

There is much talk in the Church about being on a synodal pathway but what does that mean?

A synod is a gathering, and a pathway implies a journey. This means that we are going to be journeying together for a significant length of time, in fact it means that this way of doing things is going to become a permanent way of being in the Church. Right now, we are only at the start, so we are in the learning phase. We are learning how to listen well so that we might truly understand each other, we are learning how to rely on the Spirit more than on ourselves, and we are especially learning how to dialogue so that everyone's voice is heard. We are doing this in phases and stages and right now we are in what is called the 'Local Phase' which is leading us towards 2023 when there will be a Universal Synod. This stage also includes initial listening and consultation here in Ireland that will set us up and help prepare for our own National Synodal gathering or gatherings in about five years' time.

What has happened so far in the Local Phase?

Our Local phase began when the Bishops of Ireland invited people to respond to how we might walk together better in the Irish Church. There were five hundred responders to this phase, all full of passion about the way ahead and the importance of listening to those on the margins. This then led to the setting up of a National Task Group who support the local delegates for the Dioceses of Ireland to reach out, to listen well and to share well. Every Diocese in Ireland is engaging in gatherings, either in person or on zoom, and finding their own ways to hear what is in people's hearts, taking account of the individual culture in each place, and also placing particular attention on the importance of enabling people to share freely and openly in a dialogue of trust. It is important to note that Pope Francis has encouraged such openness and freedom to speak using the term Parrhesia, which means speaking freely from the heart in charity. There is also a Steering Committee of the Bishops Conference tasked with guiding the whole process and steering us all in the right direction.

How is it connected to the Universal Phase?

This is setting us up to answer the big question of the Universal Synod 2023, when the bishops' and others assembled will be looking at 'How do we journey together as a Church?' This will be a global gathering of all the Local Churches throughout the world, sharing with each other and learning from each culture, and so continuing that walking together that is the essence of synodality. Out of this, central themes will emerge, for everyone to take back to their Local Church.

What about the Irish Phase?

Bringing back the insights from the Universal Synod will be important for the Irish Church as we then begin our remote preparations for a National Synod. It will be a

time where we can grow more deeply in our understanding of the synodal pathway by integrating the insights of the Universal Synod with our own Irish flavour. This deepening will be marked by three important aspects: the first of these is formation as we make a commitment to each other to grow in our understanding of journeying together and making this real in our practices, the second of these is spirituality where we journey deeply with the Spirit, taking the lead of the Spirit and growing in a habit of discernment as the way we make decisions, the third of these is of course learning to listen more deeply to each other in a way that enables us to stand in the shoes of the other.

The key question that we will be living with in this phase is 'What is God saying to the Irish Church?' We will be in a helpful position to answer this as we have built up a habit of journeying together and listening to what the Spirit is saying over the past five years. It will be a moment where we will see the fruits of our journeying together and to see the new future that the Spirit indicates for us.

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