

Fr David Ranson's letter from Rome: Day 3

Dear friends,

A cooler, wet day - back to the pullover

Yesterday, I raised the issue of the discrepancy between the promoted number of 300 members of the meeting and the actual number of 193. I have discovered that the number of 300 was a miscalculation of the total number that could have been expected using the formula for the nomination of members. The General Secretariat for the Synod had devised a formula for nominations, but according to the formula someone had come up with the wrong maths! The initial number promoted should have been more around the number 200, and so the discrepancy is a problem of arithmetic rather than one of ecclesial disinterest!

The day followed a similar pattern to yesterday. Following 8am Morning Prayer in Italian, for the first hour, facilitated by Mgr Hyacinthe Dione from the Dicastery for Evangelisation, Fr Gilles Routhier and Fr Tomas Halik shared theological reflections and Lia Zervino presented offerings from Fr Vincent Glynn of Archdiocese of Perth on formation to its Diocesan Assembly (by video), Fr Don Planty Jnr from the Arlington, USA on his diocese's consultative structures (not especially innovative and mirroring ours in Broken Bay), and a French parish. It has been quite amazing how highly Australia has featured during the gathering. It certainly appears that the Church in Australia is highly regarded on the topic of synodality!

The question before our small group's Conversation in the Spirit today was:

In my ministry as a parish priest, how have I experienced the dynamics of ecclesial discernment? Which ones have been happy and which ones difficult? What lessons do I draw from them? In my local context, how do participatory bodies function at the local level? And diocesan or eparchy level? What signs of hope do I recognise?

From the processes of Conversation in the Spirit over the course of the day, our group's response was:

"If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." We have recognised this wisdom though our many experiences of fostering collaboration through the various organs of discernment we have already in place in our parishes and in our dioceses - Parish Pastoral Councils, Parish Finance Committees, parish committees and commissions of many different colours, similar entities on a diocesan level. These have been especially significant in our pastoral planning and in a range of pastoral initiatives. Though them we have learnt the importance of opening spaces to listen to others. These spaces also invite connection between people, and discernment works most effectively when there is a profound connection between people.

What connects us with one another most foundationally is our shared focus on Jesus himself, our Christocentric goal. It is this, above all, that endows us, in turn, with the freedom to grow in our personal relationships which become the animation of our consultative bodies.

Our capacity to sustain such relationships, which are occasionally complex with competing viewpoints, is in no small way dependent on also opening space for ourselves, and constantly placing ourselves before the Word of God which shapes our hearts so that we might be those who respond with fullness to the spiritual needs of our people on the journey of salvation. In our engagement with our consultative bodies, we also realise that we cannot abdicate our own thinking and judgement. This may be the very catalyst for the consultation we engage, but it may need also be the factor that guards against a kind of synodalism which may have us wandering aimlessly in conversation, but which has lost its end point, Christ himself and the salvation he brings us. Then, in our engagement with our various consultative bodies and processes, we emerge with the leadership of the Good Shepherd with genuine spiritual paternity: listening and encouraging, creating connections between people, cultivating communion.

We recognise that the leadership of our Bishop is very significant in this. His care and concern for his priests translates into our care and concern not only for our people, but most importantly also for our care and concern for our brother priests, a fraternal love that is, for us, a most significant expression of synodality even as it presents often enough not without challenge. If a Bishop is synodal, then too will be the diocese/eparchy. We see that this can oscillate from bishop to bishop.

Notwithstanding our active engagement of the various consultative practices given by law and by practice, we do also recognise that new circles of listening and discernment are required. If Synodality is the Church, and the Church is Synodality, we will need to recognise that Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish Finance Committees, though important, are not sufficient for the task ahead of us. New methods, processes, and structures will also be required.

A group photograph before lunch, and in the afternoon, feedback on the day's question from the final groups that had not yet spoken was provided. One feedback was concluded with a Spanish song! The afternoon was facilitated by Fr Guiseppe Bonfrate, consultant to the Secretariat for the Synod, who gave the invitation for interventions of response both from the floor and the expert panel. Again, the panel consisted of Fr Tomas Halik, Bishop Pablo David (Philippines), Gilles Routhier, Lia Zervino and Fr Benedict Ndubouse Ejeh, a Nigerian canonist lecturing in Venice.

The latter began by giving quite a lengthy, considered lecture which seemed to have been awaiting an opportunity for its delivery rather than responding to what had just been shared. The others on the 'expert panel' followed on, with Fr Halik's the most thoughtful, "open to the storm of Pentecost." Bishop David's, however, was the most provocative, encouraging comment from the floor about celibacy. It did not seem to garner much reaction as a number came to the microphone with rather lengthy lectures of their own on a range of other matters. It is rather extraordinary how people love to take the microphone and lecture! The failing of the meeting is that time lengths are not well disciplined and so the final hour dissolves really into a number of grandstanding performances.

We finish the time together in our small group reflecting on the fruits we take with us: brotherhood, insights, conviction the Spirit is working in the Church, excitement, a profound pastoral question, conversion from universal to local, re-formation of self, hope, the recognition that synodality is a way of relating before it is a new structure, mission, compassion.

Mass celebrated in English concludes the meeting, followed by a gracious dinner that ends with the boisterousness of South American singing! And for the first time the Oceania contingent

actually gets to meet as a group - Australia, New Zealand, PNG and Samoa - just five of us in this large group.

Tomorrow, we leave Sacrofano early and return to the Vatican to meet the Holy Father and celebrate Mass in St Peter's Basilica.

It has been a memorable few days - a great deal of listening and absorbing. It will take time to absorb and to process the experience. However, I leave deeply affirmed by what we are pioneering in our parish, encouraged by the interest that has been demonstrated, and inspired to continue to work with it all. Rather than answers, I will return home with a profound pastoral question of how to mature what we have begun. The most important thing, perhaps, is not to depend on the term 'synodality' but rather to live out its many dimensions, the awareness of some which has been the gift to me of these days. Becoming Church: this is the greatest invitation to us all.

Fr David