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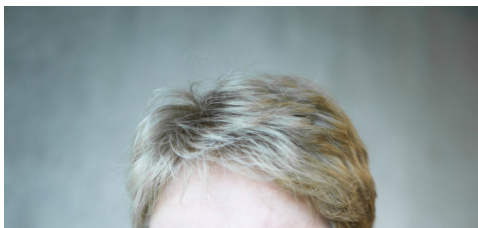
The Church of God is convoked in Synod: A dialogue with Myriam Wijlens

CHURCH



An interview with Myriam Wijlens, Dutch theologian and professor of canon law at the University of Erfurt (Germany). Pope Francis appointed Myriam Wijlens as a "consultor" to the Vatican Synod of Bishops.

by ***Stefan Tertünte scj***



Professor Myriam Wijlens was born in the Netherlands. She studied Canon Law in Ottawa, Canada, where she befriended many of our Canadian



SCJs, with whom she continues to maintain contact. She is currently teaching Canon Law at the University of Erfurt, in Germany. In 2018, Pope Francis appointed her to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. She has much experience with difficult issues about the abuse of minors and vulnerable adults in the Catholic Church. Such alone would already be an interesting topic for an interview. But, our meeting today is about another topic. This year Pope Francis appointed Professor Wijlens as a Consultor, or Advisor, to the Synod of Bishops. And on the 7th of September, she was one of the presentors of the preparation document of the Synod of the Bishops on the theme, For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.

Stefan: Now, Professor Wijlens, my first question is a bit personal... How was it for you, as a woman, in the Vatican Press Room, to present a document for the Synod of Bishops?

Myriam: Well, thank you for that question, and thank you for having me visit with you. I have known the Priests of the Sacred Heart for, I think, more than 35 years. Every winter I am skating and skiing with your confreres in Ottawa. So, I know them very, very well and I stay with them in their house. I consider it to be my second "home". Also your Generalate in Rome has become a very significant place for me. Some of our Vatican commissions have met in your house; and it is really wonderful to experience your hospitality.

You ask about how it is to be a woman presenting a document at the Vatican Press Office. What was so beautiful about the presentation, and what I really appreciated, was that on the podium when we presented the document, there was Cardinal Mario Grech, there was another Bishop, then there was a sister, she and the bishop are

undersecretaries. Ten there was a priest, and I was there as a lay person. So, on the podium the People of God -- in all their diversity -- were really represented. I thought that that in itself was a statement of how the Church is moving into a different way of thinking, and a different way of acting. It showed by the way we were sitting and by the way we were speaking the interaction that we have had over the past months among us in the office of the Synod of Bishops. It really showed that we are as People of God, on the way, on a journey. It showed that the discernment process that we have done over the past months has really in itself been a synodal process. For me, that was a beautiful experience of what we were at the same time presenting and talking about.

Let's talk about what you were saying about the Synod, because, the question now is a little bit about the content, what is the purpose of the Synod and of its process?

It is a kind of double task. It is a synod about Synodality. What we are doing is at the same time what we want to experience. What we are reflecting about is what the Holy Father wants people to experience. What is it all about? I think if you go back to Vatican II, we see that pope Francis is not really changing anything, but is just further implementing the Second Vatican Council. That Council paid a lot of attention to the relationship between the Pope and the Bishops. That was a leftover topic from Vatican I, which had focused on the papacy. The relation between the pope and the bishops was better clarified in the third chapter of Vatican II's "Constitution on the Church," *Lumen Gentium*. However, during that council the Bishops realized as well that they should insert a chapter on "the People of God" and that it should precede the chapter on the hierarchy. In the chapter on the people of God you find what is common to all baptized. In that chapter, there is a very strong emphasis on the working of the Holy Spirit within the community.

Another important aspect for understanding the current focus on synodality lies in Vatican II's changed doctrine on revelation as expressed in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*. Before the

Council revelation was very much understood as propositions with a set of doctrines which were handed over to the people (laity) who had to learn them by heart. Vatican II explains that God speaks to men and women as friends and lives among them to enter into fellowship with them (DV 2). Revelation is an encounter of persons with God and it occurs in words and deeds. The Holy Spirit leads all into relationship and understanding. (DV 5). Of decisive importance is that the Word of God is listened to and heard by all, including ordained members of the people of God. People thus encounter God directly. In the coming months we are expected to develop an appreciation for the fact that all the faithful, each and everyone, can encounter God personally.

In the past, we sometimes thought that this would only go through priests and Bishops. But the Council put it back to where we were originally --everybody can have such an encounter. That is a very important concept in the Council, the idea of a person encountering God directly. I think this is also what we are asked to do in this whole synodal process: to help each other to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to each and everyone and to us all together. This listening is to occur so that we can be a true missionary church. Each and everyone in that process, no matter where you are in the world, what status you have in life, if you are young or old, rich or poor, if you belong to the marginalized, everybody is able to have this encounter with God. Therefore, we have to listen to each other, to discern what the Word of God is saying to us here and now and then to discern where to go from here.

Listening to you, it seems to me, it is more about spiritual empowerment and not much about structures.

I think it is very much this way. The Pope is saying that the Church is in need of what I would call a "conversion". The Synod is not about structures, it is about reflecting who we are and where we are. We have to differentiate "Synod" and "Synodality". Synod is one form of exercising Synodality, by which, you come together and you listen to each other. But, Synodality can also unfold in other processes. In religious life, you have a form of Synodality without ever holding a

Synod. So, there are different ways of expressing this. Synodality is much about journeying together and listening to each other, finding communion.

And as it is a process, can you briefly outline the larger steps of this process of the Synod which are quite unusual?

The Preparatory Document on the Synod opens with the words: "The Church of God is convoked in synod.". The document uses also the terminology "Synod of the entire Church". So it is not just the Synod of Bishops. Furthermore, if you look at the document, it has a logo which reads: "Synod 2021-2023". Hence, it is not just a 2023 Synod of Bishops but it is a Synod of the entire Church and the document uses the terminology of "the Assembly of Bishops which will meet in 2023 within the Synod of the entire Church". That is new, but it is all in line with Vatican II. The process, therefore, is very unique. In the past, you had a preliminary process and now this preliminary phase has become part of the synod. The listening of the whole Church is not a preliminary matter, but part of the whole process. Furthermore, the synod begins in the dioceses and this is then an expression of the doctrine articulated in Vatican II that the Church lives in and from the local churches.

We tended to look very much to and from the perspective of the entire Church, but now more weight is given to the local church, to the dioceses, and thus to the diversity, and the cultural aspects in these local churches. People in religious life are a bit more used to that, because they have provinces in e.g. Cameroun, Indonesia, Canada, the Netherlands, Poland, Finland, all parts of the world. So, what is now necessary for all is to learn to listen to these different voices and discern what we hear and need to do together.

The process that we are proposing is that every Bishop in his diocese should appoint a person who will coordinate the listening processes at the local level. The Bishops are asked to make sure that this process includes not just the people with whom they are always in conversation but also that the people on the margins are listened to

as well. The Bishops have to go out of their way -- we may all have to go out of our way -- to do that. When the Bishops conclude that process they will then have to sit together in their episcopal conferences and discern -- not just write a report -- while asking themselves: "What do we hear from within our dioceses?" "What is good, what needs to be improved and then what report this to the entire church. That will occur next summer.

Having listened to the reports of the episcopal conferences, the Secretariat of the Synod in Rome will write another document that will go to continental structures. To engage these institutions is new in the synodal process. The continental structures are e.g. the CELAM in South America, or the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) in Asia, or the Council of Episcopal Conferences of Europe (CCEE). These institutions will now take an active role and in that way we hope to see a little bit better what is more specific to each continent. The results of that continental discernment process will be presented to Rome and the Secretariat of the Synod will then write the document for the 2023 Assembly of Bishops of the Synod.

Well, let's talk about Synodality and religious. Religious could say that we already have synodal structures. We have assemblies, we have elections, we have chapters, time limits in offices, etc. Why should we be interested in this process?

I think you have a special challenge. I am quite involved with religious communities, serving as a canonical advisor to some of them, and I really think that one of the big challenges for a number of religious institutes is, for example, are they really able to listen to people of other cultures even within their religious communities. How much is the European culture dominant in many of the religious communities? In listening, we must recognize different cultures, and biases among cultures, including our own. How do we really listen, how do we really engage? I think that this is a challenge, as is the act of living in community under one roof. Do you live together or just alongside each other?

This concerns all levels of the community. I was actually thinking

about this question when I was staying in your house ten days ago. What does it mean to live in religious community in relation to the work that many of your confreres are doing? Many of them serve as parish priest. When you exercise your ministry --which is essential to you as religious -- how do you live this Synodality there? How do you exercise it in a parish entrusted to your care? How do you interact with minorities, with women? What attitude do you have towards women or towards the poor? How do you encourage diversity on a parish board knowing that it is much easier to work with people who think the same as you?

I think that those are processes of learning to be synodal too. There is a Vademecum, a handbook that was written for the Synod. People have been saying, "What about the schools?" "How do we listen to the children?" In your community and in some parts of the world, you have schools, you might even have boarding houses. So, how do you listen to what the children have to say? How are they given voice in this whole process? Children are not -- and this comes from my work in the area of abuse -- objects. They are not only receivers, they are also protagonists, but we often tend to teach them instead of also listening to them. So, I think, it is a wonderful challenge that religious have in their own way of exercising their ministry.

Well, that reminds me that Synodality is not about structures alone, it's not enough to have a chapter to have elections; there must also be a capacity to listen to each other and to others outside of the congregation. And that may be, as you said, a special challenge for male clerical congregations which-- at certain times -- have men in positions of power, at least in parishes and other Catholic institutes, no?

Of course, that is a question of how you become aware of what you are doing. One thing is when you are in your communities, but another thing is if you are in your ministry. And there it means giving voice and enabling people to speak. I think the religious have a special task. I am deeply convinced of that in our Church. It is not just the dioceses, the episcopal structures. There is a specific prophetic task for the religious. Would it not be wonderful if at the end we could say

that the religious were the ones who particularly contributed, because they brought this experience into the learning process? But also, religious may better be aware than others that discerning together takes time. That there might be conflicting views leading to severe tensions. As a canon lawyer I know too well that this occurs also in religious communities. So, the question is then, what can we also learn from religious in solving the tensions that arise in a discernment process?

Some religious might think: we do have our synodal kind of meetings already within our community life as religious. And yet, questions can be raised: Does the provincial, does the superior of the house say, "Well, listen, this is what we have decided, this is the problem, this is an issue," or does he ask you: "Do you have concerns?" It begins with who decides what is put on the agenda of a meeting. A next step consists of reflecting about the way the meetings are moderated: how is the listening facilitated? Can all voices be heard? How do we listen to each other? How do we arrive at a decision?

Another aspect besides the listening concerns leadership to be held accountable. There is nothing more frustrating than asking people to give their opinions and then to do things your own way anyway. Or not implement what they have decided or what the group ultimately has decided. The question of accountability still remains. I am currently co-moderating a research project on "Accountability in a synodal church". We have invited a former General Superior of a very large clerical religious institute to reflect with us on topics such as "What can dioceses learn from religious institutes on being held accountable? What can they learn from holding chapters? What about stepping down after two terms of office? What does all of that mean? How could the Church benefit from these provisions and experiences?

The religious should feel encouraged to speak about the good experiences, but also about the challenges that come with it. Don't wait to be asked, but speak and share! You do have something to offer!

Well, one step back, concerning the process,. There are already many different experiences in the universal Church with synods, with councils. Isn't this a very elaborate way for a synod, risking the additional burden for the national churches, to go from one gathering to the other?

I think that Pope Francis initiated this whole synodal path already in 2015 when 50 years after the establishing of synods of bishops he reflected on them. Some churches have already begun to walk the path of synodality. For example the church in Germany and Australia. The latter celebrates currently a formal plenary council. The church in Ireland is beginning a synod for the whole country. In these three countries these processes came as a response to the sexual abuse crisis. They became aware that there are systemic issues and that they cannot just go on, but must find a new pattern of interaction and decision making. The ecclesial culture has to change. A new path must be found. Finding this new path is not only the task of the clergy; it must be done by engaging all faithful in the process. Australia, Germany, Ireland.. these are examples of countries where people have begun the journey. Other places have also started the journey. We should keep in mind: when the synod will be closed in 2023, the process of becoming a synodal process will not terminate. I am sure it has to continue and take roots in the churches subsequently. Those who are already on the road, so to speak, can, in a creative way, reflect what is going on. Sometimes people ask: what about the Germany synodal path? I think this is one way of journeying, but there are many other ways possible. As the saying goes: many roads lead to Rome. So we have to see which fruits all the different roads will produce.

A few years ago, I was in Bombay. I had the privilege of participating in a diocesan pastoral council session. From every parish there was a representative. It was remarkable how the 130 people in the room not just knew the cardinal, but how he knew the people in the room by name. Bishop and people interacted and discerned in a unique way. In many, many parts of the world, bishops have not established a

diocesan pastoral council and parish priests have no parish pastoral council. The Code of Canon Law determines that they are not obligatory. However, bishops and priests who understand that the Holy Spirit is not only with them, but that through baptism and confirmation all have received the Holy Spirit and that there are different charisms in the church, know that these councils are one way to discern with the community where the Spirit might lead such a community. Hence, these bishops and priests are then eager to have these councils, because they facilitate listening and discerning of the people of God locally.

Looking into the future, at the end of the synod, the bishops will give their conclusions to the pope and he will prepare his document for the whole Church. What would you dream to be the result at that moment?

Thank you for that question. Whenever I hear that question, I think of the Second Vatican Council. When at the opening of that Council a person would have made a statement of what the outcome of the council would be, that person would most likely have answered something very different from what the ultimate outcome was. It was the work of the Holy Spirit that caused the council to develop and articulate a new understanding. The Holy Spirit guided that whole process. It would be dangerous to predict now what will come out of the process of discernment that we are just now beginning in all the local churches around the world. We should be open to what might come our way and let ourselves be moved by it. Already now, I can see and feel the enthusiasm in Africa, Asia and South America. Europe might be inspired by the gifts that the Spirit is bestowing on us through these continents. I am very confident that something good will come out of this, but we need patience and humility to harvest the fruits.