

Give the Spirit the Mic!

– *A Strategy for Communal Discernment and Synodality*

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PART ONE

A SYNODAL CHURCH

As I write, the theme of the 2022 Synod has just been announced: *‘For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission’*. Synodality, understood as a pilgrim people walking along together and with God, is to be a constitutive dimension of the Church, with communal discernment as a central element. Already the documents from the Amazon Synod of 2020 encourage local communities to develop a participative style as they move along, and to trust that the Holy Spirit will guide them, lay and clergy, into ever-deepening fidelity to the gospel. Pope Francis has long been insistent, as throughout *Evangelii gaudium*, that communal discernment is the way forward for the People of God if they are to respond well to the emerging challenges of our world: the term recurs in that document some twenty times.

In one sense there is nothing new about synodality: in the OT the Hebrews walked along together in the wilderness, and they experienced the guiding hand of God who led them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (see Ex 13:21). The gospels too can be understood as synodal in that the disciples as a band of lay-persons, female and male, journeyed with Jesus (see Lk 8:1-3). Synodality brings us back to our identity as People of God, and opens new spaces for dialogue in the Church, with a new freedom that must be used responsibly. While it is still a largely unknown and mysterious concept both for Church leaders and the faithful, with its blossoming the Church will have come of age. The central insight, too easily overlooked, is that the ecclesial conversation involved must include God! This article stresses the crucial shift required if we are to take synodality seriously: from solely talking among ourselves about what we are to do we need

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also to engage directly with God to learn the divine will. This dimension of prayer may seem so obviously important as not to require mention, but how often does it happen?

LET'S PAUSE FOR A MOMENT'S PRAYER!

Over the years I have come to think that many ecclesial meetings resemble those of a family gathered for a case conference concerning a seriously ill member. In their heartfelt concern for the patient the members spend the time discussing among themselves the gravity of the situation and its possible remedies while ignoring the consultants who are present.

At many meetings I have attended – some of which I have led! – God may indeed be invited in, even if briefly, as when the Chair says: 'Let's pause *for a moment's prayer*'. A brief silence falls and then the agenda takes over, with facts, preferences, debates and opinions; sometimes too with power plays followed by silences born not of peace but fear. Reference may or may not be made to specifically Christian values: someone may ask almost apologetically, 'I wonder what God would want us to do?' but the atmosphere may not be congenial to the unfolding of that question. An outsider might wonder what, if anything, distinguishes the meeting from that of a humanist group.

Eventually the Chair intervenes, summarises the discussion, asks for a show of hands, and may wrap up proceedings with a perfunctory Our Father or Glory Be. Over time a pattern of dull predictability emerges both in the style of the meetings and the conclusions, leading to passive aggression or absenteeism. Meeker members may feel they wouldn't be missed by not showing up. Board meetings become 'bored meetings'. Surprisingly, *after* such meetings a surge of energy may emerge that was absent or suppressed during the meeting itself. Is that, I wonder, the sad sigh of the Spirit who is moving on to a more fertile situation?

THEY TALKED AMONG THEMSELVES

The all-too-human human approach sketched above echoes a recurring situation in the gospels: 'the scribes were *questioning in their hearts and discussing among themselves* (Mk 2:8); an argument arose *among the disciples* (Lk 9:49; Mt 20:24); the Emmaus-bound disciples were *talking with each other* (Lk 24:13-14); the Jews disputed *among themselves* about the bread of life (Jn 6:52).

The discussions between Jesus' disciples when among themselves become graced only if and when the matter is referred to Jesus, who

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‘knows their thoughts’ and who intervenes to reveal a divine value which transcends their divisions and misunderstandings. In the encounter with him liberating truth is achieved. So, for instance, the disciples learn with shock that in the kingdom of God the least in human reckoning is the greatest (Lk 9:49); that in the divine order of things it was necessary that the Messiah should suffer (Lk 24:26): and so forth.

MY THOUGHTS AND YOUR THOUGHTS

The shift from the human to the divine level is demanding and requires much unlearning. *‘As the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts’* (Is 55:8-9). Peter must have brooded long over Jesus’ criticism: *‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things’* (Mt 16:23). Despite his good intentions Peter’s unredeemed mind-set is leading him in a way opposed to the kingdom of God. The challenge to conversion he faced is ours too. Like him we must grapple with the imagination of God, who has a disconcerting habit of thinking ‘outside the box’ as shown for instance in Samuel’s efforts to identify who should be anointed king of Israel: *‘Do not look on his (Eliab’s) appearance or on the height of his stature, for I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart’* (1 Sam:16:7).

As long as we remain confined in our own mind-sets we flounder through a meeting, and our conclusions have a hit-and-miss quality about them. Certainly a worthwhile meeting demands good preparation: we must laboriously gather the facts, identify options and so forth. But what happens next? How do we make our choices? At this point do we ask the Spirit to preside, so that our choices may be in tune with divine preferences? How can we become like the disciples who gather around the risen Lord, take to heart what they hear, and *‘bear fruit with patient endurance’* (Lk 8:15)?

THEY WERE AFRAID TO ASK HIM (MK 9:32)

Perhaps the elephant in the room is our fear to ask the Lord directly and upfront, ‘What are we to do?’ (see Acts 22:10). To do so would be so counter-cultural as to seem phoney, almost theatrical, like using a *deus ex machina*. Most of us, it has been said, are atheists before breakfast, but perhaps we remain so for the rest of the day! What does it mean to ask God directly to show us what to do?

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Supposing God does not respond? Is it better to look for responses seemingly more reliable than; ‘I sensed God tugging me ...’; ‘I feel unhappy about our proposal ...’; ‘I felt God was more interested in Option X than Y’? Better to substitute some bright idea of our own, quote the latest book, launch a subtle attack on someone else’s point of view! But have you, like me, ever come away from a meeting with the disturbing feeling that you hadn’t said what you felt you should say? If so what was going on – were you by any chance *ignoring* a divine prompt, silencing the Spirit?

There is a contemplative quality about asking God to touch our hearts; to wait in silent prayer is demanding, as those who consistently try it well know. RS Thomas speaks of ‘the movement of a curtain’ as sometimes the only sign that God is at the far end of our prayer, and we evade the emptiness by saying, ‘We haven’t time for prayer, and there’s a lot to be done’.

Perhaps our faith is weak, so that we doubt this whole business of God speaking to human beings. Scripture is proclaimed as ‘The Word of the Lord’ and we respond, ‘Thanks be to God’. But we doubt that the word might be spoken to us and through us as the good news in the present tense. We accept that in scripture God is portrayed as speaking to a glorious variety of characters, but we may doubt that God might be trying to speak ‘upfront and personal’ with the likes of us, *now*. Is our self-image too low? Would we even want this to happen? Like Amos we may protest that we are not prophets, only herdsmen and dressers of sycamore trees, but the Lord may be saying to us – as Vatican II does, ‘Go, prophesy!’ (Amos 7:14-15). We are told that God likes doing new things: ‘*I will make you hear new things, hidden things that you have not known*’ (Is 48:6). This however is disconcerting to the well-ordered and tidy-minded, so let’s not go there! But in M P Gallagher’s words, the world of change is the theatre of the Spirit.

Perhaps we have a poor grasp of the language God chooses to use with us? Does God really address us through our emotions, feelings, tugs, aversions, through the struggles and mood-wars of the heart, through consolation and desolation? Perhaps we so control our own lives that we have little experience of chatting with God about our choices? Does pride, fear of change or of loss of power sap our enthusiasm for such a conversation? Are we embarrassed about sharing what went on – or didn’t go on – during our prayer for fear it might reveal our inner poverty, our paper-thin sense of God?

LED BY ANOTHER

St Ignatius was known as strong-willed but a recent biographer emphasises that the later Ignatius was always ‘led by Another’.

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He had come to see that God wishes to deal directly with each of us, and he would make no decision without consulting with God, ‘as a wise and loving Father’. He had long been ignorant of the remarkable fact that God was addressing him through his feelings and emotions, but after he internalised God’s lessons on his alternating moods of consolation and desolation, he had no doubt that the real God is always online, working on our hearts, orchestrating all things and inviting each of us into service. His advice to his followers was that ‘they should keep God always before their eyes’: this is the contemplative stance. We are to be watching out for the beckoning of God, whether in the demands of the gospel, the calls of the Church, the signs of the times, or the inner stirrings of the heart. For Ignatius, Christian living worth the name is a following of God who is drawing us from out front and from the future into the mystery of the Kingdom: we are – all of us – to be ‘led by Another’. There is radical joy in this, as pope Francis keeps reminding us: consolation is the prevailing resonance in the hearts of those who are trying to please God.

SPIRIT-LED MEETINGS

‘Bidden and unbidden, God will be present’ – so said the Delphic Oracle in the 5thc BC. A version of this quotation hung above C G Jung’s door in Switzerland, but it merits circulation at every meeting. It can remind each member that God is listening attentively to what is being said (see Mal 3:16; Jer 8:6). We can rightly say that the three divine Persons attend every meeting because decisions made at meetings shape our world for good or ill, and this world is the focus of intense divine concern. So the process of meetings must be so designed as to facilitate its members to encounter God and to struggle to harmonise with divine preferences.

A sense of mystery and anticipation grows with the belief that God will be present. Such meetings may be hard work but are never boring: encounters with the divine are not dull affairs! Gospel characters who met Jesus – the Samaritan woman at the well, Zacchaeus in his tree, the woman taken in adultery, the blind man – all were enlivened by the experience. The strategy outlined here sets up the possibility of such direct encounter with the Lord. When used well, it is found to liberate group energy, bring new life to meetings, and give participants the sense that the Holy Spirit truly does ‘speak to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7 etc). Even we Jesuits use it on occasion!

We can call this strategy *a Spirit-led conversation*, because it puts the Spirit at the centre. When all the relevant facts are to hand and the issue is boiled down to ‘What will we do?’ the group

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hands the Holy Spirit the mic! This cuts out endless opinion-airing and contradictory views, and ensures that everyone can be heard, because equal weight is given to the contribution of each. Instead of trying to hold to predetermined positions each tries to cultivate openness and uncertainty, in anticipation of the Spirit's preferred option. Faced with the mystery of God, each becomes a learner; status and rank have no priority; each contributes humbly and tentatively what they sense God may be asking. Solomon's prayer for wisdom is apposite here: *'I am only a little child: I do not know how to go out or come in...Give your servant therefore an understanding mind'* (1Kg 3:9; also Wisdom of Solomon 9). We seek *'the wisdom that comes from above'* (James 3:17). We make an act of faith that the God who created and sustains us is also committed to leading us to what is best. In asking the Spirit to animate the meeting, we will be gifted with a new awareness of the closeness of God in our lives.

PART TWO

A SPIRIT-LED EXERCISE IN DISCERNMENT

So much for preliminaries: it is time to see our strategy in practice. A Leader is presumed.

Agenda: The particular agenda of any Christian meeting for communal discernment will flow from the group's desire to *'seek the kingdom of God'* (Lk 12:31) or as Pope Francis puts it, *'We are united by the new commandment that Jesus left us, by the pursuit of the civilisation of love'* (*Beloved Amazon* 109).

Format: While I have set out below a number of steps the format must not be rigid but allow for flexibility and variation as occasion, time and the capacity of participants demand. Communal discernment can be a very human and untidy event, though conducted under the guidance of the Lord of history. In *Making Good Decisions* I offer a variety of practical examples of what actually went on.¹ The two core points are

1 Brian Grogan: *Making Good Decisions*. Dublin; Veritas 2015, pp 233-252.
The first example is of a parish which faced a change of membership of the Pastoral Council. Various models were proposed: finally one woman said, 'Why not let God take charge?' How this was achieved in practice is described.
The second example is of an impasse between a Parish Council and the Finance Committee about how best to use a considerable sum of money. The many options were boiled down to one, and the group went off to pray and report back: the total time allotted for the communal discernment was three hours. Happily a consensus was reached with 30 minutes to spare. I have found that it helps considerably if agreement is reached at the beginning that as much time will be spent in prayer as in discussion: I know of no better stimulus to brevity.

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- that solid time is given to praying privately over the issue in question:
- that the members report back on *what went on in that prayer* instead of simply resuming discussion of what each thinks should be done.

It was at one of these meetings that the phrase was coined, ‘Give the Spirit the mic!’ – to call contributors back to the task in hand when they were getting stuck in the groove of their personal agendas. In other words, ‘Don’t tell us what YOU were thinking about, but what GOD seemed to be whispering to you about the issue.’ Gentle humour works well!

Step One: The Leader welcomes the members, reminding them of the procedure, discussed beforehand, which will be followed. Then the time-commitment is set. A period of prayer to the Holy Spirit follows, each member asking to be open to the Holy Spirit, who is poured into our hearts (Rm 5:5) and waiting to speak with us (Rev 2:7). The image of Elijah waiting for the still small voice can be helpful (1Kg 19:12). (Time: 15 mins).

Step Two: Preparatory work may already have been done on the issue, so that the members are up to speed on the issue. Now the latest update on the facts is given, with clarifications as needed. The options should be taken singly; Yes or No to each. Many years ago I assisted at a discernment on the Option: ‘Should we buy a formation house in a very poor area?’ The listing of factors for and against the option united the group in common concern, and wonderfully concentrated the mind, as Samuel Johnson remarked about a prisoner being told that he is to be hanged in a fortnight.

When the Pro/Con listing is complete the communal discernment is ready to begin. The group is divided, ideally about six to a group to allow enough time for sharing. A suitable mix of personalities helps: each sub- group chooses a Chairperson who orchestrates its proceedings (15 mins)

Step Three: Everyone finds a suitable prayer space, asking the Spirit to enlighten them on the choice to be made. The focus is to be on what goes on in heart rather than head: heart is understood as the privileged place in which God meets each individual (15 minutes or more as time allows).

Step Four: The sub-groups gather in separate rooms and each person shares briefly what came up for them in the time of prayer. Everyone is encouraged to speak: the ‘small people’ so beloved of Jesus may otherwise be overawed by the fact that the PP or even the bishop is present! Who knows through whom the Spirit

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may choose to speak? God used the jawbone of an ass, wielded by Samson, to achieve divine purposes (Judges 15:16) (5 mins per person, total about 30 mins)

In this stage the Chair's task is to gently but firmly concentrate the focus on what is heart-felt rather than heady; e.g., 'We'll come back to that idea later, but had you any sense of attraction to either side of the option?' Responses might run as follows: 'I felt that God might be saying ...' 'I was against the idea at first but it warmed up for me.' 'I felt energy for the option, even though it would be demanding.'

Each sharing is followed by a silent pause without interventions.

Step Five: When everyone has spoken, a silent space follows in which each reflects prayerfully on what touched them when the others were sharing. Each then shares the fruit of this reflection (30 mins).

Again, no comments. Each is listening out for the whisper of the Spirit through the various contributions.

Step Six: The Chair thanks the members for trying to allow the Spirit's voice be heard through them, and invites suggestions on where the group seems to be beckoned, and what it wants to report back to the plenary. Clarifications may lead toward consensus (15 mins or more)

Step Seven: A plenary session. The Leader searches for signs of consensus – unity, peace, consolation, energy, joy and a growth in love for God and neighbour.

Ideally agreement will emerge on what to do next. This will involve, if required, submission of the agreed proposal to a higher authority, and consultation of others affected by the proposal. Time for confirmation of the intended action is important. Feasibility Studies, Action Plans, Pilot Projects would follow.

A brief reference to the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) may help the participants to realise that what has just gone on is linked to what went on in the Early Church. The same Spirit is at work. The issue then was whether gentiles had to be circumcised, as in Jewish tradition, before being baptised. The Spirit brought unity to the divided Church and led it into freedom, apostolic commitment, mission and joy. Ideally this present group can also say, '*It has seemed good to the Holy spirit and to us*' (Acts 15:28) (30 mins)

Conclusion: Much could be added to flesh out the intricacies of communal discernment: the importance of believing that God is fully engaged; the need for inner freedom and a pure desire for God's will; the ability to listen well to others' hearts as well as one's own; the capacity to avoid one's hidden agendas; the recognition of true consolation, of which the paradigm is Jesus who

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managed through thick and thin to 'please the Father' (Jn 8:29); the willingness to exercise the prophetic gift of trying to articulate the promptings and nudging's of the Spirit; and much more.² The process mapped out above is unequivocally Spirit-centred – an act of faith in God's graced guidance. It supposes that the still small voice of the Spirit can be heard when we silently wait for God. When Elijah came out of his cave God spoke with him: we too need to get out of our caves and stand unprotected on the mountain, so that God's grace may illuminate our dull minds and soften our shrivelled hearts. When the meeting goes well, the members will experience for themselves 'the burning of heart' that came to the Emmaus couple when Jesus was talking to them on the road (Lk 24:32).

The process 'works'!

POSTSCRIPT

Learning from the Amazon Synod, October 2019

It would be enriching to learn the process used in the recent Synod. It included formal and liturgical prayer; doubtless too the participants gave time to private prayer. One hopes that the crowded schedule allowed for the key elements of personal prayer followed by a sharing of its fruits.

A great deal of knowledge was made available and required serious study. In an atmosphere that was open and frank, Francis would have demanded of his fellow-bishops 'a continuous and profound conversion of hearts, possible only with the grace of the Holy Spirit'. This call to conversion echoes his own story of being 'a sinner yet mercifully chosen': through it he came to an extraordinary level of inner freedom.

While Pope Francis' *Beloved Amazon* is a disappointment to many good people, it reveals that communal discernment is not a DIY event, nor is it accomplished by a majority vote, nor yet is it a deal-making or a Win/Lose dynamic. Rather than being neatly wrapped up it may be spread over considerable time. It may also involve the graced emergence of a higher viewpoint: participants who in good faith differ from one another may find, sooner or later, that God is offering a greater gift than either side had hoped for. '*The Spirit can work amid differences*' (108) and opposing approaches can be resolved on a higher plane. Humble prayer can open up a creative vista in which the right step forward is revealed by '*overflow*' in Pope Francis' happy term (105). This overflow of

2 For a detailed examination of the dynamics of meetings see Brady, P & Grogan B: *Meetings Matter: Spirituality and Skills for Meetings*. Dublin; Veritas, 2009.

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grace may weave the conflicting values into a surprising synthesis, thus enabling consensus or even unanimity to emerge. We may hope that Pope Francis is waiting for one of these ‘overflow’ moments when ‘*authentic solutions*’ will be shown us by God in regard to the neuralgic issues of deaconesses and the ordination of suitable married men.

Fasting. The broadest definition of fasting is that it is the voluntary denial of the otherwise normal function of eating and drinking, for some chosen aim. The motivation for such practices has until recent times been largely religious. It could arise because of prescription by authority and this kind of fasting has had a long and rather troubled history. It would quite often be inspired by the liturgical seasons. It could simply be voluntarily undertaken, as part of a penitential programme to accompany prayer and almsgiving, especially in Lent. Today, it is often undertaken for health reasons. In early centuries it was likely among monks to lead to prayer rather than follow from it. ‘Bodily abstinence was the necessary preparation for one’s real prayer.’ Religious fasting can be motivated by, or accompanied by, the desire to give alms; it can also be put in abeyance because of the demands of charity, as many examples from the lives of the Desert Fathers attest.

- P. FINTAN LYONS, OSB, *Food, Feast and Fast*. 2020 (Dublin: Columba Books) p. 349.