

[Home](#) / [Vol 31 No 24](#) / When synodality confronts hierarchy

When synodality confronts hierarchy

John Warhurst | 14 December 2021

What an extraordinary coincidence of synodal events the Church in Australia is currently undertaking. The intersessional period between the two Assemblies of the Fifth Plenary Council is underway and the First Assembly Proposals from Small Groups and Individual Members has just been published. At the same time, we are called to participate in the consultation process with the entire Church for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality. Australian Catholics have been invited to link the two occasions by responding to the First Assembly Proposals through the Synod of Bishops consultation process.

Synodality is at the heart of both events. Archbishop Timothy Costelloe's presidential message accompanying the First Assembly Proposals document included the reflection that: 'It has been a journey of listening, dialogue and discernment which has provided the opportunity for all of us to explore the practice of 'synodality' and learn by doing'. Not only was synodality embraced by the Assembly, but a specific agenda question (No. 13) asked: 'How might the People of God, lay and ordained, women and men, approach governance in the spirit of synodality and co-responsibility for more effective proclamation of the Gospel?'

The Individual Reflection Guide issued by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) for the Synod of Bishops consultation states that 'Pope Francis is calling the Church to practice synodality, that is listening to-and hearing-one another in all facets of Church life.' We are invited to participate in the consultation process to reflect on the three dimensions of a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission.

However, synodality confronts the traditional practice of hierarchy within the church. When the ACBC responded last December to [The Light from the Southern Cross report](#), which promoted synodality and co-responsible governance, it re-stated its position that hierarchy was embedded in the church's approach to governance. This immediately set up a potential tension between episcopal authority and participation in governance by the People of God.

The official reflection guide further explores this tension, while flatly asserting that 'A synodal church is a participatory and co-responsible church'. The exploration poses some questions which are both philosophical and practical. The headings are Authority and Participation; Discerning and Deciding. The questions are more thoughtful and probing than the PC Agenda Questions.

Here is a selection:

'How does our Church community identify the goals to be pursued, the way to reach them, and the steps to be taken?'

'How is authority or governance exercised within our local Church? How are teamwork and co-responsibility put into practice?'

'How can we foster a more synodal approach in our participation and leadership?'

'How do we promote participation in decision-making within hierarchical structures?'

These questions should be considered alongside traditional, non-synodal approaches to governance. Archbishop Anthony Fisher of Sydney expressed this traditional view on December 8, speaking at the consecration of Fr Danny Meagher as bishop. His words expanded on the hierarchical emphasis of the earlier ACBC response to [The Light from the Southern Cross](#). The cross-reference to Plenary Council discussions of governance was implicit but clear.

'This traditional hierarchical view challenges the exercise of authority in a synodal way. At its extreme it undercuts any serious attempt at synodality!'

'Far from adopting a flat, Congregationalist view of the Church, as some would propose aping secular models of governance in business or bureaucracy, Vatican II insisted on the divine institution of the sacred hierarchy.'

He continued: 'It even dared say, following Christ and the ancient Fathers, that to listen to the bishops is to listen to Christ.'

This traditional hierarchical view challenges the exercise of authority in a synodal way. At its extreme it undercuts any serious attempt at synodality. There is an undoubted tension to be reconciled before we go any further along our two synodal journeys.

The language of synodality, strongly proposed by Pope Francis, is inspirational for the People of God, while the language of hierarchy is deadening. There are two ways forward, which may take place concurrently, given the different time frames of the Plenary Council (Second Assembly, July 2022) and the Synod of Bishops on Synodality (October 2023).

The first way is further national and international discernment of the meaning of the two terms, including during preparation for the Synod of Bishops. This is crucial as both terms apply at various levels of the church, including the diocese and the parish. This discussion would include exploration of 'decision-making within hierarchical structures' in the words of the Synod documentation. There may be 'strong' and 'soft' interpretations of both terms. Ideally there must be a 'co-responsible' accommodation which allows synodality to prosper. Otherwise it will die. The nature of that accommodation will inevitably vary from place to place.

The second way will be the Implementation phase of the Plenary Council in Australia. This implementation phase from August 2022 onwards will be in the hands of those who hold hierarchical positions, primarily the bishops, but also parish priests. This means that the remaining tension between hierarchy and synodality will be resolved initially by those holding traditional authority. There will be differing views around Australia. Almost certainly the Implementation phase will reveal, once again, a patchwork church.



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Main image: Wooden figures (Prot Tachapanit/Getty Images)