

**Pope Francis and the Synod:
Changing the Way the Catholic Church makes its Decisions**

Paul Vallely

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“Everybody has won and all must have prizes,” declared the dodo in Alice in Wonderland when asked to judge the winner of a race. That was also the judgement many people reached on the Synod of Bishops’ meeting on the family in Rome last month. “Everybody has won and all must have prizes.”

Certainly the final document which the Synod produced contained something to please everyone, even if few seem completely satisfied with the final delicate compromise – which took the most controversial issues off the table or treated them with ambiguous language. The result allowed conservatives to insist that nothing had really changed, and that therefore they had won¹, while liberals asserted that the door had been opened to significant change on the totemic issue of readmitting divorced and remarried Catholics to Communion². The secular media, trying to take the even-handed approach, were unable to decide³.

But what I want to suggest is that it is a mistake to look at the Synod in terms of outcome by asking “Who Won the Synod?”⁴. The final Synod text may be less

¹ “Pope Francis fails to persuade majority of bishops on remarried Catholics”, The Guardian, 23 Oct 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/23/pope-francis-fails-to-persuade-majority-of-bishops-remarried-catholics-synod-family>

² “Catholic synod moves closer on Communion for remarried divorcees”, Los Angeles Times, 24 Oct 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-catholic-synod-likely-to-produce-limited-reforms-20151024-story.html>

³ “Synod sows confusion among Pope's faithful”, BBC News, 27 Oct 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34585100>

⁴ “Who won the Synod?” New York Times, Ross Douthat, 26 Oct 2015, http://douthat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/10/26/who-won-the-synod/?_r=0

clear, and more ambiguous, than previous texts, but that in itself opens the door to further change.

There has been a tectonic shift within the Catholic Church under Pope Francis. But to understand it we need to look at process rather than outcome.

First a warning about words. It's a mistake only to look at what people and documents say. We have to look at what is **not** said. And at tone. By way of example, take the place of gay people in the Catholic Church. Despite the eve-of-synod intervention of Fr Krzysztof Charamsa the issue was firmly side-lined by the Synod. The Polish priest was a theologian inside the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith who "came out" the day before the Synod began with a dramatic announcement that the Catholic Church was "frequently violently homophobic" and "insensitive, unfair and brutal"⁵ towards people who are gay. It may have been counter-productive. Discussion of gay issues in the Church was side-lined at the Synod after fierce opposition from Cardinal Sarah and other African bishops who accounted for about one fifth of the delegates.

Commentators focused on outcome, call this a victory for the conservatives, with the final document reiterating current Church teaching – that gay Catholics must be respected and not discriminated against, while re-emphasising that there was "no basis for any comparison, however remote, between homosexual unions and God's design for marriage and the family". But two significant things **have** changed: in tone and language.

⁵ "Gay priest decries 'inhuman' treatment of homosexual Catholics", BBC News, 28 Oct 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34654581>

Perhaps the most defining single statement of this Pope's pontificate has been his response to a question on a gay priest: "who am I to judge?" The phrase reverberated round the world; the *New Yorker* said re-defined the papacy⁶

Distinctively it is not an assertion but a question. This Pope wants a Church which asks questions. (Reminds me of the old Jewish joke. Why do Jews always answer a question by asking another question? To which the rabbi's reply was: Why not? Socrates would also have approved).

What the Pope's question did was change the mood, the atmosphere and the tone. The Church may maintain that it loves the sinner but hates the sin yet, the plain truth is, that for all the previous talk of "respect", gay people have in practice been treated with hostility for decades by many in the Catholic Church. Francis's Synods are the first in which the word "gay" has been used. (One cardinal told me that they are also the first Synods in which laughter has been heard). Even the phrase "homosexual unions" is an implicit acknowledgement of a reality more conservative Catholics would be at pains to ignore. At last month's Synod there was no talk about homosexuality being "intrinsically disordered" or a "moral evil". Such talk, many in Rome suggest, is now permanently over. The issue may have been, in the words of Peter Doyle, the Bishop of Northampton, one of the two synod fathers from England, "put in a siding". That's partly because in traditional Catholic anthropology – "our understanding from the Scripture of the nature of man and woman" – there is no room for a same-sex relationship. But it's also because, he said, Synod fathers knew there was a problem but were saying "we don't know what to do" about it. Yet for all that he added: "We can't leave people dangling in the air and in limbo. The Lord loves us all and we need to find a way of embracing everyone."⁷ Those who wanted

⁶ "Who Am I to Judge? Francis Redefines the Papacy" , <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/who-am-i-to-judge-francis-redefines-the-papacy>

⁷ "Synod is neglecting issue of homosexuality, says English bishop", Catholic Herald, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2015/10/20/synod-is-neglecting-issue-of-homosexuality-says-english-bishop/>

change clearly felt that this Synod, and this time, was not the place to fight that battle. As Pope Francis said privately when someone asked him about married priests: “One thing at a time”⁸.

But if the pace of change in the Catholic Church is glacial, there are signs that the glacier is beginning to melt. As our cautious Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, put it⁹: the Synod was saying “we have to find fresh ways of accompanying families at every stage in their lives, and that's particularly true for those who have experienced hardship, hurt and breakdown and maybe have entered into second marriages... This Synod has decisively chosen a way for the Church, for the next period, of refreshing its pastoral stance and saying that we must find specific, detailed ways in which the great mercy of God becomes real to people in their lives through the ministry of the Church.” Not to see that, the cardinal reminded us is, in the words of the Pope, “to bury your heads in the sand.”

Perhaps everybody *has* won and all *have* got prizes.

So, if what is significant is not outcome but process, how do we read that process? What is the Pope’s intention? And to what extent is he achieving it?

What was the Pope’s intention? It seems to me there are five options:

- 1 He wanted to involve bishops in the decision making process.

⁸ *Pope Francis: the Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism*, Paul Vallely, Bloomsbury, p356

⁹ “Cardinal Nichols Speaks about the Crucial Role of Pope Francis in the Synod, “America,
<http://americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/cardinal-nichols-speaks-about-crucial-role-pope-francis-synod>

2 He wanted to discover what the mind of bishops was – on the totemic issue of Communion for the Remarried, and much else.

3 He wanted to assess the weight of the opposition that he faced (He wanted, as once more Machiavellian-minded commentator put it – to “smoke out the opposition” or as his conservative critics would put it, to advance what they call his “liberalism by stealth” agenda.)

4 He wanted to try to change the minds of the bishops between the 2014 and 2015 meetings.

5 He wanted to loose the Holy Spirit through the airless corridors of the church, with a genuinely open mind as to what happened.

And more subtly, I’ll look tonight to see where these options might overlap. My talk will be in three parts. First I’ll consider the narrative of the Synod process. Then I anticipate what the Pope might draw out of it. Finally I’ll consider the wider implications for the future of the Church.

At the outset we need to acknowledge what we might call Bergoglio’s Bind. Pope Francis wants two things.

- 1 First, I’ve been told directly by several individuals summoned to one-to-one talks with him – on the issue of how the Church treats remarried and gay Catholics – that Francis wants change, to allow the remarried officially to take Communion.

His focus of concern in private, I’m told, is that he wants to **re-enfold** practicing Catholics who risk being estranged from the Church by their exclusion from Holy Communion; he is particularly concerned about the loss of their children to the faith.

2 But his second concern, is that he wants to change the way that the Church makes its decisions.

He wants the recent monarchical model of papacy to be replaced by more collegial and consultative decision-making process, so that the Pope and the Vatican become the servants of the Church rather than its master.

Can he have both these desiderata? And if he has to choose, which will he prefer?

Here are three clues from his past.

First is that, priests in the slums of Buenos Aires have told me, that when he was bishop and archbishop the practice was to give Communion to anyone who came forward for it. One of the slum priests told me: “When you’re working in a shanty-town 90 per cent of your congregation are cohabiting or divorced. You have to learn to deal with that. Communion for the divorced and remarried is not an issue there. Everyone takes Communion.” Bergoglio never altered his doctrinal orthodoxy on such matters but he did not allow dogma to overrule the priority of pastoral concern. Another slum priest said: He was never rigid about “the small and stupid stuff,” because he was “interested in something deeper.”¹⁰

A second clue is that Bergoglio had a number of unhappy experiences with the Curia when he was an archbishop. His recommendations for new bishops were routinely disregarded by comparatively junior Curia officials who treated cardinals from around the world with what Bergoglio saw as infantilizing disdain. “They treated us as if we were altar boys,” as another cardinal told me. Bergoglio had been unhappy with Rome’s response to what he saw as his constructive criticisms of Benedict XVI’s ill-judged remarks about Islam at Regensburg which impacted on inter-faith relations in Argentina. He was

¹⁰ *Pope Francis: the Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism*, Paul Vallely, Bloomsbury, p130

irritated by the high-handed advice of what one of his aides called “Italians with emptying churches ... telling bishops in countries with growing congregations what they should and should not be doing”¹¹. All this instilled in him the importance of the Church being run more collegially, which is how he ran the Argentinian bishops’ conference during his six years as their president – even when their decision was not one with which he agreed¹².

And thirdly was his own experience of synods in the past in which while a cardinal he had been approached by Curia officials and told that there were certain things he was not allowed to say. The pope told the Argentine newspaper, *La Nación*: “I was the rapporteur of the 2001 synod and there was a cardinal who told us what should be discussed and what should not,” adding: “That will not happen now.”¹³ Francis is not afraid of discussion and disagreement.

By my reading, Pope Francis' innovative decision to call the synod into session, twice in twelve months, to speak about the exact same issue (“the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and the contemporary world”) showed that the exercise was not primarily not about the family. Rather, it was about re-introducing a process of discussion and debate at the highest level of the church, not seen since the first years immediately following the Second Vatican Council.

The word synod derives from the union of two Greek words, *syn* which means ‘together’, and *odòs* which means ‘path or journey’. The concept of synodality is an ancient one within the Church but in the second millennium of church history popes began to rule like medieval kings – and synodality became a concept

¹¹ *ibid*, p270

¹² as when he wanted the Church to back same-sex civil unions while opposing gay marriage

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<http://aleteia.org/2014/10/09/pope-francis-discusses-balance-of-power-in-church/>

which fell upon stony ground. Then in the final year of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI set up the Synod of Bishops. Inspired by the presence of so many bishops in Rome for Vatican II, Pope Paul wanted a body which would institutionalise for future popes the assistance of the bishops and “the consolation of their presence, the help of their wisdom and experience, the support of their counsel, and the voice of their authority”¹⁴. But then Pope Paul became nervous about realising the potential of the synod. Pope John Paul II had no time for sources of authority to rival his own and effectively closed it down. Benedict XVI was less autocratic but did not change the formula of the synod as an occasional gathering of bishops, delegated from episcopal conferences around the world, but essentially as a formal rubber-stamping body, its debates circumscribed by the Curia and its conclusions pretty much decided in advance

Time after time Francis has signalled his intention to change that. He wants to make the Synod of Bishops more collegial, as Vatican II intended. Just three months after his election, in June 2013, Francis said to the coordinating council of the synod: “We trust that the Synod of Bishops will be further developed to better facilitate dialogue and collaboration of the bishops among themselves and with the Bishop of Rome”¹⁵. Three months later, in his first interview as Pope, he told Antonio Spadaro:

“We must **walk together**: the people, the bishops and the pope.

Synodality should be lived at various levels. Maybe it is time to change the methods of the Synod of Bishops, because it seems to me that the current method is not dynamic. This will also have ecumenical value, especially with our Orthodox brethren. From them we can learn more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and the tradition of synodality”¹⁶.

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http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19650915_apostolica-sollicitudo.html

¹⁵ *Pope Francis: the Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism*, P 175

¹⁶ <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview>

And he added: “Some people tell me: ‘Do not consult too much, and decide by yourself.’ Instead, I believe that consultation is very important.”

That same month, September 2013, Pope Francis appointed the reformist Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri to head the office responsible for the Synod of Bishops. The Pope then set aside two whole days for discussion with Baldisseri and the Synod’s organising Council. The Pope brought to the table the ‘see-judge-act’ method that Latin American bishops had adopted from Liberation Theology. A three-stage process was needed, he said: to examine the lives and experiences of ordinary Catholics, and reflect upon them, and then to decide what actions were needed for change. A new vehicle was needed, the Pope told Baldisseri, to revive synodical government and return to the way the early Church conducted itself – as is still practised in the Orthodox Church. Then Francis hit upon the idea. He would turn the next meeting of the Synod of Bishops – on the subject of the Family, scheduled for October 2015 – from a two-week meeting into a two-year process. He decided that the Ordinary Synod in 2015 should be preceded by an Extraordinary Synod in October 2014 which could decide the questions that should be the basis of discussion at the regular meeting. In between the two synods, the wider Church could offer views on the issues, based on its life experiences and prayerful reflection. And before the first meeting ordinary Catholics around the world would be consulted to make their lived experience the basis for the Synod discussions. See-judge-act. Francis took the idea to the first meeting of his council of cardinal advisers in October 2013¹⁷.

Within days the synod secretariat directed that an unprecedented 38-point questionnaire should be sent to all the bishops of the world, encouraging them to canvas the lay faithful for their experience and views. It covered controversial issues like premarital sex, contraception, divorce, remarriage, same-sex relationships, in vitro fertilization and adoption by gay couples. Some bishops’

¹⁷ *Pope Francis: the Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism*, p330

conferences put it online for ordinary Catholics to answer directly. Rome also announced that ordinary believers could also write directly to the Synod office with their views. Francis called it “taking the pulse” of the Church.

The move was not just unprecedented; it was a reversal of past experience. Previous popes had made it evident that they did not want to know, what the people in the pew thought. That had been made very clear in previous years to Cardinal Basil Hume and Archbishop Derek Worlock. After the National Pastoral Congress in Liverpool in 1980 they handed the report of the meeting of 2,000 bishops, clergy and lay people to Pope John Paul II. When the British archbishops handed the report of the event to him, pointing to just one paragraph and asking him to read it there and then, the Pope put it aside without even looking at it¹⁸.

The 2013 questionnaire was far from perfect. Its wording was opaque and clumsy. It asked why ordinary people did not understand church teaching rather than enquiring what they found difficult or out of line with the Gospel. It was a classic Roman document laying the blame on the failure of the laity. But what was remarkable was, not that it was done badly, but that it was done at all. This was a significant shift.

In Francis’s vision change must encompass the whole Church from the laity to the Pope himself. Two months later, in his manifesto *Evangelii Gaudium*, he said that change was needed from the top down, starting with “a conversion of the papacy” so it was closer to the kind of leadership which Jesus modelled¹⁹.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p332

¹⁹ “It is my duty, as the Bishop of Rome, to be open to suggestions which can help make the exercise of my ministry more faithful to the meaning which Jesus Christ wished to give it.”

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

Pope John Paul II had asked for suggestions on how that should be done, Francis noted, but added pointedly: “we have made little progress in this regard”. Instead the Church is excessively centralized, which hampers its mission to spread the Gospel. He stated baldly: “It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound decentralization.” *Evangelii Gaudium* also revealed the Pope’s intention for change to pass throughout the Church right down to parish level.

Signal after signal came. Baldisseri made public that the Pope was looking to transform the Synod from a body which met occasionally, into “a dynamic permanent synod” that would create “an osmosis between centre and periphery”²⁰. Francis doubled the office space of the synod’s permanent secretariat, a body which worked entirely outside the Curia. He exempted it from his blanket freeze on recruitment. When his first list of new cardinals was announced Baldisseri was ranked in it, above Cardinal Müller, the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a body once known inside the Curia as La Suprema. Then Francis broke with tradition by making the Synod undersecretary a bishop to signal the importance of the Synod reform. Francis, aware he was seizing an historical moment, spoke, rather mystically, of the origin of the synods lying in the “inexhaustible expanse of the mystery and of the horizon of the Church of God”²¹.

Next the Pope guaranteed that the discussion at the Synod would not be bland or anodyne by pushing an issue he knew would be controversial to the top of the Synod agenda. It was a subject which was both close to his own experience of dealing with chaotic families in the slums of Buenos Aires – and which had also been a neuralgic issue at the 2005 Synod on the Eucharist: the issue of

²⁰ *Pope Francis: the Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism*, p329

²¹ quoted in Fr Ladislav Orsy, “Francis’ new order”, *The Tablet*, 19 June 2014 <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/2624/francis-new-order>

Communion for the Remarried. Francis selected probably the most controversial figure he could have picked to light the gunpowder fuse.

In February 2014 he invited Cardinal Walter Kasper to address his fellow cardinals on the subject. During the conclave Kasper had given Bergoglio a Spanish copy of his new book “Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life”.

‘Ah, mercy!’ the Argentine cardinal exclaimed when he saw the title. ‘This is the name of our God!’ He devoured Kasper’s book in the days leading up to the voting. Four days after the conclave ended the new Pope praised the book to a large crowd in St Peter’s Square, telling the world: ‘That book has done me so much good.’

Francis knew what he was doing. Ever since the time of Pope John Paul II, Kasper had been arguing that it was time to lift the ban on remarried Catholics taking Communion, arguing it was not an issue of doctrine but of “pastoral practice”. His attempt to persuade Pope John Paul to allow the change had been thwarted by conservatives in Rome, led by the then head of the CDF, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

Over the years the two German cardinals had sparred over the issue in the pages of theological journals. The view of the man who became Benedict XVI had prevailed. But Kasper was the man Pope Francis decided should address the gathering of cardinals that he had called for February 2014 to discuss the two forthcoming synods on the Family. Kasper warned the Pope that his words to his fellow cardinals would not be universally well-received. “Holy Father, there will be a controversy afterwards,” Kasper said. The Pope laughed and told him:

“Good, we should have that!”²²

When the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Cardinal Müller published a newspaper article criticizing the idea he found himself being criticized by several members of the Pope’s Council of Cardinal Advisers. They accused him, among other things, of “rigid thinking”²³.

The days were gone when the head of the CDF spoke and his word was taken as final. This was the pontificate of Francis, not Benedict. Disagreement was no longer dissent but healthy debate. That became clear when Pope Francis opened the first of the two synods in October 2014. He told the assembled bishops and other synod fathers to “speak boldly” and “listen with humility”²⁴. (Some bishops seemed to be better at the former than the latter). The Pope was determined there should be no repeat of the 2001 Synod, where he was Relator, in which a Vatican official came and told him what he could do and say. After the heated discussion in February when the cardinals debated the Kasper presentation, one cardinal had written to the Pope saying: “Some cardinals didn’t have the courage to say certain things out of respect for the Pope, believing that the Pope may have thought differently.” That was not good, Francis said. “This is not what

²² *Pope Francis: the Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism*, p334

²³ *ibid*, p 280, 336

²⁴ “One general and basic condition is this: speaking honestly. Let no one say: “I cannot say this, they will think this or this of me...”. It is necessary to say with *parrhesia* all that one feels. After the [last Consistory](#) (February 2014), in which the family was discussed, a Cardinal wrote to me, saying: what a shame that several Cardinals did not have the courage to say certain things out of respect for the Pope, perhaps believing that the Pope might think something else. This is not good, this is not *synodality*, because it is necessary to say all that, in the Lord, one feels the need to say: without polite deference, without hesitation. And, at the same time, one must listen with humility and welcome, with an open heart, what your brothers say. *Synodality* is exercised with these two approaches. (CONT)
(CONTINUATION) For this reason I ask of you, please, to employ these approaches as brothers in the Lord: speaking with *parrhesia* and listening with humility. And do so with great tranquillity and peace, so that the Synod may always unfold cum Petro et sub Petro, and the presence of the Pope is a guarantee for all and a safeguard of the faith.”

synodality is about. We must say everything we feel we need to say, in the spirit of the Lord, without pusillanimity and without fear. At the same time, we must listen humbly and embrace with an open heart what our brothers tell us. These two attitudes express synodality... speaking with *parrhesia* (boldness) and listening with humility. And do so with great tranquillity and peace, so that the Synod may always unfold *cum Petro et sub Petro* (*with Peter and under Peter*), [with] the presence of the Pope [as] a guarantee for all and a safeguard of the faith”²⁵.

Francis got what he wanted. The debate which followed was open and became passionate. That was already a major gear change from the previous two papacies. Over the last two decades open discussion had been discouraged by the Vatican. Dissent had been clamped down upon. Theologians had been silenced. Some subjects, like the ordination of women, were declared off-limits and no conversation even was allowed. Now there were not just expressions of divergent positions but a far greater sense of a genuine conversation between the synod fathers. That was in contrast to previous Synods in which they had simply read out pre-prepared statements, with no sense of interaction, let alone dialogue.

This Pope has burst open the dam which was blocking free discussion on a range of issues. The Church is no longer talking in code but speaking plainly. Liberals hail the new freedom and candour as liberating. Conservatives are bewildered or outraged, with some even accusing Pope Francis of bringing division, confusion, uncertainty and anxiety. Some hardliners have even declared that the Pope was a Machiavellian bent on introducing that “liberalism by stealth”.

The Pope’s actions gave some support to such suspicion. Certainly he overplayed his hand in the 2014 Synod when the team he had handpicked to write the

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https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/pa-pa-francesco_20141006_padri-sinodali.html

mid-Synod report produced a document which they claimed reflected bishops' written submission to the Synod as well as what they said at its meetings. But many participants were outraged at what they saw as an unbalanced account of their discussions. The paragraphs on people with ways of life which the Church viewed as "irregular" were strikingly conciliatory in their language. They suggested that pastors should seek to emphasize the positive, rather than the negative, elements of the lifestyles of remarried, cohabiting or gay Catholics. Some synod members accused the secretary of the committee, Archbishop Bruno Forte, of inserting his **own** views into his draft of the synod's final document.

The media, which had greeted the interim document as a revolution in the Church, switched to reporting the final document as a defeat for Francis at the hands of the conservatives²⁶. Church media saw it as a more open question²⁷.

But if the Pope had gone too far too fast something seismic had nonetheless occurred. There had been free and honest debate. There was no pre-cooked final document at the end of the synod. There had been about the Synod a genuinely conciliar feel. In any case, Pope Francis pulled back from his setback with a masterly final address in which he praised the frank exchanges and declared he was untroubled by the level of disagreement. "Personally, I would have been very worried and saddened if there **hadn't** been these temptations and these animated discussions, if everybody had agreed or remained silent in a false and quietist peace."²⁸ He concluded with a skilfully even-handed warning.

Traditionalist and conservative bishops should guard against zealous literalism and 'hostile rigidity'. Progressives and liberals should take care to avoid what he

²⁶ "Bishops backtrack on gay acceptance", BBC News, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-29677779>

²⁷ "Family synod's final report leaves controversial questions open", Catholic Herald <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2014/10/19/family-synods-final-report-leave-s-controversial-questions-open/>

²⁸

<http://www.thetablet.co.uk/texts-speeches-homilies/4/471/3/i-d-have-been-worried-if-there-hadn-t-been-such-heated-discussions-pope-tells-bishops-at-conclusion-of-tense-synod-on-the-family-> Source: Vatican Radio

called 'destructive do-goodism' and a 'misguided mercy' that wants to bind up wounds without first treating them²⁹. The speech won him a thunderous four-minute standing ovation. It was the kind of speech that both an arch conservative like Cardinal Raymond Burke and a liberal like Cardinal Kasper could walk away from "feeling as if the Pope understands them," wrote John Allen in the *Boston Globe*, "and it seemed to allow what had been a sometimes nasty two-week stretch to end on a high note."

The 2014 Synod was a new chapter in the history of Catholicism. A first step had been taken in significantly shifting the way the Church governed itself. Bishops had openly discussed ideas for which they could have been investigated, censured, silenced or removed from office under previous papacies. The climate of conformity and fear that had gripped Catholicism had lifted.

The price of that was that it allowed the first mainstream public opposition to Pope Francis to emerge. Some critics became fierce in their attacks on him in the weeks that followed. But Pope Francis seemed unfazed. He told the Argentinian newspaper, *La Nación*³⁰:

"Resistance is now more evident. But that's a good sign for me. It's out in the open and there is no stealthy mumbling when there's disagreement. I am not worried. It all seems normal to me. If there were no difference of opinions, that wouldn't be normal.' And he continued: "You could ask me, 'Are there any individuals who are completely obstinate in their positions?' Yes, there surely are. But that doesn't worry me. It's a question of praying for the Holy Spirit to convert them, if there are such people. The prevailing feeling was a brotherly one."

²⁹ *ibid*

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<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1750350-pope-francis-god-has-bestowed-on-me-a-healthy-dose-of-unawareness>

The stories appearing in the media set a different tone. Pope Francis had planned for a year between the 2014 and 2015 Synods to allow interactions between the bishops and the wider church. Process he knew creates relationships where events can create confrontation. A continuity of debate would allow people to develop and mature in their views.

But events set the public profile. The month after the Synod ended Francis demoted Cardinal Raymond Burke the most prominent of the Pope's critics who had previously described the Church under Francis as "like a ship without a rudder."³¹ Then Francis announced that the 2015 Synod would be run by the same team whose running of the 2014 gathering had so irked conservatives. It seeped out that the Pope was handpicking Synod fathers to augment those elected by national bishops' conferences, and rumour began to swirl that he was loading the dice by omitting traditionalists like Burke and selecting liberals like Kasper or the new moderate Archbishop of Chicago, Blase Cupich. One conservative Vatican journalist began work on a book about how the 2014 Synod had been "rigged" by Francis³².

The net effect of all this was that the 2015 Synod began with an atmosphere which was far from the brotherly one of which Francis had spoken at the end of the 2014 gathering. There was a lot of suspicion and bad faith about. On the eve of the synod reports began to circulate that Pope Francis had a benign brain tumour³³ – reports which several senior cardinals decried as a deliberate attempt to undermine the Pope by implying that his mental acuity was impaired. Then came reports – of varying degrees of accuracy – of 13 senior cardinals

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<http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2014/10/31/cardinal-catholic-church-under-pope-francis-is-a-ship-without-a-rudder/>

³² "The Rigging of a Vatican Synod?", Edward Pentin.

http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/4131/the_rigging_of_a_vatican_synod.aspx

³³

<http://www.quotidiano.net/il-papa-ha-un-tumore-al-cervello-ma-i-medici-dicono-che-%C3%A8-curabile-1.1409328>

writing to the pope on the opening day of the synod warning him against any attempt by reformers to manipulate the Synod's working document, procedures or membership of the group charged with writing the final report³⁴.

Other cardinals publicly countered, with one observing: "Everything looks yellow to the jaundiced eye."³⁵ "The Pope himself felt obliged to make some unplanned opening remarks at the synod cautioning its members against buying into what he called a "hermeneutic of conspiracy". Such fears, the pope said, are "sociologically weak and spiritually unhelpful." But it was not the most auspicious start to the gathering³⁶.

And yet, from the accounts of insiders, the letter appeared to prompt a backlash against its writers from most of the bishops in the synod hall. The Pope's insistence that doctrine and pastoral practise were complementary and not in opposition, that mercy was about how justice was implemented rather than an alternative to it, won increasing acceptance. As Cardinal Nichols of Westminster put it: "Mercy is love's second name as God approaches us in the mess we make of our lives"³⁷. By the halfway point, as the synod members began working in 13 smaller single-language groups, progress was evident. The group reports showed continuing differences but there was some narrowing of divergence and even some convergences. Small groups promote consensus rather than vote-counting. In the German group Cardinals Kasper and Müller found common ground thanks to the skilled chairmanship of Cardinal Schönborn of Vienna.

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<http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2015/10/12/uncertainty-surrounds-cardinals-letter-voicing-doubts-about-the-synod/>

³⁵

<http://www.religionnews.com/2015/10/12/top-cardinals-send-sharp-warning-letter-pope-francis-reforms/>

³⁶

<http://americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/pope-synod-fathers-dont-give-conspiracy-theory>

³⁷

<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2015/10/16/the-synod-is-not-divided-into-camps-cardinal-nichols/>

Pope Francis, a man who as my biography shows, has consistently shown signs of learning from his mistakes, handled this potentially fractious Synod with considerable skill. He cannily kept his lieutenants – Archbishop Bruno Forte, Fr Antonio Spadaro, and Archbishop Victor Manuel Fernández, who wrote the first draft of *Evangelii Gaudium* – well under the radar in the 2015 Synod. And the Pope worked the room thoroughly before and after sessions and during coffee breaks winning people over with his avuncular warmth. His aim was not to persuade the bishops to come to bold new decisions, but to change the way the Church goes about reflecting on her pastoral ministry. That is, as Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington put it, no small thing³⁸.

So we end where we began, assessing process rather than outcome. It is true that the final document of the Synod will disappoint many and not entirely satisfy anyone. Rigorists can assert that it does not change doctrine nor mandate a change in pastoral practice. Pastors can find in it permission to follow a discernment pathway, in a case-by-case priest-guided process which opens the door to Communion for the Remarried. The dozen prelates elected to the Synod Council represent both sides in equal measure, though the Pope can add three more to tip the balance as he sees fit. Some battles have been chosen not to be fought. But Pope Francis has adroitly created for the Church a little more space to deal more flexibly with the mess of people's real lives. Above all the ambiguity of the Synod's final document gives a very open hand to the Pope in drawing up the apostolic exhortation which typically follows a Synod – and which senior Vatican figures have indicated will be forthcoming in about six months. And there may well be further initiatives during the Year of Mercy.

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<http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2015/10/28/cardinal-wuerl-the-catholic-church-is-moving-from-legalism-to-mercy/>

But most important result of the Synod was the process. As the historian Massimo Faggioli has put it³⁹: “In the history of Catholic Church in the post-Reformation period we have had nothing similar to this except what happened at the Second Vatican Council. The synodal process of 2014-2015 decided by Francis (and it may not necessarily be closed) is what the Catholic Church expected fifty years ago at the end of the Second Vatican Council.

“Francis has had to make up for lost time – a lot of it. The image of the Catholic Church that has emerged from the Synod is one that is very diverse ...but there is no doubt that the majority [of bishops are] in favor of Francis’ openings. This is actually quite amazing, concludes Faggioli, given that almost all these bishops were appointed by Wojtyla and Ratzinger.”

Which brings me back to the 5 questions with which I began. **What was the Pope's intention in the process? Merely to involve bishops in the decision making?** Yes, but not merely, as we have seen there was far more to it. **Simply to discover what the mind of bishops was on the complex issues around the family in the modern world?** Again, it is far more than that; we know that from the Pope himself. In his concluding remarks at the end of the Synod he pronounced:

“The Synod was not about settling all the issues having to do with the family, but rather attempting to see them in the light of the Gospel and the Church’s tradition and two-thousand-year history, bringing the joy of hope without falling into a facile repetition of what is obvious or has already been said.”⁴⁰

³⁹ <http://www.globalpulsemagazine.com/news/life-begins-at-50/2070>

⁴⁰ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151024_sinodo-conclusione-lavori.html

“True pastors, he added, wisely carry in their hearts the joys and the tears of their faithful people.”

hat about the third question – about Francis **assessing the weight of the opposition that he faced** in the shift from what he called, in that same concluding speech, the letter of the law to its spirit – and in which he added a condemnation of those who do not allow themselves to be surprised by the God of surprises.” Those in thrall to the “hermeneutic of conspiracy” may feel that these events justify a reading of Francis as a **Machiavellian “liberal by stealth” set on smoking out the opposition. And certainly he may have briefed his lieutenants in the Synod not to fight battles that could not be won just now, and to make compromises in the cause of unity. The final Synod document is** more cautious than the text of 2014 which is perhaps why it received the quorum consent of a two-thirds majority for **all** its paragraphs. In that sense it gives us a picture of the Church – or more accurately, of its bishops – as the Church presently is, rather than the Church as Pope Francis would like it to be. But, as Massimo Faggioli says, “it is also clear where this Church is going, and not so slowly⁴¹”.

It is clear too that Francis has been about, to answer our fourth question, **trying to change the minds of the Synod between 2014 and 2015**. In part that has been about those he hand-picked to be members; out went Burke and in came Cupich, in the same strategy as we have seen him deploy in his wider appointments in the Church, appointing cardinals from poor countries rather than rich cities, and bishops who are pastors rather than policemen⁴².

⁴¹ op cit

⁴² “Archbishop-elect Matteo Maria Zuppi, renowned for his commitment to interfaith dialogue, ecumenism and conflict resolution will head one of Italy’s most important archdioceses. Bishop Zuppi, who is closely associated with the Community of St Egidio, played a key role in bringing Mozambique’s civil war to an end in 1992. renowned for “his efforts on behalf of the victims of prostitution and human trafficking, and his writings on the Church’s ‘option for the poor.’” <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2015/10/28/pope-francis-chooses-be>

But more profoundly he has been using this extended synodical process to change attitudes. Again in that closing speech⁴³ he said of the Synod:

“It was about trying to view and interpret realities, today’s realities, through God’s eyes, so as to kindle the flame of faith and enlighten people’s hearts in times marked by discouragement, social, economic and moral crisis, and growing pessimism.

“It was about bearing witness to everyone that, for the Church, the Gospel continues to be a vital source of eternal newness, against all those who would “indoctrinate” it, in dead stones, to be hurled at others.

“It was also about laying bare the closed hearts which frequently hide behind the Church’s teachings or good intentions, in order to sit in the chair of Moses and judge, sometimes with superiority and superficiality, difficult cases and wounded families.”

Commentators in Rome were swift to suggest the names of various cardinals at whom the Pope was here pointing the finger⁴⁴. Francis was talking, they said, not about the final report the synod produced but from the three weeks he spent engaged with participants in the hall.

And so to the final question, **is the intention of Pope Francis only to loose the Holy Spirit through the airless corridors of the church and see, with a genuinely open mind, where that Spirit blows?** What has become clear is that,

[rgoglio-of-italy-to-lead-the-archdiocese-of-bologna/](#) Francis chose the 60-year-old former pastor of the Sant’Egidio Community in Trastevere to replace the now-retired Cardinal Carlo Caffara, one of Italy’s leading conservative hierarchs.

⁴³http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/10/24/pope_francis_addresses_synod_of_bishops_at_conclusion/1181854

⁴⁴ He had seen four senior collaborators who head offices in the Roman Curia—Cardinals Muller, Ouellet, Pell and Sarah—rowing in a different direction to him. He is well aware that there are a number of other cardinals and bishops too who are not working in the Vatican but are also not rowing with him; he watched some of them at work in the synod.
<http://americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/popes-strong-words-those-who-seek-block-change-church>

with this pope of paradox, is not incompatible to say Yes to that while also noting that he has some idea of where he hopes that holy wind might blow us. The Synod's final text on Remarried Catholics is an exemplar of that; it offers licence for those bishops, priests and lay people who have already found temporary solutions that no rigorist interpretation of Church law would endorse; and it hints that there will be no Vatican contradiction of such accommodations while Francis is pope. As he said in that closing speech: "The Synod experience also made us better realize that the true defenders of doctrine are not those that uphold its letter, but its spirit; not ideas, but people; not formulae, but the gratuitousness of God's love and forgiveness".

The synod on the family is over. The Church now awaits what Pope Francis will decide. "The Pope will have the last word," as one headline put it⁴⁵. As one conservative commentator, Fr. Raymond de Souza, has recently declared: "Those who argued at the synod for maintaining the traditional discipline on admission to the sacraments for the civilly divorced and remarried must be ready for the Holy Father to decide differently."⁴⁶

That final Synod text allows the Pope significant new flexibility in shaping more pastoral policies. How far will he take that? Some believe that Francis is above all else a collegial Pope. "He won't go farther than the bishops want," one insider told me. I am not so sure. The Synod process will allow Francis to say, whatever conclusions he reaches in his apostolic exhortation, that – thanks to the questionnaire of the laity, the two synods and the year between them – those conclusions are based on a full open process of discernment. As Cardinal Gerald Lacroix of Quebec⁴⁷ told reporters after the Synod ended, Francis knows the "accents and difficult points" of the debates that went on. He also "knows the

⁴⁵ Editorial in the Irish Times.

<http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/editorial/pope-will-have-last-word-1.2407822>

⁴⁶ Fr. Raymond de Souza:

<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/issues/november-13th-2015-2/what-will-the-pope-say-his-friends-tell-us/>

⁴⁷ <http://ncronline.org/blogs/roman-observer/pope-has-smoked-out-his-opposition>

weight of each argument,” even of those that did not make it into the final document.

To get an idea of what the Apostolic Exhortation could say it may be necessary to look no further than to the speech that Pope Francis gave just after the Synod ended to the Convention of the Italian Church in Florence. Our times require a deeply merciful Catholicism that is unafraid of change, he said. Faced with “the problems of the church it is not useful to search for solutions in conservatism or fundamentalism, in the restoration of obsolete conduct and forms that no longer have the capacity of being significant culturally.... Christian doctrine is not a closed system incapable of generating questions, doubts, interrogatives – but is alive, knows being unsettled, enlivened,” said the pope. “It has a face that is not rigid, it has a body that moves and grows, it has a soft flesh: it is called Jesus Christ.”⁴⁸

As Fr de Souza warned his conservative readers: “Francis has steadily prepared the Church for change. It’s foolish to ignore the signs.”

“We are not living an era of change,” the Pope said. “But a change of era.”

But I do not want to end with a prediction of what might be said in the Apostolic Exhortation at the end of this synodical process. My subject is “Changing the Way the Catholic Church makes its Decisions” and Pope Francis’s ambitions go well beyond the synod on that. To get some understanding of the radical degree of change that Pope Francis has in mind consider the key address he gave on Oct. 17 during a symposium to mark the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod by Paul VI. It sets out nothing less than a new ecclesiological framework

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<http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/catholicism-can-and-must-change-francis-forcefully-tells-italian-church-gathering>

for the Catholic Church.

Pope Francis explained his thinking⁴⁹. The word “synod” means “walking together” he said and then added that this applied to “Laity, Pastors, [and] the Bishop of Rome”. And 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” he underscored that 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' [they] show their total agreement in matters of faith and morals.”

That is, lay Catholics are part of the *sensus fidelium*. And he reminded the assembled bishops: “In *Evangelii Gaudium* I stressed that “the people of God is holy because this anointing makes [the people] infallible “in matters of belief”. And he spelled out: “It was this conviction that guided me when I desired that God's people would be consulted in the preparation of the two-phased synod on the family.”

The synodal process starts by listening to the people. It continues by listening to the pastors. And it culminates in listening to the Bishop of Rome, “who is called upon to pronounce as ‘pastor and teacher of all Christians’, not based on his personal convictions but as a supreme witness of “the whole faith of the Church”.

And Pope Francis went further. The Church’s structure, the Pope said, “is like an upside-down pyramid” with the people at the top and then the priests, bishops with the Pope at the bottom. The ordained are called “ministers”, he said, because they serve the others. They must always keep connected to the people and start from people “and their daily problems”.

So the synod on the family was not just a synod on the family. It was above all an event in which Pope Francis hit the “reset button” on the ecclesiology of Vatican

⁴⁹http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html

II – to borrow a vivid phrase of the Dutch canon lawyer Professor Myriam Wijlens. “The resetting is however a process which is not finished yet,” she says “as additional steps must be taken and it is above all to be transferred to the local church, that is, to the dioceses and parishes⁵⁰ .

Something similar was said the week after the Synod ended, by the Father General of the Jesuits, Adolfo Nicolàs, SJ, who attended the synod and is close to the Pope. In an interview with *Corriere della Sera*⁵¹ , he said: “The fruit of the synod cannot just be a document, however good. The fruit [must be] practical. Each bishop when he returns home [should hold] a synod with his people, both priests and laity, to discuss how to realize on the ground locally the possibilities opened by the Synod.”

That notion was implicit in the Pope’s own words⁵² when he talked of “the Council of Priests, the College of Consultors, the Chapter of Canons and the Pastoral Council” and added: “Only to the extent that these organizations are connected with those on the ground, and begin with the people and their everyday problems, can a Synodal Church begin to take shape.”

The faithful do not just have a right to be heard. The Pope’s logic suggests we have a responsibility to participate, because all are to be concerned about the well being of the church and we all are part of the *sensus fidelium* – pope, bishops, priests, theologians, and laity. If God spares him, Pope Francis has much more to do. Perhaps by the next Synod half the members will be women.

⁵⁰ Prof. Myriam Wijlens, Erfurt University, Germany: *Theological Reading (B) of the Contemporary Catholic Cultural Moment: Church Matters*, at the Tablet 175 Durham conference on The Spirit of Catholic Renewal - Signs, Sources, and Calling

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<http://americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/pope-will-write-apostolic-exhortation-follow-synod-family>

⁵²http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html