

Report on the Synod of Bishops, by Fraternal Delegate, the Rev Dr Tim Macquiban

General Comments:

A gathering of over 250 Catholic bishops, archbishops and cardinals, the Synod of Bishops, was convened in Rome by Pope Francis on the theme of **Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment**. In addition to the ordained priests and religious/consecrated meeting in the Paul VI Synod Hall, there were a number of experts and lay people including a small but significant number of young people (between the ages of 16 and 29) who, together with the eight Fraternal Delegates as ecumenical observers (5 Protestant and 3 Orthodox) who had a voice but not a vote, were able to join in the discussions to advise Pope Francis on the chosen topic.

It started with a mass in St. Peter's Square on Wednesday 3rd October and ended with the singing of the Te Deum and approval of the final document on Saturday 27th October. It worked most days in two sessions, morning and late afternoon, lasting six hours each day.

The working method chosen was to present at the beginning a report (the Instrumentum Laboris - IL) drawn up by the Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops as a result of a questionnaire sent to all Bishops Conferences throughout the world, and online survey accessed by over 10,000 young people, and a pre-Synod consultation last March which produced a document which formed a substantial part of the IL.

The Synod Fathers and all others were given the opportunity to speak in the plenary sessions for a maximum of four minutes in an intervention of their choice on particular parts of the IL or general points they wished to raise. In addition there were a number of occasions when free interventions could be made. Pride of place was given to the young auditors to make a presentation at the beginning of each of the three parts of the IL.

These followed a pattern set by a key reading of the Emmaus Road story:

- Recognizing: the Church listens to reality
- Interpreting: Faith and Vocational Discernment
- Choosing: Paths of Pastoral and Missionary conversion

Each day started and ended with prayer – more formally in plenary sessions, and more informally in the groups. A small singing ensemble led the gathering in simple hymns, and psalms (sung to plainchant in Latin) and a reading and short homily (in Latin and the chosen language of the preacher). All plenary sessions were simultaneously translated into six languages (English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish).

The small groups were self-selected according to these languages. Most of the groups therefore had a number of persons from different parts of Africa, Asia and other parts of Europe. My group, Anglicus B, had participants from the UK, US and Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Malaysia and the Philippines, India, Poland, West and East Africa. We methodically went through each part of the IL and made suggested amendments and additions in the form of modi which had to be voted on at the end of each session by the Synod Fathers. A member of the group, under the chairmanship of Cardinal Cupich, Bishop Mark Edwards reported back in the plenary session at the end of each part a summary of our deliberations.

Summary of the topics covered by the four English speaking groups:

Much of the conversation revolved around the strategies and policies that the Church needs to adopt to reach out to and accompany young people on their journey through education and the world of work (or unemployment). Listening and discernment were key words taken up from much of Pope Francis' approach to his recent apostolic encyclicals and exhortations, with the universal call to holiness and a pastoral approach guided by the biblical principle of mercy. Underlined was a recurring theme of a preferential option or pastoral priority which should be given to young people.

Bible passages frequently cited were the Parable of the Forgiving Father (Prodigal Son), the Road to Emmaus and the examples of those who were young being called, eg. Samuel and David, Jeremiah, the young disciples and Timothy. The importance of Jesus' sending out of the 72 and the Day of Pentecost brought the themes of mission and unity to the fore. The ecumenical dimension in all this should not be ignored.

Particularly important in all this were the relationships and friendships were formed and nurtured and how particular young people challenged by illness or disabilities or questions regarding sexuality were to be offered pastoral support. A big question was what constituted the family, with some more restricted definitions centred on parents and children being challenged, to include the single, the childless and those in relationships not easily recognized by the Church.

How the voices of young people were heard and acted upon at all levels of church life, in parishes, dioceses and in Vatican agencies including the Synod of Bishops was much discussed with participation from the young people themselves as auditors being an important contribution.

Inevitably the questions of how the Church had alienated and mistreated young people, through instances of sexual and other forms of abusive behaviour by priests and others were raised, and apologies offered, though a special meeting is to be held in February specifically addressing these to the bishops.

Particular challenges to the young people of today in a digital age, from the dark web and the negative influences of the internet, were addressed, as well as other addictions, as also the problems faced by those in areas of conflict, in regions experiencing migration and religious persecution. Particular opportunities for the young to be agents of evangelisation, in music and the arts and in sport, were discussed.

What emerged was the need to be a Church which was open and welcoming for young people, for people to be trained in youth ministry and able to accompany students in campus ministries and chaplaincies in education and hospitals and elsewhere.

Vocational discernment was not to be restricted to the call to priesthood or religious life, important though these were. How life choices were to be linked to the sacraments of Christian Initiation was discussed. The vocation to love (and therefore to be holy) as modes of being, common to all the baptised, leading to vocations of doing (whether to ordained or consecrated states of being or to avenues of Christian service as faithful disciples of Christ) were explored.

The need for authentic spiritual mentorship, but not the preserve of priests or religious, was also stressed. We were all to be companions with and for the young people but some needed to be trained in the skills of accompaniment. Seminaries and diocese should attend to these and put resources aside to make these things happen.