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Mary McAleese warns ‘winds of change’ have died in Synod on Synodality

by Sarah Mac Donald

The 72-year-old lawyer described the Synod as “a kite flown by a Pope and clerical hierarchy in panic as their power seeped away”.



Many Catholics had hoped the Synod on Synodality, pictured here meeting last October, would lead to change on equality, the role of women and more.

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The “winds of change” have died within the Synod on Synodality which has “steered itself into a cul-de-sac”, according to Professor Mary McAleese, former Irish head of state.

Speaking to *The Tablet* ahead of the [Root and Branch’s lay-led gathering](#), “Empowering Ourselves: Flourish & Thrive”, from 30 August to 1 September, at which she will speak, she said the ambition of the Synod on Synodality “to strengthen an unreformed magisterium” is already a “dead letter”.

The 72-year-old lawyer described the Synod as “a kite flown by a Pope and clerical hierarchy in panic as their power seeped away”.

“It got uplift from a posse of hagiographers and Pollyannas as well as a faithful ever hopeful.” But she suggested that the “kite trails the ground and is likely to be in ribbons by the end October 2024” when [the second stage of the synod](#) is due to conclude.

According to Dr McAleese, just as the Synod of Bishops was created by Pope Paul VI to “thwart and limit the express desire of the College of Bishops for real episcopal collegiality”, the Synod on Synodality was designed to “corral and control the desire of the People of God [for full equality and collaboration](#) in the mission of Christ on earth”.

“Pope Francis did not open up a path by which reform issues in the future may be [discussed and ultimately changed](#). Quite the reverse. His Synod on Synodality was designed, as is now clear and was feared from the start, to shut down the path long since opened up by the People of God who had since the Second Vatican Council been using a new-found right and responsibility to discuss, critique and dismiss contentious magisterial teaching particularly on gender, equality, human sexuality, human reproduction, governance, authority and obedience.”

She warned: “The days of uncritical subservience to a dysfunctional magisterium are already over.”

Professor McAleese, a canon lawyer, nevertheless remains hopeful, believing that the signs of rebirth, renewal, reform “are all around, just not in Rome”.

As to whether the Synod could, in her view, be salvaged, she responded, “The path to Christ is what matters and it is always open to the Synod to find its way back to that.”

Mary Ring, one of the organisers of the lay-led Root and Branch gathering told *The Tablet* that this is the reform movement’s third hybrid live, in-person and online gathering in five years.

Online participation will be heavily represented by the English-speaking world with participants booked from Papua New Guinea and Australasia, the North American continent and Europe. Root and Branch, she said, will strive to maximise real-time participation. Recordings will be available to all who have registered.

The live sessions at Hinsley Hall will allow participants to hear a speaker, enjoy question and answer time, and then break into groups for engagement and discussion, either live or by Zoom.

Asked why this gathering is taking place when the synod is still ongoing, Mary Ring told *The Tablet*: “The Synod has not proven to be the widely engaging and reformative experience that people hoped for.”

Referring to Root and Branch’s Synod Watch analysis of the Diocesan Synodal Reports, she noted that parishioners in England and Wales, when asked what they wanted to see at the 2023 Synodal session, 100 per cent said they wanted the full inclusion of women and LGBTQ+ people and 95 per cent wanted an end to clericalism, and 100 per cent wanted an end to abuse and cover-up.

“What we now see is the topic of women deacons, even after two inconclusive commissions, removed with other issues from the Synodal table to be reported on directly to Pope Francis in 2025. In other words, not up for debate. Francis’s ‘No!’ [to Norah O’Donnell for CBS](#) earlier this year over women deacons was visceral.”

She highlighted how, according to the majority of Root and Branchers, the second stage of the Synod had been virtually ignored in their parishes. “Most parishioners are unaware of the forthcoming concluding October session,” Mary Ring said.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* was “vague” and lacked “any concrete proposals for women, LGBTQ+ people and those in ‘irregular relationships’ to feel that they are being heard, nor does it offer any ecumenical or interfaith hope. Power abuse is lamented only briefly. Clericalism, misogyny and homophobia are, as Mary McAleese says, unlikely to be reversed by the synodal process so far.”

However, she said that Root and Branch is not about “opposing” the Church.



“It is about us taking seriously our baptism and our faith. Canon Law 212 lays down our ‘right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church, and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful’.”

Root and Branch’s gathering is not simply a matter of disillusion with the Synod, according to Mary Ring.

“We had planned our first lay-led Synod in Bristol in 2021 long before Pope Francis had announced his. It is the far more important matter of returning to the teachings of Jesus.”

Kevin Liston, co-chair of the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform told *The Tablet* that Australian Catholics are “disappointed and frustrated by the continuing refusal of Church leaders to act responsibly on the ordination of women”.

“The matter has been thoroughly discussed and analysed. There are no credible historical, anthropological or theological reasons for not ordaining women. This is sinful discrimination. It discredits and undermines every Church statement on equality.”

On the issue of Church-related abuse, he said the *Instrumentum Laboris* makes it clear that the second Assembly of the Synod will continue the focus on process.

“Synod consultations since 2021 highlighted the need to give priority to survivors. We continue to hope first for action on healing and reconciliation and then for reformed structures that make safeguarding policies effective.”

However, he said, there was “little to show that the Synod will do anything for people who have and continue to be, traumatised”.

Root and Branch has said it was disappointing that the synthesis report does not address the pastoral and spiritual needs of civilly divorced and remarried Catholics. According to Kevin Liston, this is a “major factor” in some of the disillusionment with the synod.

“The authors of the *Instrumentum Laboris* know, or ought to know, that good people suffer and feel guilty and ashamed because initial relationships do not always work out and finding love in a second is unacceptable to the archaic rules of the institution. That would not be Jesus’ way,” he said.

He added that the “synod process has highlighted the disparity among Catholics between those who manage the institutional functions and the general body of believers, both church-going and others”.