

Acts of the Apostles

FR TOM O'REILLY

Vision for a Synodal Church

Where is the Spirit leading the Church? That is the underlying question in the Acts of the Apostles. Columban Fr Tom O'Reilly suggests it is also the basic question of the synodal process today.

The Vatican does not postpone major events without good reason. Just before Pentecost this year, Pope Francis postponed the next Synod of Bishops, due to be held in Rome in October 2022, for one year. The theme chosen is synodality itself, which he says is God's wish for the Church of the third millennium.

The meaning of the word synodality is journeying together. What is envisaged is a Church in which all the baptised - laity, priests, religious and bishops - journey together in seeking the way forward as we respond to our common vocation as missionary disciples of Jesus Christ.

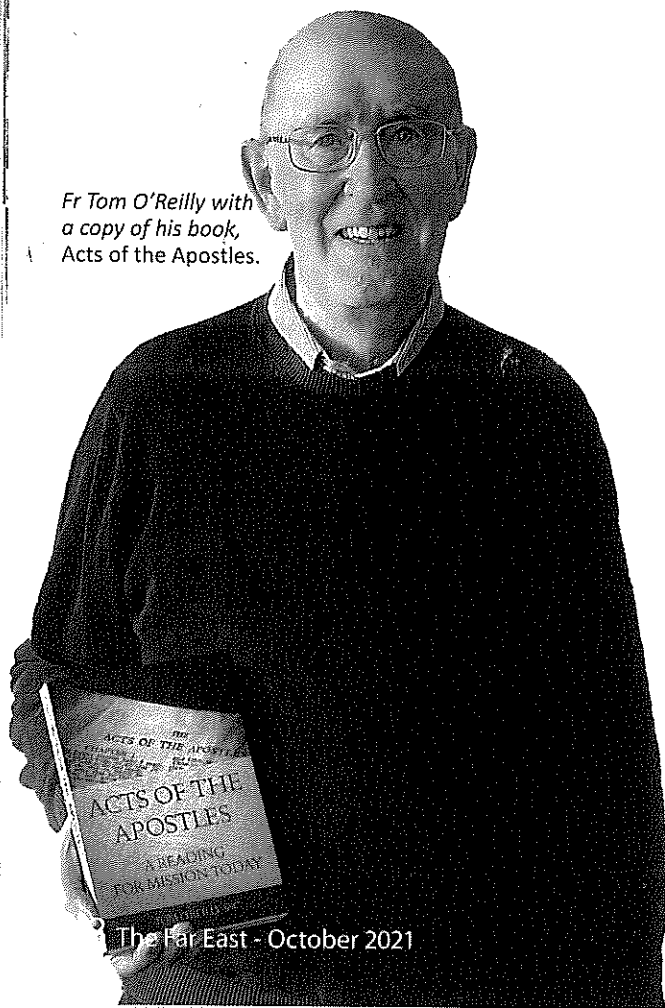
Pope Francis is saying that the synod is not just a one-off event in Rome, but an extended process in which there is maximum participation of all the faithful. For this reason, he is now providing ample opportunity for conversations at local, national and continental levels before the Rome meeting in 2023. There are three interrelated focal points for the upcoming synod: communion, participation and mission. In teasing out the meaning and implications of these, we can find inspiration and guidance from the *Acts of the Apostles*.

Let us begin with mission. The Church is not a club for the benefit of the members. Its reason for being is to continue the mission of Jesus Christ in our world. Jesus gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples so that they could be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

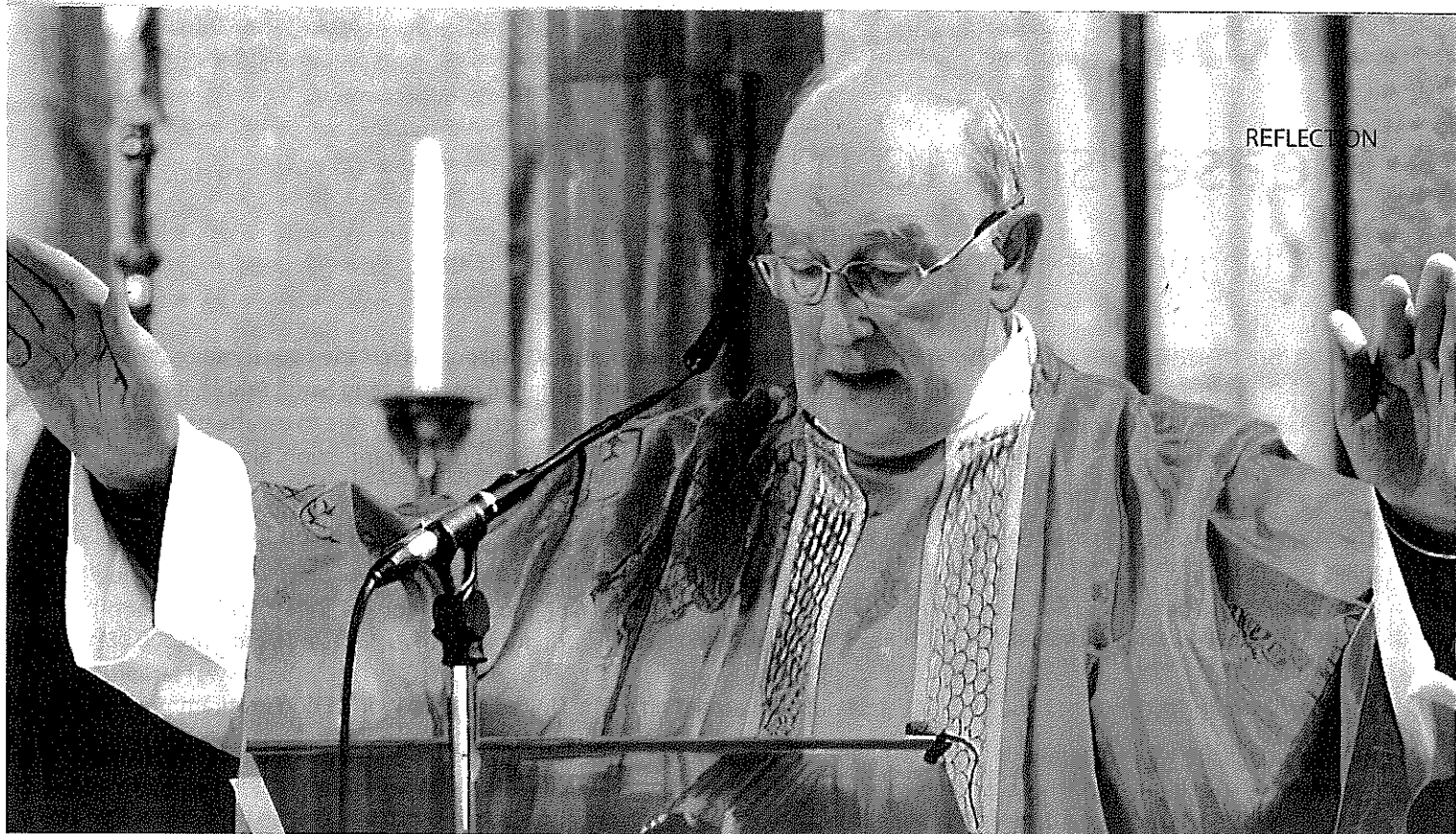
On almost every page of the *Acts of the Apostles*, we read the story of Spirit-filled disciples courageously witnessing to the good news of God's all-inclusive salvation through Jesus Christ. As they faced opposition, they experienced the Holy Spirit empowering them (Acts 5:32). As they set about their plans, they realised that the Holy Spirit had other plans for them (Acts 16:6-10). They also learned that setbacks, uncertainties and adverse circumstances can be taken up by the Holy Spirit into the working out of God's plans (Acts 20:22-23). Engaging in the synodal process means trying to discover what the Holy Spirit is doing in the ongoing mission of Jesus today and cooperating with that.

Mission and communion are inseparably connected. Communion has to do with how we relate to one another in the Church. In the early chapters of *Acts*, we hear how the Holy Spirit is creating a prayerful, discerning community that is open to what God is doing in its midst and in which there is a great spirit of sharing and practical care for the poor (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35). However, we are also told of a counter spirit that sows seeds of division, deceit, hypocrisy, self-glorification, collusion and possessiveness (Acts 5:1-11; 6:1).

Fr Tom O'Reilly with a copy of his book, *Acts of the Apostles*.



The Far East - October 2021



Fr O'Reilly has written of the valuable lesson the Acts of the Apostles has for us in choosing leaders for our communities.

If Christian mission is about the promotion of loving, compassionate, forgiving and just relationships, then we must be a sign of that by the way we relate to one another in the Church. In a world where people are often divided on the grounds of class, culture and race, we need the witness of Christian communities in which people with diverse backgrounds, cultures and viewpoints can relate in a mutually enriching way.

During the synodal process, we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit drawing us into open, hospitable communion, where all are included, and each one's contribution is valued. A synodal Church promotes the participation of all in its life and mission. Here also we can draw inspiration from the *Acts of the Apostles*. When ministerial structures proved inadequate to meet community needs, "the whole community of disciples" selected seven Spirit-filled persons who were then approved for ministry by the apostles (Acts 6:1-6).

When the apostles and elders met to discuss the implications of the increasing influx of Gentiles into what had been a predominantly Jewish-Christian Church, "the whole Church" had a part in reaching fundamental decisions about Christian identity and communal life (Acts 15:6-29). These decisions were taken with the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28), who is given to every baptised Christian.

Here we are touching on a basic principle of synodality: the *sensus fidelium* - that is, the instinct of the whole Church in recognising true Christian faith and discerning the new ways that the Holy Spirit is revealing it to the Church.

Where is the Holy Spirit leading the Church? That is the underlying question in the *Acts of the Apostles*. It is also the question in the synodal process today. This process differs from the parliamentary procedure of debate and argumentation where the loudest or most articulate voices often prevail. A mindset interested only in defending positions or pushing agendas is detrimental to the synodal process.

A synodal Church is a listening Church in which everyone has something to learn. A synodal Church is a praying Church, open to hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit and aware of the prejudices and resistances that make us deaf to the Holy Spirit. A synodal Church recognises and values the variety of roles in the Church where, in the words of Pope Francis, *the only authority is the authority of service*.

Columban Fr Tom O'Reilly lives and works in Ireland.