

## Fr David Ranson's letter from Rome

Dear friends

I have come now to the end of the first day, Monday 29 January, at Fraterna Domus, Sacrofano about 40kms north of Rome where the Special Meeting of Parish Priests for the Synod of Bishops is taking place. It is a remarkable conference centre, almost an entire village set in beautiful Roman countryside, that can easily accommodate us all. It is a valuable venue to help focus us on the matters before us and to nurture new friendships from around the world.

We arrived here on the evening of Sunday 28 April, many of us having been bused from a meeting place at the Vatican. There I made contact with Fr Paul Crotty, Parish Priest of Cober Pedy in the Diocese of Port Pirie in South Australia, the other Australian to have been nominated to the conference, and also Fr Helio Fernandes who is the parish priest of the community with whom the Parish of Lower North Shore has a partnership. By sheer coincidence, I also met Andrew Spiteri, a member of the Focolare Community, who was one of the Facilitators of the Synod of Bishops, and will be for our conference, too, Andrew is a person whom Yvonne Corpuz has enjoyed online dialogue for our own parish about the method of Conversation in the Spirit and who has therefore influenced our own practice of Parish-in-Council. Sitting on the bus together, we spent the time to Sacrofano deep in conversation about a range of matters. It was extraordinary to meet him in person following Yvonne's discussion with him.

The connectedness continued once I had arrived at Sacrofano, soon meeting a priest of the Archdiocese of Southwark, England, Fr David Camilleri whom I had known very well in Melbourne nearly 30 years ago. Neither of us knew of the other's attendance at the Conference and the conference has occasioned quite an unexpected reunion.

It has been a very full day. We have been assigned to tables in the large hall according to language groups, though each table may have many different nationalities. I am at Table 10 and we have priests from Lebanon, Germany, United States, Japan, Korean, Philippines, Kenya, England, and Oman with a wonderful Italian facilitator, Riccardo Sisso.

The day's work began with Morning Prayer in Italian, followed by many speeches providing the context and direction of the Conference: an opening address by Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops with a presentation on the importance of story-sharing. He was then followed by a presentation from Cardinal Lazarus You Heung-Sik, Prefect of the Dicastery for Clergy, and representatives from the Dicastery for Evangelization and the Dicastery for Oriental Churches. Bishop Louis Marin de san Martin OSA, Undersecretary of the General Secretariat of the Synod and Fr Giacoma Costa SJ, Special Secretary of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops also spoke. They were followed by presentations from theologians, Bishop Tomas Halik of the Czech Republic, Fr Gilles Routhier of Canada, Bishop Pablo Virgilio David of the Philippines, and Sr Natalie Becquart, Undersecretary of the General Secretariat for the Synod, on the methodology of Conversation in the Spirit.

Then followed three short presentations from invited speakers on best practice. I was the third of these. I had been asked to present for 3 minutes. However, given that we were so overtime given all the previous addresses, when I came to the microphone, I had asked to limit the presentation to two minutes! This was the text I edited 'on the run.'

Our parish of Chatswood in the Diocese of Broken Bay is a vibrant, urban, and multicultural community. Given its circumstances and opportunities, over the last two years we have moved from having a Parish Pastoral Council, limited to the representation of a few, to being a Parish-in-Council which seeks the engagement and participation of many.

The notion of being a Parish-in-Council was inspired by the 3rd chapter of the 6th century Rule of St Benedict but supported and developed by the vision of a synodal Church from Pope Francis. We now gather as a Parish-in-Council three times a year: May, August, and November. We are in our second year of doing so. Coming together as a Parish in Council is constructed on the principles of encounter, listening, and discernment. Each session takes half a day. It begins with a community midday meal, moves to a significant period of prayer together, and unfolds through the methodology of spiritual conversation in groups of eight by which everyone's voice is heard, but no one voice dominates. The sessions are supported by a voluntary animation group drawn from the expertise in the community,

We have also developed a Kids-in-Council for the children who attend. And we are now developing a Youth-in-Council for the emerging leaders of our two Catholic high schools.

Our sessions are not about issues of maintenance and management which are undertaken by the staff of the parish, but rather at the service of developing our shared mission to bring the Light of Christ to our city in strategic and practical ways. As Pastor, I enable the integrity of the sessions. I am also ultimately responsible for their agenda, and their agency. The shared discernment of the Parish-in-Council returns to me for further deliberation and actioning. By this, I have discovered the role of authority as an unmistakable service to shared discernment and to the synodal way such that the pitfall of a certain congregationalism might be avoided.

Some 100 of our community come together when we are a Parish-in-Council. Though this is but a small number of those who are part of the community, the effects of being a Parish-in-Council have conveyed to everyone a spirit of inclusion and welcome and the opportunity for participation. This has greatly affected the culture of the community, Most importantly it has empowered new leadership in our community.

Though occasional, periodic parish assemblies have been practiced in Australia in the past, we are aware of the innovative nature of being a Parish-in-Council and are open to share our experience and resources to others.

Despite the very short time of presentation, the idea of 'parish-in-council' struck the imagination of not a few and it has remained a vogue phase for much of the remainder of the day.

Following Morning Tea, the focus changed to Conversation in the Spirit at our tables, and this was rich exchange on each participant's experience of synodal processes. In the afternoon, feedback from some of the groups was provided, and I was asked to present the synthesis from my own group:

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.

Along with the feedback from a number of groups, there was also the opportunity throughout the afternoon for individuals to make contributions. The diverse exchange of perspectives and experiences was very helpful, perhaps more so than the long presentations in the morning. At different times the variety of interventions was responded to by a panel of 'accompanists' Bishop David, Bishop Halik, Fr Routhier, Fr Ndubueze Ekeh (a Nigerian canonist from Venice) and Dr Maria Lia Zervino, Consultant to the Dicastery of Bishops, from Argentina. Perhaps the last intervention from a priest from Burkina Faso was the most striking: How do we implement synodality in the face of terrorism?

Our day concluded with Mass at 7pm celebrated in Spanish (with a very long homily!) and an 8pm dinner to which many of the participants had contributed dishes and food from their places of origin.

Doubtless to share, it has been a very full day, and quite tiring listening to so many. Yet, it has demonstrated the universality of our Church in such an unmistakable manner. The day has certainly confirmed the direction that has emerged in our own parish, but it has also reminded us that we are part of much larger impetus of the Spirit of God. May this act to mature what we have begun and bring it to its fulfillment

Thinking of you all at home, profoundly grateful for the way in which you have led me.

Fr David