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What Made Synod 2014 & 2015 So Interesting?  
Collegiality & Synodality!  

Icebreaker: God still has a lot to do  
Two stories come to mind when I think of the twin "Sisters" Collegiality and Synodality. The first is about little Johnny’s most unusual birthday present. Instead of choosing a present for him, Johnny’s parents handed him a voucher to the local shop, with the instruction: “Get yourself a birthday present that will tell us something important about yourself”!  
Off went little Johnny, returning almost immediately with his present. When the time came to open the present, it was his parents who watched expectantly to see what he had chosen. Johnny opened his special present very carefully, revealing bit by bit a picture poster depicting a lovely, luscious green leaf, but on the edge of the leaf was a hideous looking caterpillar munching away. However it was the caption that bowled them over. It read: “God has not finished with me yet”  

The second story is one of Aesop’s Fables. Know the Full Story  
A farmer and his son set out to sell their donkey at the local market. As they walked along leading the donkey, a passerby remarked: “How stupid walking when they could be riding”. So, the lad gets on the donkey. They carry on merrily, until another remarks: “What a disrespectful young man! Riding while his father walks”. So, the son alights to let his father ride; only for a bystander to comment: “How inconsiderate making the boy walk while he rides in comfort”. After a brief discussion they both get on the donkey. Of course, it wasn't long before someone complained: “How cruel two healthy men riding a poor little donkey”.  
After further consultation they decide to carry the donkey on a pole suspended between them. But as cross a fast-flowing river as they near the village, the donkey hears the rushing water, kicks out violently in a panic; the boy loses his grip, lets go of his end of the pole allowing the donkey to break free, jump off the bridge into the raging torrent below and is drowned.  

[Moral of the story, when you know the full story, do not be swayed by those who don't!]  

1. The Full Story in Southern Africa  
My task here is to share with you the full story of how I learned through my experience in the Church in Southern Africa to know and apply the twin concepts of Collegiality and Synodality. Although these have been around since Vatican II, they are now being given a sharp focus by Pope Francis.  

This is not to say that his predecessors had done nothing about them. It’s just that, Pope Francis has incorporated into the principal objectives of his pontificate the mandate that emerged from what the Cardinals had to say during those intense discussions that preceded the Conclave. By far the clearest emphasis of those meetings was that what the new pope needed to do was to reform and renew the Church and to do so together with his fellow Bishops. In other words collegially.  

Proving that he is a marvelous listener, Pope Francis drew on his wisdom and experience, when the time came to make the reforms happen and especially to make them stick. He decided there and then that this would need the direct and immediate involvement of the College of Cardinals and Bishops. Hence his challenge to all of us to make Collegiality and Synodality a working reality!  

2. Collegiality and Synodality  
What do we understand by Collegiality and especially Synodality, which for many is a strange word? To avoid confusion, let me give you my understanding of these two terms.
COLLEGIALITY could be described as "a cooperative relationship of colleagues" as for example, "the participation of bishops in the government of the Catholic Church in collaboration with the Pope".

According to Lumen Gentium (the basic Constitution of the Catholic Church developed and promulgated at Vatican II) a person becomes a member of the College by virtue of episcopal consecration, which introduces him into hierarchical communion with the head of the College, the Pope, and with its members, his fellow bishops. (LG. 22)
This college, in so far as it is composed of many members, is the expression of the multifariousness (diversity) and universality (catholicity) of the People of God as well as of the unity of the flock of Christ, in so far as it is assembled under one head.

In the College, the Bishops, whilst loyally respecting the primacy and pre-eminence of their head, exercise their own proper authority for the good of their faithful, indeed even for the good of the whole Church, the organic structure and harmony of which are strengthened by the continued influence of the Holy Spirit.

The supreme authority over the whole Church, which this college possesses, is exercised in a solemn way in an ecumenical council. There never is an ecumenical council which is not confirmed or at least recognized as such by Peter's successor.

What about Synodality?
Synodality is the practical expression of the participation by the local Church in the life and ministry of the universal Church. As such it is a way of expressing collegiality, or as was said above it is the Bishop exercising his responsibility for the Universal Church together with other Bishops through the Synodal process.

Under Pope Francis, the Synod is becoming a process characterised by three distinct actions by the members of the College of Bishops.

The first distinct action, which expresses Synodality is the Bishops listening together to the Faithful. While this has always been part of the Synod process, Pope Francis is giving it much greater prominence, indeed immediacy, when, for instance, he gave instructions that the questionnaire attached to the Lineamenta or Discussion Document, preparing for a Synod Session, should be answered by all levels of the Church - the biggest and most important numerically speaking, being the Lay Faithful!

A second distinct action through which Synodality is lived, is the pastors themselves listening to each other more attentively and purposefully. This is what Pope Francis had in mind when at the beginning of Synod 2014 he urged the Synod Fathers: "Speak openly and honestly, but listen humbly! And don't be afraid of offending the Pope!".

The third action that makes Synodality happen, is when the pastors today listen to the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, who by the way, through his particular office of leadership is to make pronouncements "not based on his personal convictions, but as the supreme witness of the faith of the entire Church", which is formulated in the course of this series of listenings.

The role of bishops in general, but especially when in Synod is always to "act as authentic custodians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole church, attentively distinguishing it from the often changing fluxes of public opinion."

Having set out what I understand by the terms Collegiality and Synodality, I would now like to move from what they are understood to mean in Church teaching and theology, to what they have meant in my personal life experience as a bishop.

3. Collegiality in action - my Lived Experience
My understanding of Collegiality has been shaped no so much by what I have been taught in the Seminary or in ongoing theological workshops since then, but by what I saw being practised by the Bishops of Southern Africa, since January 1979 when I attended the Plenary Session of the Conference for the first time as newly appointed Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Kokstad.

What I experienced was a College of Bishops in the process of working out, first of all its true identity as a Conference of Bishops that needed to mould their Priests, Religious Brothers and Sisters, but especially their very racially and culturally mixed Laity Faithful into a Church that would make a difference in the widely divided society that was South Africa.

The main item on the agenda was how to facilitate a consultation, which would engage every Church member in the search for the best way to equip the Church to carry its weight effectively in the struggle to remove apartheid thinking, speaking and acting from society, certainly! but in the first instance from the Church’s own day to day life. The Bishops were committed to engage in what Pope Francis would describe as “pastors earnestly listening to each other but also listening to the laity”.

Looking back now some 25 to 30 years later, it is clear that Collegiality was the basic strength of the Catholic Church and the foundation stone for the crucial role it played in the struggle against political and social injustice in general and apartheid in particular. It is important to note that this was done not so much by uttering political slogan, or issuing statements and declaration expressing the Church’s Social Teaching, but rather by moving resolutely from such statements and declarations against apartheid to trendsetting policies and transforming actions within the Church itself.

A small but significant example was the Bishops’ response to the Soweto Students’ Uprising of 16th June 1976. The Bishops formulated and then began immediately implementing their “Declaration of Commitment on Social Justice and Race Relations within the Church” in all Catholic institutions. Among the first significant actions in this regard was the opening up of all Catholic Schools to children of all races, in direct defiance of the government’s policy of racial discrimination and segregation.

The next area to be tackled was the racial mindset and attitude of Catholics, who as a result of generations of indoctrination and division on the basis of race, needed a paradigm shift to bring them to recognise that each and every person has equally dignity and worth, and therefore needs to be accorded equal respect and the human rights that flow therefrom.

4. The Challenge of the Declaration of Commitment

The challenge, which the Bishops put to themselves and to all members of the Church, is well expressed in these concluding words of the Declaration:

“To take into account the singular situation and resultant tensions of the Church in South Africa, where 80% of the laity are Black and 80% of the clergy White, and to investigate as a matter of extreme urgency the feasibility of a Pastoral Consultation in which lay people, religious and priests, in large majority Black, may participate with the bishops, in arriving at policy on Church life and Apostolate but not on doctrinal and canonical matters”.

It was this last commitment which set in motion a process, which went on for 10 years before culminating in an all embracing vision for the Church in the region. By the grace of God this vision set us on the way to a practical Pastoral Plan that enabled us to emerge more rather than less united from the most difficult and fraught years of struggle against apartheid. It enabled us to pledge together that: “We are committed to becoming a Church that is a Community Serving Humanity!”

The first key word is "COMMUNITY"! It expresses the explicit intention and commitment of the Bishops - to eradicating all race or colour discrimination by consciously working to becoming a real community of brothers and sisters, who have a spiritual but real communion in Christ, which they were committed to living and propagating in both the Church and society.
The second key expression is “SERVING HUMANITY”! It spells out what the immediate fruit of our new found community would be, - that even as we were finding each other as brothers and sisters in Christ in his Church, so would we be seeking to make real community happen in society around us.

5. Listening to each other - Living Synodality
Again, I would like to base my understanding of Synodality upon my experience of the synod process, which experience began in 1983, when as newly elected VicePresident, I was elected to represent our Conference at the Synod on Penance and Reconciliation. That was the first of many.

The others that followed were:

In the mean time, between those Synod Assemblies, I have served continuously on the Council of the Secretariat of the Synod since 1989, when I was drafted in following the untimely death of Archbishop Stephen Naidoo CSsR of Cape Town. So, for me Synodality has been a hands-on experience rather than an academically studied or researched one.

Of these the one which stands out above all the others has to be the African Synod of 1994.

The Church in Africa comes of age
For a number of reasons the African Synod of 1994 epitomized what Synodality is about. Not only does that Synod encapsulate most of what Pope Francis is saying on the subject today, but it also stands out because it came at a time when the Universal Church and the world were witnessing Africa at its best, and Africa at its worst. As if for dramatic effect, both faces of Africa were being revealed at about the same time.

Africa at its best was evidenced by the amazing transition of South Africa from the dark mists of hopelessness of apartheid to the bright promise of a new and democratic future by way of the "miracle elections" held over the 27th and 28th of April 1994.

Africa at its worst was evidenced by the horrific genocide perpetrated in Ruanda during that Synod's sitting.

A second outstanding feature of the African Synod was the high level of participation by the local Churches in the consultations that preceded the Assembly. Of the 37 Bishops’ Conferences in Africa at that time, 34 responded to the Lineamenta questions and did so in time! The three Conferences that did not, simply could not! Political instability prevented the Bishops from holding the consultations in their own Dioceses, let alone meeting to collate and consolidate the results at Conference level.

A third highlight was the absolute rigour with which the Secretary General of the Synod, Archbishop Jan Schotte insisted that at every step of the Synod process - from the drafting of the Lineamenta and its questionnaire, through the Instrumentum Laboris, to the Propositiones and the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation - Ecclesia in Africa - everything was clearly and firmly in the hands of the Bishops of Africa who had been elected by their peers or appointed by Pope John Paul II as members of the Council of Synod.

Transparency to the Nth Degree
Indeed, I recall an occasion when the Council had all but completed its task of drafting a Synod document. Only 2 or 3 pages of the draft remained to be completed when we ran out of time. The hard-pressed Council suggested to the Secretary General that he and his staff finish off the work since they had a good sense of the Council's thinking. Archbishop Schotte's response was simple and firm: "Elect two Council members - one English-speaking, the other French - and let them come and finish the work with us"!

His reason was simple and clear: There must be not even the slightest suspicion that the Secretariat had manipulated the process at any stage!
An obvious and clear consequence of this transparency was the universal and enthusiastic acceptance of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation - “Ecclesia in Africa” by every level of the Church in Africa.

Perhaps, this will explain why there was, especially from the African Members of the recent Synods, such an outcry when it began to look as if the process was being guided towards a particular conclusion. We had tasted, indeed we had been spoilt by a level of accountability and transparency which will be hard to repeat. For those who had experienced a Synod such as the Synod for Africa of 1994 the bar of best practice in both Collegiality and Synodality had been set extremely high. We simply had to react strongly to anything that was not measuring up!

6. Special Challenges to Collegiality and Synodality
I would now like to focus on the two most recent Synods on the Family.

As with every human endeavour, Synods 2014 & 2015 contained both what was best and what was worst in regard to lived experience of Collegiality and Synodality. Pope Francis’s opening address which included these memorable words: “Speak openly and honestly, but listen humbly! Do not be afraid of offending the Pope!”, made it possible for us to say without fear what was on our mind or in our heart. As a result many Synod Fathers were heard at the end of the first week saying things like: “This is the best Synod experience I’ve ever had!”

On the negative side, the Relatio post Disceptionem, also called the Mid-Synod Report, was the cause of deeper levels of scepticism and distrust being expressed than in any Synod that I had experienced. One immediate result was the rather firm warning contained in Pope Francis’s closing address calling on everyone to avoid the two extreme positions – Wanting everything to be changed – Wanting nothing to be changed!

Even the final report of the 2014 Synod did not sit well with many who had attended the extraordinary Synod. Though better than the Mid-Synod Report it still left a lot to be desired. This is one reason why at the beginning of the 2015 Ordinary Synod a group of Cardinals – in the spirit of speaking openly and honestly, but also open to listening humbly, and not being afraid of offending the Pope! – wrote to Pope Francis expressing concern that the process might once more be guided in a particular direction! Once again Pope Francis responded immediately addressing the concerns and assuring the Synod that all would be done according to the rules.

7. Scepticism and Distrust
Every virtue seems to be always accompanied by its corresponding vice. So with Synods 2014 & 2015. Writing an opinion piece in the Catholic Herald of London on my hopes and expectations for Synod 2015, I expressed deep concern about the tendency of the media to pigeon-hole leading personalities, including cardinals and bishops as left-wing vs right-wing; liberal vs conservative; progressive vs reactionary!

The main concern was that the Synod Fathers should not be seen as pitted against each other in a contest for control of the Church, but rather as a College, walking together in Synodality, in a joint effort to make the Church a change-maker in modern society. Our main task was to work together to identify the best and most effective ways of reforming the Church beginning with Marriage and the Family, which are the basic foundations and vital cells of both the Church and society.

This is why at every opportunity the African contingent at the Synod strove to remind the Assembly that the designated theme of the Synod was the Vocation and Mission of the Family, not the resolution of the nutty problems like "Communion for civilly married divorcees", "same sex marriages", "cohabitation as a “positive” value because it might lead to marriage sometime in the future. No, our focus had to be how to give the Family the best start by supporting it with good preparation for marriage and equally good accompaniment.
Rather! Synod 2015 was first of all about clarifying and re-affirming that marriage is a vocation by which God calls a couple to total commitment to be united as one, in a life-long and fruitful union through thick and thin. Second, it was about defining marriage and the family as essential parts of God’s plan for society and for his Church.

A third challenge was the fact that the media had come to Synod 2015 with their minds made up as to the outcome. For many of them the Catholic Church was going change its teaching or at least its praxis to be in step with what the secular world was demanding. The worst case scenario was that the “stick in the mud” contingent would keep it where it was, and therefore “out of touch with the real world!”

Anyone reading the final report will of course realise that apart from three paragraphs (83-86) the outcome of the Synod was very much a re-affirmation of the Church’s teaching and practice aimed most specifically at addressing the challenges identified by Synod 2014.

Pervading the whole process, I must draw attention to what is the hallmark of Pope Francis’s pontificate – reaching out to all in need, to all on the margins of society or the Church for whatever reason – but also reforming the Church from top to bottom (from Pope to Family) and from bottom to top (from Family to Pope).

Many may remember that when he launched the reform process, Pope Francis began by saying: “To reform the Church I must reform myself first!”

8. A last challenge – the media in particular the social media
One of the strongest point of Pope Francis’s way of teaching his particular gift of expressing profound teachings and truths in ‘sound bites’. By definition sound bites are extremely easy to remember, to repeat, broadcast and propagate. But this is also the weakest point, because so often the context and the full substance of his statement and especially of the Church’s teaching is deliberately overlooked. An example is: “Who am I to judge?”
This is used to claim that he supports homosexuality or at least that he does not regard it as the Church does, this in spite of the fact that after asking: Who am I to judge, he immediately quotes the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The sins of the media were exposed especially by Synod 2014. For example after the Mid-Synod Report headlines proclaimed: “Catholic Church makes ground-shaking changes to its teaching on marriage and the family!
When the Final Report appeared the headlines read: “Serious Setback for Pope Francis’s plan to bring Church up to date!
How they knew Pope Francis’s plans, since he never expressed them before the Synod or after the Mid-Synod or the Final Reports, is anyone’s guess!
In fact for him to have done so would have totally neutralised his challenge to his Brother Bishops: “Speak openly and honestly, but listen humbly!
Why this comment about the media? Simply because it was responsible for what actually happened in the Synod not being communicated, resulting in serious misunderstanding of what the Synod is and what it can and cannot do.

9. Conclusion
As I come to the end of my time as Archbishop of Durban, I find it useful to reflect on my varied and most enriching experience of both Collegiality and Synodality. For me they have been the surest evidence that the Lord has kept his promise:
“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you”. (John 14:15-17)

What fill me with hope even as the situation looks more and more hopeless is Johnny's honest assessment of his situation: God has not finished with me yet.
Thank you most kindly for your attention. God bless you all!
+ Cardinal Wilfrid Napier OFM
Archbishop of Durban