



A Pope who is not afraid of open discussion and even dissent in the Church

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Pope Francis is an unusual Pope who is bringing real change to the Church by encouraging open discussion and refusing to silence dissent. In fact, he has said, “Open and fraternal debate makes theological and pastoral thought grow.... That doesn’t frighten me. What’s more, I look for it.”

Many people would like to see him clarify matters and crack down on dissent, but Francis is patient and wants people to speak their minds because he believes in a synodal church. He trusts that the Holy Spirit will guide us in the right direction.

Pope Francis, talking to the bishops before the first session of the Synod on the Family, told them: “You need to say all that you feel with *parrhesia*” [boldly, candidly and without fear]. “And at the same time, you should listen with humility and accept with an open heart what your brothers say.”

Parrhesia, or speaking boldly, listening humbly and always with an open trusting heart is Francis’s prescription for synodality and discernment. It is also collegial consensus-building. Francis is not in a hurry. For him, initiating processes is more important than forcing or arriving at quick decisions.

Here in Australia, we are about to begin in earnest our process of preparation for the 2020 Plenary Council, where we will discuss and discern the future of our Church in Australia. Archbishop Coleridge, the chair of the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council, has assured us that everyone is invited to speak freely, speaking from their heart and their mind.

At the beginning of the Synod, the Pope invited the bishops to speak up even if they thought he might not want to hear what they had to say. We are invited to speak boldly even if it may seem to be something the bishops and priests might not want to hear. In fact, Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium* (n. 37) tells us everyone is “permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church”. Pope Francis believes in the *sensus fidelium*, or the sense of the faithful, as an important part of the teaching authority of the Church.

This is a new approach to what it means to be Church. Lay people have not always been encouraged to speak up and we clergy have not always appreciated our responsibility to invite the *sensus fidelium* and to listen humbly.

We all have much to learn and it may be a little messy and hurtful in the process. Consulting, speaking up, listening, discerning are all skills and they take practice to master. I imagine that the first time we speak boldly, it may be clumsy and/or angry. It will probably be even more difficult for us to listen humbly, neither pointing a finger at, nor judging others, but with open kind hearts trying to appreciate what the Spirit is saying through each of us.

It will require of us virtues like charity, open-mindedness, trust and patience. Charity to be kind, respect and listen to one another. Open-mindedness because “we cannot dialogue with people if we already know all the answers to their problems”. And, above all, trusting and patient because, as Pope Francis has shown us, we need not be afraid of open and fraternal debate because that is how we will find what the Spirit wants.

Most important things take time to emerge, but if we give ourselves boldly, humbly and trustingly to the process, it will bear fruit at the right time. There may not be remarkable decisions, but if we become a more synodal, consultative and participatory Church, it will be worth it.