

On the Wings of a Dove: the Synodal Journey

Jesuit Gerry O'Hanlon who lives in Ballyfermot, Dublin, writes
about the *Final Document* of the World Synod 2024.

In October 2024, at the end of the World Synod in Rome, Julieann Moran, General Secretary of the Irish Synodal Pathway, looked forward to the implementation of the Synod's work in Ireland. She did so by using the striking biblical image 'on the wings of a dove' (Ps 55). She meant by this that we journey with the help of the Holy Spirit and of two documents, inspired by the Spirit and of particular relevance to the Irish Church, namely the *Irish Synthesis Report* (emerging in 2022 from the extensive consultation in Ireland from 2021–2) and the *Final Document of the World Synod* (2024).

The *Final Document* is hopeful and confident in tone, clearly the fruit of a discernment carried out in consolation. It has a new maturity around the idea of synodality. In brief, this refers to a Church that is more relational, closer to the people, in which all the baptised have a say in both governance and teaching, while the ultimate authority rests, as always, with the bishops. It is a way of being Church that is closer to what the early disciples experienced after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and indeed to the good parts of our own culture: equality, diversity, transparency, ac-

countability and evaluation.

It is this kind of Church that, rooted in our faith encounter with Jesus Christ, is better configured to carry out its mission of bringing hope to our broken world, to witness and speak authentic words to issues like poverty, inequality, war and peace, and the ecological degradation of our planet. It aims to do this in cooperation with all people of faith, in particular members of other Christian Churches, and indeed of all people of good will.

The *Final Document* did not please everyone, and it is clear, in particular, that it still has a long way to go on issues like the role of women and of sexuality. On the role of women it is true that much progress has been made: women increasingly occupy leadership roles within the Vatican and at diocesan level, they were active and assertive voting members at the Synod and the issue of the female diaconate is still open. Nonetheless, understandably, this has not satisfied many men and women, particularly in our part of the world. Dissatisfaction is a sign of an issue that has not yet been settled. This is why the synodal process is so important – it leaves space for ongoing listening, discussion and discernment until a



Pope Francis addresses bishops gathered in St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican for the Synod on Synodality closing Mass on 27 October 2024

point is reached at which the Christian community can be at peace. The same applies to the issue of sexuality, and in particular that concerning the LGBT+ community: it is heartening in this respect that one of the study groups is devoting itself with a particular focus to a re-examination of this issue.

Already, in its very composition, the *Final Document* is the embodiment of a new way of being Church: this is a document of the Magisterium, prepared and written by a mixed group of women and men, lay and clerical. For this new way to be effective, however, it must be realised in every parish and diocese all over the world. This is the challenge ahead of us, and this is the invitation given to each of

us by the Irish bishops, when they ask us to participate in the current process of discernment in preparation for a pre-synodal assembly in October 2025, to be followed by a full synodal assembly in October 2026.

All this is in line with the original plan of the bishops (articulated before Pope Francis announced the World Synod) to hold a five-year synodal pathway in Ireland from 2021–2026 in order to discern ‘what God wants of the Church in Ireland today’. This was done in the context of the sexual abuse trauma from which victims/survivors and their families still suffer, as well as the many other challenges facing the Irish Church that are well expressed in our *Synthesis Report*.

Let's take the next step together.