

GENERAL SYNOD

The Synod of Bishops in Rome On the New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith

A report from The Rt. Revd. Dr. Steven Croft, Bishop of Sheffield

What is the Synod of Bishops?

1. A general Synod of Bishops is called by the Pope every three to four years. Roman Catholic Bishops come together from across the world to reflect together on a particular theme, to share their experiences and to offer advice and counsel.
2. The theme of this Synod was the New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith. The Synod met from 7th-28th October. Two hundred and sixty bishops gathered at the Pope's invitation together with around a hundred priests and lay advisors and a dozen or so Fraternal Delegates representing other churches. I was the Anglican Fraternal Delegate at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury.
3. This particular Synod also marked the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, the twentieth anniversary of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the inauguration by the Pope of the Year of Faith.

What is the New Evangelisation?

4. Fifty years ago, evangelisation became one of the central topics of the Vatican Council. The term is a wider one than the term evangelism and describes the whole process of the initial proclamation of the faith, catechesis and ongoing Christian formation.
5. These ideas around evangelisation have been developed and underlined now by three popes. Pope Paul VI emphasised the need to evangelise those who have been baptised but have never understood or grasped the faith as their own. Pope John Paul II developed the term "new evangelisation" to describe this aspect of the task.
6. Pope Benedict VI has built on these ideas in his own teaching and has made this the theme of the key Synod of Bishops. The new evangelisation is not therefore the primary communication of the gospel to those who have never heard it but the transmission of a living faith in Jesus Christ to those who have grown up in some sense within the Church and within nations which have been traditionally Christian.

The Synod process

7. The Synod process has been fascinating from an Anglican perspective. It took over two years to prepare for the Synod. A list of questions was prepared and sent to every Bishop's Conference (the Lineamenta). The responses were collated into the working document for the Synod (the Instrumentum Laboris – an eighty page summary). In the first twelve days of the Synod most of the Synod Fathers made their five minute contributions which focussed on one or other aspects of this working document.

8. The Synod itself involved a great deal of listening: twelve five minute contributions an hour for around five hours a day, beginning and ending with prayers. There were six official languages, including Latin. The Pope was present for every morning session and some afternoons to listen to the assembled Fathers. But there was very little dialogue. No intervention referred to any of the others.
9. After twelve days of plenary and a summary of the contributions, the Synod divided into groups. The aim of the groups was to develop the two Synod outputs: a Message to the whole Church (the Nuntius) and a series of Propositions which form the basis of considered advice to the Synod to the Pope.

Some themes of the Synod

10. It has been a remarkable privilege to sit and listen to the conversation. There has been a sense from beginning to end of a Church seeking to listen and to find a way forward in challenging circumstances. The most moving aspect of the interventions were the many, many bishops who spoke of seeking to communicate the faith in immensely difficult circumstances.
11. So we heard in the different sessions from Cambodia, from Haiti, from Syria, from India, from Ethiopia, and from Norway and just about every other part of the world. The challenges were remarkably similar in many different places. The Synod Fathers spoke often of the importance of catechesis, of schools, of small ecclesial communities, of prayer, of the Church itself needing to be converted, of scripture and the Eucharist, of priestly formation. They spoke constantly of Jesus.
12. There were many points of hope and encouragement but also, of course, very serious challenges. The most focussed was from the combination of globalization and secularization which everywhere was seen to weaken participation in faith and make it more difficult to transmit the faith to others producing in Pope Benedicts phrase, an inner desert in humankind.
13. I left the Synod at the group stage for nine days of engagements in the Diocese before returning for the final plenaries. I arrived back to lead a Deanery evening for a group of parishes south of Rotherham on re-imagining ministry for mission. As we talked about the joys and challenges we face in the Church of England today, it felt like exactly the same conversation I had left behind in Rome. The whole world and the whole Church are wrestling with exactly the questions the Church of England is facing.

The Anglican contribution

14. The Archbishop of Canterbury was invited to address the Synod for 30 minutes and to take questions for a further 30 minutes. This was a singular honour and has never been extended before to an Anglican. Apart from the Pope's opening reflection, Archbishop Rowan's address was the only sustained theological input during the Synod. He chose as his theme the importance of contemplation in evangelization, drawing on the theologians of the Second Vatican Council.
15. The message was immensely well received. Many of the Cardinals and the Bishops took time to tell me over the following days just how much they had appreciated what the Archbishop had said: "A new Pentecost", said one. "The best contribution of the

Synod”, said another. The address is well worth reading in full and the full text of the address is here: <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/>

My favourite quote is this one: “To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter”.

16. As a Fraternal Delegate, I was invited to speak for four minutes. I shared the Anglican experience of fresh expressions of church, from which I believe the Roman Catholic Church has much to learn, and spoke of the need to focus more on discipleship and on *diakonia* as ministry in mission. The text of my own intervention is here: <http://bishopofsheffield.blogspot.co.uk> (16th October).
17. In various ways the Synod was a powerful reminder of the seriousness with which the Roman Catholic Church views the Anglican Communion as an ecumenical partner, together with the Orthodox Churches and the way in which our present Archbishop has built up our relationships with both Churches and is regarded with immense respect and affection by both.

The Message and the Propositions

18. The Message from the Synod is pastoral, Christ-centred and heart-felt. It is worth reading in full. The Bible passage chosen for the opening reflection is the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well as the paradigm story for the new evangelization and for cross cultural mission.
19. There are 51 Propositions. Many imply affirm or re-affirm present practice in the light of the New Evangelisation. However, to my Anglican eyes and ears, there was a significant and clear overall direction emerging which resonates with recent Anglican reflection on mission and the transmission of the faith. Here are eight points worth noting in this respect.

1. A permanent call to mission

The Roman Catholic Church clearly perceives a permanent call to engage in God's mission and to the transmission of the faith both in the countries which have been traditional mission fields and the countries traditionally regarded as Christian (see Propositions 6, 7, 40, 41).

The Propositions recognise this both in theory and in suggesting various structural responses, including a permanent Council for New Evangelisation as part of every Bishop's Conference (40), establishing the study of the New Evangelisation in Catholic Universities (30) and the New Evangelisation to be the integrating element in the formation of priests and deacons (49).

New Evangelisation therefore comes to occupy a central place within theology and practice similar to that of the mission of God in many of the Protestant Churches and the Five Marks of Mission within the Anglican Communion.

2. Inculturation

Inculturation is a key concept in the Propositions, introduced as one of the first substantial paragraphs (5). Its prominence reveals the dilemma at the heart of so much of the transmission of the faith: how do we communicate an unchanging gospel in a changing world?

3. Secularisation (8)

There is an awareness of secularisation in the Propositions as throughout the documents (8). However there has been little in depth analysis of the problem.

4. The right to proclaim and to hear the gospel (10, 15, 16)

This is rightly a strong theme. The freedom to preach the gospel is felt to be under attack both in the secularised West and in some places from militant Islam. The worldwide Church needs to make clear its stance not to impose faith on anyone but to assert the right of everyone to choose their religion.

5. Initial proclamation (9)

Proposition 9 calls for major pieces of work to be done on the initial proclamation of the gospel. This work is to be both theological - describing the heart of the gospel - and pastoral - describing strategies for communicating the faith. It calls for serious and welcome attention to the theology of evangelism.

6. Apologetics (17, 18, 19, 20, 54, 55)

A major new initiative is called for here though its shape is less precise. Theologians, universities, new media experts, artists and scientists are all called to be involved.

7. Adult Catechesis (28, 29, 37, 38)

The Synod has rightly paid major attention to the development of catechesis, building on the publication of The Catechism of the Catholic Church. Attention is focussed here on the formation of catechists.

8. New ecclesial communities (43)

Finally the Synod is extremely positive and affirming of all that the new ecclesial communities have brought to the life and witness of the Church since Vatican 2.

20. Overall then there is a significant agenda here. This has been a prayerful, biblical, united and humble Synod which has taken a further step of placing the idea of the mission of God and evangelisation at the heart of the theology and structure and purpose of the Church. It's been a privilege to take part. Thanks be to God.
21. Further narrative and impressions of the Synod are on my own blog: <http://bishopofsheffield.blogspot.co.uk> along with links to the main Synod documents.

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