

"Synodality means taking the risk of surprise"

Exclusive interview with woman theologian who is helping coordinate the synodal process

By Céline Hoyeau

Agnès Desmazières has some impressive international credentials.

She earned her doctorate in history from the European University Institute in Florence (Italy) in 2009 and then another doctorate in theology in 2017 from the Centre Sèvres, the Jesuit School of Theology in Paris where she is currently professor of theology, ecclesiology and Church history.

She has also done extensive research at the University of California, Berkeley.

Desmazières is a member of the national committee that is coordinating the synodal process in France.

She spoke with La Croix's Céline Hoyeau about this exciting new phase in the Church's ongoing history and development.

La Croix: The synodal process on the future of the Church that Pope Francis has initiated invites us to listen very widely, well beyond the circles of practicing Catholics. What do we mean by Church, basically?

Agnès Desmazières: What struck me in the preparatory document sent by the Vatican to dioceses around the world is the idea of involving "fellow travellers" in the synodal process.

That is, not only those who are in the Church, but all those we come into contact with, at work, in our neighbourhood, in our sports activities, taking public transportation on the same day at the same time... It is much broader.

I myself have travelled and lived abroad a lot, five years in Italy, where I did my PhD in history, and in California, as a student and researcher. When you travel, you meet people you are not used to being around. It's about welcoming the surprise.

We also learn the language of the other person in order to understand them, which implies an inner displacement. Involving "fellow travellers" invites us to a Church on the move, that is to say, not closed in on itself but missionary and having a fundamental dynamic: we have met the risen Jesus and we want to bear witness to him.

Concretely, what does this mean?

In some dioceses in France, there are already neighbourhood groups where people are more widely welcomed, where we make sure that neighbours can share their vision of the Church.

They don't necessarily share our relationship to the Church, but we are close enough to them that they are interested in what we are doing.

Fellow travellers are all those to whom we want to share what we are, to whom we can open up. This translates into a certain intimacy because we don't always talk about our faith in concrete life.

We can also listen to the way in which the media speaks about the Church, which also reflects current aspirations: the aspiration for more transparency, for coherence, for social justice, for respect for the environment, for fraternity, the aspiration to an increased responsibility of the laity...

It is very enriching to hear how people outside the Church perceive it.

I don't think they see our polarizations and internal conflicts as much as we do. This can help to put them in their proper place.

What are the risks to avoid?

This synodal process leads us to meet those we have not chosen.

The very term "Church" (ecclesia) refers to the idea of convocation: we are all called by God, that is what brings us together, and not primarily personal affinities.

The risk would be to flee from our social and cultural differences, to find ourselves among believers with the same aspirations for the Church, in a system of small groups with their own demands.

But we are called by God in our differences.

The Church can only expand to others to the extent that it experiences diversity within itself.

Are there any groups with whom you would find it more difficult to dialogue?

I don't like to function by categories. The question for me is: are we ready to really listen to each other or do we make it a power issue?

Sometimes it is easier to discuss with people from very different backgrounds, who share an intellectual honesty, than with people of the same sensibility but who instrumentalize the process to satisfy a taste for power.

Synodality can be a beautiful façade that in fact hides authoritarian practices. They say they ask for advice, but in reality they decide on their own.

This process of dialogue in the Church invites us not to control but to listen, together, to the Holy Spirit, at the risk of surprise.

Our view of the Church changes depending on whether we are in places with power or in other places where the Church is so diminished that it can more easily find the message of the Gospel.

I am particularly attached to Catholicism of the people, which I know from my ties in Brittany and my association with the Franciscans in Italy, and which I also discovered on my return to France in 2013, in my former parish.

This popular Catholicism resists time and crises, it manifests itself through rites, symbols, and above all through the joy of being together. It is far removed from questions of power.

You are a theologian and have been associated with the team that coordinates the synodal process in France at the national level. What led you to theology?

During my history studies at the Sorbonne, I took a course on the history of the Church, and as part of my master's degree on the revival of Thomas Aquinas' thinking in the 20th century, I interviewed Pierre d'Ornellas, who was then director of the studium at the École Cathédrale.

It was he who suggested that I begin studying theology.

Then, when I prepared for the highest teaching diploma in France, I opted for history, because I felt more at ease there, as a lay woman, than in theology.

I am still attached to history: it seems important to me, as a Catholic and as a lay woman, to place value on a scientific dimension that can be shared with non-believers.

It was after the election of Pope Francis that I returned to theology: it set me in motion, gave me a reason to hope for the Church, to which I wanted to give greater witness.

It was also the time of my return to France; I felt the need to give back to my country what I had received abroad. I wanted to bear witness to the faith experiences I had had there, and to the cultural diversity I had experienced.

Coming back to the Paris region, to working-class neighbourhoods, was very important for me: in my eyes, there is a very important issue for French Catholicism, which is nourished and enlivened by the contribution of Christians from abroad.

How can we welcome them, how can we make sure that they are not just passive but participate in the responsibilities of the Church?

What led you to this theme of synodality?

I have worked a lot on the concept of dialogue, which seems to me to be more explicit and the foundation of a new theological paradigm after Vatican II.

The Church thinks of itself in terms of dialogue, with others, but also within itself.

Obviously, dialogue does not avoid the question of conflict. We must know how to say things to each other if we want to move forward. In the Church, we are always in euphemism mode.

Perhaps, with the current crisis, we are finally beginning to name the problems. Conflict is not inherently bad, but the question is whether we want to move forward towards unity.

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