

Revd Prof Paul S. Fiddes. Concluding reflections on:
Learning on the Way: Receptive Ecumenism and the Catholic Synodal Pathway
Friday 23 June, 2023. Notes for presentation

From papers and group reports I would like to identify three issues:

1. The problem of integrating synodality at different levels – local, regional and universal. How do listening, discerning and deciding relate – what level, if any, has priority?
Practically, if Catholic practice deepens/expands the synodal way in a particular locality, what happens to universal synodality?
I suggest one insight that has emerged is that discernment at different levels of social and ecclesial life does not need to be built automatically into any particular power structure, or at least immediately into a fixed authority system.
Increasing listening, openness, conferring and discernment can create its own effect, as we wait to see what the Spirit will do with this increased communication and awareness. This is what several presentations have been calling an attention to the “flow”, or “going with the flow”.
With some approaches, there is a focus on the local, while in others different decisions will need to be taken at different levels and in different contexts, but it may take time to work this out. Again there is a phrase that we have been using: “slow wisdom”.
Ecumenically too, process of discernment can be shared even if joint decisions cannot yet be taken.
Walking together requires trust, walking as covenant phraseology says, in “ways that are known *and to be made known*” (see my paper).
2. Several papers have proposed that synodality, walking together and mutual listening must include walking with those outside the church – what one paper calls “walking with the nation”. Of course this means serving the whole of society, but it also means listening to people’s stories in order to discover what God is doing in people’s lives, how the spirit is creating life and community, how Christ is present in life.
We walk with others in order to work with the mission of God.
So there’s a challenge there. How can we incorporate this listening, these stories, into our synodical processes?
Scripture tells us that God’s covenant is wider than the church, though the church has an indispensable part to play and an essential story to tell.
3. We have spoken a good deal about the link between synodality and the ecumenical. One way we can make this link is through sharing formation, not only of laity but of the ordained. Several papers have stressed that synodality has a spiritual and formational dimension – it’s about forming a certain way of relating to other people,

characterized by interest in them, empathy, openness and the ability to listen. We have said that there is “the spiritual in the structures”.

I believe that those to be priests, pastors, ministers and deacons should experience this formation together, taking strengths from the experience and spirituality of different traditions. Further, since a great deal of the formation of ordinands now takes place, not in college but onsite in local church contexts, shared formation would also mean a shared experience of each others’ congregational life. This may address the situation that the Catholic Briefing Paper identifies, of priests as the “gatekeepers to the level and style of synodal experience of parishioners” (p. 15). I know there’s a great deal of shared *theological* education, in the classical disciplines; we are listening to and reading each other’s scholars. But formation of the person, shaping of a person’s being – “ontology” – tends to take place within the isolation of different traditions. Synodality calls us to cross these boundaries, and to do so urgently.