

Brendan Hoban: Wishing a fair wind to the Synod

Church's Great Council is finally back on track

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As regular readers of this column will know, the Second Vatican Council has long been a telling reference point for me. In summary, at the invitation of Pope John XXIII, the Catholic bishops of the world gathered in Rome and attempted in a few short years (1962-65) to drag the Catholic Church out of the Middle Ages into the twentieth century.

A series of documents that charted the outlines of a vision of a very different church was overwhelmingly voted through by the bishops. A general council, with its conclusions affirmed by the pope and the bishops of the world comprises the most definitive teaching authority of the Catholic Church, so it looked as if a huge gate had opened into a new and very different future – and a very different Church.

The year after the Great Council ended, I went to Maynooth to study for the priesthood. Vatican Two, as we called the Council, wasn't the reason I went to Maynooth but it was the main reason I stayed. The vision of a new and different way of being Church fuelled the expectation of my generation of priests for a new, different and dynamic Church based on the principle that the Holy Spirit didn't just act through the pope and the bishops but through all the baptised. Or, as it was said, the people are the Church.

I was ordained in 1973 and while there were some cosmetic changes introduced and a lot of fine talk about the Great Council, the vision of 'a People's Church' was still-born. Indeed it can be said that at no point in the 40 years that followed did the leadership of the Catholic Church seriously entertain or even focus on for a time the vision of Vatican Two.

There was no one to take up the torch of reform that John XXIII had lit. And unfortunately, there were those, not least Popes John Paul and Benedict, who seemed to move the Church backwards rather than forward. Rome and the Vatican continued to control and dictate an agenda that was a far cry from the promise of the Great Council.

In 2013, 40 years after I was ordained, another John XXIII was the gift of the Holy Spirit to our disintegrating Church. Pope Francis appeared on the balcony of St Peter's in Rome and introduced himself as 'the bishop of Rome'. All over the world, the message was clear. Francis saw himself in a very different light: his focus would be not on the centrality of Rome but on local churches around the world and on 'the People of God'. With Francis Vatican Two and church reform were back on the agenda.

Francis had hardly settled himself into the Chair of St Peter when he was breaking long-established traditions around the papacy and speaking directly to the people. The key word, he spoke, was 'synodality': 'It is precisely', he said, 'this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium'. The word 'synodality' means 'walking together', a collaborative leadership that listens and discerns and that is based on involving and empowering all the baptised.

Francis has explained this new form of leadership with an image of an inverted pyramid. Before this the pyramid model of authority in the Church had the clerical Church – the pope, the bishops, the priests and religious – at the top of the pyramid and the people at its base. The Holy

Spirit inspired the clerical Church who then told the people what to do. The Church had been divided into 'the teaching Church' and 'the learning Church'.

Francis, to explain the change, flipped the pyramid which now puts the people on top and the clerics at the bottom with authority based on a synodal approach which has all of the participants listening to each other, collaborating together and discerning what the future will be – with the Spirit working through all (the baptised).

It is a new style of leadership at a time and in a world when hierarchical authority is often questioned and rejected and it promises a new kind of shared leadership that can help the Church 'to speak again with authority'.

During the last eight years Francis has come back time and again to this key notion of synodality. He has decided that there is going to be a synod of bishops next year on the subject in Rome. Recently he suggested that the Italian bishops should hold a national synod and when there was no response he 'insisted' that they should!

The message has not gone unnoticed in Ireland. The Irish bishops have recently announced plans for a national synod, a committee has been meeting on it for some time and an outline and timetable is in place.

It will take time, and we've very little time left. It will take significant resources – not least in terms of expertise and energy – and we're almost running on empty. It will take huge commitment from everyone – people, bishops, priests and religious – and already there is evidence that some will attempt to derail the process.

Yet extraordinarily, almost 60 years after the bishops left Rome, the Great Council is back on track. While I fear that many will feel that it's all too little and too late, as someone who has longed for this day, I wish it a fair wind.