

# The Synod: Where Are We Now?

Jesuit Gerry O'Hanlon looks ahead to the Synod in Rome,  
which will begin on 4 October 2023.

Professor Myriam Wijlens, a Dutch canon lawyer, tells a story about synodality. Back some years ago, at a conference, she met a newly ordained German bishop with whom she had studied many years ago. The bishop asked if he could pick her brains. In his new diocese there were many difficult issues that required quick decisions; given the circumstances, did Professor Wijlens think the bishop would be justified in bypassing his diocesan pastoral council? She asked him if, as bishop, he did confirmations. He said that he did, and that he liked meeting idealistic young people. She then asked did he believe these young people received the Holy Spirit at confirmation? Of course, he replied. She then asked him if he believed that the Holy Spirit was still with these young people when they became adults.

The bishop saw what she was getting at: if the Holy Spirit was in these adult Catholics, then something like a diocesan pastoral council was a more than useful – even necessary – tool for accessing what the Spirit might be saying. The bishop took Professor Wijlens's advice and retained his council. Decisions, he reported many years later, took longer, but they were more solidly grounded and much better received.

It was the Holy Spirit who guided the early Church to come to terms with the culture of the time and who, in a particularly striking instance at the early Council of Jerusalem, persuaded the disciples to admit non-Jews (Gentiles) to the early Christian community without having first to become Jews. It was the Spirit, then, who allowed the Church to read the 'signs of the times' of that early culture and to adapt accordingly without giving in simply to what the Germans call the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age.

We are faced with a similar challenge today. The shape of our Church has become dysfunctional with respect to today's culture. Pope Francis has identified this again and again. We are too 'top-down' in our way of proceeding, too reliant on clergy, overly-male in our decision-making and visibility, and we have lost sight, at a time of secularisation, of what should be at the centre of our lives: encounter with Jesus Christ, made accessible to us in faith by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Just as Professor Wijlens had suggested to the bishop, Pope Francis is asking us to return to a model of Church in which the gift of the Holy Spirit to each of the faithful is treasured. To this end he has initiated a synodal pathway, and we in Ireland



have responded to his invitation to re-imagine Church along these lines.

In Ireland there was a national consultation in 2021–2, culminating in the paper ‘Synthesis for the Consultation in Ireland for the Diocesan Stage of the Universal Synod 2021–2023’. This was joined with 112 other such syntheses globally to culminate in the ‘Document for the Continental Stage’ in 2022. This document was further debated at seven continental assemblies in February and March 2023. This resulted in a ‘Working Document’ for the October 2023 (and 2024) Synod in Rome, which, in a first in modern times, will include a substantial number of non-episcopal voting members, women as well as men.

Our Church is changing in front of

our eyes. Irish bishops will be inviting us again to re-engage in a specifically Irish-focused exercise over these next few years around the question, ‘What does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time?’ We will do so in dialogue with what is emerging from the universal synod in Rome but faithful to what has already been gathered in the consultation in Ireland to date. The process to date has been characterised by transparency and accountability. We are all invited to participate; the more of us that do so, the more likely it is that synodality will be translated into the concrete shape of a new Church, more suited to bring the hopeful message and person of Jesus Christ, the merciful face of God, to our troubled world.