



Introduction

Empowered by the call for synodality, and in accordance with the request by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Lay Synod Initiative of Glastonbury Abbey, Hingham MA, held two large and one small listening session regarding the *Synthesis Report* from Synod in October 2023. The participants were from many dioceses all of whom shared agreement with the documents promulgated by both Vatican II and the Synod of 2023.

The essential and overriding question that the Lay Synod Initiative grapples with and desires to proactively contribute to is “What kind of Church do we want to be?” It is unanimous that we want a synodal Church. Because this topic is so broad our intent is to focus on the process of Synodality and the role of the laity in the Church today in that process. Three specific areas in the *Synthesis Report* were identified as critical; Chapter 16-Towards a Listening Church; Chapter 9-Women in the Life and Mission of the Church; and Chapter 18-Structures for Participation.

Chapter 16- Towards a Listening Church

According to the *Synthesis Report*, listening and responding to all, particularly the marginalized and the poor, is a prerequisite for walking together as one. A synodal Church must be a listening Church. It is imperative that this commitment be translated into practice on both the diocesan and local level. To accomplish this, adequate formation of all stakeholders, bishops, clergy, laity and religious is critical.

Frustration with the failure of some bishops and local clergy to support and communicate the work of the Synod was evident in all listening sessions. There was consensus among the participants that many bishops and priests need to be more active in understanding and implementing synodality. The formation of present and future priests in the synodal way of being Church is critical, especially in this time of polarization and the prevalent sense among some that the Church needs to stay rooted in the traditional past. Educating seminarians on college campuses with both laymen, laywomen and priest professors would help defuse clericalism which, in itself, impedes true synodality.

There has often been limited formation and educational opportunities beyond the early CCD programs in their youth to fully enable the laity to understand their role as co-responsible for furthering the mission of the Church. The role of the laity must be defined, followed by more on-going formation and support to enable them to fulfill their role effectively. Because of the active resistance from a large number of U.S. pastors and bishops, some felt the laity themselves should be more pro-active in educating others. Rather than waiting for permission, they should make something happen through such vehicles as directly approaching the local pastor, nudging existing parish councils, establishing “kitchen table” gatherings and book clubs.

Chapter 9- Women in the Life and Structure of the Church

According to Scripture we are all made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Acts 2: 42-47 describes the early Church as a community of believers with few distinctions between women and men. However, over hundreds of years the Church structure morphed into a hierarchical structure with the laity at the bottom of the pyramid, particularly women, thus becoming the equivalent of “second class citizens”.

As stated in the *Synthesis Report* “Churches all over the world have expressed a clear request that the active contribution of women be recognized and valued and that their pastoral leadership increase in all areas of the Church’s life and mission.” (SR 9:i) The participants in the listening session strongly believe that women urgently need equal representation and decision-making authority on all levels of Church governance structures. Theological and pastoral research should continue regarding the access of women to the diaconate especially since many women are already performing in that role. Planning for the ultimate goal of full recognition must begin. While dogma cannot change, the doctrines and disciplines that inhibit full participation of women can change. The participants urge that canon law be revisited with this intent.

Chapter 18-Structures for Participation.

"For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:13). These are the opening words of the Synod *Synthesis Report* of 2023. By virtue of our baptism all are called to embody and be responsible for furthering the mission of the Church by utilizing our different gifts. Laymen and laywomen, those in consecrated life, and ordained ministers as well as those on the margins all have equal dignity. The exercise of this co-responsibility is essential for synodality and is necessary at all levels of the Church.

According to *Lumen Gentium* 37 all pastors should recognize and promote the dignity and responsibility of the laity in the Church and should willingly use the laity’s prudent advice and give them the courage to undertake works on their own initiative. The clergy should be with the people as a person who shares authority in a more synodal “walking together” manner. Structures need to be developed on the local level according to the needs of the community.

It is imperative that Parish Councils be created and, if already established, need to be revamped in terms of their function and authority. There is a tremendous opportunity here for the young and those who are marginalized to contribute. The laity should be involved in determining their next bishop or pastor so as to appoint an appropriate clergy member who can meet the needs

of the local community. By utilizing the skills of the laity, parishes could be administered by a lay person thus freeing up the pastors and priests for pastoral work. Holding bishops, pastors, lay administrators, and parish councils accountable will strengthen a future Church.

Conclusion

Although synodality is not new, the process leading up to as well as the actual Synod of Bishops in Rome was the beginning of something historic in the Church. All baptized have been invited to give their input into the future of the Church. The synodal way, guided by the Holy Spirit, is a means for us to pray, listen, discern, and connect with each other to develop a shared meaning on how to be Church. We recognize that this is a process with no quick answers.

Bishops are indispensable in allowing the fruits of the Synod to be accomplished. Their support of synodality will decisively influence how priests and laity together implement or not implement the process of synodality and the proposals arising from the Synod. The plea from those at the listening sessions is for both clergy and laity to take the process of synodality seriously by listening to the work of the Holy Spirit. The Synod is not over. God has given us a unique opportunity to fashion a stronger Church. The question remains for us “What kind of Church do we want to be?”

For God has called a People,
not 'them and us'
'Them and us' are unable to gather around,
for at a roundtable, there are no sides
And ALL are invited to wholeness and to food. ...

Roundtabling means no preferred seating,
no first & last,
no better,
no corners for 'the least of these'
Roundtabling means being with,
a part of,
together,
and one
It means room for the Spirit and gifts
and disturbing profound peace for all.

And it is we in the present
who are mixing and kneading the dough for the future.
We can no longer prepare for the past. ...

—Chuck Lathrop

1977 poem, "[In Search of a Roundtable](#)'

The Lay Synod Initiative at Glastonbury Abbey does not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey but solely represents the views of those participants involved in the Synod listening sessions.

