



The synodal Process and **THE LISTENING CHURCH**

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Introduction

What does it mean to be a "listening church"?

In the next half hour we're going to explore synodality in the wider context of deep change across the Church and across the world. I am not going into the administrative processes of the Synod, you'll be pleased to hear.

What I will explore this morning is:

- What synodality is really about - what it means to listen to the Holy Spirit, to have a wider sense of vocation for the whole People of God
- Why synodality is happening now
- How Catholic Social Teaching can help us understand this new era that we are moving into
- How we are called - we'll go through some practical steps - what it takes to become a listening church

But before we go any further, let me say a few words about my story. I am the daughter of an Anglican vicar who became a bishop. I was a bit of a rebel; I became estranged from the Church in my teens. Then in my mid-twenties much against everyone's expectations I had a conversion experience - I was received into the Catholic Church.

Then about 12 years ago I experienced a prompting of the Spirit in my life and I started what is now *Together for the Common Good* - a UK charity.¹ We draw on Catholic Social Teaching² and we engage across the Christian traditions to encourage people to play their part in spiritual and civic renewal. My work draws me into listening and learning right across the churches, and this has shown me a clearer sense of the calling of the Catholic Church, and the opportunities that the Synod presents at this time in our history.

Synodality, the Church and The Holy Spirit

So what does synodality mean? This is a word that is constantly misunderstood - sometimes seen as an internal ecclesial exercise, other times seen as a battleground. It's actually a terrible word that always has to be explained. But it has a wonderful meaning.

The synodal practice of mutual listening and reflection brings us closer to the mission of Jesus – closer to the ways of the early Church.

Essentially synodality means walking together and listening to the Holy Spirit. It's both old and new: it's an ancient practice and a new way of being church.

In the synodal conversation model (the spiritual conversation³) which many of you will have taken part in, we invite the Holy Spirit to join us, and through periods of listening, sharing and silence together, our hearts become open to what God is saying, how God moves in our lives.

Also I want to be clear what I mean by "church" in this talk today. What I mean by church is not just buildings and hierarchy and ecclesiastical arrangements, important as they are - I'm thinking of the church as the body of Christ, the whole People of God. I'm thinking of groups of faithful people traveling together in relationship with God, with a covenantal commitment to place. So "church" includes all of us, all your conferences, your centres, shops, parishes, your school groups, your staff teams, your groups of volunteers - that's church.

So why synodality now? It's because it brings us back to God's priorities rather than our own, our society has got very lost and this is what the world needs now. Pope Francis says the Synod involves "*discernment of the times*"⁴ in order to fulfil the Church's mission - which is God's mission - and as Pope Paul VI said is "*to proclaim and establish among all peoples, the Kingdom of God.*" (*Lumen Gentium*⁵).

At the heart of this mission is God's desire to heal the fragmentation caused by a de-sacralised world. It's about bringing the Kingdom alive on earth as in heaven.

Changing Church

But how can the Church fulfil that mission? The prospects do not look good. The institutional churches in the West are in decline. And yet God is at work: there are signs of new energy and growth. The whole body of Christ globally is undergoing profound change.

Walking more closely with God means we will be better able to sense the movements of the Spirit - in our own parishes and our neighbourhoods - and sense where we are called to participate.

What's not working is what I'd call the "consumerist" model of church. You know - where you go to church, you get something and you go home again. Churches seeing growth are doing something different: they are relational, providing a sense of family, they are attentive to the Holy Spirit, living in friendship alongside their neighbours, making it easy for people to get involved. That approach is unglamorous, it's about patience, listening, forgiveness, redemption, mutuality, accompaniment, creating spaces for people to spend time together and with God. Sabbath.

New Era: Catholic Social Teaching helps us stay true to mission

This call for synodality comes at a time of socio-economic crisis, but it offers energy and hope. However, to seize the opportunity, we need to read the signs of the times.

About eight years ago Pope Francis said,

*"We are living not through an era of change, but a change of era."*⁶

We've got to take that seriously. To understand why synodality is important, we need to understand the new era.

Catholic Social Teaching - which has been called the theology of the Holy Spirit in practice - can help us recognise what's going on. It helps us identify social and cultural systems that are dehumanising. It's always concerned about the human person. It gives us an authentically Christian political literacy, helping us avoid mission drift and resist the corrosive influence of secular ideologies which are becoming more active in this new era.

Those ideologies are dangerous for Christians. Secular humanism laughs at God. It reduces religion is a lifestyle choice, aims to relegate the Church to a private club out of the public square. Post-modernist ideology wants us to adopt false ideas about human beings. And some well-intentioned people in the Church have been seduced into these worldviews. But we should be confident in our Christian identity. We need to remember we are made in the image of God: and as Christians our identity is in Jesus Christ.

In fact, Frederic Ozanam's⁷ active Christian love of the poor helped inspire Catholic Social Teaching - and Catholic Social Teaching still underpins the ethos of the SVP. So the SVP can resist mission drift by becoming more anchored in your charism.

Back in 1891, when Catholic Social Teaching, the modern version of it, started, it was mounting a response⁸ to the industrial revolution - noticing what was happening to human beings. It's then continued to guide us all these years with encyclicals, letters and guidance - to uphold true freedom, to uphold the human spirit in the face of what we might call "the principalities and powers".

So Catholic Social Teaching sees three kinds of power: the two earthly powers of money and state, and the one transcendent power of human beings in relationship. Because we're made in the image of God, we are partly transcendent, that means relational power is a transcendent power.

Catholic Social Teaching transcends left and right. It's non-partisan, correctly understood. It's not anti-capitalist, because it recognises that capital can be creative, but it recognises that its exploitative, extractive and commodifying tendencies and so it has to be constrained.

But neither is Catholic Social Teaching pro- or anti-state. It recognises that governments can and do promote the good, but it also calls out bureaucratic systems in the administrative state when they are dehumanising. It's always concerned about the human person.

So it calls for both state and money power to be de-centralised, distributed wherever possible down to local institutions and to the family which it regards as the building block of society.

New Era: the Unravelling

So our Catholic Social Teaching lens can help us navigate this change of era. It helps us see what is happening to the human being.

I think we can all sense it, can't we, but we find it hard to name. We are caught in a deep spiritual malaise. There are forces have been corroding our civic life for over forty years, with deeper roots going back at least two centuries. The pandemic⁹ accelerated these trends, but they are not new.

These forces were unleashed by a philosophy¹⁰ that views human beings as isolated individuals, rather than the relational beings as God created us. So it's based on a wrong anthropology.

This individualism is antithetical to the Catholic understanding of human nature. And like any lie that is treated as true, it has deeply damaged our institutional and social relationships and our sense of belonging and meaning.

We can see that the family, community and relationship with place have all been undermined. Many of you deal with the fallout. The economic application of this transactional individualism has led to the degradation of large parts of our country, to the abandonment of whole communities.

This is a breach of the common good.

And successive governments from both left and right have steadily promoted the neoliberal frame underpinning the "me-first" society. And now it's unravelling.

Right across the West, in all the countries that have adopted the same system, we see breakdowns in trust, political and cultural polarisation, social fragmentation, increasing inequality, and rising pathologies and symptoms of human distress like loneliness, addiction, self-harm, depression and nihilism. I'm sorry to be frank, but this is what's happening.

The churches too have been vulnerable to this assault too and have not known how to resist.

The era of individualism has generated also a careless globalisation: with its off shoring of jobs, capital flight, human trafficking, zero hours contracts; the medicalisation of sadness, the shaming of manual work by the so-called knowledge economy, the promotion of "social mobility" over belonging to place. All of this is in the interests of big corporations. It's not in the interests of families and communities.

Geopolitical change and war are adding to the inherent instability of this economic model. The collusion of capital and the technocratic state which we're now seeing, with big tech, big pharma and big media - altogether what some people are calling "the machine"¹¹ - is challenging the very meaning of human life.

As governments fail to act, we see this loss of trust, and in the vacuum, extreme ideologies gain traction.

Identity: God vs Self

This individualism has deep roots. It begins with the Enlightenment of the 17th century, which of course brought many benefits but it also included a turning: a turning away from God and towards the Self. Over time, it led to a loss of the sense of the transcendent nature of the human person. We need to get things the right way up again.

Everything seems stacked against us in a world completely dominated by the cult of Self, framed by an aggressive secular humanism. And this new era is just unfolding. We may need to accept a tragic realism that things are not going to get back to normal.

But the truth is this is God's world. And if we really believe that God is real, then God *is* the primary agent. And so the proper posture for this time of uncertainty is surrender.¹²

We need to be clear about who we are as human beings - our real, God-given identity. My identity is not to be reduced to a category, like "straight, white woman." No! my identity and yours is as a transcendent human being in God. This is who we are - before we were born, after we die, and all our mortal life.

Now Catholics in particular appreciate the sacramental reality of the two realms, the earthly and the heavenly. Each realm has its own worldview and we have to choose the right one. As Moses said to the Israelites leaving Egypt, we should choose freedom in God, not the false freedoms of the machine. The machine deceives and unravels. Meanwhile God builds relationships.

Sometimes in the Church we make the wrong choice. We forget who we are. We choose the earthly paradigm. We rely on managerial, technocratic approaches. Like the builders of the towers of Babel, we think we can sort it all out on our own. Well we can't.

The purpose of the Synodal Way

Why do we need to know all this? What's the purpose of the synodal way.

Because this is why synodality is happening now. This is what Pope Francis saw when he first thought about this synodality phase in the life of the Church.

The world needs the Church to be fit for purpose - to resist the dehumanising powers and work for the Kingdom in the places where we live. The local church (that's us) needs to be generating relational power, as part of God's mission to uphold the human space.

This is what Catholic Social Teaching has consistently taught us, and this is why in *Fratelli Tutti*¹³ Pope Francis most recent encyclical talks about the importance of fraternity and civic friendship. This is not rhetoric; he actually means it.

The Catholic tradition calls us to a counter cultural insurgency against individualism.

This can be a spiritual, a relational practice - of accompaniment, sabbath, loving-kindness, building relationships - in other words, being synodal.

It can also look like forms of statecraft that uphold humanity and the natural world - but that's for another talk.

However the churches have been weakened by individualism and many have fallen out of relationship with their local communities. And it has to be said, that few Catholics know the reality of the Holy Spirit in their lives - it's not been part of their formation. But this is something that the synodal way can teach us. Some of you here will have experienced the unmistakable gentleness of the Spirit, will know what I mean.

Becoming a listening church

So how do we become a listening church?

Let's think about what this "walking together" means. And let's think of "church" as the whole People of God, groups of faithful people committed to a place. This is not abstract, it's very particular. Because people live in places. God loves people, so it's located, it's grounded. Christians are called to be the embodiment of love in a desecrated world.

In the "enlarging your tent"¹⁴ text, as Isaiah is saying, that when God comes, His presence will add new dimensions to your life, your family, and your church. So we'd better enlarge our tent - because more people, more energy, more life will come.

What practical steps can we take to become a listening church? I suggest the approach is a two-fold posture: inward and outward:

Inward facing - focusing on your formation as church

Outward-facing - how you relate to your neighbourhood

Both require remembering God is primary agent, not us.

And both require a culture of hearing each other's stories, by embedding the one-to-one conversation as a core practice, I would suggest.

This works both ways: a church develops a culture of encounter, so people are recognised and heard, their stories are known. When you are sitting next to someone in the pew, you actually know who they are.

Then, outward facing - the members of the congregation develop a habit of one to one's with their neighbours, building relationships. In this way they will discern how the Spirit is at work in the neighbourhood.

I recommend this as a valuable practice in itself - not for a campaign, not for a project - which it often is used for, which often makes people feel used, frankly. But doing the one to one conversation just for the honour of hearing a person's story. We have a resource on one to one conversations on our website, if you'd like to download it, it's for free.¹⁵

Becoming a listening church: inward-facing

But now I'd like to look at your inward-facing synodal approach - how to become a listening church.

What will this look like for you, in your church, in your shop, in your group, in your conference?

Let's look at this:

"You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last."

John 15:16

You'll want to put in place some simple ways of learning to hear the Holy Spirit.

So first the core synodal conversational practice - it wasn't meant just for 2021 and 2022 - it's meant to be a way of being. So your parish should be offering this all the time. To offer everyone the opportunity to experience this if they haven't already - it's just the practice of listening to God, sharing and silence - it's very simple and powerful.

Then I'd suggest there are two practices of discernment that can be really helpful:

One is to help the lay people to spot vocations. By vocations I don't mean necessarily towards ordination or becoming a religious, I mean the broader sense of how we're called. We all have a calling; we all have a vocation.¹⁶ We need to accompany each other to ask God how he is calling us, develop an awareness of our gifts and skills. Before this I was a graphic designer, I wasn't doing anything like this. God called me. This is what happens. I meet people like this all the time.

We need to learn what is of God and not of God: this is very important in this time of confusion. This means becoming attuned to distinguish God's voice from the malign voices dressed up as benign ideas. We need to separate the good fruit from the weeds.

In all discernment it's about asking God to show us what He wants of us, listening and being careful we are not confusing this with our own ideas and projects. Really easy to do that, we need to be really careful.

You may also want to think about Formation for your church, your group.

As the Catechism says, the Eucharist is "the source and summit" of the Christian life". So around that perhaps think about creative use of music to cultivate a more communal spirituality, makes it easy for people who aren't used to church to join in. You may want to explore ways, help people find a depth in the Eucharist, help them to study it and learn more about it.

But it should not be assumed that everyone knows what it means to have a relationship with the Holy Spirit. There is a need to teach people how to pray. People do sometimes say, I don't know how, could you teach me? Every parish should be enabling people to taste the wonderful variety of Catholic prayer - from *Lectio*, to the Examen¹⁷, to Taizé chant, to the daily Divine Office, to silent contemplation, from music-based prayer to pilgrimage¹⁸. Memorised prayers can be wonderful, but on their own they can encourage an individualistic, passive spiritual life. We need to give people pathways and help them into this new way of being.

And in our regular Adoration we can have experience of silence or contemplative music which provides a really important refuge from the confusion of the dominant culture to refresh and re-centre ourselves with God.

Now great liturgy is inspirational and important, but the sacrifice of the Mass also needs to be lived out every day of the week. And small, self-run discipleship groups, groups that journey together, pray together, read Scripture together, build trust and spiritual intimacy. This is a powerful formation.

It's worth noting that churches with these kinds of cell groups fared much better to the disruptions of the pandemic than those that didn't.

A group like this can enable encounter with the Spirit, like the early church. This is fundamental for renewal.

Everyone in the parish should be encouraged to join some kind of prayer group, whatever kind suits them best. Young people are especially to be encouraged, they bring important energy and will find nourishment. Older people bring life experience, wisdom, practice and patience.

The Alpha¹⁹ programme is a great place to start a small group. *Lectio*²⁰ is great too. There are other ways of running small cell groups. Integrating a shared meal - this is a great way to build fraternity.

Also in your inward-focusing preparations for becoming a listening church you'll want to think about Governance. This is a big part of the synodal process.

Of course, since churches are human as well as sacred institutions, they need strong systems of accountability. And for Catholics, that starts with a Parish Council. So is the Parish Council strong, do you have one/don't you have one; how could you start one? It can help the church – its buildings and its people and its priest – to become an anchor in the community. You can integrate, in fact, the synodal discernment practice into your governance meetings.

It's also important to take great care to build trust with all parties and act with sensitivity to overcome the clerical and individualistic culture that fragments relationships between priests and laity. Great sensitivity.

The synodal documents speak of communion, participation, and mission. That means fostering a leadership that is more bottom-up than top-down. Remember Jesus built the Church on a humble fisherman. Peter was not well educated, not an obvious leader. So be intentional about new patterns of leadership, get beyond the usual suspects, build a broader mix. Hear people's stories and discern new leaders among people who previously may not have been obvious, people who've been overlooked, attending not just to age, gender and race but to class, to educational background, socio-economic background - and crucially, to diversity of opinion.

These are just some of the ways to think about your inward-facing approach to becoming a listening church.

Becoming a listening church: outward-facing

Let's look at the other side of this two-fold posture. We have inward-facing, and now, the outward-facing approach.

In this time of unravelling, becoming a listening church means becoming a relational church. Becoming part, a humble part, of the reweaving of the civic space.

Some of the questions we can ask ourselves at ground level are

How can we become more attentive to where God is already at work so we can join in?

Who are we, as a people, in this place? what is God calling us to do here and now? Who, among our neighbours are we called to be in relationship with? What can we do together?

How can we build relationships between neighbours who've become estranged?

Who do we know? Where are our blind spots? Do we know someone who can connect us with neighbours we're not in relationship with?

How do we keep it relational – person to person?

What are some of the practices we can adopt, in line with Catholic Social Teaching, that help us become a listening church?

Fundamentally a listening posture, attentive to finding God in the neighbourhood.²¹ This the shift. From the contractual era of individualism to the covenantal era we hope we can move to, we have to be attentive to God.

Work with the small and in the local.

Create places where people feel welcome, a sense of family.

Honour every person: every conversation matters.

Value young people, what they have to say, Remember that loneliness is statistically higher among 18-24 year olds than among the old.²² Provide a space for them, a physical space for their gatherings.

Realise that relationship with place²³ is central. Draw a map - a simple map - of your area - mark all the local institutions - charities, clubs, businesses, shops, schools, FE colleges, places of worship. There are connections to be made. Within Catholic Social Teaching it is very important that local institutions connect with their neighbours and build bonds of trust. This is how we reweave the broken civil society layer that has become so fragmented.

Recognise actually, that vulnerability can be a strength: even though the church has been weakened, and the church is increasingly marginalised, the church needs friends. And it's actually when you're vulnerable that you ask for help. That's often when connections are made. Jesus didn't start a private club. So reaching out in the local as a constructive neighbour is likely to be well received. So cultivate these relationships, build trust.

Invite neighbours to a shared meal, celebrate together.

Welcome people who are not used to church, make it easy for them to participate. Strive for worship that is more relational, more enriching, more communal.

You could pray for local business owners - you could even offer to host a monthly prayer breakfast. Always look for opportunities of partnership.

Now the churches have buildings and land - you have many assets. We should be sharing these. Within the Catholic Social Teaching set of principles "the universal destination of goods" means we're grateful to have them, but we are called to share them. So you might want to think, in your neighbourhood, how could we share what we have. Building an economy of gift.

Also important to think about these "in-between" spaces that exist within the community. Perhaps thinking about people who have become estranged, groups who no longer trust each other, where suspicion has grown. How can the church become that space "in-between", to foster encounters between people that don't trust each other?

Get to know your neighbours. You could start by asking what people would most value. A church I know²⁴ in Birmingham asked the neighbours what they most wanted. The top of the list was a playground. So that's what the church did. It organised locally, got everyone involved. People actually dug the foundations together. That was 25 years ago. That church was nothing, it started with a dilapidated building. It's now the hub of that community with 2,500 people going through that building every week. Start by outward-facing, listening.

Talk about "communities of place", how can we become communities of place? The best approaches don't necessarily need funding or much planning. For example to run a *Place Of Welcome*²⁵ all you need is a room and some warm, sensitive, prayerful people to host and invite people to come, do simple things together. Be close, accompany each other, make it inter-generational.

All of this relationship building might then extend to your solidarity to resist the powers and strive to correct the abandonment, joining perhaps with your neighbours to support families in the community, to advocate for decent jobs and place-based investment - to make it a place where young people can build a life.

So these are just some of the steps to becoming a listening church.

What else do we need to do to enlarge our tent?

A woman told me she had been struggling with terrible debt for two years. She had gone to mass every week but hadn't told a soul. That's the opposite of synodal. By contrast, a listening church has a culture where people are known, where we can be authentic despite our brokenness, where we can love and support each other.

Remember that Pope Francis says the poor are the treasure of the Church. He also says that the Church needs to be evangelised by the poor, so we need to try to move away from this "service-client" dynamic that creates the tension of 'us' and 'them'.²⁶ This means not doing things *to* or *for* people but finding ways to do things together, now this is a cultural shift, not that easy. We need to foster the leadership of

people who perhaps would otherwise be seen as beneficiaries, recipients or "service users" - this language is part of the old, contractual, individualistic era.

Instead, the listening church strives for a sense of family - giving a *hand up* rather than a *hand out*. The listening church knows that it's not the rescuer; only God can do that.

The listening church is able to receive as well as give.

So this reciprocity - the building of local covenantal relationships²⁷ - echoes the wonderful passage of Jeremiah:

*"Seek the shalom of the city - and pray to the LORD on its behalf,
for in its shalom, you will find shalom." Jeremiah 29.7*

If I may, can I just finish with a prayer, I would really love to pray for you:

I just want to thank you Lord for bringing all these beautiful people together today. Bless every one of them and their families and the people they meet. Thank you for their gifts and skills and for their generosity of heart. Thank you for joining with us in the laughter and weeping with us in the pain. We trust Lord, that in this strange time, that you are holding the whole world in your hands and that the fruit that comes from this meeting is all for Your glory.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

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This was a keynote for delegates attending the SVP National Meeting 2023: SVP trustees, staff, leaders and volunteers from SVP centres, parish and school groups, Young Vincentians groups, SVP retail outlets, as well as leaders and members from SVP local conferences across England and Wales.

NOTES

- ¹ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/about/our-founder-director>
- ² <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/about/catholic-social-thought>
- ³ https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/en/EN_Step_6_Spiritual-Conversation.pdf
- ⁴ Pope Francis for the opening of the Synod, 2021: <https://rb.gy/ekerw>
- ⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, 1964: <https://rb.gy/hmtbp>
- ⁶ <https://aleteia.org/blogs/aleteia-blog/pope-francis-we-are-not-living-an-era-of-change-but-a-change-of-era/>
- ⁷ <https://svp.org.uk/our-history>
- ⁸ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/to-live-a-decent-life>
- ⁹ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/the-plague-and-the-parish>
- ¹⁰ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/how-christian-is-postliberalism>
- ¹¹ <https://unherd.com/the-post/paul-kingsnorth-how-to-resist-the-machine/>
- ¹² <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/the-story-in-which-we-find-ourselves>
- ¹³ *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020: <https://rb.gy/x37dg>
- ¹⁴ <https://wherepeteris.com/big-tent-catholicism/>
- ¹⁵ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/resources/one-to-one-conversations>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.pathsoflove.com/johnpaul-vocation.html#sdfootnote6anc>
- ¹⁷ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/resources/the-common-good-examen>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.pilgrimways.org.uk/>
- ¹⁹ <https://alpha.org.uk/catholic-context>
- ²⁰ <https://www.24-7prayer.com/podcast/introducing-lectio-divina/>
- ²¹ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/the-soil-of-community>
- ²² <https://www.ukonward.com/reports/age-of-alienation-loneliness-young-people/>
- ²³ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/the-politics-of-grace-and-place>
- ²⁴ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/stories/pavilion-shaping-a-community-of-hope>
- ²⁵ <https://www.placesofwelcome.org.uk/>
- ²⁶ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/from-jenny-sinclair/how-should-the-church-respond-to-poverty-at-this-time>
- ²⁷ <https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/renewing-the-covenant>