

Interview with Sandra Chaoul

on its contribution to the Synod on Synodality in Rome in October 2023

by Jean Brasseur on 2 February 2024

Sandra Chaoul works for the Discerning Leadership Programme¹. She contributes as a facilitator and director of a network of coaches serving members of the programme.

Jean:

Before getting to the heart of the matter, can you put your experience of the Synod in context?

Sandra:



The universal phase of the Synod, known as "the Synod of Bishops", was held in Rome from 4 to 28 October 2023 with 350 participants, bishops and cardinals, men and women, clergy and laity from all over the world.

As it approached, I became increasingly aware of the historic significance of this event and its meaning for the whole Church. Despite my joy at the approach of the Synod, I also felt a kind of apprehension about the resistance that this process might trigger in the face of the way of being Church and of doing the Synod that would be proposed as part of the very process of deliberations. The regular times of prayer and sharing between facilitators helped us a great deal to prepare ourselves spiritually for the experience and to continue to review our inner movements.

In the weeks leading up to the opening, I often wondered: "What could the Lord possibly have in store for us in Rome?" From the very first days, journalists were waiting at the door of the hall to try finding out more about the foreseeable progress in the areas they considered important. It seemed that for many, the "success" of the synod was linked to its ability to offer concrete answers to a list of considerations in a very short space of time.

Looking back on the experience four months on, and before entering my experience as facilitator of this synod, it seems important to me to consider this synodal journey through two notions of time, those of *Chronos* and *Kairos*. In any process, and a fortiori in a process that involves the whole Church, there is always a *Chronos* period, which has a "chronological" character, delimited in time, naturally made up of tasks to be accomplished, subjects and questions that expect clear answers within a short timeframe... However, it would be premature to judge the synodal journey today by what it will achieve between now and next October.

It is important to be able to read this historic moment in its most spiritual sense of *Kairos*. Rather than being a meeting that we attend, a synod is above all something that we



The sixty or so women at the Synod

¹ [Discerning Leadership Program | New leadership for the Church](#)

become. The process itself reminds us of who we are as a Church. By simply embarking on this journey together, the Church has begun its conversion.

From this perspective, it is no longer just a question of productivity and results, but above all of fertility. We realize that the renewal we have been waiting for has begun. The Holy Spirit is already rejuvenating the Church, for the whole world.

Jean:

Did you take an active part in the 3 phases of the Synod (parishes, continents, universal church)?

Sandra:

For the continental phase, I was facilitator for the Middle East in February 2023. And in Rome in October, I was facilitator for one of the 35 round tables.

Jean:

What can you tell us about the preparations for the Synod?

Sandra:

Since the beginning of the Synod, David McCallum sj, Executive Director of the Discerning Leadership (DL) programme, has been part of the Methodology Commission along with other DL colleagues, including Christina Kheng. The fact that I was working with them helped me to get into the swing of things right from the start. My colleagues shared with me the fruits and challenges of these months of preparation, as well as the experience of Frascati in September 2022, which they had found very inspiring. A group of experts and theologians met there to synthesise the hundred or so reports from the various local Churches, and to discern the themes and convergences that were emerging and that would be worth exploring during the continental phase of the Synod. This led to the choice of the theme "Enlarging the Tent" for this phase.

After Frascati, when the working document came out, it was returned to the local churches to begin the continental phase assemblies. This return process was a safeguard for the discernment process, since the assemblies were asked to confirm whether the document was faithful to their experience ("Did we hear you right?"). Based on the review of the document bringing together the experiences of the world's Churches, the continental assemblies were invited to discern which priorities stood out for them, and to name the aspects where a certain resistance was felt. The assemblies submitted a report at the end of their discernment process, setting out the priorities for their region or continent to the Holy Father so that they could be the focus of attention at the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 2023.

Jean:

For this continental phase of the Synod, you were facilitator for the Middle East assembly.



Sandra:

With Wissam Abdo, who is also an Esdac facilitator, and Dany Younes sj, former provincial of the Middle East province, we set up a team of facilitators. We began by training some twenty people representing several Eastern Churches in Arab countries - religious and lay people - in Spiritual Conversation (SC). This experience enabled them to accompany the sub-groups during the Middle East assembly in February 2023. It was fascinating, especially as it was the first time that lay people had actively participated in a synodal meeting in the Middle East.

It was also the first time that the SC methodology had been applied. We spent 5 days together and produced a report. Together with the steering committee, I took part in reviewing and formulating .it After this continental phase of the Synod for the Middle East, my role was over.

In April-May 2023, I was informed that my name was on the list that each continent had submitted to the Pope. I was preparing to take part in the universal phase of the Synod in Rome, when I was told: "You are part of the team of facilitators chosen to facilitate the groups in October. "

Jean:

You then lived through the very intense days leading up to the Synod of Bishops in Rome.

Sandra:

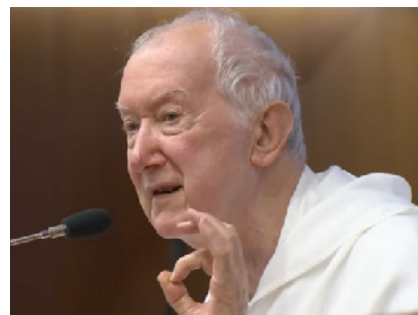
We didn't have much time to prepare. The first two Zoom meetings were fairly general, but they were very useful for getting to know each other, teaming up and getting an idea of the role we would be playing.



In autumn 2023, for 3 days before the Synod proper, the 350 participants went on retreat to Sacrofano on the outskirts of Rome. Each morning, the retreatants had times of silence and prayer and a short talk by Timothy Radcliffe². During this time the facilitators were trained in Rome to familiarise themselves with the process that had been devised for the Synod deliberations. Each morning, we received the training, and listened to

Timothy Radcliffe via Zoom, while in the afternoon we went by bus to join the retreatants. From 3pm to 9pm, we facilitated spiritual conversation between them about the fruits of their personal time of silent prayer, 2 or 3 hours in all each day, and shared Mass and dinner together.

The methodology was new to most of the participants. In the first round, many of them openly shared the fruits of their time of silence and meditation. For some, it was often easier to offer theological clarifications than to focus on what had challenged them most and to speak from the depths of their desire or experience. The second round was not always obvious. Rather than offering a word or an echo received during the first round, rather than getting personally involved, some sometimes added what they had forgotten to say. But it didn't matter whether we followed the procedure to the letter or not. What was most consoling about the three-day retreat



² [Radcliffe meditations](#)

was the space that members dared to open within themselves and with each other, and the camaraderie and friendships that began to build.

In this way, the members of the Synod were able to familiarise themselves with spiritual conversation, to exercise this "muscle", before the start of the synodal work proper.

It was an incredibly rich and humbling experience, a chance to experience the taste of the Church in its universality. We quickly became aware of the diversity of our experiences: of our ways of praying, of living our faith, and of God's faithfulness in meeting us where we are. The morning times of silence during the Synod retreat were not experienced in the same way as in an Esdac retreat: some were used to contemplation or lectio divina, while others recited the rosary with their rosary beads between their fingers; some walked, while others worked... but these times always bore fruit.

Jean:

*For the synodal assembly itself, a document was designed to structure the proceedings, the *Instrumentum Laboris*³. It includes a diagram which represents the "Conversation in the Spirit" process shown below.*

Then, for 4 weeks, you facilitated this process for a dozen participants around one of the 35 round tables in the Vatican's huge Paul VI Hall.



Sandra is in the foreground on the left

Sandra:

During the first week of the Synod, we did not go directly into the planned themes. Instead of immediately sharing the respective positions of the participants on various issues, the organisers proposed to review the synodal experience in the personal lived experience of each person, in the here and now of each session. For a week, we practised spiritual conversation on themes that strengthened our communion of spirit, instead of tackling too soon themes that could have divided us.

Jean:

In doing so, you brought the participants back to their experience, their presence there, in the assembly hall.

Sandra:

Exactly

³ https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/ENG_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS.pdf

The conversation in the Spirit

A dynamic of discernment in the synodal Church



PERSONAL PREPARATION

By entrusting oneself to the Father, conversing in prayer with the Lord Jesus and listening to the Holy Spirit, each one prepares his or her own contribution to the question about which he or she is called to discern.

Silence, prayer and listening
to the Word of God

«Taking the word and listening»

Each person takes turns speaking from his or her own experience and prayer, and listens carefully to the contribution of others.



Silence and
Prayer



«Making space for others and the Other»

From what the others have said, each one shares what has resonated most with him or her or what has aroused the most resistance in him or her, allowing himself or herself to be guided by the Holy Spirit: "When, listening, did my heart burn within me?"

Silence and
Prayer

«Building together»

Together we dialogue on the basis of what emerged earlier in order to discern and gather the fruit of the conversation in the Spirit: to recognize intuitions and convergences; to identify discordances, obstacles and new questions; to allow prophetic voices to emerge.

It is important that everyone can feel represented by the outcome of the work.

"To what steps is the Holy Spirit calling us together?"



Final prayer of thanksgiving

Jean:

What was your role?

Sandra:

My role was to hold a space that respected as much as possible moments of silence, to create small openings where the Spirit could surprise us.

We were the ones who set the pace; we introduced each of the three rounds of spiritual conversation. We were encouraged by the Synod team to use our personal experience as facilitators. The fact that we had received very little training together worked in our favour. There was no single scenario for everyone. Some began a session with a short period of silence, others with a prayer, and I sometimes began with a poem to help the group centre itself.

This was a new way of doing things for both lay and consecrated people. Many of the participants were invited, for the first time in their Christian lives, to experience the time spent speaking as a time of sharing: to listen AND to become aware of internal movements, what is going on deep inside me as I listen to this person".

Often, in the context of the Church, personal affective experience is not sufficiently solicited. The sharing in the sub-groups was organised in such a way as to allow as much as possible a genuine expression of each persons' experience. Women and young people often took the initiative to speak from the heart, freeing others through their frankness.

Around the same table, cardinals, bishops, religious and lay people shared smiles, tears and conversations that were sometimes tense but always respectful.

When an intense emotion arose in my group, I sometimes invited the members to a time of silence to slow down the pace, open the space of interiority and welcome what was being expressed and, only then, give the floor to the next person.

It was very surprising to see how the participants were able to adapt to the rhythm of the spiritual conversation and to growing in communion.

I remember a very personal moment of sharing, when the person speaking was very affected and expressed to the group an experience of suffering with the Church. The participants listened with empathy and respect to the pain being expressed. One of the members of this group found it a little difficult to be an active listener and to speak from personal experience. When it was his turn, it was very surprising and consoling to hear him say, with his notebook in hand: "I had prepared a talk on this theme, taken from a teaching that I wanted to share with you. But, having listened to you, after hearing what has just been shared, the only thing I can do now is remain silent."

It was as if the initial sharing had created such a deep resonance that we couldn't go on talking to each other in the same way. A moment of silence came over our group. Everyone was able to put aside, if only for a moment, words of teaching that were probably very true and relevant, in order to be present in silence in the face of the pain of another.

Jean:

I'm very moved by what you're saying. People have gathered around this table, each with what they have prepared on their own. Then they are led let go of that, because someone realises that something much more important is going on here between them. It's a marvellous moment, but also a very delicate one because it's provoked by a single participant, by a silence, a breath...

Sandra:

It's an experience of grace that you live in those moments. It wasn't always easy...

As in any process of discernment, there were also times of doubt around the tables. Sometimes the emotion or opinion expressed was perceived by one or other as manipulation, or it aroused mistrust in some. It was then important to discern and recognise what inner movement or spiritual dynamic was at work in our group. Was it a movement that was leading the group towards greater unity, solidarity, respect and compassion? Was it a word that divided, distanced or judged?

We didn't always have the chance or the opportunity to name these movements; it was still too early. In an Esdac retreat, we are often invited by the facilitators to name: "What exactly is happening here in our group?" We can use a common vocabulary to evoke movements of consolation or desolation, to name a temptation.

In the large Synod group, various spiritual cultures intersected, each with its own language and richness. Spiritual conversation therefore requires a great deal of learning before it is possible to exchange ideas in depth and with confidence. Failing that, the facilitator suggested a time of prayer and mutual clarification between distinct spiritualities; I also think that the next synod meeting will provide an opportunity to deepen sharing in the assembly.

Jean:

As a facilitator, you confined yourself to shaping the space in which these inner movements could be experienced, but without naming them.

Sandra:

Exactly, it's sensitive, it's beautiful but it's difficult to explain, to share... When a group manages to name certain movements of desolation, it can lead them to pray more. But it takes time.

Even in tense situations, we were surprised by the work of the Spirit. In one of the groups I was in, a member had difficulty conforming to the rules of spiritual conversation, especially in terms of time and listening. At times I had to intervene, to prevent one or other from imposing a summary text on the subject, conceived without having listened to the others. I sensed that the group was withdrawing into silence and I found it difficult to freely assume my role as facilitator without causing tension or confrontation.

What I found very helpful was that during those three days when I was facilitating this spiritual conversation, this resistance created a movement within the group and within me that pushed me to review my own practice, and stimulated each member of the group to ask the question, "What could I do in this situation? What am I called to do?"

Not everyone is familiar with this sensitivity of discerning in the moment: "What key is our band playing in?" We were doing a re-reading with the group at the end of which someone came up to me and said, "I was very disturbed to see what you had to deal with, to be interrupted and questioned, but I'm grateful that this conflict took place, because it showed me how I sometimes behave when a woman facilitates a meeting in my diocese."

It really touched me: the Spirit works even within our limits. We were able to find more peace and more truth once we had contemplated our dynamic in prayer.

Jean:

It's beautiful: in a difficult situation, it's a woman who invites the people around the table to return to the present moment of their relationship.



Session on October 4, the first day of the Synod. The Pope is seated at the table in the top right-hand

When Michel Bacq saw this photo of the 35 tables in the great hall in Rome, he said to me: "The kingdom of God is alive, right before our eyes". Did you also experience this awareness of the kingdom of God, right there in the present moment, when you took part in October?

Sandra:

I certainly felt it; the people in the room were certainly touched. The picture above shows us seated, but between sessions we got up and walked around. The tables were grouped by language: French-speaking, English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, Italian-speaking.... We couldn't always talk to each other because we didn't share the same language with everyone, but we smiled at each other as we went round. From the first week, the presence of women and young people created a spirit of conviviality and warmth. Some afternoons, a few went from table to table, handing out chocolates; a few days later the other tables started to bring and share their own sweets. This spirit then spread from table to table by contagion. It was a spirit of camaraderie and joy. There was a lot of humour, we exchanged jokes, selfies... Friendships were made.



During the assembly, I can't say whether the members were able to relate this joy to the kingdom of God. Looking back on the experience now, I can say that we had a taste of it. We certainly experienced a new way of relating, of being Church.

Among those around the tables were people with very opposing opinions, but who remained open to the experience of the encounter. Through this synodal experience, I believe that the Church has a word to say, a testimony and a lot of hope to offer in these times of war and conflict, if the participants manage to reproduce this experience of spiritual conversation in their different contexts.



I'm not sure to what extent local Churches around the world will give this Synod a chance. But those that do are reaping the rewards. That's why it's really important for the participants in the Synod to be able to bear witness to their experience wherever they go to share the spirit and the joy of Earlier .it, when I shared my experience, you, Jean, had tears in your eyes, you smiled, you laughed. The memory of what I had in mind made you smile. Our consolation creates a resonance. Its' important to talk about it.

Jean:

In terms of how the Synod functioned - working and discerning together - to what extent have the organisers been influenced by recent developments in the non-ecclesial world? I'm thinking in particular of all the training in theory U and organisational development that you followed. Were there any experts in organisational development from the non-ecclesial world among those who prepared and led the Synod in Rome?

Sandra:

Among the facilitators and experts, there were consultants who had no specific experience in discernment, but who were professionals with expertise in facilitating a conversation, developing non-violent communication and listening skills.

Some facilitators were also trained in theory U, others in polarities management. These models of the organisational world have a lot to offer in terms of practices and tools that can help us to better accompany the synodal process; it's a question of recognising and naming tensions that seem paradoxical, in opposition, but which in fact constitute two poles that we are called upon to reconcile, instead of emphasising one at the expense of the other. For example: the polarities between love and truth, between charity and justice, between contemplation and action, between the local and the global, between tradition and change. We often tend to think that the solution must be either or the other (like a pendulum swing, favouring one of the poles while ignoring the other), or that the solution should be a compromise, but often the compromise dilutes both poles. The Polarity Navigation model⁴, inspired by the work of leadership experts, invites us to be open to the possibility of holding both poles at the same time, recognising the risk of abuse when one pole is favoured at the expense of the other.

It is this third way that we are called to find between two values that seem to contradict each other: how can we reconcile the pastoral value of accompanying people in non-regular situations with the value of always being true to the teachings of Jesus? how can we be faithful to tradition while opening ourselves up to the invitations of the world? how can we practice creative fidelity to the teachings of Jesus?

Spiritual conversation has helped us to open up to AND- rather than OR-thinking, to be challenged by someone "holding the other side of the polarity", and to realise that what unites us is paramount and much stronger than what risks dividing us.

This often where we encounter resistance. There is often a fear that this AND-thinking will dilute the Church's teaching and make us forget our foundation, our tradition. That's why it's important that we continue to build bridges, stay in conversation and deepen our links, so that we can learn each other's language, recognise each other's fears and expectations, and rediscover what unites us, beyond our oppositions.

Jean:

So we need to find a compromise!

Sandra:

I believe that the synodal approach goes beyond compromise. Jesus did not compromise; his starting point was always love and he invited people to the truth, to a genuine journey of conversion.

⁴ see ["Polarity Navigation" on the Internet](#)

In the introduction to the summary report⁵ of the first session of the Synod of Bishops in Rome, published in Rome on the last day of the Synod in October 2023, the following passage shows how this conversion was experienced by the participants without waiting for the conclusions:

[In this document], we will be able to testify to the richness of our experience of listening, of silence and sharing, and of prayer. We will also share that it is not easy to listen to different ideas, without immediately giving in to the temptation to counter the views expressed; or to offer one's contribution as a gift for others and not as something absolute or certain. However, the Lord's grace has led us to achieve this, despite our limitations, and this has been for us a true experience of synodality. By having practised it, we understand it better and have grasped its value.

Jean:

How does this invitation affect you and your colleagues in the "Discerning Leadership" network personally?

Sandra:

One of the points raised in this summary underlined the importance of training in spiritual conversation, in the practice of discerning leadership, capable of serving a synodal Church. This work is at the heart of our Discerning Leadership mission. We can imagine that there will be many requests for training at all levels (including Esdac). I think it's important to be prepared to meet these demands.

This brings us back to the beginning of what I was saying about *Kairos'* and *Chronos*: I think it's asking too much of the Synod of 2024 to quickly change a way of thinking, doing and being that has been in use for 2,000 years. But the Synod has set us in motion. If we start to give more space to spiritual conversation, to get together, to train ourselves in discernment, in a more authentic and integral collaboration between lay and consecrated people, together we could find ways to respond to the challenges of our time and be true witnesses of Christ.

Beyond this article, we could enter into a wider conversation with others.

⁵ <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/french/2023.10.28-FRA-Synthesis-Report.pdf>