

Reflections on Synodality (1 Cor 12:4-11)

Phil Mortell

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (12:4-11):

*“There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit;
there are different forms of service but the same Lord;
there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone.
To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit.
To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of
knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts
of healing by the one Spirit; to another mighty deeds; to another prophesy; to another
discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues.*

*But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each
person as he wishes.”*

The above extract is from a section of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians in which he is discussing spiritual gifts and their purposes, which he says here and elsewhere in this Letter are to build up “the kingdom of God on earth,” “the Church” (1 Cor 14:4).

Paul is making a number of points:

The gifts of the Spirit are given to all. But, what does he mean when he says ‘gifts.’ In 1 Cor 13:4-7 Paul itemises those ‘gifts’ as patience, kindness, not being jealous, not being pompous, not being boastful, not rude, not quick-tempered, not seeking one's own interests but the good of others, etc. In other words, Paul is talking about the everyday virtues of Christian living, Christ-like love in all its forms. They are given to all “to build up the Church,” the “Body of Christ.”

Therefore, it is God's intention/plan, inbuilt into our creation as Christians, that all have a role and that all participate in the building up of the Church, the Body of Christ by putting that love into our everyday words and actions.

As in the human body there are different parts, so also in the Body of Christ. Different members/parts are given different God-given gifts for different purposes. But, all are gifted, all gifts are God-given, all gifts are freely given by God and not earned, all gifts are needed, all gifts are inter-related and are inter-dependent, all gifts are needed to build up the church.

As all are given gifts by the Spirit, then all have the God-given responsibility of developing and using those gifts for the benefit of the Church, for the building up of the Body of Christ.

Just as in building a physical church, many different skills are needed (e.g. planners, brick-layers, carpenters, roofers), so in building the spiritual Church, the Body of Christ, many different skills or services are needed (e.g. preachers, teachers, healers, leaders). All are to

use their different skills so that together they complete the Church: take away some skills and the Church will remain unfinished or in danger of collapse.

Different people may be given different sets of gifts but there is one gift given to everyone – love (1 Cor 13:1-3).

“I may be able to speak the languages of human beings and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell. I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains – but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burnt – but if I have no love, this does me no good.”

Paul then describes this ‘love’ (1 Cor 13:4-8): *“Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope and patience never fail. Love is eternal.”*

That love is no ordinary love. In his Letter to the Romans (chapter 5:5) Paul states clearly that this love is eternal or “divine love poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” It is a spiritual, inter-personal, transformational, reconciling love, reconciling us to one another and to God. And we are “Ambassadors of Christ” bringing that love to the world we live in, transforming it into the world God wants – and we need.

Application to the Synodal Process:

This synodal process is an opportunity for all to be involved in building up the Church. This may well require finding new ways of consulting everyone (e.g. setting up in-person meetings, small groups, welcoming online and postal feedback, involving others in action groups).

Pope Francis has challenged us to “call [the church] to account, demand action, insist on change” (Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, 2013). But we must begin by calling ourselves to account, by demanding action on our own part, and by insisting on change in our attitudes, and in our behaviour.

The overall objective is to build together a community where everyone’s needs are met through the caring and sharing of each person in the community, where everyone feels loved, valued and respected ((McVerry, *The God of Mercy, the God of the Gospels*, 94-95). That loving, valuing and respecting must also be the means of achieving the objective.