

Synod on Synodality and Communication: An Asian Perspective

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Communication is at the heart of the synodal process. As we are aware, this synod on synodality is not so much about doctrines of the church, but about the new way of being church as envisioned in the ecclesiology of Vatican II and now clearly articulated in the magisterium of Pope Francis. The phrase ‘new way of being church in Asia’ is a favorite and frequently used expression articulated by the FABC in its plenary assemblies in Bandung, Indonesia in 1990 and in Manila, the Philippines in 1995 and in many of its subsequent documents.

Pope Francis and the New Way of Being Church

The synod has opened a new pathway for the Church under the papacy Pope Francis- not so much as an event, but an integral part of living the reality of the Church as ‘ecclesia’, the people of God. This new vision can be grasped only when we read the major documents from the magisterium of Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Amoris Laetitia*, *Fratelli Tutti*, *Laudato Si*, *Praedicate Evangelium*, and for us who reflect on communication, also the various World Communications Day messages. These reflections emerge from the ecclesiology of Vatican II. They are the fruit of a new reading of the Gospel in our times, led by the magisterium of the Church, which we believe is inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit. When seen together, one can see a pattern in them- a connecting thread.

I was amazed at the frequency with which the name of Pope Francis was invoked, and he was quoted by the speakers and participants on the recently concluded FABC General Conference in Bangkok (FABC 50, October 12-30, 2022). It indicates the profound impact his thoughts have on the universal Church, of course with important consequences for the Church in Asia.

The Conference devoted much time to look at the emerging social and ecclesial realities in Asia in the light of the gospel and the documents of Pope Francis. In his message to the FABC General Conference, Pope Francis, quoting the words of the book of Revelation urging the bishops of Asia to “listen to what the Spirit is telling the Churches in Asia.” Listening should become a program of life in the mission of the Church.

Synod and Listening

The synod on synodality is unique in many ways. But allow me to look at it here from the communication perspective. One of the most liked words from the synodal process was the word ‘listening’. For a people who have been used to listening to the bishops and priests, the opportunity for ‘speaking up’, ‘speaking out’ ‘speaking to’- were like a big change. Most people who participated in the process remarked that they experienced, some for the first time, an opportunity to speak, to be heard, to be listened to. It was quite different from being preached to, talked to. It was not the voice from the pulpit alone spoken to a captive audience,

but the people at the pews speaking. It was a participatory process, a two-way communication. There was much freedom to speak freely.

Pope Francis' message for the World Day of Communications 2022 was on 'listening with the heart'. The message further reinforced the Pope's concern to make the Church a listening Church. The synod has provided a voice to the people of God- all sections of the people- especially those whose voices were seldom or never heard. Sometimes we call them 'voiceless', but I would rather prefer to use the phrase 'voice-suppressed': they are people in the margins, people who are sometimes unwilling to speak, not because they have nothing to say, but because they are afraid to speak, because there is fear, there is power inequality. They are afraid they will not be heard; their voices suppressed; their feeble voices may be over-powered by the din of noise around them. They feel their words do not count. Silencing others and stifling their voice are the modus operandi of those who want to dominate, the style of a dictator. The Church has to rid itself of these forms of behaviour in the emerging dynamics of change.

Synod Offers Participation, Power

But the synod aims to give the people of God, participation, and power, it is providing them a voice, an opportunity to speak, to be heard. The process is not perfect yet, we must admit, but there is much hope and expectation at the start, and it is hoped it will continue to promote an environment for such speaking. The speaking of the people in the periphery, in the margins should not be dismissed for lack of clarity or logic. When a child starts speaking the speech is not perfect. It has limitations; the words are not articulate; the meaning is not obvious. We call it by all sorts of names- a babble, baby-talk, patter or even chatter. Just as parents, particularly the mother, is patient and rejoices when the child starts to speak for the first time, all of us in leadership in the Church, must be glad and rejoice. After all the Church is a mother (*mater ecclesia* was a phrase dear to Pope John XXIII). We ought to listen patiently and with rejoicing to those who begin the conversation in the Church. We must listen, not always for the content of the speech, but for speaking itself. How beautiful is the word 'mother tongue' for that speech that each of us learnt at the lap of our mothers!

Communication is a Gift of the Spirit

Now you will understand why I began by saying that communication is at the heart of the synodal process and the heart of this new way of being Church. Communication is a unique capacity humans enjoy- it is a gift. Indeed, it is a gift of the Spirit. Only the Spirit can give us utterance, speech. We cannot call God Abba, Father, unless the Spirit prompts us (Rom 8:15). Every communicative action is a gift of the Spirit. Jesus promised us that the Spirit will lead you to truth, to complete truth. The Spirit will teach you what to say. It is a human act guided by the divine. The Apostles would be bold as to say "We and the Holy Spirit" have decided. The shift from the confusion of Babel to the clarity of Pentecost is truly the act of the Holy Spirit.

Christina Kheng, a native of Singapore, who served on the Commission on Methodology for the synod at the Vatican said, “in the Asian context the lack of synodality is not just ecclesial; it’s in the family, it’s cultural, it’s societal. It’s definitely political.” In patriarchal Asian societies, women and the young are not often asked their opinions. But in dioceses across Asia people were so touched to have finally been invited to participate in a dialogue about the direction of the Church and to have “the experience of being given a voice. They called for greater transparency in Church structures and improvements in governance and leadership — even better homilies from their priests.” Many were excited not so much by the content of the discussions, but that they were happening at all. The process provided a safe, neutral space to raise questions on accountability and leadership.

As the process unfolded at the diocesan and parish levels, there was much spontaneity and creativity shown in publicizing the process and explaining how Catholics could participate. Games in Mandarin were created for children; lay people posted homemade videos on sharing platforms; songs were composed, and dances choreographed. The instructions on Synod and the documents were translated even to some remote indigenous languages. People took it upon themselves to make videos to instruct other people. Kheng called it quite amazing. “It’s really a thousand flowers blooming.”

Most people wish that this would continue. They really like talking to each other, the clergy and laity, really talking and sharing. “For Asia and maybe many other parts of the world, the whole hierarchical system, it’s something that is quite entrenched; it’s orderly and neat.” It is hard for many to step out of their comfort zones. Some bishops admitted that they have priests in their dioceses who want to continue the status quo, who are not willing or open to change, who are afraid of and even resist change. Some of them are afraid of chaos, disequilibrium. But Pope Francis already pre-empted this when he spoke of the Holy Spirit disturbing the status quo.

Challenges for a New Way of Being Church

But the new way of being Church in Asia implies new challenges. In the first place, it means allowing the old and out-dates mode to fade away and even die. Asia is the most populated, the largest, and least Christian continent. It is the cradle of the world’s major religions like Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism as well as the home of numerous smaller and ethnic religions. Christianity, with a total of 7%, is a minority in all except two countries of Asia.

The majority of Asian population is youth. Two thirds of world’s youth are Asians. They are active in the IT sector and are avid users of social media as the major platform for their communication. The data shows the internet penetration and social media in Asia are growing rapidly. We have to keep this context in mind in planning our pastoral strategies.

Social media is interactive. It is quite different from the traditional one-way, linear communication which the Church is more familiar and comfortable with. The new media entails engagement. I consider engagement as evangelization. It is indispensable to the new way of being Church. Pastoral leaders must become digital shepherds because their sheep

have migrated to the digital continent. Jesus spoke of ‘other sheep’ he has. They are the people of other faiths, and for us in Asia they are so many. They too are children of the digital era. The good shepherd cannot ignore them. Communication is at the heart of what the young people are doing. The digital shepherds have to adopt that same mode of communication. It involves creating space for connection, conversation, community. Earlier we use the phrase ‘harbour’- a place where the ships arrive and depart. Today in the information age we speak of networks, ‘hub’ and ‘information superhighway.’

The synodal process has given a renewed awareness about the place of the lay faithful in the Church. The Church according to the Vatican II is the People of God. What is at the heart of our Christian identity? It is the sacrament of Baptism- which we all- ordained priests or lay faithful share. Thus, together we constitute the Church. We are talking about ecclesial communities rather than episcopal and presbyteral Church.

Synodal Process in Asia and Communication

Most of the Asian countries who shared their experience of synod from the communication perspective, reported how the modern media, particularly the digital and social media, helped the local churches to make communication interactive and participatory in the synodal process. They used the media to help the process of discussions, dissemination of information, sending out questionnaires, developing graphics and providing visual support. However, communication has remained largely extrinsic, outside the main synodal process. There was lack of a serious integration of communication into the process. What we have observed is more of an instrumentalist approach to communication. This stems from a fundamental failure in understanding what the Church has through its documents insisted on the important role of communication.

Linguistic diversity as well as lack of translated texts and church documents in many vernacular languages in numerically smaller communities prevented many from active participation in the process. The linguistic diversity and lack of a common language in which everyone can communicate is a problem even in the FABC deliberations.

Covid 19 and the Synodal Process

The Covid 19 Pandemic had a decisive influence on the synodal process. It slowed down the process suffered due to lack of possibilities to hold meetings face to face. It also enhanced the conviction about the importance of communication, and the many possibilities to adopt digital technology.

There have been many good and practical examples of successful adoption and application of digital technology for online Mass and other pastoral ministries, holding meetings and discussions, sharing content and prayers. It increased the use of media for education, worship, catechesis, work, entertainment and increased the value of and desire for face-to-face communication which many had taken for granted. Many hesitant pastors became more

convinced. Many who knew only rudiments of digital communication acquired greater competence and expertise in using the media for a variety of pastoral ministry. Covid pandemic helped this 'digital conversion' or growth in conviction.

New Changes on the Horizon and the Role of Communication

Pope Francis is making major structural changes in the church by opening the doors to a more inclusive, participatory church where the voice of the people on the margins are being listened to. The laity, especially women, youth, people who feel their voices have not been listened to sufficiently, suddenly feel a sense of empowerment. This is no longer 'business as usual'. This should not be an event, but a process, a way of being church in the future.

Communication has much to do to make the process not a monologue but a participatory dialogue, a dialogue between equals without too many walls and ladders of hierarchy. This requires structural changes- changes in power equations, a renewal in the Spirit to understand that we are not masters but servants, stewards. In the true incarnational paradigm, those in authority, those who have power must come down to the level of those who are at the bottom rung. Kenosis of Christ should be our paradigm. It means a shift from an episcopal and presbyteral church to an ecclesial community consisting of the people of God. The Vatican curia have been re-structured. We need to continue this process also at the continental, diocesan and parish levels to realize the new ecclesiology, the new way of being the Church.

We need a paradigm of participatory communication. Among the priority areas to strengthen communication for a greater synodality: some structural changes proposed include areas of formation, media education, more integrated approach, greater recognition of the role of communication in pastoral ministry, training of personnel working in communication, greater networking with other offices, commissions for joint action, more openness to dialogue, facilitating listening, and contributing to the process.

Communication and listening, as mentioned, must be guided by the Holy Spirit. It calls for openness to truth. The truth that will set us free from prejudice and false pride. We are in the age of half-truths and fake news. We need, more than ever, the light and wisdom of the Holy Spirit who will lead us to the complete truth.

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