

Making A New Space:
Reflections on the Opening of the Synod on Synodality

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One of the pivotal moments of conflict during the Second Vatican Council may seem irrelevant and minor, but it was a seismic shift in how the Church understands herself. The argument was over the order of the chapters in one of the documents, *Lumen Gentium*, the Constitution on the Church. This document defines the way the Church is ordered, its mission, structure and operation. The fight over the order of the chapters was contentious and not just from a stylistic point of view. What comes first is foundational to what comes after. That foundation is what everything else is built upon. On one side of this battle was the progressive majority arguing that the concept of the People of God is the foundation of the Church. This is the sense that all of the Christian Faithful share in a common priesthood of believers and the Holy Spirit is communicating to all in and through our life experience. The conservatives were arguing that the Church is grounded in hierarchy. The Church is ordered from top to bottom beginning with the Pope to the Cardinals to Bishops, priests and then the rest of us who look up the chain to know clearly the will of God. They believed that this hierarchical ordering is the true foundation of the Church's authority.

In the end, the progressives prevailed and "On the People of God" appears before and "On the Hierarchical Structure". While this dispute was settled in the crafting of *Lumen Gentium* by a vote of the Council Fathers, the tensions between these two concepts of Church continues. Is the Church a circle or a pyramid? Could it be both at the same time and what does that look like? Does one threaten the other? After all, the democratic revolutions of the 18th century led

to the downfall of most of the hierarchical monarchies of Europe. Wouldn't the Catholic Church be the same?

This battle of identity still rages on even as both models of Church have grown together over the past 50 years, intertwining and supporting one another. In practice though, the Church has continued to make decisions and find validation primarily in a hierarchical way.

This tensions within *Lumen Gentium* were on my mind yesterday as I entered the Paul VI Audience Hall in Vatican City. It was the first official meeting of the Synod on Synodality, a process attempting to demonstrate a way of proceeding rooted in the People of God first.

I, along with other journalists, were ushered into the press balcony in the Audience Hall to witness the opening session of the Synod. Even before a word was spoken, I was overcome by the venue and the layout of the space. Synods have always taken place in Synod Hall. This grand lecture hall is specifically designed for these meetings, but the architecture of Synod Hall is based on Chapter Two and it is impossible to configure it in a different way. This space is not made for lateral conversations. It is made for an audience to listen to a main speaker, but this synod is not about gathering an audience to listen to one person but to foster the active engagement, of every participant in seeking consensus. A change was required. So, the Synod on Synodality is being held in the grand plebian audience hall where the Pope normally meets with up to 6,000 people at a time. The space is like a convention center. The floor is flat and even placing everyone on the same plane. There is a stage in the Audience Hall, but it is completely bare except for an icon of Mary. Round tables replace raised bleachers. Bishops and Cardinals and even the Pope are seated at tables mixed with women and lay men. Each has a screen, a camera and a microphone. There is no podium in the room for the speaker except for one used to proclaim the Scripture during morning prayer. Everyone has the ability to speak to the entire assembly from their own seat. The process for conversation will be in small groups and will use a process of consensus building through listening. The Relator of the Synod, Cardinal Hollerich from Luxembourg, even called this a non-hierarchical arrangement.

The stage has been set for a conversation among the People of God, including women, lay men and young people as voting members and all grounded in a consultation of every baptized Catholic. Before any speeches or conversation, the space communicated loudly that this is a different kind of gathering.

Architecture and process reveal our operative theology, our relationships to each other and the agency of each person in the space. The alterations ushered in by this Synod reflect a new or renewed understanding of the way and manner that God is working among us and will most certainly affect the ends. Among the enduring legacy of this Synod may be the way church meeting spaces are configured in the future and the criteria for a legitimate discernment.

The now empty and dark Synod Hall is reflective of a hierarchical mindset and methodology. It assumes that there are some with more agency, expertise and insight than others. In that space only a few speak. In that space some are raised up higher. In that space, legitimacy comes from the authority of one's office, position or rank. This Synod is challenging all of those arrangements. In this new space, legitimacy comes through listening more than talking, from participating in a cooperative process of discerning and letting go of preconceived conclusions in order to perceive what is emerging. Once such a change is made is it ever possible to return to a previous way or would returning to the Synod Hall delegitimize any future conclusions? Could a future Synod be considered legitimate without consultation or broad representation? Can the hierarchical structures of the Church ever legitimately operate with authority without standing on the foundation of the People of God? Some wonder if the Synod on Synodality will affect any real changes in the Church. From what I have witnessed, it already has.