations and five tensions that have surfaced from her engagement with synodality.

Brian Flanagan began his remarks by thanking the theologians, some present at the session, who through their scholarship in the last fifty years prepared the ground for the current discussions on synodality. He then reflected on three predictions about the synod he had made in various talks he gave in the last two years and found them largely accurate. Those predictions were that

- synodality was going to be messy and that the synod on synodality would be opposed, especially in the US,
- synodality would be empowering, particularly to the historically marginalized voiced in the church, and
- the synod would bring some disappointment.

Flanagan concluded by raising one issue of crucial importance lying ahead of the church, namely, that theologians need to be thinking about synodality after the conclusion of the synod. The real test of the synodal moment will be what happens with the reception and normalization of synodality long term, especially on the local level.

After these presentations, the session continued with a conversation among the panelists and concluded with an energetic discussion among members of the audience and the presenters.

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