

Fr David Ranson's letter from Rome: Day 2

Dear friends,

I am delayed in sharing with you my reflections for Day 2 of our Meeting, Tuesday 30 April, given the length of yesterday which left us all rather exhausted. We commenced the day at 8am with Morning Prayer and concluded at 11pm, with only meal breaks in between. The final session of the day commenced at 9pm and at 10.30pm even a new presenter was introduced! It was a very quick route from the meeting hall to my bed!

Firstly, some corrections from my report of Day 1. Tomas Halik is not a Bishop! He is a priest living in Prague. I was confused by the way in which his title is listed in the program. He is quite a fascinating person and a powerful thinker. He was ordained in secret in East Germany such that not even his mother knew of it; he is now one of Europe's most influential thinkers. It was special for me to have some personal time with him during the day reflecting on the current cultural milieu. I have found his presentations the most helpful in the negotiation of the Church in a secular society. It was good also to have a shorter conversation at the coffee machine with St Nathalie Becquart XMCJ, Undersecretary of the General Secretariat of the Synod whom I discovered was following me on X (Twitter)!

And the surname of our wonderful group facilitator is Risso - Riccardo Risso. He, too, is a priest - in Italy but with excellent English.

Further, though the publicity for the meeting has indicated that the meeting is for 300 priests, there are but 193 priests here, from 99 countries. It seems that though the meeting was designed for 300, it was a struggle to reach this number, and a number of priests are here through other means than nomination from their episcopal conference. Hence, we have 6 Korean priests with us, courtesy of the fact that the Prefect of the Dicastery for Clergy is Korean! I am not sure how to interpret the smaller number - does it indicate a caution in many countries about the concept and practice of synodality?

Despite its length, the balance of Day 2 was much better than the first, with most of the day spent in small groups and interventions from the floor. The focus of the day was on charisms, vocations, and ministries with the question, "In my ministry as a parish priest, how have I experienced the participation of different charisms, vocations, ministries in the parish and diocese? What insights and questions have they occasioned in me? In my local context, what significant experiences have we had of parish communities contributing to the life and mission of the local Church to which they belong? What have we learned from these experiences?"

The day began with the panel of experts providing input of about 20 minutes each: Tomas Halik, Gilles Routhier, and Lia Zervone, facilitated by Fr Lorenzo Felice, from the Dicastery for the Clergy. Lia presented three short videos of synodal processes - one from an Italian cluster of parishes, the second from the Archdiocese of Perth, the third from Argentina.

Conversation in the Spirit followed in our small group. As it processed through the day, the synthesis from our own group emerged as follows:

Jesus never called for volunteers. Instead, he personally invited people into discipleship. So too, for us, we seek to engage others into the life, ministry, and mission of our parish communities, not only in the members of the communities themselves but even through the engagement of Fidei Donum priests.

This impels us as synodal leaders to understand the nature of charisms, to have both the hospitality and skill to identify and welcome their manifestation in our community, and to commission them in the exercise of ministry. By this, we affirm and honour the presence of persons in our communities and enable them to sense how they can contribute to the life of the Church in its entirety rather than simply at the service of their own interests. This begins by developing a spirit and ministry of welcome in our communities, the effectiveness of which should not be underestimated.

This is Pentecost: to release the power of the Spirit given to each one at their baptism! It is the heart of the Eucharist from which we are sent in Mission! We heard examples of parishes who have strong ministries of outreach, especially to the unchurched and the marginal, without self-referentiality. These are significant means of evangelisation.

Most importantly, our discernment of charisms cannot occur without prayer. Prayer is the space of waiting; it widens hearts of vigilance; it purifies motivation. It is the foundation for our pastoral listening that is confident that the Spirit gives to each community, not all the charisms, but those it requires to be what the Lord intends for it. Therefore, it is the foundation of trust. Trusting the charisms given our community frees us from the burden of undertaking everything ourselves. It empowers communication, consultation, and collaboration. In turn, this generates connection between people that develops into widening networks through which the Spirit breathes ever new life. This has been a particular feature of our own experience during these days as we have shared our experiences together and heard many personal stories.

At both a parish and diocesan level, we have been especially enlivened when our leadership has opened up a space from which the sound of an orchestra of charisms and ministries has come forth. All this will require new orientations in the formation of candidates to priesthood so that the discernment and promotion of charisms comes more to the fore.

There are challenges everywhere but so, too, is there great hope.

The afternoon provided the occasion for small group reports and personal invitations, with responses from the panel of experts/accompanists, facilitated by Fr Dario Vitali, a rather colourful character who is a theological Consultant to the General Secretariat for the Synod. It was a valuable period of reflection on the nature of charisms in our communities and how these may be engaged at the service of mission. The diversity of experience is remarkable: one priest from Brazil spoke of how he has 72 churches in his parish, and at each church is a community! A German priest spoke of his disillusionment at maintaining a community of but 30 persons.

Through all of this, I have begun to realise that synodality is a great deal more than 'meetings'. It is a way of ministering, a way of enlivening an entire community through engagement of people's charisms. And it begins in the way that priests care for one another. Synodality must really be grounded in how we honour each other and call forth one another's discipleship.

Our celebration of Eucharist for the day was in the form of the Armenian Rite, presided by Fr Rafi Ouhanessian from the Patriarchate of Cilicia of the Armenians - a little abbreviated for the context with some insertion of Italian to guide us through, and with a homily in French.

Following dinner, a Q&A was conducted in the hall with Cardinal Grech and Bishop Marin de San Martin OSA on the processes and conduct of the current Synod of Bishops. At 10.30pm (!!) it was followed by a presentation by Bishop Luis Ruiz, Secretary of the Dicastery of Communications on the digital consultation that was part of the Synod.

Unmistakably, all finished the day exhausted!

Fr David