

Your faith

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Journey into the liminal space



By Fr Donald Chambers

Of late, I am reflecting on the question, “How

can the Lenten season enable the Church to become more synodal?”

As we are cognisant, the synodal journey that commenced on October 10, 2021, aims to develop a Church that listens, discerns, and acts together.

The term ‘People of God’ is utilised to describe members of the Church—laity, religious, clergy, and bishops—who together ‘sense’ the movement and direction in which the Holy Spirit is leading the Church today.

“The path of synodality seeks to make pastoral decisions that reflect the will of God as closely as possible, grounding

them in the living voice (sensus fidelium) of the People of God” (68, *International Theological Commission, Syn*).

What is Lent?

It is a liturgical season in the life of the Church in which the People of God retreat from the business of life to listen attentively to the voice of God calling them to repentance and conversion.

In this season, the Church calls its members to intense and deeper prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

While these are ongoing Christian activities, we are summoned to focus and reflect on the season’s spiritual value of self-sacrifice. Consequently, at the start of the season on Ash Wednesday, the appropriate gospel reading from Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21 speaks of the intended purpose of fasting, praying and almsgiving.



The desert is a commonly used metaphor in scripture to describe a period in which individuals or communities lose the power of total control over external circumstances of life. They possess, however, the power to respond—manage and negotiate the space.

This phase triggers feelings of helplessness and weakness, tames the ego, and causes us to stare at the stark reality of our own dispensability, finiteness, and limitations.

Due to the non-existence of deserts in the Caribbean, perhaps a more suitable metaphor is the experience of hurricanes where the only power we have is simply to prepare to wait out the storm.

This phase of powerlessness is often described as liminal, originating from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold—a point or place of entering or beginning. A liminal space is the time between the ‘what was’ and the next—a place of transition, of waiting, and of not knowing. It is an opportunity for transformation.

Fr Richard Rohr OFM says, “We have to allow ourselves to be drawn out of ‘business as usual’ and remain patiently on the ‘threshold’... It’s the realm where God can best get at us because our false certitudes are finally out of the way. This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed.”

While the Season of Lent is an unforced invitation into the liminal space, real-life circumstances force individuals and the Church into this space. Recent happenings in the universal Church have forced us into this liminal space.

Some of these are the loss of our moral and authoritative voices on global and moral issues due to our mismanagement of the sex abuse issue, the loss of respectability in some societies, the loss of political power and control, the rate of decline of Catholic populations, and the surgency of other

religious and secular competing voices of authority.

In a word, the roman collar and religious garb no longer gain us automatic trust and respect. In some respects, the Church is grieving the loss of power, control, and influence.

How must the Church respond? With the synodal process coinciding with the season of Lent, the People of God are invited to journey together into this post-hurricane liminal space.

The hurricanes of local and global forces have stripped us bare. In addition, the coronavirus pandemic has thrown us into a space of unknown—unable to immediately provide pre-prepared theological and spiritual answers for the questions emerging from this Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) period.

Now we must learn to abandon a dependence on and addiction to the silo of authoritative voices of pastoral leaders, and learn to trust the *sensus fidelium*, the voice of the People of God through a process of listening, guided by the word of God and prayer.

As the Church undergoes the consultative period of the synodal journey guided by a certain spirituality, attitude, and questionnaire, it will trigger feelings of discomfort and awkwardness.

The journey will be imperfect. We will make mistakes. It will be messy. These are the characteristics of the liminal phase.

We must, however, remain faithful to the roadmap that is given in the *Synodal Handbook*. This roadmap is crucial for the betwixt and between periods. It will guide the Church through the valley of the shadow of death to the green pastures of a new way of being Church—a Synodal Church.

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Fr Donald Chambers of the Archdiocese of Kingston, Jamaica is the General Secretary of the Antilles Episcopal Conference.

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