

Synodality requires "spiritual attitudes" foreign to many Catholics

Interview with Jos Moons, a Dutch Jesuit who lectures at the Catholic University of Leuven and is currently preparing a book on the project Pope Francis has launched -- synodality



Jos Moons SJ (Image: [YouTube](#) screengrab)

By [Hendro Munsterman](#) | [Spain](#)

It is not just a complicated word, but "[synodality](#)" is also a new one in the Catholic tradition.

Yet, in its basics, it is very simple, says theologian Jos Moons.

"It can be expressed in three simple points: we are Church together, on the way, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit," contends 41-year-old Dutch Jesuit.

But he admits that synodality soon gets complicated, because synodality has to do with the participation of believers in the life of the Church.

How do you organize a process that takes the participation of 1.3 billion Catholics worldwide seriously?

Moons, who entered the Society of Jesus in 2009, wrote his doctoral dissertation on *Lumen gentium* and pneumatological renewal.

He is currently in Salamanca (Spain) completing a nine-month sabbatical, which he calls "a refresher course for Jesuits".

But in May he will return to Belgium where he does parish work and teaches at the Catholic University of Louvain (KL-Leuven).

And once back he will "make an overview of what is going on worldwide around synodality", mapping out subtopics, cataloguing the various topics and identifying important thinkers.

Moons hopes it will be a "service on a large scale" to universities and the entire Church.

The young Jesuit is also currently working with two fellow theologians on a book on synodality.

"We want to show that synodality as an ecclesial practice has actually existed for a very long time. Many people don't know that. But it has been functioning for centuries, for example in monasteries or in other Christian Churches," he said.

Moons gave the following interview to journalist Hendro Munsterman:

Hendro Munsterman: What does synodality need in order to succeed?

Jos Moons: Synodality requires some spiritual attitudes that we are not used to in the Catholic Church.

Such as the spiritual attitude of boldness: this has traditionally been discouraged. It also requires an attitude of listening. Bishops are not trained in that and neither are ordinary believers.

Listening in order to then set up a discussion, they can usually do that. But listening in the sense of being genuinely curious about what the other person thinks is much more difficult.

Finally, it also requires the spiritual attitude of discernment. When different voices are raised, you have to weigh them. This presupposes inner freedom on the part of those involved, something we are also often not accustomed to in the Church.

Bishops often know the situation and are not always good at putting their own opinions in perspective. The baptized faithful, in turn, often find it just as difficult.

But if everyone is allowed to have their say, isn't there a danger of cacophony? If the people think something, is that necessarily the opinion of the Holy Spirit?

That may indeed seem naïve, and indeed it is. But just as naïve is the fear on the part of some to enter into this process.

If the Catholic faithful by a large majority think something, you cannot rule out the possibility that the Holy Spirit wants to say something to the Church by doing so.

How does the weighing and balancing work?

Bishops often say that such-and-such is the Church's teaching and we must teach and defend it. Believers say, this is how we feel.

The bishops' position deserves respect and attention; so does the position of the faithful. But we also need an objectifying stroke to think about this calmly.

There is a group of people who specialize in this, and that is the university. It is not involved enough in this kind of process.

How does that work concretely?

I'll give you an example.

In Leuven, I give a lecture on the place of women in the Roman Catholic Church and I have students read a chapter with historical evidence for the existence of women deacons in the first centuries of the Church. That evidence is overwhelming.

At the same time, I note that in my own theological education, I myself had never heard about it. I also note that it plays no role whatsoever in the Church's talk about the diaconate.

I see that in Rome a commission is very carefully rigged and then another commission, when the evidence is right there. So there is a good theological reason for people's opinion, their sense of the matter.

If we are going to evaluate what believers think we could include not only Church doctrine, but also the university, where these things are thought about.

I note with sorrow that there is a great divide between Church and theology.

The bishops feel they are the guardians of tradition. Is that no longer so?

I don't want to strip bishops of their teaching authority, but it would be good if bishops not only taught, but were also learners. And then not only in the theology of Church documents, but also in academic theology where standards of intellectual soundness apply.

Don't Catholics in fact need more catechetical and theological instruction?

What Dutch Bishop Gerard de Korte calls the "speechlessness" of Catholics is true: we often know so little and what we do know we say poorly.

But it is not only about an intellectual learning; it's also about spiritual learning -- how to live in connection with God.

Also if we are going to teach things, they must be things that are convincing.

If you look, for example, at what is said about the place of women in the Church and the ordination of women to the ministry, it is very difficult to intellectually accept the arguments that are given to us by the Magisterium.

Isn't there a danger to Catholic unity if everyone is allowed to shout their subjective opinions? Aren't there threats of schisms?

That danger cannot be avoided. It is part of modern times. The individual has become very important in modern culture. So you automatically end up in a situation of plurality.

But everyone participates, including traditionalist Catholics. They say for example, "I go to a traditional liturgy, because there I find a lot". That is a personal argument and completely modern.

Our Church's challenge is not so much to seek uniformity, but to pull together with different perspectives.

Synodality requires a lot of trust in the Holy Spirit. But the latter is rather elusive. How do you know what the Spirit wants from the Church?

First of all, it is important that we don't just see the Spirit as a kind of force but realize that it is actively involved. This is often difficult for Western people to imagine, but very important.

If the Spirit does not present itself as the protagonist, the main actor remains the hierarchy, and then, as a matter of course, obedience becomes the main virtue.

If the Spirit is the main actor, then the main virtue is discernment. Then you have to sense spiritually what is wise and that requires detachment on all sides.

Traditionalists have to accept a little that they don't always know exactly how things are and should be. Progressives have to let go of a little bit of impatience, for example.

Impatience, when it is present in discernment, is typically something that does not come from the good Spirit. Then you become hard, frustrated, cynical.

The pope is intentionally making this a process, because in a process thoughts can be purified.

This interview was published first in the Dutch Christian newspaper [Nederlands Dagblad](#).