

Pope Francis formally opened his audacious two-year synodal process on Sunday 10 October. Many Catholics are still hesitating over whether to take up his invitation, to walk together, on what will be a challenging journey / **By CHRIS KNOWLES**

# ‘Walk with me ...’

**I’VE HEARD** several people say that “a synod on synodality”, a synod that aims to help the Church “be more synodal”, is a bit hard to get your head around. As one friend said, at least in the general synods in Rome, “you’ve had something to hang your hat on, be it the family, or youth, or the Amazon”. Is the two-year synodal process “a colossal waste of time”, as I heard one Catholic commentator say on the radio last Sunday, a few hours before it was officially launched by Pope Francis in Rome?

From the outside, even for Catholics, synodality can be difficult to understand, and harder to warm to. During a meeting of the Liverpool archdiocesan synod, which concluded earlier this year, Brian, a synod member from the Isle of Man, spoke about how he had started the process as a cynic. It was “another initiative”, “a PR exercise”

rather than “something real and meaningful”. But he had become an enthusiastic convert to the synodal process.

I have been involved in the reception of the 2018 Synod on Youth and more recently in the Liverpool synod. What I have found is that those who joined these synodal pathways – young and old – found themselves transformed by the process itself. Synodality might look unappealing; once inside, it brings its own fruits.

Sarah Wells from St Helens took part in two of the preparatory meetings before the 2018 synod. She wasn’t sure that the priests organising the event were actually open to listening. “Were they ‘just doing their job?’” she wondered. But, “as the week went on, we built up a rapport, and it started to feel like we were in it together”.

At the meetings of 300 or so young people from around the world in Rome in advance of the 2018 synod, there were plenty of disagreements. Some in Sarah’s group had “very different perspectives on lots of topics”. She said that if it “was a one-off conversation, or on social media, I’d have dismissed what they were saying”. But the time spent listening to each other created a different dynamic. “I really came to like them,” she said. The disagreements hadn’t gone but something about the process felt “very healthy, and that only came through talking and spending time together”. Trust had been built.

**AS I JOINED** the final phase of the Liverpool synod as a consultant, I wondered if the same thing had happened. I had grown up in the diocese and I found ways to put my ear to the ground. One synod member, Susan, told me that they had decided “we weren’t going to wait for the big picture to come to fruition before we started making our own changes”. Brian’s experience of conversion from doubt in the synodal process to trust was not the only one.

The experience of synodality itself – praying, talking and listening together, hearing people describing experiences very like your own that you’d never been able to find words for, or listening to other Catholics talk of their joys and struggles – had been transformative.

At the heart of synodality is “authentic lis-

tening”. As Pope Francis has explained, this “is more than simply hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn”.

In the Liverpool synod, an extraordinary 25,000 people responded to the listening process. And the issues that came up most often related to family life, both a source of joy, the place where many find God and the place of greatest anxiety and concern – about economic security, about the safety of children and about how they can be educated in the Catholic faith and its values.

We will misunderstand synodality if we think it is merely a chance to tell the bishops what they should do. While it involves speaking honestly, more fundamentally synodality is about the whole of the People of God – lay people, priests and religious, bishops and cardinals – being open to where the Holy Spirit is calling us individually and

as Church. As Pope Francis said in his homily at the opening of the synod last Sunday, it also requires courage and “a willingness to allow ourselves to be challenged by the presence and the stories of others”.

**THERE’S MUCH** to discuss about both inner conversion and the radical reform of church roles and structures; and discussions of contentious issues should not be stifled. There will be those who feel threatened by change and there will be those who will feel frustrated at the slow pace of change; there will be those who will try to sabotage it because its discussions are unsettling and there will be those who will sneer because its resolutions are too timorous. If we let these challenges lead us into scepticism and cynicism, we’ll miss a huge opportunity to renew our Church.

If you’re someone who has lost their trust in the institutional Church, or who is wary of bishops, I’d encourage you to give the process a chance.

“Celebrating a synod,” Pope Francis said last week, “means walking on the same road.” The Church will only be on the right road if all of us make the journey together.

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## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY CATHOLIC ASSOCIATION

### NOTICE OF AN EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL MEETING

Notice is given of an Extraordinary General Meeting to pass a Resolution to amend the Cambridge University Catholic Association’s Constitution at a meeting on 28 November 2021 at Fisher House, Guildhall Street, Cambridge CB2 3NH. (Amendments are governed by clause 12 (ii) of our Constitution.)

**The amendment will permit the election of ordinary members of Council over the age of 70 years. The following Resolution is proposed:**

1. That in clause 5 of the Constitution the following wording shall be deleted: “no one shall be eligible to be elected or re-elected as an ordinary member after the age of 70, or to serve for more than six consecutive years” and replaced by the following wording: “no one shall be eligible to serve as an ordinary member for more than six consecutive years.”

If passed, this resolution will take effect immediately.

**Prof. Janet Soskice, President**  
Date 8 October 2021



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