

# Reflections on the Synodal Experience

Loreto Sister Pat Murray works on the General Staff of Loreto in Rome. She was invited by Pope Francis as a member of the Synod.

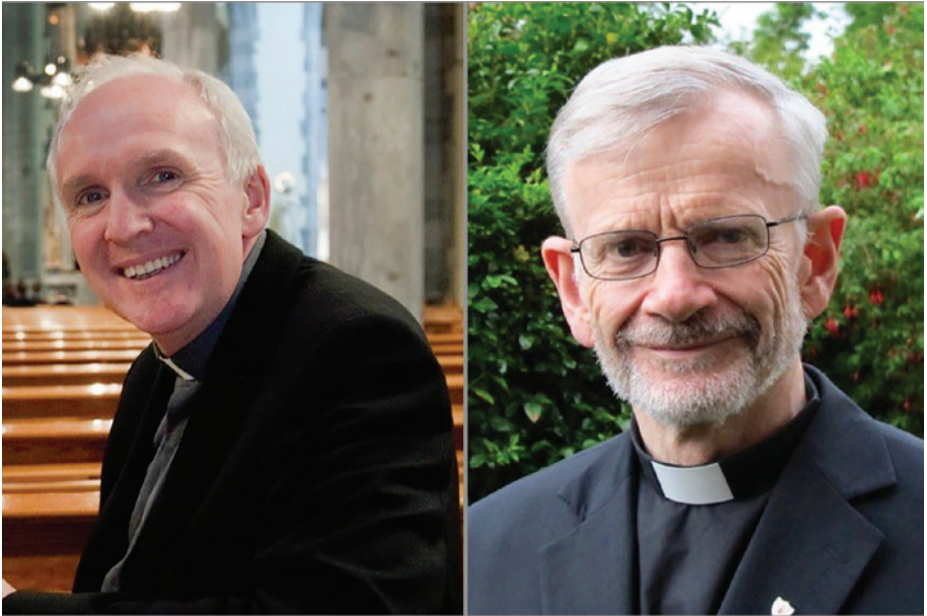
Walking into the synod hall each day I was continually struck by the immense variety of participants. On the eve of the Synod we had participated in an Ecumenical Prayer Vigil 'Together' in St Peter's Square, led by the Brothers from the Taizé community and a group of young people. There Pope Francis reminded us that we were brothers and sisters 'from every nation, from all tribes, peoples and languages' (Rev 7:9). We were daughters and sons, inspired by the Spirit received in Baptism and called to the same hope. (Eph 4:4–5) This diversity of cultures, ages, roles, experiences, perspectives and expectations were clearly present across the 365 synod participants which included for the first time 54 women with the right to vote.

This enormous variety at every level was the abiding sense that I had throughout the whole synodal experience. Sitting at round tables of twelve, we listened to different insights and perspectives, having first prayed about the particular topics from the Working Document. Each person shared for four minutes what he or she had carefully prepared. Whether cardinal or lay woman, archbishop or religious sister or brother, layman or bishop or priest, the words of each

person were important as we listened and discerned where the Spirit is leading the Church at this time in history. The method used is called Conversation in the Spirit. There are three rounds of contemplative listening – with a prayerful pause after each contribution – before the final task of deciding together what to include in the final table report. This report noted points of agreement and of divergence. All the table reports from the weeks of conversation shaped the final document which was voted on, section by section on the final day.

This type of deep listening calls for freedom and openness and many participants shared how they found themselves being able to welcome and hold the diversity of views in a new way. The practice of discernment takes time and that is why there will be a second session in October 2024 with the time beforehand being used for study and reflection on the *Synod Synthesis Report* at different levels within the Church.

What stays with me from the experience is I have a new understanding and appreciation of both the meaning and process of synodality. Pope Francis reminds us that synodality 'is not a chapter in an ecclesiastical textbook,



**Irish representatives at the Synod, Bishop Brendan Leahy and Bishop Alan McGuckian**

much less a fad or a slogan to be bandied about; but is an expression of the Church's nature, style and mission.'

The word 'synodality' which comes from the Greek words *syn* (together) and *hodos* (road, path) reminds us that the common dignity of baptism makes us all brothers and sisters in Christ, sharing the one Spirit and sent to fulfil a common mission at a critical time in the Church and in the world. While synodality brings with it a certain novelty and freshness, it also expresses a deep desire for radical inclusion. Many have felt alienated or excluded from the Church and we all have a part to play in creating a Church of welcome and inclusion.

In the synodal conversations you could sense the deep desire to experience Church as a faith community where everyone is involved and where people get to know each other

and are in dialogue with each other; where they support one another and seek to shape their lives and their environment in the spirit of Jesus. At the Synod we could speak openly about complex topics – e.g. creating new lay ministries, women deacons, communion for the divorced and remarried, the LGBT communities, abuses of authority and power– naming these and other areas as needing deeper study, prayer and reflection.

Finally synodality is not only a theology but it is also a spiritual practice; a way of life which has to be cultivated and lived. The three interrelated pillars of the synodal Church: communion, participation and mission invite us to discern together what new vision and pastoral approaches the Spirit is asking of the Church for its mission today and how we are being called to contribute.