

Learning on the Way: Receptive Ecumenism and the Catholic Synodal Pathway

Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham University 22–23 June 2023

Friday Morning

Learning on the Way: A First Reception

Perhaps the best summary of the spirit of the symposium was by Wolfgang Vondey when, in introducing the Pentecostalist discussion, he said, ‘We have to find ways to be other than we have been.’

It has been clear throughout our journey together that this ‘becoming other than we have been’ through synodality must be a both/and: both *structure* and *spirituality, charism, mysticism, and scripture*, and with appropriate formation for supporting growth into the living of this. Relevant synodal structures, with participation in them by right rather than concession, and consisting in shared deliberation and not just consultation, are being regarded as essential but alone insufficient for synodality to become the ‘Church’s ordinary way of living and working’ as the current synodal process intends.

One powerful expression of this was in the generous introduction we received to the understanding and practice of Quaker business meetings as themselves contexts of prayerful discernment, and not simply meetings briefly prefaced with prayer. This should be a foundational insight for Catholics, of relevance for many formal and informal synodal situations alike.

The strong presence amongst us of many women and men Catholic religious and the varied habits and practices of prayerful shared discernment they represent is a tangible reminder that there is already sufficient resonance with authentic Catholic tradition that we can embark on receptive ecumenical learning about synodality with dynamic integrity.

Ruth Moriarty, when introducing the Baptist discussion, encouraged us to see that the structures we explore need to be ‘kind and gentle spaces’: spaces which, as others have noted, need to be both inclusive enough and open enough to allow for the disruption of the unplanned; spaces which are not viewed as all that matters and so can be complemented by developing ways of also listening both to those in our communities who are committed non-attenders of meetings and to those who wish to stay liminal to core church life; spaces which allow for the non-linear processes required for ‘slow wisdom’ to emerge into view whilst recognising that such patience is in tension with the desire for progress on pressing issues and the sense of frustration to which this can give rise.

This sense of frustration can be particularly sharp for Catholic women in view of the range of strong roles for women that are evident in the ordinary ways of living and working in each of the other traditions sharing in this symposium. The tension between patience and progress on pressing issues was powerfully expressed in Bishop Sarah Clark’s self-description as ‘a living witness to synodality’, as too in her recognition that ‘decision is only the first step’, and,

albeit differently, in the Quaker practice of deferring decisions until the mind of the meeting arrives at consensus.

There has been a sense of appreciation during our time together for our being taken beyond and behind our respective structures, processes, and associated spiritualities to the ecclesial self-understandings and practices in which these are situated. Something of this is indicated by the respective core language and concepts that forms the ordinary ecclesiological vocabulary of each tradition: e.g., conferring, connexionalism, conciliarism, and covenant. These are all ‘c’ words, about which it is interesting to ask how they relate to that other core ‘c’ word, of catholicity. In this regard, Pat Jones asked after what ‘dynamic equivalence’, familiar from discussions on biblical and liturgical translations, might pertain between these concepts and practices and the Catholic instinct for a necessary ‘mutual interiority between the local and the universal’. What possibilities does this open for receptive Catholic learning about what it truly means to be a catholic people? Indeed, what possibilities does it open for learning what it means to be a ‘people’ – the People of God, a significant element in contemporary Catholic understanding of synodality.

Within this dynamic of universal-local, repeated appreciation was heard over the two days of the symposium for the notion of ‘flow’ between different levels of church structure, and this not in a simple bottom-up or -top-down handing over manner, but as an organic breathing-together—the kind of *conspiratio* John Henry Newman envisaged for the bishops and faithful in the exercise of the *sensus fidelium*.

Each of these expressions and carriers of living catholicity is rooted in a strong sense of the common dignity of all the baptised, sharing in the three-fold office of Christ and a range of Spirit-initiated, Spirit-shaped ministries. Following Henri de Lubac’s retrieval of a eucharistic ecclesiology into Catholic understanding and sensibility, it has become Catholic commonplace to speak of the eucharist as ‘making’ the church. There is important truth in that insight but it surely needs to be complemented by the clear Baptist recognition of the ways in which baptism and covenant continually make and remake the church. Reflecting on this appreciatively from her own Quaker perspective, Rachel Muers offered us the powerful visual image of the church becoming ever new and not just numerically larger. For some of us there was echo here of St Bede’s comment that ‘the church daily generates the church’ (*Commentary on the Apocalypse*. 12:5)

In turn, Paul Fiddes encouraged us to push behind dynamic understandings of ecclesial existence to the dynamic views of revelation and tradition that support them and with which he finds strong Catholic resonance. The fundamental understanding at work here is of Christian existence as consisting in a process of ever new yet coherent performances and improvisations in the Spirit.

Significant also here is Toni Pizzey’s reminding us of the eschatological proviso that properly stands over all Christian existence and ecclesial reality: we all fall short of the glory of God whilst on our pilgrim way. There is liberation and not just judgment here. For as we recognise and embrace our inevitable falling short rather than living in denial of it, and as we begin to be prepared to show it to each other in ecumenical circles and to ask after assistance from our others’ gifts, then we can move, as Philip Brooks noted, from idealised self-projections to our

actual lived realities, and can do so with a confidence and freedom born from experiencing ourselves as also being valued and gifted. As Toni Pizzey also reminded us, it is just normal for fellow pilgrims to help each other on their respective ways. There is not only a need for synodal formation, but also ongoing synodal accompaniment and healing.

Chiming with this, in the context of this Catholic-hosted symposium, wherein the primary invitation has been to help with a series of exercises in possible Catholic receptive ecumenical learning, Christopher Wells voiced a sense of strong and widespread realisation that the current Catholic call to synodal renewal is not just of relevance for the Catholic Church but for every church, each in its own way. In embarking on its own renewal and seeking the assistance of its ecumenical others in this task, he has found the Catholic Church to be offering a gift and encouragement to others.

Well, if all that is so, if synodal renewal is indeed for all the churches and if receptive ecumenical engagement and learning is a vital aid in this process, then we need to develop ways in which the practice of this symposium can become routine habit in the life and work of each of our churches. That would be a real lasting legacy for this event; one well worth striving for.

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