

Julieann Moran: *Pilgrims of Hope – Walking the Synodal Pathway*

1. Introduction – Setting the Scene

Good morning, everyone. Thank you so much for the warm welcome. I'm truly delighted to be here and to share with you some reflections on the theme *Pilgrims of Hope* and how this connects deeply with a movement of the Spirit that is close to my heart — synodality as a reason for great hope, especially in this Jubilee Year. Let me begin by saying this: to be a pilgrim means to be on a journey; to be moving, not aimlessly, but with purpose. For us, the purposeful path we are walking is called synodality, and the strength to keep walking is the virtue, hope.

Of course, at the heart of our Christian faith is this incredible truth about hope: we are people of the Resurrection. That means we are people of hope. We are Easter people and Alleluia is our song! We believe wholeheartedly that no darkness, no challenge, is greater than the light of Jesus Christ. And I want to explore with you how that hope finds expression in the synodal pathway we're on together as a Church.

Synodality is not just the latest Church initiative or the brain child of Pope Francis, may he rest in peace. It's not something new. At its heart, it's the way God is calling us to be Church today. I say it's not new, and that's true; it's not. But there is a deep sense that the Holy Spirit is stirring something new in the Church reminding us that the very nature of the Church should be synodal. Pope Francis use to say that the Church is synodal or it is not Church at all. But why does synodality matter to us, here, in this centre, in the city of Belfast, or anywhere else outside of Rome for that matter? And how can it give us hope for the future of our Church?

2. Theological Grounding of Christian Hope in Action

Let's begin with the word *hope*. We often use it casually — “I hope the weather holds up,” or “I hope this works out” and I really do hope this works out! But, we are also acutely aware that hope is a powerful word. It gives us the strength to keep going through many of life's challenges. Other words like optimism or confidence help describe it, but Christian hope is something much more. It's not just about wishing for something better. It's rooted in something deeper: our trust in God's promises. Christian hope is a virtue, a deep, lived trust in the promises of God. It's the anchor of our soul, as the letter to the Hebrews says (6:19).

The Old Testament gives us two beautiful Hebrew words for hope: *Qavah* and *Yachal*. *Qavah* is an eager waiting with tense anticipation. You know something is about to happen, but you're not sure exactly when, just like how Noah waited for the waters to recede. *Yachal* is a more patient, enduring hope, a hope that you know is going to take time, like farmers waiting for crops to grow. It's the kind of hope expressed in Lamentations 3:26: “It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.” Both of these words for hope express a hopeful waiting and trusting in God, and in God's timing, but in different ways.

In the New Testament, we get the Greek word *Elpis* — a confident, joyful expectation. Early Christians used this word to describe their *living hope*, rooted in the risen Jesus. This kind of hope says: *We know the end of the story*. We trust that God's plan is unfolding, even when we can't see the full picture yet. This is the same hope that should be fuelling our journey today.

As Pope Francis wrote in *Spes Non Confundit — Hope Does Not Disappoint* — the heart of our faith is “anchored in Jesus Christ.” It's a hope that acts, that serves, that believes God's promises will be fulfilled. Hope *does things*! In *Spe Salvi – Saved in Hope*, Pope Benedict

XVI wrote, “The one who has hope lives differently.” And again, Pope Francis added to this with “Works of mercy are also works of hope” (*Spes Non Confundit*). And that’s the kind of hope we need to rediscover. Hope in action. Hope that gives us courage. Hope that calls us to serve, to build, to accompany others. When we serve others — those who are poor, those who are sick, those imprisoned, those who feel excluded or isolated, our elderly brothers and sisters — we are living out our hope. We are becoming signs of the Kingdom. That’s what the Jubilee Year calls us to: To be *pilgrims of hope*, bringing light into a world often marked by division and despair.

But hope doesn’t only lift us up in hard times. It also deepens in times of joy and peace. Hope flourishes when we recognise God’s blessings in our lives and when we trust that even greater things are yet to come, knowing that our relationship with God is always growing. Even in moments of abundance, joy, comfort, and peace, hope deepens and strengthens our connection to God’s promise. And let’s not forget Mary, our model of hope — trusting, active, courageous. She said “yes” to God’s plan before she could even see how it would unfold. Her witness reminds us that hope is not a soft virtue. It is *radical trust in God’s goodness*. As Elizabeth said to her: “Blessed is she who believed that the promises made her by the Lord would be fulfilled” (Luke 1:45).

3. Synodality: A Church that Walks Together in Hope

Now let’s bring that hope into the reality of synodality. The word *synod* comes from two Greek words — *syn* meaning “with,” and *hodos* meaning “path” or “way.” It literally means *walking the path together*. Synodality is that ancient practice of journeying as the People of God — bishops, clergy, religious, and laity — listening, discerning, praying, and walking side by side. Co-pilgrims of hope! It’s not some fagary imposed on us by Pope Francis, or the hierarchy. It’s something rooted in our baptism. Each one of us, by virtue of our baptism, is called to walk this road. Not as passive back seat passengers, asking are we there yet, but as pilgrims. If *hodos* means the way, our baptism commands us to become “hodophiles”—lovers of the way!

Synodality calls for this shift from passive observation to active involvement. This way of being together emphasises co-responsibility among all members of the Church, fostering a shared discernment grounded in our common baptism. If synod literally means walking the path together, then synodality, the living out of being synodal, is realised when we walk the path together, when we gather, listen to each other, and discern and make decisions together by virtue of our baptism—not by our ecclesial status or ministry within the Church.

In this style of Church, the Pope, the Magisterium, and our bishops, as part of the People of God, take part in the mutual listening and discernment process. This is a profound shift—a new way of exercising leadership, where decisions are not made in isolation by a few but through the shared wisdom of the entire Church community. This model of decision-making is not just a matter of governance or structural change or changes to canon law etc. This model embodies Christian hope by trusting that the Holy Spirit works through all the members of the Church. It reminds us that each person, by their baptism, has a vital role to play in the mission of the Church and are called to do so with joy, with purpose, and with hope.

Synodality changes how we understand leadership. It’s not “Father does everything.” It’s not “the bishop decides everything in a vacuum.” It’s about shared responsibility grounded in our common baptism. Even if we had a surge in vocations tomorrow, we’d still be called to this synodal vision. We are invited to build a Church that welcomes, listens, prays, and discerns

together. And this involves everyone: young people, women, LGBTQ+ persons, migrants, those on the so called margins — all have a place at the table. We are co-workers in the vineyard. And that gives us real hope. Because we all have something unique to contribute.

Synodality is not just about holding meetings or producing documents either—it is about a way or a style of being Church together. Pope Francis repeatedly emphasised that “the journey of synodality is the journey that God expects from his Church at the beginning of this third millennium.” This journey is fuelled by hope: hope that by listening to one another, we will hear God’s voice more clearly through the Holy Spirit; hope that by working together, we can be a more faithful witness to the Gospel, more inclusive, more missionary, more hopeful. Pope Leo affirmed all this when he said, “we want to be a synodal Church, a Church that moves forward, a Church that always seeks peace, that always seeks charity, that always seeks to be close, above all to those who are suffering.” He said this less than an hour after he had been elected Pope in his first address to the world. Two days later when he addressed the Cardinals on 10th May, he said, “Let us take up this precious legacy and continue on the journey, inspired by the same hope that is born of faith.” When meeting with other faith leaders on 19th May he said, “I wish to assure you of my intention to continue Pope Francis’ commitment to promoting the synodal character of the Catholic Church and to developing new and concrete forms for an ever more intense synodality in the ecumenical field.”

4. Synodality – A Church that Listens and Discerns Together

One of the most grace-filled and hopeful aspects of this process has been the emphasis on listening. Here in Ireland, we’ve been on this synodal pathway since 2021. You might remember that the Irish Bishops launched a synodal process, asking: “What does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time?” We heard from people in every corner of the country. Through prayer, listening, and reflection, we captured the voices of thousands. And out of that came themes we cannot ignore:

- A longing for inclusion and belonging
- A deep desire for healing from past wounds
- A call for more co-responsible leadership and shared decision-making, especially for women
- A hunger for faith formation and better adult catechesis
- A desire to fully welcome, rather than tolerate, those on the so-called margins

We summed it up with one powerful line that made its way into the global synodal synthesis: *“Those who feel at home in the Church feel the absence of those who don’t.”*

We learned, through *Conversations in the Spirit* and the principle of circularity in the listening process, that the Holy Spirit speaks through the voices of all — not just the ordained. This was and is co-responsibility in action. We also learned that synodality isn’t a passing moment. It’s a long-haul journey. And that’s okay — because journeys require trust, patience, and yes... hope.

That’s why over the last year, we’ve trained over 350 lay, religious, and ordained people across Ireland to facilitate *Conversations in the Spirit* – a way of praying, listening, and discerning together, and why we’re also using something called circularity – a way of feeding back, checking in, and refining our collective wisdom. This isn’t just consultation. It’s collaboration. We’ve been learning to exercise our synodal muscles. And, in all of this, we trust that the Holy Spirit is alive and active in the voices of the People of God.

5. Synodality – Rooted in Christ, Moved by the Spirit

I've said this already, but I am going to say it again. Becoming a synodal Church will not happen overnight. It requires a continual commitment to listening, discerning, and acting together. We must embrace this process with patience, humility, and hope, trusting that the Holy Spirit will guide us into a future full of grace and possibility. We need to learn to exercise our synodal muscles, so the way of the People of God becomes the way we speak with courage and honesty, but respectfully, to each other. It becomes the way we listen intently to each other simply to understand and hear what the Holy Spirit is saying in us and through us. It becomes the way we listen to God by listening to the Word of God; the way we pray and discern together, and the way we make and take decisions together. Synodality is a call to action for all Catholics to embrace this way or style of being Church—one marked by co-responsibility, transparency, and missionary zeal. For the Church in Ireland, this means fostering a culture where every person's gifts are recognised, where decision-making is shared, and where mission is at the heart of all we do. This then becomes the way we experience Church, the way we experience synodality as the Body of Christ, and the way we shape its future.

We have been given some excellent guiding principles as we all try to take part in this remarkable spiritual journey and exercise our dormant synodal muscles – the listening sessions, the Conversations in the Spirit, the circularity of the dialogue and discernment. But to embrace and sustain this new vision, I believe we must root ourselves in five essential principles reflected in the life, mission and example of Jesus Christ:

The first is baptism. Baptism is at the heart of synodality. Rooted in Jesus Christ's own baptism, it ontologically changes every one of us. It marks the beginning of our journey of faith and initiates us into the body of believers of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Jesus chose to be baptised by John the Baptist. Let that sink in for a moment. Despite the fact that he was completely divine, and completely sinless, he chose to be baptised by John the Baptist, to demonstrate humility and solidarity with humanity. In the sacrament of baptism, we are united with Christ, in his death and resurrection, and become members of the body of Christ. This communal aspect of baptism emphasises the interconnectedness of all believers, fostering a sense of belonging and shared mission. As baptised members of the Body of Christ we are called to participate actively in the life, mission, and governance of the Church: to contribute our unique gifts, wisdom and insights to the synodal process.

I have often reflected on the difference we would all make if we focused more on the fact that we are the baptised people of God. So often, we say, "I was baptised." We reflect or focus on the sacramental ritual itself when most of us were babies, but what a difference it would be make if we were to say, "I am baptised!" I think it would change how we see ourselves as the People of God; how we live out our baptism as the People of God; how we would truly see ourselves as the brothers and sisters of Christ—in fact, see every Christian as another Christ, and how we would take much greater responsibility for the life and mission of the Church, the Body of Christ, no matter our vocation (married, ordained, single, consecrated etc). I think it would encourage us to step forward, not as passive observers, but as active participants, in the Church's discernment, decision making, and decision taking, shaping her present and future together.

Furthermore, if we look at what happens after Jesus is baptised, an account of which is in all four of our Gospels, we can see that the Holy Spirit descended upon him. So baptism signifies not only the washing away of sin, but our preparation for receiving the Holy Spirit. And it is this spiritual transformation that enables us to discern God's will collectively and to

seek consensus in the decision-making process within the Church. All of us, not just our bishops, priests, or popes; all of us. Baptism serves as the foundation for synodality, empowering the faithful to journey together in faith, hope and love.

The second is prayer. We cannot discern the will of God without being in conversation with God through prayer, and we see this in the person of Jesus Christ when he prays to God his Father not only in times of anguish or pain, like Gethsemane or on the Cross, but after he is baptised, during his time in the desert in preparation for his ministry, before he discerns and chooses the twelve apostles, and many more occasions. Prayer must be the primary preparation and continued practice for this spiritual journey of being in Synod together.

The third is the Word of God. We cannot discern the will of God without listening to God through the Word of God and, again, we see this in the person of Jesus Christ as he continually opens up the Scriptures to those around him. When we recount the Gospel story of Mary and Joseph losing their son during the time of festival, where did they find him? In the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions and everyone being amazed at his understanding of the Scriptures; or when the risen Christ opened up the Scriptures to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

The fourth is listening. We cannot discern the will of God without listening attentively to others. Made in the image and likeness of God, we must not forget that God is already and always present in every person we encounter, and there are far too many people to mention that Jesus encounters and listens to in the Gospels or we will be here all day, but what is clear from each encounter with Jesus in the Gospels is that Jesus listens to people's stories, the lived reality of their lives, their pleas for healing, and the fears many of them have that their religious beliefs and traditions are being criticised or altered by his presence and preaching. But what does Jesus do? He listens to them, he dialogues with them, and discerns with them how they must change in order to live life more abundantly.

And the fifth is the Holy Spirit. We cannot discern the will of God without the Holy Spirit. Jesus teaches clearly that the Holy Spirit will teach his followers what is true. He promises his disciples that the Holy Spirit will teach all things and will remind them of everything he has said to them. We see this clearly in the first written account we have of the Apostles gathering in synod to discern whether gentiles needed to become Jews before they become Christians. The Acts of the Apostles chapter 15 tells us that having gathered at the Council of Jerusalem and listened to each other's experiences, debated, and prayed from the Scriptures, they reach a consensus. They then wrote to the early Church in Antioch with these words: "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to impose on you any further burden than these essentials."

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us... This is what is at the heart of being in Synod. The purpose of all the conversations and the listening sessions, of all the feedback and further rounds of conversation; the purpose of this journeying together as the People of God is to make the Good News of Jesus Christ better known and more effective in the lives of people today, amongst all of the challenges we face, by discerning and recognising the will of God when it seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us.

I want to revisit those five principles that ground this journey — principles that speak to our *identity* as the People of God:

1. Baptism – Our call to mission and co-responsibility begins here.
2. Prayer – We can't discern God's will without being in dialogue with Him.

3. Scripture – The Word of God shapes our listening and direction.
4. Listening – Truly hearing one another reveals the Spirit's voice.
5. The Holy Spirit – Always our guide, our companion, and our strength.

Conclusion: So, why is synodality a reason for great hope? Because it invites us to be a Church where every voice matters. Because it challenges us to share the mission together. Because it calls us to listen deeply and act boldly together. Because it invites us to make manifest that central verse from the Lord's Prayer, the only prayer that Jesus taught us: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." This verse directly connects synodality and hope in the context of discerning God's will for the Church and the world.

Let's break down these connections: When we pray "Your Kingdom come" we express what's called eschatological hope—a hope that longs for the fullness of God's kingdom, but here on earth, not out there somewhere beyond our grasp or after our death, here on earth. This hope is not passive; it compels us to be co-workers in building a world marked by reconciliation, love, and dignity. In the synodal process, this hope takes shape as the Church opens itself to the Spirit's guidance, trusting that even amid all the challenges, God is working through the community's discernment to bring about this transformation.

When we pray, "Your will be done," we acknowledge that no one person holds a monopoly on God's truth. Through dialogue and mutual discernment, we actively seek and hope to embody God's will, not my will, not your will, not the bishop's will or even the Pope's will; God's will. In a synodal Church, this means listening deeply to the Holy Spirit through the voices of all the faithful—clergy, religious, and laity—so that our collective actions align with God's desire for justice, mercy, and peace.

Discerning God's will in light of the Lord's Prayer involves a continuous openness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Lord's Prayer asks for God's will to be done "on earth as in heaven," synodality calls the Church to bridge the gap between these divine ideals and earthly realities through ongoing discernment and shared mission, a shared commitment to seeking and living out God's will. It encourages us to trust that, through the Spirit-led process of communal discernment, the Church can embody the values of the kingdom—justice, peace, and love—here and now.

The path of synodality is not always easy. It requires patience, humility, and a willingness to be changed by what we hear. But the promise is great: A Church more alive, more faithful, and more reflective of the Gospel we preach. As we continue this journey together, may we be people of hope – trusting that the Holy Spirit is leading us toward a future full of grace and possibility. Let us walk together, pray together, hope together, and dream together of a Church that truly reflects God's kingdom here on earth, a kingdom filled with the love of Jesus Christ.