

Looking Ahead

Jesuit theologian Gerry O'Hanlon looks at this month's Synod in the Vatican, guided by *Instrumentum Laboris*.

Sometimes significant change is flagged by small, seemingly trivial details. This month's Synod in the Vatican has been moved from the usual Synod Hall to the Paul VI Audience Hall. Why? Because the latter is bigger and can accommodate more easily the circular format of small working groups for the larger than usual number of participants. The number is larger because, in addition to the usual 300 or so bishop members, there are also over 70 non-ordained (women as well as men) voting members. The method of working together will not be primarily by means of set-piece lectures but rather by face-to-face interaction in smaller groups, with plenary sessions following. Here we have in graphic illustration a model of the new synodal Church imagined by Pope Francis: representatives of all the baptised speaking and listening together on terms of equality, the inverted pyramid taking a circular shape.

What can we expect from this Synod? We remember that this is simply part of a process begun in 2021 – the synodal pathway is as much about process as it is about key events. According to the 'Working Tool' document (the *Instrumentum Laboris*, *IL*, published in June 2023) one of the expected fruits will be a confirma-

tion of the 'conversation in the Spirit' discernment method that has been employed in the synodal process and will increasingly become part of parish and diocesan life in local churches. This confirmation will perhaps come with some adaptations: I note in particular the hints in the *IL* document that we can expect a better integration of theological thinking into the process. Up to now, and very fruitfully, the emphasis has been on spiritual experience and open speaking, but we need to do more to respect the role of debate and discussion, even a respect for the limited role of parliamentary procedure (voting, for example) than heretofore.

More generally, as the equal membership of Church by all the baptised is realised and enacted, we may expect a Church that is more in line with the vision of Pope Francis for a 'poor church for the poor', a 'field hospital' for our wounded world, more attractive to outsiders and more capable of dealing with the great issues of our times, which the *IL* has identified: climate change, economic inequality, migration, war and peace, cultural colonisation, and secularisation. This outward looking Church will have to be transformed internally: to become more penitent in the face of the sexual



Pope Paul VI Audience Hall, viewed from the dome of St Peter's, showing the photovoltaic panel roof

abuse crisis; to find ways of combining truth and love in a more welcoming and inclusive attitude to disaffected groups like the LGBTQI+ community and those who have been divorced and remarried; and at last, to come to terms with a more visible role for women in decision-making and ministry. This latter point is perhaps best summed up in the concrete question up for discernment at the Synod about the possible inclusion in the diaconate for women.

It is likely that many such questions will be referred by the Synod for further study over the year ahead and that a more conclusive discernment will not take place until the second session of the Synod in October 2024 (which will then have to be confirmed by the Pope himself).

In an interesting observation –

which may have implications for questions like the ordination of women to priesthood – the *IL* notes that when questions reappear they may be a sign of a ‘changed reality or situation where there is need for an “overflow” of grace. This requires further reflection on the Deposit of Faith and the living Tradition of the Church.’

How will all this affect Catholic Church life in Ireland? Well, expect a push for formation of laity in terms of leadership and co-responsibility, as well as an announcement from the Episcopal Conference, after more consultation, about the way ahead for the Irish synodal pathway over the next few years. Real change is happening, it is never too late to come aboard, there is life and hope abounding in this new, more penitent and more humble Church.