

## *A Maelstrom of Discernment*

“There is a maelstrom, there's no doubt. And everyone's feeling it. But that may well be what happens when you get into the very turbulent, and in the end uncontrollable, process of discernment. Once you're into that maelstrom of discernment you really have to make an act of faith that there is something greater than Solomon.”- Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Brisbane. (1)

++Coleridge was evidently referring to the dynamics at work among the bishops during the October 2015 Synod in Rome. While the gathering may well have generated a *maelstrom of discernment*, it was largely about themselves and had very little to do with deep reflection on the Catholic family's vocation and mission in the Church and the modern world.

Another couple of synonyms which provide added colour are ‘accompaniment’ and ‘walking.’ Pope Francis, according to Archbishop Blase Cupich of Chicago, ‘taught us (the bishops?) all how to walk together,’ According to Coleridge and Cupich, the bishops were on the learning curve of their lives as they revelled in the peak experiences of talking and walking together. This was largely due to the genius of Pope Francis who actually called upon the bishops to think and act like *adults*. Apparently it was a new experience for many. Cupich was not being frivolous in reference to learning how to walk. He went on to note with evident gratitude the important psychological and spiritual development the bishops experienced at the Synod:

“First of all, I came here knowing it was my first synod and so I wanted to be slow in participating because I wanted to listen attentively to how the pope defined how the synod should go. He said two things: listen attentively with humility but also to speak boldly. So I took my time just to be disciplined that way and I think that the process that was outlined worked well. I don't have the ability to compare with what happened before, but talking to bishops who were here before they have spoken of vast improvement here. I could see why this is considered an improvement because we were given total flexibility, total openness to be able to say what was on our mind in the small groups and in the general assembly, and this is the way adults should work. I think it was a great success just because of process.” (2)

The irony of it all, however, was that, even though it was a Synod of Bishops, its theme was “the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world”, a topic on which celibate ageing bishops are not likely to be well informed. Sadly, the lay constituency was spectacularly under represented with only a token few laity who had been invited to the Synod to speak for three minutes and none of whom had voting rights. There were around 250 bishops who were entitled to both podium and ballot. While it is true that much of what went on at the Synod remains unreported, it would be reasonable to think that too much of the Bishops' time and energy was invested in ideological standoffs and thrashing around in a maze of sectional interests.

The October Synod in Rome focused its attention almost exclusively on the Bishops. The “*maelstrom of discernment*” did not involve deep reflection on the Catholic family's vocation and mission in the Church and the modern world.

Furthermore, the Synod show-cased an appalling exhibition of the Church's profoundly flawed structures of governance. The participants with both speaking and voting rights were all celibate and mainly elderly clerics who spent practically a month arguing about their own brittle partisan matters and avoiding the vexatious issues which continue to impact negatively on the *vocation and mission* of 99.99 % of the Church members.

Millions of Catholics find themselves in situations which are either canonically and/or morally intractable. A significant number of these people are still loyal Catholics who are conscientiously and courageously participating as best they can in the life of their Faith communities. They were and are also actively searching for solutions to their circumstances which extend beyond linguistic semantics and cosmeticised terminology to significant movements in pastoral practice and even to shifts in doctrine. If the Synod had spent a whole month, single-mindedly engaged on these matters and if the Laity were far more involved in the actual Synod debates, then Pope Francis and the Bishops would have had a *Maelstrom of Discernment* beyond their wildest imaginings.

Archbishop Coleridge has elaborated on the Synod's theme of 'accompaniment.' In an October interview, he said: "If there was any word that came to dominate the language of the synod, it was 'accompaniment'. In other words, you have to walk with people." He then went on to add the inevitable conditional clause: "Church teaching has not been touched at its heart, and it won't be, but that doesn't mean to say it's all or nothing." Coleridge was refreshingly candid about some of the limits to comprehensive solutions to problems which are near insoluble: "It's exploring that difficult but crucial middle ground where we can walk together. We mightn't agree but we can agree that we're human and we can agree that we'll walk together, we'll listen to each other, we might even learn from each other." (3)

At least he admitted that, while there might not always be a meeting of minds, some good might emerge from simply walking and talking together. This is good public relations language and it may help both bishops and people to feel more hopeful about the future, but if it is to go beyond shallow platitudes this kind of solidarity must be validated by action. It also risks being ultimately reduced to classic episcopal weasel-words when there comes a point in having to admit that, in roundabout cosmetic language, sometimes the only outcome is to 'put lipstick on the pig.'

What would have been more helpful, pastorally astute and theologically accurate was to affirm that it is precisely at the intersection of difference, intractability and mutual disagreement that ground can shift when law is informed by mercy, and compassion overwhelms compulsion. It's in the 'crucial middle ground' that accommodation is possible and that will happen when an ecclesial atmosphere of genuine trust, congruence and equilibrium is created. Since the Coleridge interview, even the Pope reaffirmed the substance of what was said about 'accompaniment,' open discussion and the action which is generated by them:

"Remember moreover that the best way to dialogue is not that of speaking and debating but that of doing something together, of making plans: not alone, among Catholics, but together with all those who are of good will. Do not be afraid to engage in the exodus necessary for every authentic dialogue." (4)

It was in Francis' power to enable "the best way" to a comprehensive dialogue between bishops and laity, for "making plans" by changing the structure, the make-up, ground rules and to revolutionise protocols and procedures for the Synod. Now, what remains is an enormous lost opportunity to have had a Synod with little more than a token contingent of Laity present as virtual on-lookers. It need not be like this again.

On August 5, 2015, Dr Paul Collins, gave an address at a Catalyst for Renewal gathering (*Spirituality in the Pub*) in Melbourne's inner East. The topic was: "Will the Catholic Church change its view on sexual matters soon?" Collins answered, yes and no: No, the *Magisterium* would not authorise doctrinal changes but yes, the Laity has already shifted its teaching (doctrine) on birth control, Communion for the divorced and remarried, cohabitation, and the 'gender equality' issues. Put simply, Collins articulated what is common knowledge that large numbers of Catholic people have developed a powerful *hermeneutic of suspicion* about the credibility of their Bishops' teaching on a range of doctrine and have long ago effectively ceased taking much notice of the hierarchy.

Recognition of this regrettable but understandable fact should be the starting point for a candid and robust conversation among adults and not just a continuation of patronising indoctrination from above. A useful starting point would be to name some of the most important theological and pastoral issues to be dealt with by all the People of God, not just the clergy.

Firstly, almost without exception, every family in the Church has members who find themselves in life situations which are deemed to be intractable/irresolvable either sacramentally or in Canon Law. Consequently, all are crying out for a pastoral policy and ministry which are based on mercy and a compassion which causes law to bend and be re-shaped to assume the human condition. God's ultimate adaptability and accommodation is, after all, at the heart of the Incarnation which is the ultimate personal expression of God's merciful compassion. Once these are accepted as realities which touch the lives of every Catholic family then the dynamics of dialogue and relationships shift to a higher, more Christ-like dimension.

Canonical prohibitions and sanctions governing 'irregular circumstances' may have been effective in the past when they were supported by strong social coherence and peer group pressures operating in small towns or hamlets. This is not the case in large anonymous communities. Anonymity in large cities either masks or even negates the effects of Canonical sanctions. When Archbishop Coleridge and his episcopal colleagues speak of tweaking and softening ecclesiastical language in order to sound less negative in relation to people in canonical and morally intractable situations, then they are doing little more than play a Public Relations game.

In a recent NCR interview Mary McAleese, former President of Ireland and now Canon lawyer, observed: “The church has to be able to say that at times, in God’s name, we got some things badly wrong and bad things happened,” she said. “The church is not good at saying we managed to get things wrong and doing something about it.” (5)

The Synod on the Family failed to grasp the opportunity to address the most pressing concerns raised in the two surveys conducted over the last two years. The Synod was given the chance to do some serious public reflection on these key moral and canonically sensitive areas. The bishops also passed up on an opportunity to demonstrate some remorse for the hierarchy’s failures in teaching and leadership.

Firstly, the Synod did not even discuss the grave threat to the faith of Catholic families throughout the world caused in part by the rapid decline in the availability of the sacraments. The sticking point is the embarrassing contraction in the numbers of priests in ministry particularly but not exclusively so in the West. The hierarchy’s lack of pastoral and theological insight, combined with a massive loss of nerve and feckless leadership has led to the scandalous abandonment of a primary pastoral responsibility which is to nourish and strengthen its people with the Sacraments. This dereliction is directly linked to the arrogantly presumptuous theology of priesthood which underpins and sustains Clericalism.

Another massive gap in the Synod’s credibility was its failure to address the catastrophic effects on Catholic families caused by clerical sexual abuse of children. The fact that the Catholic Church still maintains and enforces a system of Canon Law which protects clerical abusers against civil prosecution except in jurisdictions which require mandatory criminal reporting. Instead of demonstrating sound, credible moral leadership in this area, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, from Pope to local bishops, has adopted the strategies of presumption and social contempt by sitting it out, hoping that people’s memories will prove short and that the whole mess will soon blow over.

Thirdly, a genuinely inclusive *maelstrom of discernment* would involve acceptance of the fact that +90% of Catholics have rejected the doctrinal authority of the *Magisterium’s* prohibition against artificial birth-control and its claims to be morally binding on the Catholic conscience. In perhaps the bluntest speech of the entire Synod, Sharron Cole, New Zealand laywoman and non-voting participant, had some blunt words for the Pope and his fellow bishops. Cole courageously addressed the inherent dangers in the Hierarchy’s resistance to taking the Laity seriously and to acknowledge their integrally important role in the *Sensus Fidei Fidelium*:

“The response of the Church to this unsatisfactory situation has been for better catechesis or to ignore the dissent. This "paralysed status quo" cannot continue. The matter must be discussed afresh because lay people will not be content to leave it to clergy alone. Too many in authority responded to clergy sexual abuse in a way which demonstrated that they lacked the expertise in sexuality and psychology to make good decisions, with the result they became complicit in perpetuating enormous harm done to lay people.

It will take not more catechesis but rather listening with deep empathy to restore the credibility of the Church in matters of sexual ethics. The time is now for this synod to propose that the Church re-examine its teaching on marriage and sexuality, and its understanding of responsible parenthood, in a dialogue of laity and bishops together.”<sup>(6)</sup>

Massimo Faggioli has recently drawn attention to the *de facto* parallel Churches (the *Magisterium*, the other Laity supported by many/most clergy) which emerged following *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. Cardinal Kasper has described *the practical schism*. This has never been faced publicly by the *Magisterium* except in terms addressed by Sharron Cole at the Synod:

“After the eruption of dissent that many theologians voiced over *Humanae Vitae* (1968), and especially during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the magisterium and the theological community, while living within the same Church, have spoken two different languages and have sometimes even operated in two almost parallel ecclesial spaces. This has clearly harmed the necessary – we could say ‘synodal’ – cooperation between different voices in the Church.”<sup>(7)</sup>

Sandro Magister, the conservative correspondent with *chiesa.espresso*, commenting on Pope Francis’ address to the Italian Episcopal conference on November, 10 reports: “In Florence, the address of Pope Bergoglio was frequently interrupted by applause, which was all the more thunderous the more he called upon the consensus of the “people” in order to blast the bishops.”<sup>(8)</sup>

It is evident that the Church’s hierarchy has demonstrated an inability to accept the fact that their people are generally better educated and probably far more urban than they are. They have been left behind and should be very worried about this situation. Vatican II encouraged the laity to become theologically literate and it happened. Most benefited generally through the Catholic school religious education system, various forms of adult education. Between the early 1980s and the present, thousands of Catholic laity in Australia have obtained professional theological credentials many up to the very highest levels.

Ironically, the vocational call of bishops to teach, sanctify and to govern has been appropriated by the laity. Particularly over recent decades, many members of the hierarchy have become derelict in their duties and have betrayed the trust of their people. A dramatic role reversal has occurred and, in many instances, it is the lay people who are doing the real teaching, generating an environment of holiness and providing effective governance in a Church almost destroyed by shocking papal and episcopal dysfunction and dereliction.

Perhaps, local episcopal conferences and maybe the next Synod of bishops in Rome, could start with the proposition that vast numbers of Catholics who live in those canonically irregular, intractable situations actually don’t care much about legal prohibitions, censures or any of that. They keep going to Communion regardless, often with the full knowledge of their priests and other fellow Catholics.

Probably the major accomplishment of Pope Francis at the Synod was made possible by the German speaking group of bishops who succeeded in winning over the trust of their more timid and less theologically astute colleagues. The breakthrough was the rediscovery of the 800 year old genius of Thomas Aquinas' theology of conscience. Thomas' doctrine on the primacy of an informed conscience has for centuries provided Catholic with a sure, safe and integral pastoral solution for cases which are canonically and/or sacramentally intractable. Safe resolution to these problems is very often achieved in the internal forum. (9)

### *Some concluding thoughts*

Mary McAleese describes Francis as "by far the most intriguing pope of my lifetime" and after just two and a half years, "his greatest legacy to the church has been his welcoming of debate after **"the stultifying and suffocating imposed silence"** of his two immediate predecessors.

Francis, despite the fact that many Catholics are frustrated with the scope and slowness of the reform process, is probably doing the laity an enormous service by coaxing and cajoling the bishops to move forward. After thirty five years of ***the stultifying and suffocating imposed silence, micromanagement, supine compliance and collective inertia***, Francis is leading the hierarchy into unfamiliar territory where they are being coaxed to grow up, to think independently and to lead prophetically with confidence and courage.

Francis is also providing the Laity with the authority, validation and language to insist that their bishops listen to them, genuinely dialogue with them and collaborate in the common work of renewal and reform of the Church. The hierarchy is being summoned to a deeper conversion away from the insularity of clericalism to a genuine renewal of the culture of the primitive Christian Community wherein all were addressed as sisters and brothers and all were gatekeepers of the Faith.

### *Endnotes*

- 1) Joshua McElwee, "Australian Archbishop: Synod should propose 'less negative' reading of reality," *NCR* Oct. 14, 2015. (Linked [HERE](#)) and [HERE](#))
- 2) Gerard O'Connell, "Cupich: At the Synod, Pope Francis 'Taught Us All How to Walk Together,'" *America Magazine*, Oct 28, 2015. (Linked [HERE](#))
- 3) "Synod Report 'Clear and Compassionate,' Archbishop Coleridge," *The Catholic Leader*, October 28, 2015. (Linked [HERE](#)) According to Michael Sean Winters, the Synodal style of few speeches and more group discussions has had a transformative effect on the recent meeting of the USCCB, "Reflections on the USCCB Meeting: Part II," *NCR*, Nov. 19, 2015 (Linked [HERE](#))

- 4) MEETING WITH THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE FIFTH CONVENTION OF THE ITALIAN CHURCH. *ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER* , *Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence, Tuesday, 10 November 2015* (Linked [HERE](#))
- 5) Michael Kelly, “Former Irish President McAleese discusses her decision to defy Church leaders,” *NCR*, Nov. 13, 2015. (Linked [HERE](#))
- 6) Sharron Cole (English C) in Mary Rose-Milavec, “What did Women at the Synod say and will it matter?” *Synod Watch, Future Church blog* October 20, 2015. (Linked [HERE](#)) Cole also directly challenged the credibility of the Hierarchy when she identified the constant cognitive dissonance of the bishops whose responses to the rejection of *Humanae Vitae*, is to claim that the people have not been sufficiently catechised or they are perversely in invincible ignorance.
- 7) “Theology in a synodal Church. Francis calls for a new engagement, for a ‘listening Church.’” *Global Pulse*, November 23, 2015. (NB: Paywall applies but linked [HERE](#)); See also Gerard O’Connell, “Kasper: The Synod Will Have to Discuss the ‘Practical Schism’ in the Church,” *America*, Sep 2 2015. (Linked [HERE](#))
- 8) “All the toil of being Primate of Italy,” *chiesa.espressonline.it* November 17, 2015 (Linked [HERE](#)); See also Joshua McElwee:
 

“We must not surrender ourselves to the idea of having to apply this system ... to all our lives, to the life of the family, of the city, of society,” said the pontiff. “And much less to the life of the church. It would be terrible -- an inhospitable church, like a pent-up family, demeaning the Gospel and drying up the world!” “No bulletproof doors in the church!” he exhorted. “All open!” See also: “Francis cries out for welcoming Church: House of God ‘refuge not prison,’” *NCR* Nov. 18, 2015. (Linked [HERE](#))
- 9) “The Internal Forum – a concise explication,” *Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church*. (Linked [HERE](#))

***For further thought:***

- Deborah Rose-Milavec, “What did women at the synod say and will it matter?” *Synod Watch* (Future Church), October 20, 2015 (Linked [HERE](#)):

‘Kelleher said she has faced some difficulty in the group. While she said she feels free to talk to any of the members in a friendly manner during coffee breaks, there are also "times that I have felt the condescension so heavy, you could cut it with a knife."

"I see a high level of non-acceptance of us as holding up half the sky," she said, referring to some bishops' difficulty in working with women. "It's very clear that I'm not speaking with one iota of formation on some of the teachings that have formed these men in the seminary," said Kelleher. "Some of it is, 'Oh, here comes the bleeding heart. Well, she's a woman what else would you expect?' kind of thing."

- Joshua McElwee , “US sister-auditor: Synod shows cultural divide between bishops, laypeople,” *NCR* Oct. 19, 2015. (Linked [HERE](#))
- NCR Editorial staff “NCR: We need fearless discussion on women’s ordination,” Nov. 13, 2015*NCR* (Linked [HERE](#))
- Thomas Reese, “Three ways to improve the synod of bishops,” *NCR* Nov. 12, 2015. (Linked [HERE](#))

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