

"So that's what the Synod was like!"

Kevin de Souza was appointed to the Team of Experts for the recently concluded Synod for young people. He recounts his experiences during the days of the synod.

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The word “synod” is not in everyday use. When I sent Whatsapp messages to family and friends abroad that I would be part of the Synod on “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment,” a good

number didn't reply immediately. They later confessed that they had to look up the meaning of "synod" before getting back to me!

A Synod is an assembly of bishops who have been chosen from different parts of the world to come together in union with the Pope to study matters of the faith, for its preservation and growth in the world. For this Synod about 50 *uditori*, or observers, were invited. The majority were young people from all around the world. There were fraternal delegates invited such as Anglican Bishop Joel Waweru from Kenya and Rev. Chris Ferguson, General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches – Germany. I was on the team of 23 experts.

Pope Francis, the Synod Pacesetter

The Inaugural Mass of the Synod for the Youth took place at 10 a.m. at St

Peter's Square on Wednesday, 3 October 2018. The liturgy of the Mass was beautiful in all its aspects. The choir's repertoire and the moments of pin drop silence every now and then invited to personal prayer. Some of the Synod Youth presented the offerings to the Holy Father.

At the end of the Mass, Pope Francis went about greeting people on the perimeter of the *sagrato* in his customary manner. My yellow synod identity badge had earned me a front-row seat and I was overjoyed to meet the Pope and tell him I was in the Synod. And then he was gone. I was under the impression that I would not meet him up close again. But I was wrong.

That very day, the opening session in the Aula Paul VI was scheduled to start at 4:30 p.m. I got there half an hour earlier. Suddenly I saw the Holy Father walking towards the building

from his *Santa Marta* residence. I didn't want to get in his way so I detained myself outside for about 5 minutes before stepping into the hall.

To my surprise, I found Pope Francis standing right there in front of me! There was no security detail and his gestures sent a powerful message: "Welcome to the Synod!" he seemed to say with a beaming smile. I was tongue-tied and blurted out an indistinct, "*Buonasera Santo Padre*" and shuffled away. Many shared this experience. It was edifying.

The First General Assembly

The Aula holds more than 300 people in a semi-circular arrangement. Cardinals and bishops took most of the spaces. To the top right there were the *uditori*. On the top left was the team of experts. There were also some official journalists and a good number of technical assistants not to mention an outstanding team of

women who were doing simultaneous translations into 5 languages all through the Synod.

The presiding table was headed by the Pope seated in the centre flanked by the Synod Secretary General, Cardinal Baldisseri, a number of other cardinals and the two Special Secretaries, Fr. Giacomo Costa and Fr. Rossano Sala. The latter two headed the team of experts that worked all through the Synod to synthesize ideas presented and to see how to incorporate them in the Final Document.

After the electronic attendance of the Synodal Fathers was done, we started listening to presentations from different Synodal Fathers. Each had 4 minutes to speak about a paragraph of choice from the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the document prepared after the March 2018 Pre-Synod Meeting with youth. We listened to

presentations until 7:15 p.m. when the Pope concluded the First General Assembly with the recital of the Angelus and the aspiration *Maria Mater Ecclesiae - ora pro nobis.*

The Holy Spirit Weaves a Universal Tapestry

In the whole Synod there were 22 General Assemblies. Apart from the last three, the others were an exercise of listening and listening and listening. Only one person could speak at a time. The Pope made a recommendation that was implemented from day one: after every 5 presentations, there would be a 3-minute silence to ponder on what we heard.

The context of the discourses was the three-Part *Instrumentum Laboris* that dwelt on recognizing the reality of the youth in the world, interpreting these varied situations and choosing ways forward to help the youth to

encounter Christ and to feel at home in the Church.

Some have the impression that listening to hundreds of discourses must have been very boring. It was quite the contrary because the sessions were very enriching. It was a real “ecclesial experience” to listen to the Synodal Fathers speaking from the different continents. Their presentations were like threads that weaved a universal tapestry of a Holy Church that has members in all kinds of situations.

One could sense the inspirations of the Holy Spirit when Synodal Fathers spoke of the problems of migrants and some who dwelt on educational issues. One Father made a heart-felt apology to the youth for not having taken good enough care of them. One spoke of thriving priestly vocations in his diocese. Another recounted how a young person in his diocese

died a martyr buried in a pit and stoned to death. Young Safa Al Abbia spoke of the fate of Christians in the Middle East. The latter two accounts drew prolonged applause.

Out of The Box Experiences

The morning sessions were from 9:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. They commenced with the singing in Latin of the *Ora Tertia* from the Breviary. After that Cardinal Baldisserri asked the Synodal Fathers to electronically record their attendance. Then it was time to listen to the presentations and to pause every 20 minutes.

The coffee break at 10:30 a.m. was always welcome! All participants went down to the atrium of the Paul VI. I rubbed my eyes when I thought I saw Pope Francis with a cup of coffee in his hands, having a hearty conversation with some people around him. What's more is that he didn't move from there. He hung

around and met those who wanted to greet him.

Towards the end of the day, there was a space in the schedule for 3-minute open contributions. Synodal fathers and youth could press a button on a remote control attached to every seat to solicit a slot to speak. It worked on a first come, first serve basis. A Synodal Father made an out-of-the-box proposal: he urged the organizers to think of slotting in a pilgrimage, because after all this was a Youth Synod. No guesses how the youth responded: a loud applause and a “woo hoo”!

Organizing a pilgrimage for so many people in about 10 days is a little complex. But Cardinal Baldisserri and his team studied the matter and gave the green light. The Synod timetable was restructured. A sign-up desk was arranged and a 6-kilometre pilgrimage along the *Via Francigena*

to the tomb of St Peter was organized for Thursday 24th October. 100 youth from different Roman parishes were invited to join. Volunteers were roped in. And the Roman Police were on alert to protect pilgrims from the busy morning traffic.

It was a lovely icon of the Synod focus: bishops and youth walking together along the same path to the “heaven” of St Peter’s Basilica. Along the way, there were moments of prayer, reading of scripture, singing hymns and chit chatting. Pope Francis joined the pilgrims in renewing their baptismal vows before the tomb of Peter in the Basilica. A Solemn Mass was celebrated after that followed by lunch at the atrium of the Paul VI Hall.

A Gift from the Youth to the Pope and Synodal Fathers

While the drafting team was busy working on the Final Document, the youth were cooking up a small surprise for everyone on Friday 26th October. Their voice had been heard in the Aula and in the Small Groups. Now they wanted to run a variety show on their own.

Everyone was convoked to the Atrium where chairs had been arranged and a provisional stage had been set up. At the very front was the distinct figure of Pope Francis who had been escorted there by one of the youth, Yadira Vieyra from the US, and her husband. Sebastian Duhau from Australia and Emilie Callan from Canada were the hosts for the evening. They did an excellent job of introducing the various items, spicing up their script with little jokes about the bishops and cardinals that were funny and yet very respectful.

Thirty-six young people. Thirty-six creative minds. Songs. Poems. Interviews. And last but not least, dance. The whole group performed a choreographed dance to music from the Shalom Community. Several young people went out to bring some of the bishops on stage. It was a palpable way of showing appreciation for what they had lived in the last few weeks. It was a clear show of confidence in these Church figures as real Fathers.

That Friday night will forever be etched in my mind. After the Show, a good number of the youth headed to the church of St Lorenzo for an hour of adoration. It was a moving moment to see the very same lively young people who had been on stage a few minutes before now prostrate themselves before the Blessed Sacrament, singing *Laudate Dominum omnes gentes* and other

hymns, and leaving moments for silent prayer.

The Last General Assembly: the Final Countdown

The next day was certainly the longest working day of the Synod. In the morning, the Final Document was circulated and the two General Secretaries started to read it paragraph by paragraph as simultaneous translation was being done.

In the afternoon, the Synodal Fathers were reminded to record their attendance. And then, in a systematic way, they were called upon to vote paragraph by paragraph. There were two options: *Placet, Non placet*, – Acceptable, Not Acceptable. A majority of 166 votes was needed for every paragraph to be approved. It was smooth sailing in general. Before 6 p.m. the voting was done for the

First Two Parts. The Third Part had to be read and then voted on.

As the clock was close to striking 8 p.m., the voting had almost reached the final paragraph No. 167 on sanctity that partially read: “*Through the holiness of the youth, the Church can renew her spiritual ardor and her apostolic vigor ...*” There was a silence as the voice in off announced that voting for No. 167 was now closed. After a pause the result was announced: 239 *placet* and 2 *non placet*. A loud applause redoubled with shouts from the young people meant that it was all over. Three weeks of intense work were now complete.

The Church is our Mother

In some sense, there was a certain reluctance to leave the Aula. It would be the last time that we would hear those genuine words from the Pope: “*buona cena, buon riposo, ci vediamo*

domani ... have a good dinner, rest well and see you tomorrow.”

Pope Francis told us that the Synod is not a parliament. It is a protected area where the Holy Spirit has been acting. Secondly, he thanked us for the Final Document. At the same time he reminded every participant in the Synod that *we* are the first receivers of it, the first ones to pray about it and the pioneers of making it a reality.

The Church is a Family

Sunday 28th October brought to an end the historic Synod for young people. The 300-plus participants were asked to gather in the “braccio di Costantino” – a large hall on the right-hand side of St Peter’s Basilica. Cardinals, bishops and priests vested for the Mass, while the rest of us formed part of the entrance procession.

Pope Francis delivered the homily. The Synod had become a family gathering. And the Father of this gathering reminded us that we have to listen to the youth, we have to be their friends, and bring them closer to Christ through the joy of our lives. *“To all of you who have taken part in this ‘journey together’, I say ‘thank you’ for your witness,”* he concluded.

The recessional procession took us back to the large hall. The friendships that had been moulded over 25 days were evident among all the participants. Handshakes and hugs were exchanged as tears of gratitude flowed for the priceless moments spent together. It was truly a grace to be a part of the Synod. We now have the mandate from the Holy Father to take the message of listening and accompaniment, a message of real friendship to all those in the Church and those outside.

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