



SYNODALITY



Knights of the Southern Cross Formation Program 2022

Session 5

The Synodal Church – a Discerning Church

Prayerful discernment is a process of making decisions or arriving at answers in a prayerful way. Many of you will be familiar with it in the context of The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. Pope Francis often talks about discernment: *“Discernment is one of the things that worked inside St. Ignatius. For him it is an instrument of struggle in order to know the Lord and follow him more closely...”(Pope Francis 2013) and just recently “Christians need to learn the art of discernment to deal with “new and complex questions” (Pope Francis Jan 24, 2022).*

Another Jesuit, Father James Martin SJ, explains the essence of discernment: *“At heart, the process begins with the belief that God wants a person or a group to make good, life-giving decisions; and through the ‘discernment of spirits,’ that is, sorting out what is coming from God and what is not, one gains clarity about the best path. God therefore both wants and enables individuals and groups to arrive at good decisions.”*

The Synodal Process is first and foremost a spiritual process. It is not a mechanical data-gathering exercise or a series of meetings and debates. Synodal listening is oriented towards discernment. It requires us to learn and exercise the art of personal and communal discernment. We listen to each other, to our faith tradition, and to the signs of the times in order to discern what God is saying to all of us. Pope Francis characterizes the two interrelated goals of this process of listening: *“to listen to God, so that with him we may hear the cry of his people; to listen to his people until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us.*

A **Synodal Church**, then, is a discerning Church, in which everyone listens to each other, in order to listen to the Holy Spirit. One condition of the discerning, synodal Church, for Francis, is not merely listening, but speaking.

What we see in the early Church as related in the Acts of the Apostles, we see also in the Church today, namely, the Church in the process of becoming the discerning Church, a Church able to identify the work of the Holy Spirit among us and to follow its lead. The synod was founded by Pope Paul VI as a way of continuing the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. On its fiftieth anniversary, Francis set out his own vision, telling the bishops that the synod is ‘one of the most precious legacies of the Second Vatican Council’ and explaining that it is a key aspect of his ministry as Pope to ‘enhance’ it. The synod is meant to be an ‘image’ of the council and is ‘to reflect its spirit and method’.

Francis’s vision for the synodal Church reflects the language of discernment. *A synodal Church is a Church of listening. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn: the faithful, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome; each listening to the others; and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (John 14:17), to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (Revelation 2:7).*

This kind of discernment is not a one-time exercise, but ultimately a way of life, grounded in Christ, following the lead of the Holy Spirit, living for the greater glory of God. Communal discernment helps to build flourishing and resilient communities for the mission of the Church today. Discernment is a



SYNODALITY



Knights of the Southern Cross Formation Program 2022

grace from God, but it requires our human involvement in simple ways: praying, reflecting, paying attention to one's inner disposition, listening and talking to one another in an authentic, meaningful, and welcoming way.

The Church offers us several keys to spiritual discernment. In a spiritual sense, discernment is the art of interpreting in what direction the desires of the heart lead us, without letting ourselves be seduced by what leads us to where we never wanted to go. Discernment involves reflection and engages both the heart and head in making decisions in our concrete lives to seek and find the will of God

Listening to those who have the same views as we do bears no fruit. Dialogue involves coming together across diverse opinions. Indeed, God often speaks through the voices of those that we can easily exclude, cast aside, or discount. We must make a special effort to listen to those we may be tempted to see as unimportant and those who force us to consider new points of view that may change our way of thinking.

A synodal Church, then, is a discerning Church, in which everyone listens to each other, in order to listen to the Holy Spirit. Our relationship with God is at the heart of discernment. God respects our freedom by acting very gently with us. This means that discernment happens when we need to continually fine-tune our listening to God amid the other interior and exterior voices in our lives.

Reflection and Discussion

- 1 What was it like for you as a KSC when you reflected on discernment?
- 2 In our Church nobody is to be a passive recipient. In the preparatory document for this Synod, we have been given " the ability to imagine a different future for the Church and her institutions in keeping the Mission she has received" . What do you think about that? What does it mean for KSC members in 2022?
- 3 How do we know that we are listening to God and following the movement of the Spirit within ourselves or in our group?

Prayer: So then, together, listening to the Holy Spirit, let us be led by God, as we pray

**We stand before You, Holy Spirit,
as we gather in Your name.
With You alone to guide us,
make Yourself at home in our hearts.
Teach us the way we must go
and how we are to pursue it.**

**We are weak and sinful.
Do not let us promote disorder.
Do not let ignorance**

**lead us down the wrong path
nor partiality influence our actions.
Let us find in You our unity
so that we may journey together
to eternal life and not stray
from the way of truth and what is right.**

**All this we ask of You, who are at work in
every place and time, in the communion of
the Father and the Son, forever and ever.
Amen**