

Synod, synodality and conversation

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“Cor ad cor loquitur”¹

Introduction

In 1994, I was a member of a small group of Catholics here in Sydney calling itself Catalyst for Renewal. The group’s stated intent was to promote “conversation” for renewal within the Church. Initially, we presumed that we all shared the same understanding of what “conversation” meant. I say that because no one questioned what we might mean by “conversation” – no need to!

Our first forum for “conversation” was Spirituality in the Pub. Very quickly it became obvious to me that there was something unexpected – both subtle and complex – in the idea of “conversation” that I had not foreseen. I began to reflect on my experience. (See separate document with texts for further reflection.)

Some things were clear. “Conversation” is much more than mere chatter or small talk or even discussion; it is also something quite different from debate or argument. “Conversation” demands that we listen to the other, respect reasonable differences and generally take the interaction and the one with whom we interact, seriously.

A significant development in my thinking occurred when I realised that “conversation” shares an etymology with “conversion”. It seemed to me then – and even more so now – that the most significant feature of “conversation” is that it is an encounter within which I can be changed. My willingness – even desire – to be changed in and through the encounter with the other, is, I believe, the key to “conversation”.

An obvious corollary of this is that “conversation” is first and foremost about process, not content. Content – especially if it is emotionally charged – can in fact be an obstacle to conversation.

¹ Expression used by St Francis de Sales (1567-1622) in a letter to one of his spiritual directees. Later used as the motto of St John Henry Newman (1801-1890).

The word “conversation”

The English words “conversation” and “dialogue” may be used interchangeably. However, the word “dialogue” carries with it a measure of seriousness that makes it somewhat remote from most people. For example, we would probably not have a “dialogue” at a bbq with family and friends but we would have a “conversation”.

The word “conversation” has the advantage of carrying all the meaning of the word “dialogue” yet remaining close to the ordinary lives of most people.² It also has an advantage over the word “dialogue” because of its rich etymology that takes us further into the ordinary experiences of daily living.

Its richer meaning is derived from two Latin words, *conversari*, meaning “to dwell,” “to keep company with” or “to abide,” and *convertere*, meaning “to change,” “to convert,” “to alter,” “to refresh” or “to turn.” These two Latin verbs suggest two distinct but interrelated movements.

The first of these two movements – *conversari* – may be understood as a movement out, towards the *other*. I make a choice to be with you in some positive and creative way.

The second movement – *convertere* – is a movement within, towards *myself*. I make a choice to open myself to discovery and change, in and through this encounter with you.

“Conversation” as “facing”

Conversari and *convertere* constitute a never-ending mutuality, each enhancing the other. The metaphor of “facing” is useful here.

Consider the typical statue or painting of the Madonna and Child. The child is held very loosely, responsively; the mother’s arms are ready to accommodate the movements of the child; the initiative is graciously surrendered to the child. The maternal face is open, responsive and free of preconceptions; she is utterly given over to facing her child. The mother’s face is evocative; her face

² There is of course a danger in using the word “conversation” of implying something unimportant or even banal. But it is probably easier to avoid this possibility than it is to avoid the possibility that “dialogue” implies something beyond ordinary folk and their interactions.

asks the child to respond, to make his needs known, to present his gifts or to ask for hers. The baby's face is serene and confident in the look of the mother.

The mother's loving gaze draws the child forth, inviting him into the world where he can face others and he can allow others to face him. The mother's face is thus the child's point of entry into the human journey. The maternal face introduces the "beyond" which evokes the child's "towards"; henceforth, his life will be a self-transcending movement of mutuality between himself and the people, events and things of his world.

Conversation may be understood as a "facing" both self and other.

"Conversation" as "giving of self in love"

The 1971 Pastoral Instruction on the uses of modern means of communication reminds us:

"Communication is more than the expression of ideas and the indication of emotion. At its most profound level it is the giving of self in love"
(*Communio et Progressio*, 11).

Pope Francis' writes:

"Dialogue is much more than the communication of a truth. It arises from the enjoyment of speaking and it enriches those who express their love for one another through the medium of words. This is an enrichment which does not consist in objects but in persons who share themselves in dialogue" (Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, #142).

St Paul's words are helpful in understanding "conversation":

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:4–7).

Read this text of St Paul's, substituting the word "conversation" for the word "love" and the word "it" – and reflect.

“Conversation” as necessary risk

In the “facing” of the Madonna and Child, there is also evident a great – and painful – paradox. The compassionate and honest facing prepares the child for one of life’s greatest challenges: It enables the child to walk away – see Luke 2:22-52 & 8:19-21.

Commenting on David Tracy’s “theology as conversation”, Stephen Okey writes:

“Herein lies the risk, though: entering into conversation puts one’s understanding at risk of disillusionment, of ecstatic wonder, of frustration, of joy. Conversation risks change that, even when it is for the better, can be frightening. Although the ideal conversation among committed, intelligent, and charitable interlocutors may not be the norm, it remains something to aspire to” (Stephen Okey, *A Theology of Conversation: An Introduction to David Tracy*, (p. 1). Liturgical Press. Kindle Edition).

“Conversation” assumes that life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved. There are of course many problems in life that need solutions, but life itself is not a problem. There is no solution to life. The word “mystery” names the *inexhaustible intelligibility* of the world. Mystery says that both questions and answers are steps along the way as we move together more and more deeply into an intelligible reality whose intelligibility we will never exhaust. Recall the revelation on Sinai: “I shall be with you (as) I am!” (Exodus 3:1-12).

A sense of mystery reminds us that, as we endeavour to move more deeply into truth, we should be constantly looking together for the questions embedded in every answer and the truth that is beginning to emerge just offstage. It should also remind us that we are not alone in our pursuit of truth, that this is an affair of the community and ultimately of God, the Source of all Truth.

Entering a “conversation” is walking into the wilderness. This is uncharted territory – always uncharted, even if we think we have “been here before”. God holds the map. There is no other map.

Pope Francis’ words to the world on the evening of his election 13 March 2013, are significant:

“And now, let us begin this journey: bishop and people. This journey of the Church of Rome, which is the one that presides in charity over all the Churches, a journey of brotherhood, of love, of trust among us.”

“Conversation”, synodality, Synod and Church

Synod and synodality are distinct but not separate. Synod without synodality will frustrate its best possibilities. Pope Francis’ Address at the Commemorative Ceremony for the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015, said:

“The world in which we live and that we are called to love and serve even with its contradictions, demands from the Church the strengthening of synergies in all areas of her mission. And it is precisely on this way of synodality where we find the pathway that God expects from the Church of the third millennium. In a certain sense, what the Lord asks of us is already contained in the word ‘synod.’ Walking together – Laity, Pastors, the Bishop of Rome – is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice. After reiterating that the People of God is comprised of all the baptized who are called to ‘be a spiritual edifice and a holy priesthood,’ the Second Vatican Council proclaims that “the whole body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief and manifests this reality in the supernatural sense of faith of the whole people, when ‘from the bishops to the last of the lay faithful’ show their total agreement in matters of faith and morals. ... (Synodality) is a constitutive element of the Church”.

Pope Francis goes on to name one of the *primary marks* of synodality in the life of the Church:

“A synodal church is a listening church, knowing that listening ‘is more than feeling.’ It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. Faithful people, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: we are one in listening to others; and all are listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), to know what the Spirit ‘is saying to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7)”.

Implicit in Pope Francis' words is the corollary: Synodality implies "conversation". Synodality is a much bigger concept than conversation. But there can be no synodality without "conversation".

We must resist any and every reductionist tendency to think synodality is merely a process whereby everyone is consulted, debates occur and opinions and data are collated. If there is no "conversation", no amount of consultation or debate or gathering of opinions and data will serve our purposes as the pilgrim People of God.

Together, Synod, synodality and "conversation" are together crucial elements of the Church. Without these the Church will be terribly impoverished.

I believe "conversation" is the greatest practical challenge in our attempts to make synodality part of the everyday being of the Church.

"Conversation" is natural to us

Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), writes:

"The capacity for 'dialogue' is rooted in the nature of the person and human dignity. ... Dialogue is an indispensable step along the path toward human self-realization, the self-realization both of each individual and of every human community" (#28).

In the life and teaching of Jesus – presented in the Christian Scriptures by narrative rather than apologetics – *conversari* and *convertere* of "conversation" are profoundly present. See, for example, John 4:1-26 – Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman – and Luke 24:13-35 – the story of the two on the road to Emmaus. And of course there is the Council of Jerusalem – Acts 15:1-29.

Synodality – and therefore "conversation" – from the beginning, is a distinctive mark of the Church as the Pilgrim People of God. Pope Francis, in his Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome, 18 September 2021, said:

"Synodality is not a chapter in an ecclesiology textbook, much less a fad or a slogan to be bandied about in our meetings. Synodality is an expression of the Church's nature, her form, style and mission. We can talk about the Church as being 'synodal', without reducing that word to yet another description or definition of the Church. I say this not as a theological opinion

or even my own thinking, but based on what can be considered the first and most important 'manual' of ecclesiology: the Acts of the Apostles.

"The word 'synod' says it all: it means 'journeying together'. The Book of Acts is the story of a journey that started in Jerusalem, passed through Samaria and Judea, then on to the regions of Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, ending up in Rome. A journey that reveals how God's word, and the people who heed and put their faith in that word, journey together. The word of God journeys with us. Everyone has a part to play; no one is a mere extra.

"This is important: everyone has a part to play. The Pope, the Cardinal Vicar and the auxiliary bishops are not more important than the others; no, all of us have a part to play and no one can be considered simply as an extra.

"At that time, the ministries were clearly seen as forms of service. Authority derived from listening to the voice of God and of the people, inseparably. This kept those who received it humble, serving the lowly with faith and love.

"Yet that story, that journey, was not merely geographical, it was also marked by a constant inner restlessness. This is essential: if Christians do not feel a deep inner restlessness, then something is missing. That inner restlessness is born of faith; it impels us to consider what it is best to do, what needs to be preserved or changed. History teaches us that it is not good for the Church to stand still (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 23). Movement is the fruit of docility to the Holy Spirit, who directs this history, in which all have a part to play, in which all are restless, never standing still."

St Basil's advice in a Letter to his friend Gregory, Bishop of Nazianzus, complements the words of Pope Francis:

"This, too, is a very important point to attend to – knowledge of how to converse; to interrogate without over-earnestness; to answer without desire of display; not to interrupt a profitable speaker, or to desire ambitiously to put in a word of one's own; to be measured in speaking and hearing; not to be ashamed of receiving, or to be grudging in giving information, nor to pass another's knowledge for one's own but to refer it candidly to the true parent. The middle tone of voice is best, neither so low

as to be inaudible, nor to be ill-bred from its high pitch. One should reflect first what one is going to say, and then give it utterance: be courteous when addressed; amiable in social intercourse; not aiming to be pleasant by facetiousness, but cultivating gentleness in kind admonitions. Harshness is ever to be put aside, even in censuring. The more you show modesty and humility yourself, the more likely are you to be acceptable to the patient who needs your treatment. There are however many occasions when we shall do well to employ the kind of rebuke used by the prophet who did not in his own person utter the sentence of condemnation on David after his sin, but by suggesting an imaginary character made the sinner judge of his own sin, so that, after passing his own sentence, he could not find fault with the seer who had convicted him” (St Basil the Great, *Letter to Gregory Nazianzus*, 5).

“Conversation” and the “other”

Our appreciation for “otherness” is a particularly significant part of “conversation”. Encountering *the otherness of others* in “conversation” can be a most enriching experience. The “other” must be seen in terms of promise rather than threat.

It is worth noting that St Thomas Aquinas spoke of five transcendentals. Apart from the customary three – goodness, unity and truth – he added “thing” and “otherness”.³

This is not the place for a philosophical commentary. However, St Thomas’ inclusion of “otherness” reminds us of the revelation of God on Sinai as “other” – emphatically and mysteriously “other”! And we are made in the image and likeness of the emphatically and mysteriously “other”. “Otherness” is a divine quality. “Otherness” awaits us everywhere – even within ourselves. Both movements of “conversation” – *conversari* and *convertere* – bring us face to face with the “other”.⁴

³ He also wrote of “beauty” in different places, implying it too was one of the transcendentals.

⁴ I recommend Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, Penguin, 2016. Her Talk on Google by the same title is also worth viewing.

My willingness to be “other” and not surrender to the levelling demands of the group is crucial for conversation. Each of us brings a unique gift to the community in our “otherness”. In any loving relationship – and I assume we aspire to make all relationships loving – “otherness” is a gift we bring to the relationship. A precious gift. The way we accept and embrace “otherness” is a key sign of the health – or ill health – of a relationship.

“Otherness” is a fact of life that manifests our divine origin. Remembering that, contributes well to our humanity and specifically to our capacity for “conversation”. Forgetting that, will sabotage both our capacity for being human and specifically our capacity for “conversation” and therefore synodality.

“Conversation” as inclusivity

Care for the “other” necessarily implies inclusivity. Pope Paul VI suggests this beautifully in his first encyclical in 1964: “The child is invited to it; the mystic finds a full outlet in it” (*Ecclesiam Suam* 70). Pope Francis says: “everyone has a part to play” (see above). The late Enda McDonagh says it nicely:

“The Church in history is a communion of sinners and only in hope a communion of saints ... So the present movement towards the kingdom, together with its past and future formations, should be generous with its boundaries, and welcoming of the gifts of all the faithful, not just of the ‘party faithful’, but of the partly faithful, which is in fact all of us, bishops, priests, religious and lay people, always in need of being sustained, forgiven and transformed by the in-breaking of God” (Enda McDonagh, *Vulnerable to the Holy: In faith, morality and art*, The Columba Press, 2004, 77 & 82).

“Conversation” as pastoral care

“Conversation” is encounter. It is self-transcendence. It is service. It is being the place where God is set free in the world – for us and the other. The in-between of “conversation” is a privileged place of care because it is owned, not by us, but by God. Pope Francis urges us:

“We need to avoid (worldliness) by making the Church constantly go out from herself, keeping her mission focused on Jesus Christ, and her commitment to the poor. God save us from a worldly Church with superficial spiritual and pastoral trappings! This stifling worldliness can only be healed by breath-

ing in the pure air of the Holy Spirit who frees us from self-centredness cloaked in an outward religiosity bereft of God. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the Gospel!" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #97).

Pastoral encounters are always mutual – whether we acknowledge it or not. If we do not allow that mutuality we will miss a great source of energy, wisdom and healing for both ourselves and others.

Pastoral care is being fully present, allowing “your spirit and the Holy Spirit to bear united witness” (Romans 8:16). In visiting others, we are ourselves visited. In serving others, we are ourselves served. In the giving is the receiving and in the receiving is the giving.

Pastoral care may be understood as a mode of “conversation”.

Summary statement

“Conversation” is a process whereby we encounter others in a mutual search for what is true.

“Conversation” requires a willingness and ability

- to listen at depth for what is happening within me and between us,
- to refrain from pre-empting the outcome,
- to be transformed through the encounter with the other.

“Conversation” is much more than mere talk or discussion or debate or argument.

“Conversation” is at its best when the participants are together actively seeking to submit to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

A spirituality of “conversation” will emerge slowly and incrementally for participants as they give themselves to the process of “conversation”.

APPENDIX

A spiritual exercise

“I will be with you!” [Exodus 3:12] This is not only a promise, it is an expression of the very nature of God. To be God is to be with! Jesus embodies this promise: “Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time” (Mt 28:20).

We are made in the image and likeness of the One whose nature it is “to be with”. It is also our nature “to be with”. We are at our best when that “being with” is embraced generously and allowed to shape our lives. We thrive in constructive and life-giving relationships. We wither in the absence of such relationships. “Relationship is written into the very nature of human beings. As the Bible sees human beings, you cannot think about them, without recognizing that they are, as it were, made for relationship” (Aelred Squire, *Asking the Fathers*, SPCK, 1972, 20).

We find ourselves in four interdependent relationships.

(1) All human beings are in relationship consciously or unconsciously with the Absolute, however we name it. For those baptized into Christ, the Absolute is revealed as the God of our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the God of Jesus who is the Christ. In this primary relationship we find the living context for the other three relationships.

(2) All human beings are in relationship consciously or unconsciously with themselves. Concretely, this is the immediate focus from which all our other relationships take shape. As a general principle, we can say that as I relate with myself so I will relate with God, other people and the world at large.

(3) All human beings are in relationship consciously or unconsciously with other human beings.

(4) All human beings are in relationship consciously or unconsciously with the world at large. “Everything in the world is connected” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, #16).

In the light of the foregoing, here is a little exercise: *Accompany yourself through your day as if you were your own best friend*. This involves an internal conversation with three processes happening together:

- (1) Open questioning,
- (2) facing and submitting to the truth of what emerges and
- (3) without judgment.

Open questions are questions you ask but *do not answer!* You listen! You might start with the open question: What am I feeling at the moment? Acknowledge honestly, as best you can, what emerges. Do not judge, just pay attention. Continue the open questioning, such as: When did I last experience this? What is it like? Where in my body does it make itself felt? What events tend to evoke this sort of experience? What sorts of behaviours tend to follow this sort of experience? What feelings are present? What thoughts accompany this experience? And so on.

Be imaginative and innovative about the open questions. Just do not answer – listen! And do not judge!

At least four significant outcomes can be expected:

(1). The open questioning allows us *to keep the initiative*. When our feelings take the initiative and, in effect, make the decisions, we tend to think and act in inappropriate ways. By keeping the initiative, we increase the possibility of making decisions we will be at peace with.

(2). The soul has something similar to the body's immune system. When allowed to, *our spirit and the Holy Spirit work together*, bearing witness that God is our Father – see Romans 8:16. This “working together” goes on, out of view. And so, by maintaining the initiative through open questioning, we can facilitate that deep formative work of the human spirit with the Holy Spirit.

(3). God promised to be with us (see Exodus 3:1-12). Jesus reiterated this promise (see Matthew 28:20). Jesus also identified himself with the truth (see John 14:6). *We will find yourself face to face with the truth* in our experience through this open questioning. Thus, we can make of our daily experiences spiritual exercises. In fact, they become encounters with Jesus.

(4). Jesus promised that *the truth will set us free* (see John 8:32). The foregoing is an exercise in expanding freedom.