

# That Synod

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That synod on the laity expired quietly on Friday October 30 unloved, unmourned, largely unreported. Most of those who were inside put on a brave front, tried to salvage something from the wreckage, and claimed to have had an intense experience of 'affective collegiality'. This is the warm glow that comes from brothers (and a few sisters) celebrating their unity, and hugging it to themselves. It is contrasted with 'effective collegiality', in which Pope and bishops combine to get things done. So far this pontificate has been stronger on affective than effective collegiality.

Archbishop Roger Mahoney gave the game away in a casual remark as he departed, early, for Los Angeles: 'It doesn't matter what the Synod is about, what matters is that it should meet.' Mahoney was a papal nominee at the Synod, so he probably is privy to the mind of the Pope. But what contempt this remark reveals for the laity who in some countries were extensively consulted in advance of the Synod. The four bishops from the United States, for example, held elaborate and costly meetings involving over 200,000 laypeople. Their speeches to the Synod in the first week faithfully reflected what they had heard. They had done what the Synod Secretariat told them to do: consulted. The results of their consultation were spurned, mocked, one could almost say.

The US Bishops hid their disappointment, concealed their wounds. On the question of women Archbishop Rembert Weakland, of Milwaukee, consoled himself with the thought that 'at least we did not pedal backwards.' That conjured up the image of the Synod as a sort of cycling-machine, like the one at *Civiltà Cattolica*, that reputedly belonged to Pope Pius XII. The Synod fathers puffed hard, and inched nowhere.

The Canadians, by contrast, did not feel under any obligation to be diplomatic. Archbishop Donat Chiasson (see *The Tablet*, November 7, 1987, p. 1226) was 'angry and disappointed'. He had nothing to take home at all to his eleven million Catholics. Nothing? 'Nothing, except perhaps the conviction that the Church is lived at home. After listening to some of the Bishops in other countries, I go back proud of the Church in Canada. I think the breadth of Vatican II is a little better accepted in our milieu than elsewhere ... That is my consolation.'

Future historians may well regard that as one of the most important statements made about the Church in the late twentieth century. What Chiasson is really saying is that the Church no longer looks to Rome for leadership, because the Roman Curia has for all practical purposes waved good-bye to Vatican II. Cardinal Basil Hume said the same thing, but more delicately, and in advance: 'The People of God travels through history on bread and butter, not caviar, and because of this it is important to look at the local Church as the arena for change, not to Rome.' That was *before* the Synod. After it he conceded that the caviar was a bit off.

What else is left to say? The Synod was a lead ballon or, to change the metaphor, an emperor who is discovered to be without any clothes. I fear for those who point this out. For the judgement of Pope John Paul II is that this Synod was a great success. Nay, more, 'in a certain sense it was unprecedented, a model and a point of reference for the future.' Those words were spoken in St Peter's at the final Mass. They are very ambivalent: in what sense was the Synod unprecedented? Was it the presence of sixty or so lay-people? Will they be back again? If so, that is cold comfort, for most of them represented (or even had founded) organizations of a distinctly right-wing nature (Comunione e Liberazione, the Neo-catechumenate, the Focolare Movement the Charismatic Renewal). But we do not know what the Pope meant by calling it 'unprecedented'. He might also have meant that the on the whole successful exclusion of the press was a triumph. But the point of the remark is that if this Synod is deemed to have been a success and a model for the future, then the next Synod, in 1990, will follow exactly the same pattern, however much the North Americans may growl and complain.

This final papal homily in St Peter's was of some significance as a revelation of papal thinking. 'Profound and stimulating things were said,' the Pope acknowledged, 'on "women" and "youth".' Both words were put in quotes, as though figments of the imagination. But the Holy Father promised to take into account what he had heard so as to 'gather it together in the next few months and present it in an orderly fashion to the whole people of God.' So far no one, officially, has seen the fifty-four propositions and no one, officially, will be able to judge in six or so months' time whether the Pope has faithfully reflected the Synod or not.

However, there is always a gap between official and unofficial Rome. A secret is defined as something you tell to only one person at once. In this case, the ludicrous situation was arrived at whereby bishops, obliged to surrender their precious propositions because they were also used as voting papers, then went outside and bought a copy from the same source as certain journalists. The late Bishop Agnellus Andrew, when he was vice-president of the Pontifical Commission for

the Means of Social Communications, once told Pope John Paul: 'You want a good press, Holy Father, but you also want secrecy. You cannot have both at the same time. You must choose what you want.' There seems to be a preferential option for secrecy.

Journalists flatter themselves if they think that secrecy is designed to annoy them. Its real function is to conceal what is happening. Its real function is to *cacher le jeu*. What it does is to suggest that bishops are in agreement when this is far from being true.

We can detect this process at work in the development of the Synod itself. In the first ten days there was a relative freedom to speak out in the name of episcopal conferences. Thirty-two of them said that women must be given something more than a pat on the head by the end of the Synod. The simple way to do that would be to extend the provisions of *Ministeria Quaedam* of 1972 to include laywomen: their exclusion from the lay ministries of acolyte and reader was, in any case, unjust. That would probably have carried altar girls in its slipstream. Cardinal Albert Decourtray, of Lyons, the new President of the French episcopal conference, quoted the Pope in San Francisco to the effect that women should participate 'in all of the Church's activities' (Bolletino, October 7, 1987), although he probably knew that the Pope had carefully avoided all talk of 'lay ministries' because he mistrusts them.

That was confirmed by the intervention of Archbishop Roger Mahoney, of Los Angeles, as mentioned, a papal nominee. He had not worked collegially with the other US Bishops, but had prepared his intervention in isolation, possibly with the aid of Fr Joseph D. Fessio S.J., who was eccentrically present as a Synod theologian. Mahoney said he wanted to stress the distinction between clergy and laity. His aim was 'to help the laity to be the laity, and the clergy to be clergy with all this implies.' Most of us do not have too much of a problem making the distinction. Why should he say this? Because he wanted to stress, with the Holy Father, that there is 'an essential distinction, and not merely one of degree, between the ordained priesthood and the non-ordained' (*Lumen Gentium*, 10).

Now, the truth of the matter is that this concept, which is a little hard to grasp, was introduced to tranquillize the Orientals at Vatican II who were alarmed at what they saw as the revival of the Lutheran doctrine of 'the universal priesthood of all the faithful'. But it was used in the Mahoney intervention to put down lay ministries altogether. He wonders whether the term 'lay ministries' is not a contradiction in terms, and therefore whether the only true minister is the priestly minister.

Once again, one asks, why bother to say that? What real life situations are in mind? It becomes clear after several pages that what Mahoney was talking about was the restoration of lost clerical control. Thus Mahoney assured the Synod that 'confusion can arise among

pastors and parishioners in trying to balance the popular views of the parishioners with the judgements of the pastors who must represent the requirements of Church law and its guidelines.' When the crunch comes, Father still knows best.

At this point I packed my bags and went home to restore my health and sanity. Meantime there had been the financial crash in the United States, the great storm in Britain, rockets were flashing around the Persian Gulf, and the Reagan-Gorbachev meeting was first on and then off. I found it quite impossible to explain to anyone what the Synod was doing, and what it had to do with the 'real world' towards which, ironically enough, it urged us to turn our attention.

Most reporters, covering a Synod for the first time, fell into the familiar trap. In the first ten days many good things are said: reporting them fills one with hope and uplift, and makes one feel good about the local churches. The error is to imagine that they are going to be taken up at the end as the authentic voice of the Synod.

Take the example of Miss Patricia Jones of Liverpool. At 31 she was by far the youngest member of the Synod. She had not the faintest idea why she was there, she said. (Actually she was there because Archbishop Derek Worlock still has some influence on the Pontifical Council for the Laity.) A graduate of Heythrop College, she works in a pastoral team that includes a priest, a sister and a married woman. Together they are responsible for pastoral formation in parishes in the Liverpool diocese. The first priority of the pastoral team, she said, was 'to enable people and priests to develop collaborative ministry. We need collaboration in ministry because it reveals the nature of the Church most effectively.'

I do not say this is profound, but at least it got the starting-point right. It was the antithesis to the Archbishop Roger Mahoney approach, which was concerned with separation, status, maintaining walls of division and fomenting demarcation disputes. 'Collaborative ministry' could have been the formula that saved the Synod. Ministry in the Church should flow from the nature of the Church as *koinonia*. 'We know', said our heroine, 'that there is too much unemployment in the world; there should be none in the Church.' Miss Jones lives in a parish that is surrounded on three sides by an immense tobacco factory, and on the remaining by semi-derelict apartments.

Thus a faint stink of the real world oozed its way into the Synod. It also made nonsense of the claim, propounded as a dogma by whoever organized the Synod, that concentration on 'lay ministries' distracted the laity from their real tasks 'in the world'. It cannot be said that ministry in Liverpool is a 'flight from the world', or an escape from harsh realities into some womb-like church community. 'Formation', said Miss Jones, 'must be essentially outward-looking and kingdom-serving.' Personal political commitment follows not because of some theory about the laity

but as 'an essential consequence of baptism'. Some people are activists by temperament; they tend to be active across the whole board.

I admired the Jones paper. But I also knew that it was doomed. The free expression of the first ten days was an illusion. It was as though bishops and the invited lay people were allowed to let off a little harmless steam, and to gesture towards their 'constituencies' back home. They were not talking in order to change anything or to get anywhere. Cardinal Tomas O Fiach, knowing this perfectly well, quoted (without acknowledgement) the lay consultation held at All Hallows in the spring: 'The sleeping giant of the Irish laity is waking up,' he averred, and ensured himself a good press. Archbishop Weakland could tell the women of America—if they still cared to listen—that he had put their case as strongly as possible. But, alas, alack, it did not command a majority in the Synod. And, as his former teacher Cardinal Paul Augustin Meyer O.S.B. said to him after his intervention: 'What about all those women who are perfectly content with their position in the Church? Are they not the majority?' To which the answer should have been: 'Yes, your Eminence, but may I remind you that you usually stress that the Church is not a democracy? So why should it matter what the majority of women think?'

At this point I need to say something rather 'delicate', as the Romans put it. The level of theological argument at this Synod was desperately low. Scripture played no part in the debates (no doubt because the lay-clerical distinction is not found there, and the only 'priests' mentioned in the Gospels are those responsible for the death of Jesus). There were no ecumenical observers present to prevent caricatures being substituted for argument. The few theologians there were hand-picked for their docility.

'At the 1974 Synod on Evangelization,' one bishop told me, 'interventions from Cardinal Suenens or Helder Camera or Don Pedro Arrupe, General of the Jesuits, could empty the bars and change the whole course of the Synod. There are no such personalities here.' Maybe that's just another nostalgic lament for what are remembered as 'the good old days of Paul VI'. But it is a reminder that the Synod once had a life—and a mind—of its own, however tentative, miniscule and 'potential'.

Here is another hard saying. Some bishops from the third world, especially from Africa, joined forces with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to dismiss the North American case for a greater role for women in the Church. No one, incidentally, was talking about the priestly ordination of women, a tabu topic. Some Africans, financially dependent on the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (formerly Propaganda) declared that African culture could not bear to see women on the altar because for them that would be a form of witchcraft. If that were true, it

is high time African Christians were educated out of such superstition. But African theologians not at the Synod, and those rare African women whose voices have been heard, deny this lazy-minded and convenient theory. African women are triply oppressed: as poor, as black, and as women. The Church can bring them a powerful message of liberation. It is the one great advantage that Christianity has over Islam in Africa. It would be folly to throw it away.

Africans, I regret to say, were unduly flattered by having Cardinal Hyacinthe Thiandoum, Archbishop of Dakar, Senegal, as *relator* at the Synod. But this was mere tokenism. Thiandoum in Dakar succeeded Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. Did he write his own reports? *Videtur quod non*. I do not mean that he was incapable of writing them; but that he was allowed to, I doubt. The result was that the poor fellow appeared as a kind of ventriloquist's dummy or a puppet on a string. I believe that people in the Church should be able to look each other in the eye, forge their own words in the light of their convictions, and say what they really think. The Synod did not fulfil these conditions. The Africans were exploited even as they were flattered.

When I returned to Rome on October 25 I found that I had missed nothing. The deck-chairs were still being moved about the Titanic as though nothing was amiss and no iceberg loomed. The language-based discussion groups had occupied the interval, but, for the first time in synodal history, there was nothing, not even a superficial summary, of their reports. Why? There was no official explanation. Here is a theory. If we knew, really knew, what was contained in the *circuli minores*, then we could judge who had most influence on the final propositions. It could have been, as in 1985, the German-language group, for example, that dictated the final propositions. Or we might have noticed that the Italian-language group was less than unanimous on 'movements' than we were allowed to know.

All manner of unverifiable hypotheses are possible. The one thing we cannot know yet is the truth.<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul congratulated the Synod on achieving this result. In his Latin speech on October 29, when he thanked everyone in sight, he said:

I am pleased to thank the Moderators of the *circuli minores* who so wisely directed the work so that not only did everyone enjoy freedom of speech but also so that the opinions expressed in the Synod and various interventions might be *harmonized* and, as it were synthesised in the mature synodal consensus.... They have spent many hours in this arduous work of reconciling everything.

But is it the task of the Synod to aim at consensus? Its original function was to inform the Holy Father and give him advice about the true state of opinion in the Church. If the Church is divided then it should say so. It

cannot possibly give honest advice if, under cover of secrecy, it is pressurized to burn the midnight oil until it reaches a consensus that is largely spurious, and would fall apart if we had the full documentation available.

A simple test is to consider what happened to the 'movements'. The Synod was largely organized for the benefit of the 'movements', and in particular for the benefit of *Comunione e Liberazione*, whose founder, Mgr. Luigi Guissani, was present as another papal nominee. The movements were the only people who knew what they wanted from the Synod. They wanted to extend to the whole Church the benefits of the papal blessing that has been conferred upon them. While the US Bishops were naively consulting their laity, thinking that was the name of the game, the movements were organizing their forces. There were two decisive meetings at Rocca di Papa, one at the end of February and the other in May. The sixty or so lay observers emerged from the second meeting.

But the first was in a way more important, for, on March 2, they heard Pope John Paul say that the 'new movements' (unnamed, but he was in fact addressing *Comunione e Liberazione*) represented 'the charismatic element in the Church today' and that they were absolutely indispensable' (*senz' altro insostituibili*). This judgement really means that 'movements' have replaced religious orders as bearers of charisms in the Church. Can this really be true?

Quoting an early article by Joseph Ratzinger<sup>1</sup>, Bishop Paul Cordes, vice-president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, compared the 'new movements' to the Franciscan and Dominican movements of the thirteenth century. They were saved by the papacy. Franciscans and Dominicans were both resented, said Cordes, because they took people and money away from the parish churches and the dioceses. This was a blow below the belt and, according to one source, a hiss ran through the Synod at these remarks. Historical analogies always limp, and this one limps more than most: it is impossible to believe that Mgr Luigi Guissani, founder of *Comunione e Liberazione*, and Mgr Alvarez Portillo, first Prelate of *Opus Dei*, are the Francis and Dominic of the twentieth century. 'It would be difficult,' said one Synod member, 'to find anyone less charismatic than that pair. If its charism you want, try Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolarini.'

The 'movements' were attacked from two points of view. Cardinal Aloisio Lorscheider of Brazil said they disrupted local pastoral planning, failed to understand the local culture, and did not make the option for the poor. This was censored out of *l'Osservatore Romano*. They dared not do that to Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini of Milan, the city where *Comunione e Liberazione*. Martini is not hostile to the movements as such: he wants them to behave less as a 'Church within the Church' and to recognise that

for the vast majority of Catholics, the parish will be the normal place where they receive the sacraments and experience community.

Who won? Guissani was interviewed afterwards about Martini's intervention. He was asked for his most sincere thoughts. 'Sincerely,' he replied, 'I didn't like it at first. Then the devotion and respect I have for the Cardinal predisposed me not to give it a too negative interpretation. The conversations I had with the Cardinal later confirmed me in this attitude.' (Interview in *l'Avvenire*, October 31, 1987). So the 'movements' won. Hands down. Asked what the most important fruit of the Synod was, Guissani replied:

Beyond doubt the widespread recognition of the movements as a factor in the life of the Church. It is as though with this Synod the movements have now definitively entered the very definition of the Church's life at all levels, universal and local (*Ibid*).

You have been warned.

You may ask why I spend so much time on the fantasies of founders of movements that we know little about and barely exist in our countries. I do so for one reason only: their promotion was the hidden agenda of the Synod. *Comunione e Liberazione* has already been entrusted 'in a special way' with the mission of 'new evangelization' that will carry us through to the year 2000. A lot of money from Dutch sports-centre millionaire, Piet Derkson, has been poured into a project called 'Evangelization 2000'. Fr Tom Forrest CSSR, leader of the Charismatic Renewal Movement, is involved as well. He was also present at the Synod as a papal nominee.

I mention these facts merely to illustrate the gap that now exists between the thinking of the Vatican, officially endorsed by the Synod, and the local Churches. There are two entirely different agenda on the table. I do not know what can or should be done about this. But I do know that the Synod of 1987 was an attempt to impose on the local Churches ideas which they are not, on the whole, eager to entertain. *Deo volente*, I shall return for the Synod of 1990, desperately hoping to have been proved wrong.

*This article was first given as a lecture to the London Newman Society on 27 November.*

- 1 *Der Einfluss des Bettlerordensstreites auf die Entwicklung der Lehre vom päpstlichen Universal Primat, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des hgl. Bonaventura. In Theologie in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Festschrift Michael Schmaus. Munich, 1957, pp. 697—724.*
- 2 Since *That Synod* went for setting, I have seen most of the *circuli minores*. Once again it was the German-language group that dictated the final propositions. Its rapporteur was Bishop Paul Cordes, vice-president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, and its most prominent member was Cardinal Ratzinger.