

Fr David Ranson's letter from Rome: Final Day

Dear friends,

I am now on the flight homeward bound, via a stopover in Singapore to help with the adjustment of time zones. And so this will be my final sharing with you on what has been a very privileged experience. I want to record my deep gratitude to Bishop Anthony for his encouragement of me and for his special generosity, and to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference for its nomination of me to attend this meeting. This has been a very rich and memorable occasion that also brings with it considerable responsibility to continue to nurture a synodal spirit within our Church.

It was a particular delight to be at the meeting with Fr Paul Crotty, Parish Priest of Coober Pedy, in South Australia, who impressed me greatly as such a fine person and pastor. Meeting him was very much a highlight of the meeting. A number of faces come to mind from the last week: Fr Bob and Fr Paul Soper from Boston, Fr Joe Friend from Arknasaw, Fr Elio Fernandes from Timor Leste, Fr Akira from Japan, Fr Harry from the Netherlands, Fr Pierre from Canada, Fr Gerard from Lithuania, Fr David Camilleri and Fr Marcus Holden from Southwark, UK, Fr Aldo from Scotland, Fr Adelino Guarda from Belgium, Fr Charbel from Beirut, Fr Hubertus from Germany, Fr Jason from the Philippines and other priests from the Philippines including two from Fr Joey's home parish, the six Korean priests . . . To name a few with whom I enjoyed the most conversation over the days. And Fr Riccardo Rossi our wonderful group facilitator and Mr Andrew Spiteri, of the Focolare Movement, another of the facilitators for the week. Fr Tomas Halik.

So much diverse experience. The Catholic genius. A unity across such multiple contexts: from Siberia to the Dominican Republic to the Congo. All were present at the meeting. I think the faces and the stories are the greatest gift of these days.

However, there was insight, too, and reflection. These are best summarised for me in my own small group's syntheses over the three days which I had the privilege of writing, based on sharing that occurred through the Conversation in the Spirit. These provide almost a compendium as it were of an understanding and practice of a synodal Church:

Day One

We have been enriched and inspired by the sharing of other's stories which has widened our horizons. For us, it has been a demonstration of how the processes of synodality can transform affectivity (sharing of experiences) into effectivity (impetus to action). We recognised many are the forms of synodality exercised in our parish communities. These can often be in the form of what we might call, micro-synodality by which small groups encourage fuller involvement of its members and many volunteers enlisted, through to parish pastoral councils representative of the diversity and complexity of the parish, through to an entire community being a parish-in-council. There is not a single way of being synodal and the context will speak out the mode. However, foundational is the exercise of a synodal leadership. This means listening intently to

and learning from the People of God entrusted to our care, inviting their participation at many different levels, and developing a shared course of action to which many have contributed. The synodal style of leadership is imbued with 'closeness' 'tenderness' 'proximity'. This begins in the way priests care for each other which then ripples through the community and its members' way of being present to one another. This creates a care-giving community, a Church serving humanity together with the Lord and on the model of Jesus himself. The desired outcome is engagement of all the baptised, with a co-responsibility for mission. This however renders pastors vulnerable, especially to criticism, and in need of support for there is a possibility for synodality to become subject to destructive agendas. Therefore, the balance between the exercise of authority and the empowerment of the laity requires careful consideration in order to avoid moving from one extreme to another. The challenge might become simply a power play between clergy and laity. Synodal leadership requires formation, the development of particular skill, and above all, the spirit of humility.

Day Two

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 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.

Day Three

“If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” We have recognised this wisdom through 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. Through 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.

In some ways these daily syntheses, taken together, form a kind of Charter for Synodality.

The final morning of our time together was spent at the Vatican. We left the venue of the meeting at Sacrofano on buses for the slow trip back to Rome given the peak morning traffic but arrived in good time for our scheduled meeting with Pope Francis in the conference room above the

vast Paul VI Audience Hall. The pope was actually early. It was a significant day for him - meeting with the King of Jordan, and with the Archbishop of Canterbury and a visiting group of Anglican bishops. He entered the theatre in his wheelchair but transferred himself to the chair on the dais for the seven questions to be put to him from the meeting out of the 100 that were suggested from the whole group. Fr Paul Crotty's question on the relationship between priests and bishops in light of the scandal of sexual abuse was the final question to be asked. The pope took each one as a catalyst for his own teaching and spent an hour or so with us, concluding by commissioning each of us to be 'ambassadors for synodality' in our countries and signing, in our presence, a letter to the Parish Priests of the world. With the utmost generosity, he then greeted each of us personally as we left the auditorium. My words to him were simple: Grazie per tutti (Thank you for everything).

Our final event was the celebration of a beautiful Mass at the Chair of St Peter in St Peter's Basilica with Cardinal Grech, concelebrated with Cardinal Tagle, and Bishops Marin and David, and with the restoration of the great baldachinno of Bernini's taking place behind us. Affectionate farewells followed, and then I walked out of the Vatican the way I had arrived to catch the metro to my lodgings for the evening near Termini Station.

The afternoon provided me the opportunity to spend some time at the Basilica of St Mary Major's, close to where I was staying, and the evening to spend time at Santa Maria di Trastevere, one of my favourite churches in Rome, before dinner with my cousin, Fr Ben McKenna SM at Gli Amici restaurant around the corner from the basilica, operated by the San Egidio Community for those with intellectual disabilities as the staff. The most unexpected event of the evening, however, occurred in running into an old friend, Professor Micheli Riordino in the piazza! The chances of that occurring were extraordinarily high indeed.

And now, I make my way home to my much-loved community and spiritual family whom I have carried constantly in my heart over these days. You have been for me the greatest teachers of synodality and I commit myself to continuing to walk with you in our becoming Church.

Fr David