

Dead end or no end? Could synodality really be the "turning point"?

By Justin Stanwix

Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Germany made a noble gesture when recently he tendered his resignation to Pope Francis.

He stated his impression that the Church is "at a dead end". Quintessentially, he allowed the potential of a "turning point".

That is the essence of Jesus' message.

Thankfully, the cardinal's offer has been refused and for good reason. The pope reminded him that it remains time to tend the sheep. Probably more urgently than ever.

The generosity and undoubtedly prayerful discernment that preceded the cardinal's offer must be acknowledged.

The inherent rectitude and personal penalty involved as he shouldered vicarious responsibility for the sexual abuse crisis, in the interest of the whole Church, may appeal to many.

A missionary Church that has made many mistakes throughout history

But his offer raises the question about how we see ourselves as Church.

Even for a reason of generous proportion is it acceptable to offer to quit in such circumstances?

No cavil about the sinful situation in which we find ourselves. My issue is about how we should respond, move forward and give example. How we live the Gospel message now.

We are not solely individuals in our Church, the institution is not only human and its fundamentally divine nature is not of our making.

We are a missionary Church and a pilgrim people. The People of God have accumulated plenty of missionary mistakes, repeated atrociously sinful behaviour and have failed to learn even obvious lessons.

We wasted no time after the death of Jesus in Beatitudes-absent behaviour. Given the history of the two thousand years since, we are highly likely to engage in some lamentable repetition.

At some point we must move beyond the sexual abuse crisis. Obviously, I don't mean ignore it or avoid the guilt, the shame and the ongoing responsibility we have in many ways to victims and families.

The Holy Spirit is in charge

As Church we have a rugged history. Our missionary Church has faced division, scandal and an abundance of challenge.

The whole while we have been blessed by the presence of the Holy Spirit. No doubt at times the Spirit has shuddered but the promise of Jesus to be with his Church until the end of time is no mean promise.

We may never gainsay that certainty because it is the Gospel message.

We can celebrate prayerful and beautiful liturgies for the great occasions of our Church – or not. But we cannot ignore the Holy Spirit in our lives and his presence in our Church and in the world.

As Cardinal Marx refers in his resignation letter, Pope Francis has repeatedly called for a radical missionary focus that requires change in the behaviour of every one of us.

He asks us to take up the challenge to be missionary disciples, to take a whole lot more care of our common home, to serve better, to review and change our economic behaviour, to welcome refugees and so much more.

Could synodality be the turning point?

The pope seeks to encourage a synodal Church where we work together collaboratively at all levels, abandon clericalism and monarchical structures and operate much differently from the way we do at present.

In this context, the decision to defer the Synod of Bishops' assembly on synodality, while a world-wide consultation of the international Church takes place, must be embraced for the quantum change it represents.

For as Cardinal Mario Grech, the Synod's secretary general, said when announcing the deferral of the meeting: "The Second Vatican Council teaches that the People of God participate in the prophetic office of Christ. Therefore, we must listen to the People of God, and this means going out to the local churches.

"Now, as much as ever, we are all called to "tend our sheep" – whether we are bishop, priest or lay person. Our mission is to act with deliberation and missionary fervour, actively living the Gospel message.

The demand is for us to "put out into the deep" -- even when it is dark and cold. Certainly not to hang up the nets.

An imperfect Church must keep rebuilding. Our only option is to live the Gospel message of hope and love.

I confidently imagine the Holy Spirit understands despair, but also that she is alive and well and has no place for so called ecclesial "dead ends".

Synodality genuinely embraced could provide the very turning point that Cardinal Marx envisages.

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