

New Directions in the Church
Speaking Notes of Bishop Brendan Leahy
First Session

I would like to thank you for the invitation to speak here today. In conversation with others, we get a chance to reflect further ourselves and that is always valuable.

In this first session, the organisers have asked me to address the question: why I took the diocese in a new direction with a Synod and what did it look like?

The most immediate reason I moved in the direction of the Synod was that when I became Bishop of Limerick, I quickly realised the Diocese had already engaged in a valuable and widespread listening exercise under the wise guidance of Bishop Donal Murray and had taken many positive steps in developing clusters and pastoral areas. I had to build on that not repeat it. If you don't go forwards, you backwards! Added to that, with all that the painful difficulties the Church in Ireland has been going through, I felt a collective step was needed. A Synod seemed to fit that bill.

I had many other reasons. As a Church activity, a Synod is a time-honoured and well-thought-out organised process that listens to the heart-beat of the Diocese and indicates precise directions that can then become local church law. A Synod is a way of taking up the Gospel's invitation to work more in unity with one another. And, of course, I was influenced also by the fact that Pope Francis has emphasised the importance of Synods in the Church.

In calling the whole Church to reform, one the key elements in this reform is the adoption of a synodal approach to Church. The Pope is convinced that, "making a synodal Church a reality is an

indispensable precondition for a new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God.”¹

As the Concluding Message of last year’s Synod on Young people puts it, what we are dealing with is nothing less than a prophecy of the Second Vatican Council, “which we have yet to absorb in all its profundity and to develop in its daily implications”. Pope Francis says clearly: “It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium”.²

My theological studies had also convinced me of the value of promoting what might be called a Synodal style in the Church.³

What did the Synod look like? Beforehand, of course, there was an element of risk involved. Years ago, a diocesan synod was mostly a matter of just a morning, or a day or two’s deliberations, with the Bishop and some clergy making practical decisions. To convoke a Synod today is different. It is more about process and dialogue. And just like when any of us start talking about anything, it can take time to sort out our viewpoints and what we want to say and where we are going in it all. A Synod is a process during which people express hopes and wishes, but also fears and anxieties. There’s a risk that some might take personally comments intended on a more general level.

Some said to me that I had courage to call a Synod. I didn’t see it like that. It was simply the right thing to do – the Risen Jesus would lead us when gathered in his name, in love for one another. I think I received a grace to believe in the process of the Synod as linked to the

¹ International Theology Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 9.

² Francis, *Address for the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015

³ See Brendan Leahy, “People, Synod and Upper Room: Vatican II’s Ecclesiology of Communion”, in Dermot A. Lane and Brendan Leahy, *Vatican II, Facing the 21st Century*, Dublin: Veritas, 2006, 49-80

Holy Spirit. In all of this, I tried to keep before me the figure of the Crucified Christ who, in difficulty and even apparent failure generated the Church, and so I thought to myself: even if it goes badly, it'll go okay.

Some suggested the word "Synod" was odd. Maybe we should call the process something else. I appreciate there are many synodal-type gatherings going on today. Some speak of diocesan assemblies or gatherings or listening processes. I believed, however, that while the term "Synod" has fallen into dis-use, it's still a word worth recuperating. Not just the word but, more importantly, the practice of holding synods.

Then there are the issues that go beyond a Bishop's specific diocesan remit. I sensed a fear that red button issues might get disproportionate coverage distracting from the real everyday concerns of people. Media coverage might focus on just the controversial issues.

Finally, there is the question of cost. It was said to me, however, that while we so often have to spend a lot of money on Church buildings, it is wise to spend money on a Synod that constructs the building that is the Church, the People of God.

In reflecting on these issues I also learned from the experiences of Synods in America and Rome. The 1997 Vatican Instruction on Diocesan Synods was an important resource.

In convoking the Synod in September 2014, I issued a pastoral letter entitled, "Together in Mission: A Time to Begin Again". As well as outlining the reasons for the Synod and explaining some of the steps involved, I indicated how I wanted to make my own the words of Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter on the *Joy of the Gospel*: 'I dream of a "missionary option", that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably

channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.' (n. 27).

I recounted how I often heard people in Limerick talk about the "Miracle Match", a great day back in 2003, when Munster, against all the odds, by determination, by working together, and above all by having a dream, advanced to the semi-finals of the Heineken Cup. I expressed the hope that if we would work together with a new enthusiasm we, too, could advance as a Church.

In explaining how I didn't want to predetermine the outcomes, nevertheless, I indicated pitfalls to avoid: firstly, focussing just on structures; secondly, limiting ourselves to our own local experience without looking at the bigger picture and, thirdly, narrowing our vision to specifically religious or liturgical questions rather than looking at the social dimensions of the Church. I felt it was important too to emphasise that for the Synod to be successful it would need to touch each one of us personally and spiritually. We were entering a period of spiritual "discernment".

A Synod is something you can't just jump into. I consulted with various groups about the possibility of a Synod – the College of Consultors, the Priests' Council, lay members of the Pastoral Areas and others. Once I received a favourable response, I asked Fr. Éamonn Fitzgibbon, our Episcopal Vicar for Pastoral Planning if he would become the Director of the Synod. He had just completed doctoral studies in Ministry in the area of parish development and renewal.

Fr. Éamonn took on the new task as Director of the Synod with enthusiasm and he worked tirelessly at it (even if it probably cost him many sleepless nights)! He travelled to dioceses in America and to Rome where synods had taken place, to discuss the ins and outs of the process. He read the literature on synods and studied the documentation, especially a 1997 Vatican Instruction on Diocesan

Synods. He was ably assisted by a member of our Diocesan Office who did Trojan work in the administrative aspects of the Synod.

After the initial pastoral letter in September 2014 announcing the Synod entitled, “Together in Mission: A Time to Begin Again”, I formed a Preparatory Commission that met faithfully every month. The 400 approx. delegates were elected mainly from parishes but some also from other groups of the Diocese. Along with these many others gave generously of their time and talents as resource people, speakers and leaders of catechesis and prayer.

There were various steps of our journey. I’ll just refer to them briefly –questionnaires, focus groups and parish gatherings involving over 5000 people; media advertising, Synod Sundays (updating parishioners throughout the Diocese) and public conferences; the gatherings of delegates, the presentation of the statistical profile of the Diocese, themed meetings pin-pointing specific ideas, and then the final phase before the Synod, the actual formulation of 100 proposals that we were to vote on at the Synod.

For all of us the journey was unfamiliar territory and there was a sense of adventure. Fr. Éamonn was inspired with a phrase that must have come from God because it kept reassuring us at each point along the journey: “we are where we’re meant to be”. At times, I wondered how we would get to the point of having proposals clearly discerned, laid out and presentable for a Synod. But, thankfully, we got to that point.

Throughout the Synod process a wide variety of themes surfaced. As I mentioned above, just like when any of us start talking about anything, it can take time to sort out our viewpoints and what we want to say and where we are going in it all. A Synod is like that. We needed a lot of listening, talking and clarifying. We expressed hopes and wishes, but also had to name fears and anxieties. It was

important to come together also as Diocesan clergy because so much of the Synod outcomes would impact directly on their day-to-day lives and ministry.

A 150-page workbook was distributed to the delegates, a wonderful (and, indeed, a little miraculous!) summary of what had emerged to date (results of surveys, catechesis and proposals). That guide would inform delegates present at the Synod.

The six main themes that emerged from the consultation were: 1) Community & Sense of Belonging; 2) Faith Formation; 3) Pastoral Care of the Family; 4) New Models of Leadership; 5) Liturgy and Life; 6) Young People.

The Synod itself was facilitated by Martin Kennedy, a Limerick man and accomplished facilitator and Jessie Rogers, a Scripture scholar who led the assembly in prayerful discernment.

The way the Synod worked was that each of the six main themes were presented by a speaker, summarising the main points that had emerged in consultation and Church teaching on that topic. The Bishop was invited to respond to the theme proposed. Then the Synod delegates were invited through a Scriptural input into a space of reflection, then exchange, really listening to one another, then a few points from the floor for the whole assembly. Then finally the vote with a zapper-type click that meant we had the results instantly! The zappers resembled TV Remotes. These devices allowed each person to vote in one of three ways – by pressing Number 1 to say ‘I strongly support this proposal’, by pressing 2 to say ‘I support this proposal’ or Number 3 to say ‘I do not support this proposal’. This system enabled us to vote quickly and efficiently across 101 proposals.

I was particularly pleased, however, that the main dynamic of the proceedings was one of spiritual discernment. I believe we all grew in that art of discernment during the weeks and months of the Synod

journey and at the Synod itself. By linking Scriptural inputs with a focus on mutual listening to and learning from one another, in a spirit of the New Commandment of love for one another, we became “trained” in a way of communion that should always undergird decision-making in the Church.

The Synod was a formative process that will remain regardless of particular outcomes. For many it was a profound immersion in the Church as a living organism rather than simply an organisation. At different times, there was a palpable sense of being in the presence of God “where two or three are gathered”, savouring the divine at work. It also taught us the need to adapt attitudes of frankness and openness, to recognise fears and challenges, to be prepared to travel a journey.

Would we do things differently? Yes, of course. It was a first Synod in a long time. It was a new experience for all of us. I suspect a future Synod would not try to review the whole life of the Church. It would be sufficient to pick one or two topics or areas for review. It might be a shorter Synod. We might devote greater time and attention to the catechetical dimension of the Synod. It would be important to develop a regular frequent rhythm of Synods.

Session Two

Moving Forward

The Synod was a great experience for many. An experience of Church-People of God united in the name of Jesus. It gave us much data in terms of decisions, inputs, perspectives. But we needed now to move into the implementation stage by working on a pastoral plan.

Immediately following the Synod, Fr. Tony Mullins, Vicar General said: “And now we continue this journey. This is the beginning

of something new, something great. No doubt there are going to be challenges along the way but I cannot see anything except this bearing fruit. We have a huge bank of positivity built up after this Synod but make no mistake about it, there's much work to do. We now need to distil all that happened over the three days – and that's a huge amount – into a practical plan. It needs to be well thought out and reflected on and there has to be a strategic review built into it. There also needs to be patience with the workload ahead. It will not happen overnight but it will happen.”

A first step was to interpret the data. We called on professionals (statisticians, mathematicians) to help us drill down into the voting and get a clearer picture of how each vote went. Not all proposals could be treated equally; some proposals were strategic in nature and others were very straightforward projects that are good to do (assuming they fit with the local needs). Proposals which received a strong mandate from the delegates also needed to be prioritised.

We realised the Pastoral Plan needed to identify strategic priorities without which it would run the risk of being a collection of disparate projects. We realised in consulting others that Pastoral Planning should be broad and identify the thrust of where we wanted to get to, identifying the main elements of the church we are working towards in view of the Synod vote. It should also offer a menu to parishes, pastoral areas and the Diocese as a whole to choose from. The creation of a broad strategic plan with key milestones gives a picture of where we are all going together – parishes, pastoral areas, diocese – but it shouldn't imply that everybody has to be doing the same thing at the same time.

In working on the Pastoral Plan we came back to the Delegates with an assembly some months later to tell the story and hear from them that we were interpreting accurately the data we had received.

In order to realise our Vision we realised we needed to develop capacity or ability to deliver at diocesan and local level.

In our Pastoral Plan, in each theme we aim to begin by doing something at diocesan level to increase our ability to move on this theme – this is achieved by training, employing or appointing people to key positions. Then, in turn we aim to similarly develop the ability on the ground to make progress on actions by providing training and resources and ensuring there are people at local level who can deliver actions in this theme.

Many proposals and many actions are named in the plan – the intention is that local communities approach many of these (the ones that are not core or essential) as they would a menu and choose those that are appropriate to their circumstances.

Finally, there are two other categories of proposals for which we have employed a different strategy.

Firstly, there are those proposals brought forward by groups or agencies who are already working in this area and who have experience and expertise, for example Compassionate Communities, Bedford Row project (working with prisoners and the families of prisoners), Childrens' Grief project etc. Here the strategy is to work with and support these groups rather than working in parallel. Secondly some proposals were brought forward by delegates themselves who have a passion and experience in the particular area, for example, Inter-faith dialogue, Living with disability, Laudato Si and care for the Environment, or the JP II Awards. Again here the strategy is to go back to those delegates and work with them to act upon their proposals.

What are the challenges as we move forward? The main challenge is to ensure the outcomes of the Synod are “implemented”. We now have a pastoral plan with many very fine proposals and tips

for strategic planning and actions. But if they remain in a document then that would be a failure. Thankfully, as a Diocese we have moved on some of the decisions taken at the Synod.

I sent two people, a priest and a layperson to do further studies in liturgy. We are working with Mary Immaculate College and neighbouring dioceses to offer a qualification in catechetical/pastoral training. We have established the John Paul II awards for young people. A major step has been the establishment of pastoral units and team ministry in the Diocese. I am not naive about this – it will take time to settle but it comes from the Synod and has started. Some parishes have taken up the call to make greater use of technology in parishes. Some parishes have started having a simple cup-of-tea occasionally after Sunday Mass or other big moments. We established the Family Forum and, of course, were helped by Providence with the preparations for and the celebration of the World Meeting of Families. The network of care agencies are meeting together for mutual support as suggested at the Synod.

So, we are moving forward. Of course, more could be done. Much depends on personnel, volunteering, good will.

A major challenge now is that we've to make sure the Synod doesn't become an event of the past that we now move on from and forget! Worse still, no matter how much we tried to communicate about the Synod, there will be some who weren't really part of it and now could figure the results of the Synod are coming "from above" whereas the whole Synod event involved very much a "bottom up" approach. It's strange to hear occasionally the accusation of "top down" levelled at an event that involved 5000 people of the Diocese! But it reminds me again and again of how we can never do enough to communicate so that all feel participants in our Diocesan life.

The biggest challenge now, it seems to me, is to keep the Synod alive, not as an event to look back on, but rather as a style of Church. And that requires more than techniques, methods and programmes. It needs, above all, a new step in how we approach our spiritual life as members of the Church and not just as individuals.

In terms of approach to a Synod Church spirituality and culture, Pope Francis has provided us with images that can help us.

Journey. The word “synodality” contains the image of journey. Quoting Saint John Chrysostom Pope Francis says, that ‘Church and Synod are synonymous’, inasmuch as the Church is nothing other than the “journeying together” of God’s flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord”.⁴ He often returns to this theme. It is walking together that we access Truth, that we understand what to do, that we see what direction to take.

A key biblical image for him is the text on the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24: 13-35). They travel dejected, walking “away” from Jerusalem. Jesus accompanies them, interprets for them and renews them in hope, transforming them in mission.

I was part of a IARCCUM event two years ago. It was a pilgrimage to Canterbury and Rome with “pairs” of bishops (one Anglican, one Catholic) from across the world taking part together. Pope Francis really underlined the importance of journeying together, doing things together and so understanding together.

A second image is that of the **pyramid** reversed. Often in the past, when speaking of the Church as a structured, ordered society (the “perfect society”), the image used was one of a pyramid with the

⁴ Francis, *Address for the Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015

Pope and Bishops on top and then down through the various “levels” of the Church. In speaking of the pyramid reversed, Pope Francis is telling all of us that a way of viewing relationships in terms of inferior serving the superior, needs to change. In a synodal process, we all, as St. Paul advised, see others as greater than ourselves. We all serve one another and so the hierarchical “ministers” (who are necessary and have a specific charism) see themselves not above but in service. The biblical text here is the great Christological hymn of St. Paul (Phil 2:6-11) that speaks of the self-emptying Christ, the Kenotic Christ. During his trip to Panama, Pope Francis based his talk to the Bishops on this text.

A third image, that is perhaps slightly more abstract is the **polyhedron**. The Pope comments on this in his first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. He explains the model of pastoral and indeed political activity is not the sphere where every point is equidistant from the centre, and where there are no differences between them.

Instead, it is the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness. Pastoral and political activity alike seek to gather in this polyhedron the best of each. There is a place for the poor and their culture, their aspirations and their potential. Even people who can be considered dubious on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked. It is the convergence of peoples who, within the universal order, maintain their own individuality; it is the sum total of persons within a society which pursues the common good, which truly has a place for everyone.... (n. 236).

I don't think the Pope has indicated a specific Gospel image, but it might be simply that of the Kingdom or reign of God that Jesus

proclaimed, with its Trinitarian shape (unity in diversity) summarised in Jesus' last will and testament: "that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (Jn 17:21).

Pope Francis is inviting us to adopt a synodal style of ecclesial life. In reviewing his statements and the text of the International Theological Commission entitled, "Synodality in Life and Mission of the Church," I think we can indicate some key traits of this style.

Listening. A key theme is Pope Francis' proposal of a synodal culture is listening. In his address commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, he said, 'A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening "is more than simply hearing". It is a *mutual* listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of truth" (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he "says to the Churches" (Rev 2:7)'.⁵

Processes of communal discernment. As a good Jesuit, it is not surprising the theme of discernment comes up often in Pope Francis' pronouncements. He underlines how the renewal of the Church demands that we initiate processes for consulting the entire People of God. The International Theological Commission document makes an important point: "In a diocese, for example, it is necessary to distinguish between the process of *decision-making* through a joint exercise of discernment, consultation and co-operation, and *decision-taking*, which is within the competence of the Bishop, the guarantor of apostolicity and Catholicity." (n. 69). For Pope Francis communal discernment is another word for synodal discernment. It can inspire

⁵ (Francis, *Address for the Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015)

and encourage shared choices which will mean “sparking new processes for evangelising culture” (EV, 69).

All of this is linked to discerning authentic manifestations of the *sensus fidei* (sense of the faith) and *sensus fidelium* (sense of the people of faith) In 2014 the International Theological Commission has produced an excellent document on the place of the *sensus fidei* in the life of the Church.

Participation and Co-responsibility. Behind Pope Francis’ focus on listening and communal discernment as key elements of a synod style of Church, lies the ecclesiology of the People of God characteristic of the Second Vatican Council. It stressed the common dignity and mission of all the baptised, in exercising the variety and ordered richness of their charisms, their vocations and their ministries. It also underlined the “*sensus fidei*”, the instinct for the truth of the Gospel that enables people to recognise authentic Christian doctrine and practice, and to reject what is false.

All the baptized participate in the priesthood of Christ. As the Second Vatican Council put it, “the whole body of the faithful, who have an anointing which comes from the holy one (cf. 1 Jn 2:20,27), cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*)”. By virtue of baptism, every member of the People of God is given a share in the authority granted by the Risen Christ to go and teach all nations, having received the “anointing of the Holy Spirit” (cf. 1 Jn 2:20,27), having been taught by God (cf. Jn 6:45) and having been guided “to the complete truth” (cf. Jn 16:13).

In his first Angelus address, Pope Francis gave a homely example of his conviction around all of this. He quoted the words of a humble, elderly woman he once met: ‘If the Lord did not forgive everything, the world would not exist’; and he commented with

admiration: ‘that is the wisdom which the Holy Spirit gives’. We could say the woman’s insight was “a striking manifestation of the *sensus fidei*, which, as well as enabling a certain discernment with regard to the things of faith, fosters true wisdom and gives rise, as here, to proclamation of the truth.”⁶

We need a robust Synodal Spirituality of Communion

As I say, Synodality requires more than techniques, methods and programmes. It needs, above all, a new step in how we approach our spiritual life as members of the Church and not just as individuals. I would like finally to reflect further on this.

Last year during his visit to the Focolare Movement’s international town in Loppiano near Florence, Pope Francis told a story last year that struck me. A priest gave him a test, he said, asking him, “tell me, father, what is the contrary of ‘I’, the opposite of ‘me’?”. And, the Pope said, ‘I fell into the trap, and immediately I answered: “you”. And he told me: “No, the contrary of all individualism, both of ‘I’ and of ‘you’, is ‘us. The opposite is ‘us”.’ The notion of “we/us” is at the heart of what Pope Francis calls a mysticism of Encounter. It requires we live a spirituality of the “we”, an “us” spirituality.

In thinking about an “us” spirituality” we remember what Saint Pope John Paul said in 2001: “To make the Church the home and the school of communion that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God’s plan and respond to the world’s deepest yearnings.”⁷

In a talk she gave recently on the theme of the Holy Spirit, soul of the Church, Maria Voce, president of the Focolare quoted a writing from Chiara Lubich that also struck me because it reminds me that we

⁶ International Theological Commission document on “Sensus fidei in the life of the Church” (2014)

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43 (6th January 2001).

aren't talking so much of the need for more structures but rather putting into practice in synodal style the participative structures that we have (priest councils, pastoral councils, episcopal conferences). But even more than that, we need to guarantee the "cement of mutual love" is present:

The Church is the people of God. Since it is the people of God, there is of course an order in this people. Saint Paul speaks of different ministries, of persons who should guide the people, who should nourish them with the sacraments and teach the people of God with wisdom and with the magisterium. We need Bishops too, and we need the Pope. But the Church is already built; we don't have to build it ourselves, of course. However, very often, in between the stones of this building, between one brick and another, what has gone missing? The cement of mutual love is missing. So you can understand that a Church built with bricks, or even stone blocks or boulders, but with nothing that binds them to one another, is a bit precarious, a little shaky. What kind of cement is missing? The cement of mutual love – being one, all being one soul. In fact, Jesus said, by this they will know, if you love one another. That is a means that can help us be truly Church. ... we must show a Church that truly lives its own reality.⁸

8 Cf C. LUBICH, *Answers to questions*, at the little town of Loppiano, 30th May 1984.