

Foreword to the Timothy Radcliffe book,  
“Listening Together, meditations on Synodality”,  
*By Card. Michael Czerny S.J.*<sup>1</sup>

Reading a book by Timothy Radcliffe is like taking a deep, intense breath of fresh air. It invigorates the heart and soothes the spirit. Anyone who has come across his previous works may have already had this experience. However, the pages that follow are different from those that the English Dominican, former Master of the Order of Preachers, has offered us in the past. They have the flavour of ripe fruit, of a synthesis that conveys the faith experience of an entire lifetime.

Radcliffe offers the Church and the world an incisive reflection on synodality, which is both profound and at the same time accessible to all. He approaches this topic by seeing it as an opportunity to imagine a Church with open doors, welcoming and hospitable, in which everyone can find a place and live together as sons and daughters in the Father's house (cf. EG 47). It is this attitude of wisdom that allows Fr. Timothy to communicate deep truths of faith with simplicity, placing his way of doing theology in continuity with that host of authors – Chenu, Congar, De Lubac, Daniélou, to name but a few – who have questioned the idea of a monolithic or homogeneous Christianity.

All this with that appropriate dose of English humour that has always characterized his work. The ability to wittily grasp and shrewdly portray certain aspects of the Christian life, eliciting a smile but without losing any depth, is not only a rare talent but also a powerful antidote to sterile rhetoric. One has the impression of being in the presence, not of a learned preacher, but of a long-time friend with whom we engage in pleasant conversation, as Fr. Timothy and I have the opportunity to do from time to time.

This book brings together a series of talks and writings that Fr. Timothy has offered in various circumstances, and which are all united by the intent to reflect on the theme of synodality. The text is divided into three parts. The first part presents the six talks given to

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the members of the Assembly of the Synod on Synodality during the Retreat at Sacrofano in early October 2023, published in the order in which they were given. The second part features three meditations that opened the sessions in the Synod Hall during the course of Assembly itself. In the third part, as an appendix, there are four short "epistles" that were addressed to the Dominican family earlier. They offer key insights into the co-responsibility and participation of the faithful in the good governance of the Church.

The present work is a coherent collection on synodality, not a systematic textbook. Several key themes can help us to understand Fr. Timothy's thinking presented here and orient our reflection. These four key words help deepen the meaning of synodality, explain its richness, and avoid reducing its scope to an intra-ecclesial decision-making procedure.

### ***Hope***

One of Radcliffe's most poignant insights is his sharp focus on the purpose of the Synod on Synodality: not to produce more documents, but to open horizons of hope. Summoned from different parts of the world, from different life experiences, with distinct and complementary responsibilities and ministries, the Synod participants bring with them expectations and dreams, but also fears and concerns. However, we should not be discouraged or alarmed by the fact that they do not necessarily converge on the same expectations, but that "contradictory hopes" emerge. Radcliffe argues that the divine and human natures of Jesus show us how the experience of crisis is the framework in which hope is made manifest: at the very moment when he was about to be delivered into the hands of the violent, Jesus offered himself, in bread and wine, to his disciples at the Last Supper. This is the paradigmatic meaning of Gospel hope, namely: breaking through the darkness of a future that appears closed, foreboding, or doomed to ruin. Christian hope is Eucharistic because it recognizes the vulnerabilities, limitations, and obstacles of the present, yet trustingly surrenders into the hands of God, believing that he can work to transform what to a merely human gaze appears impossible or inevitably destined to fail.

### ***Unity/Plurality***

The Church keeps and renews her fidelity to Christ in the dialectic between identity and mission. This "polar tension" – as Pope Francis would call it, following Romano Guardini –

is unavoidable. It is not, however, to be seen in negative or conflictual terms. Rather, the tension between identity and mission should be understood as a resource. The Church stands in the divide between the past and the future, fully inserted in the movement of history, in the actualization and unfolding of salvation, between the "already" and the "not yet."

Two dimensions can help to articulate afresh the relationship between identity and mission, inside and outside the Church. Within the Church, Christian identity should not be thought of as uniformity, because the Gospel message is totally inclusive: every culture is fertile ground for the seed of God's Word. Moreover, the Church is challenged to rethink its structures and understanding of ministry in such a way as to make them as dynamic, extended, and open to all the baptized as possible. Radcliffe urges living out synodality as a two-fold opportunity to engage with the challenge of inculturating the faith, on the one hand, and on the other to promote the participation of the lay faithful in the life and governance of Catholic communities.

Beyond the confines of the Church, the proclamation of the Gospel cannot fail to dialogue with today's world, conversing with the plurality of visions and experiences of what it means to be human. This challenges our very idea of mission, inviting us to reflect on who it is directed towards. To whom is our mission oriented? Is our pastoral action directed only to those who have already found their "place" in the Church, or does it turn outwards to seek those who do not feel "at home" in our communities? There is an urgent need to rethink the role of women in the Church, to take seriously the difficulties experienced by people due to their sexual orientation, and to embrace those who feel unwelcome in the Church.

### ***Friendship***

Proclaiming the Gospel is never an act of cold communication of divinely revealed truths, of transmitting mere information. Sharing the Gospel, to be truly effective in releasing the life-giving and transformative power of the Word of God, must take place within authentic relationships. The proclamation of the Gospel is an offer of "spacious friendship"; it is an encounter between different people who recognize their unity in God's loving embrace. The more unlikely a friendship is, the more it reveals the power of Pentecost. Crossing boundaries is God's way of doing things; it is the very meaning of salvation history. In

Christ, God crossed over the distance that separated him from men and women and took on our human condition.

Radcliffe notes with regret how, in the local listening phase of the Synod, it was often the clergy who were most reluctant to embrace the opportunity to embark on a synodal journey. An unspoken and low-intensity resistance, usually expressed indirectly, manifested their misgivings, doubts and difficulties. We need to ask how the identity of the priest has been presented, particularly during the formation of candidates for ordained ministry. At the same time, it urges us to reconceive the essence of priestly ministry by emphasizing the centrality of creative friendship, the art of weaving relationships and mending broken ties. This lies at the very heart of priestly ministry: cultivating a compassionate imagination, capable of putting oneself in the other's shoes, entering "into their skin," willing to understand their lived experience, to empathize with the suffering caused by those wounds that risk distancing us from God. With all these, the Church extends the reconciling presence of Christ's love. Friendship, in this sense, is an antidote to the deplorable scourge of clericalism, but also a key to properly interpreting the principle of authority in the Church. Friendship brings into focus a renewed understanding that is more faithful to the Gospel and responsive to the challenges posed by the complexity of today's world.

### ***Authority***

Radcliffe makes no secret of the fact that the Church today faces a serious crisis of authority. It needs to be assessed on several levels, paying attention to many underlying aspects. Firstly, this crisis is part of a bigger picture that has affected all institutions globally. Secondly, the crisis of authority that the Church faces is closely connected to the painful affair of sexual abuse, which has diminished the credibility of the Church's witness. Finally, the Church is challenged to rethink authority in its entirety, specifying its expression through forms of governance that put into practice the doctrinal teachings of the Second Vatican Council, especially by rediscovering the dignity of all the faithful that emanates from baptism.

Radcliffe broaches this multi-layered question by rereading the transcendentals of being – beauty, goodness, truth – so as to focus on the foundation of authority in the Gospel. It is interesting to note the order in which the transcendentals are presented, whereby

beauty comes first, goodness in the middle, and truth at the end. Why? Because without the beauty that attracts, without the goodness that allows us to lower our defences and lay down our weapons, truth can overwhelm. The defence of doctrine for its own sake can generate a style of authority that oppresses and homogenizes.

Here, as the starting point for proclaiming the Good News, beauty emerges as a "door" that opens and disposes us to dialogue. Goodness then sustains the effort of not letting ourselves be infected by wrongness and contaminated by ugliness. Truth is made incarnate in the unveiling of God's gaze on humankind, leaning towards its final fulfilment in the kingdom, as a project to be lived out here and now as we walk forward together. Authority flows from presenting oneself in truth, without hiding errors and shortcomings. It is truth that makes us free and credible. It can be implemented only by renouncing the pretence of control and overcoming the fear of being seen as "insufficient."

For authority to be configured in a new way in the Church, we must conceive and understand ourselves as a "we" in which diverse identities are complementary. The conciliatory example of James at the Jerusalem "synod," as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles (15:1-34), becomes paradigmatic. Having new processes emerge is part of defining a plural Church identity that is more fully Catholic, since it includes all the subjectivities that it is made up of. Achieving this new expression of authority in Church governance requires time and patience. Compared to the velocity imposed on us by the present, through mechanisms of mass consumption and instantaneous communication, the Church should not be afraid to walk at a "slow pace." The gradualness of synodal processes may be countercultural, yet their success lies not in hitting some preconceived target, but rather in enabling those who participate in them, as one Church, to experience conversion of heart and mind.

The example of the Dominicans demonstrates how the exercise of authority consists in giving each person a way to find his or her own "power." Authority as service, true leadership, does not threaten those who are subject to authority, nor does it draw strength from weakening the other. Good governance works when we recognize and respect the authority that each brother or sister shares, and refuse to absolutize any individual form of authority. It is an exercise in shared responsibility, in which the fulfilment of another's vocation is felt to be part of the full realization of one's own vocation.

Before leaving the reader with the arduous joy of engaging with Radcliffe's thought, I would like to personally thank Timothy for giving us these meditations on synodality, showing us how the act of teaching today unfolds through a generous and dearly needed gesture of friendship.

Every line of this text exudes Fr. Timothy's ardent desire to immerse himself in contemporary culture, to recognize and listen to its many voices, to embrace its fears and expectations. This is evident in the many quotations from books, films, and music that draw us to the effort and desire to confront current events. Thus, we recognize history and culture as the providential "place" in which to encounter the men and women of our times, and to encounter God who does not cease to make himself close to people today, making his presence known through the proclamation of the Good News that is already the gift of his salvation.