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VULNERABILITY
ON THE SYNODAL
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Wisdom for the Synodal Journey

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Dr. Jessie Rogers made history recently, becoming the first lay person and the first woman to be dean of St Patrick's College, Maynooth. Dr Rogers, originally South African, undertook her graduate studies at the University of Stellenbosch and came to Ireland in 2007 to teach in Mary Immaculate College before joining the Faculty of Theology at Saint Patrick's College in 2014. As a Scripture scholar specialising in the Old Testament, her academic work focuses on biblical wisdom literature. In recent years it has broadened to include spirituality and a focus on the theology of childhood. Dr Rogers is a member of the Irish Biblical Association, the South African Society for Near Eastern Studies, the European Society for Catholic Theology, and the Godly Play International College of Trainers.

1.

Wisdom is a rich concept. It is so much more than a body of knowledge; it refers to ways of being and acting in the world. Wisdom is an aptitude and a disposition. The wise person both knows the right action *and* desires to do it. Wisdom is the ability to choose the best goals and to discern the best path to get there. Wisdom entails living our lives in alignment with what is real so that we are able to achieve the highest good. Wisdom takes account of the deep structure of reality and chooses goals and methods in harmony with that.

That is why I would like to begin with what we believe about God, the world and our mission in the world. That reality provides the fundamental contours for true wisdom. Israel's sages taught that "*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*" (Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7; 9:10; Sir 1:14). Fear here means reverence; it means to take God seriously so that our lives and our commitments are consciously shaped by what we know of God's will and calling, for us and for the world.

Developments in human knowing invite us to see the cosmos as an interconnected web that is on a journey of becoming. Our faith assures us that this is God's world and that God is at work to reconcile and to restore all things in Christ (cf Col 1:15-20). We confess that the final destination is universal *shalom*: peace and wholeness and blessedness. Knowing this, we can discern God's Spirit at work in every impulse toward life and love, even in the midst of brokenness. We also know that our mission

is to build up the body of Christ, understood in the widest sense, and to be a channel of God's blessing to the world.

But there are many different ways in which this can be done. The Holy Spirit bestows diverse gifts and there are numerous possibilities for faithfully living out our calling. On top of that, we are journeying with the God of surprises who comes to meet us from an unknown future. We cannot predict ahead of time where the journey will take us. God is both faithful and creative, always true to Godself and a keeper of covenants, and yet bigger than any box we may make for God. How do we journey in an emergent cosmos with a trustworthy yet radically free God who has chosen to involve God's creatures in the creative process and who has given us free will so that we can choose against, as well as for, life and wholeness? That is the challenge of synodality, of journeying together.

2.

The only way to proceed in wisdom is to keep close to God and what God is doing. That requires both rootedness and openness. Listen to words addressed to God's people in exile which outline this dance of discernment:

*Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:16-19)*

God's people are told to remember as, with a few evocative phrases conjuring up the crossing of the sea and the drowning of Pharaoh's army, the poet reminds them that the God who addresses them is the God of the Exodus, the God of their ancestors and the God of the Tradition. This is the God of faithfulness in times past. But then, after explicitly reminding them, the poet tells them: '*do not remember the former things or consider the things of old.*' They are to forget just enough to create a space for God's newness. If, in their imagination, they hold on too tightly to how God acted in the past, they might overlook the new thing that God is doing in the present. They need to remember so that they can recognise God's footprints, but then not remember lest expectations based on the past blind them to what God is doing now. It is the same God and the same story, but in a different key. Where the journey of the Exodus led through the water to freedom, this journey will take them out of exile, through the desert and back home.

Can you hear the wisdom here for your own synodal journey? You are nourished by the traditions which have shaped you, by your founding charisms, and by your own personal stories in which you have come to know God. That history gives you a firm

place to stand; it has shaped your understanding of God and how God works. Such knowledge is key to being able to recognise God's footprints. But, like a tree putting out new branches, you need to be open to the future, a future that you cannot predict in advance, but one whose new shoots you can recognise in the present if you pay attention. The God you have come to know is the God who will take the story further. But this God cannot be limited to what you know already.

We are invited by the biblical text to create a space in our remembering to stop us from trying to trap the future in the cage of the past. We are called to be open and responsive to the new thing that God is doing. In the present moment, which hangs in the gap between the past we think we know and the future that is still becoming, we can embrace uncertainty with curiosity. We are being asked to pay attention because what God is doing cannot be named in advance, but it can be perceived if we are alert and attentive. There is a continuity in the work of God which, although it eludes prediction, can be intuited in the present and confirmed in hindsight.

What dispositions and attitudes of heart will help us in this dance of discernment, this remembering and forgetting and noticing? I am reminded of Jesus' words to his disciples after he has been inviting them to discern the Kingdom of God through the lens of parables which stretch, provoke and entice into a new way of experiencing God in the world: *"Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."* (Matthew 13:52). When we are wise, we are neither rigid and stuck in the past nor carried along by every new fashion. We are both rooted and responsive. We are able to discern what to cherish in the old and what to embrace in the new. We know our stories and our history. But we have also caught a glimpse of the glorious future toward which God beckons us. Suspended between the past and the future, we are attentive to the signs of God at work in the present.

Not everything in the past can be brought out as a treasure. Freedom requires the courage to face the darkness in our past, individually and collectively. For what do we need to give and receive forgiveness? What must we relinquish? We can remain rooted in the life-giving dimensions of the past without trying to justify those parts of it that are broken and harmful or that no longer serve us well. But let us celebrate those elements that continue to be life-giving. Wise women sing and dance their stories of liberation, like Miriam on the far side of the Red Sea who took up her tambourine and led the women in the dancing: *"Let us sing unto the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider thrown into the sea."* (Exodus 15:21).

What will help us to see the new thing that God is doing in our midst and in the world? An attitude of contemplative wonder, compassionate attentiveness, and hope. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis exhorts us:

"Let us believe the Gospel when it tells us that the kingdom of God is already present in this world and is growing, here and there, and in different ways: like the small seed which grows into a great tree, like the measure of leaven that makes the dough rise, and like the good seed that grows amidst the weeds and can always pleasantly surprise us. The kingdom is here, it returns, it struggles to flourish anew. Christ's resurrection everywhere calls forth seeds of that new world; even if they are cut back, they grow again, for the resurrection is already

secretly woven into the fabric of this history, for Jesus did not rise in vain.”(EG par 278)

If we believe that, if we trust that God is at work, and long to be a part of this march of living hope, then we will catch a glimpse of the new thing that God is doing.

3.

The God of the Exodus is revealed to us as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The paschal mystery is a powerful reminder that God works in surprising ways. It must be at the core of our remembering, because followers of Jesus Christ are called to embrace the wisdom of vulnerability. St Paul reminds us that the good news we proclaim is Christ crucified. What the world calls weakness, foolishness and failure, is actually the power and the wisdom of God in action. *“For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”* (1 Corinthians 1:25). In the face of fierce opposition, Jesus avoided the instinctive reactions to danger of fight or flight. He did not seek to overcome violence with force, which is the way of the revolutionary. Nor did he choose pacifism by running away or allowing himself to be silenced. Jesus embraced the third way of nonviolent resistance. He remained faithful to the end. By absorbing the violence without retaliating or backing down, by neither fighting nor fleeing but by persevering in faithful obedience to his Father, Jesus unmasked the lies of the powerful and suffered in solidarity with the powerless. His death created the possibility for reconciliation and new possibilities for oppressed and oppressor alike to have their humanity restored. That is the transformative power of vulnerable solidarity to which God says a resounding ‘yes’ in the Resurrection.

How can we embrace the wisdom of vulnerability? It means sowing seeds hopefully, even when we are weeping, and entrusting their growth to God (Psalm 126). It means risking ourselves and our future for the sake of the world and its future. It means accepting that change comes about not by force, but by embracing the other, through the offer of reconciliation. We need to imbibe Jesus’ countercultural way of being in the world. Conventional wisdom may tell us that we can only bring about change from a position of power and influence, or that we need to control the narrative, or that the end justifies the means. But that is not how God brings about newness.

I want to note, though, that In a patriarchal world, the temptation faced by women is often inverted. Jesus tells us that the one who wants to save her life will lose it, but the one who loses her life will save it (Matt 16:27). But there are different motivations for losing one’s life. Others will want to take it from us by asking us to sacrifice ourselves for their agendas or desires. To deny oneself to enable the selfishness or destructiveness of others is not to live out of a Christ-shaped vulnerability. We must be convinced of our own inestimable worth in God’s eyes to find the inner freedom to give ourselves in love. When we have heard the Father’s affirmation “You are my beloved daughter, I delight in you” (cf Luke 3:22), we will have the strength to say ‘no’ to the temptations that would take us off mission, just like Jesus did in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-12). Sometimes the temptation is fueled by pride, but for women in particular, the voices that must be resisted often come from a sense of inadequacy, or from an internalised cultural expectation that we live our lives according to the will

of others. Jesus was not a doormat, and neither are we. Wisdom calls us to act out of a place of genuine freedom. When we know that our lives are God's and that they are precious beyond measure, we will lay them down for the right reasons.

4.

Wisdom embraces the best goals and chooses the optimal paths to achieving them. What actions and values does living wisely and journeying synodally in an interconnected, emerging, God-infused, struggling and beautiful world call for?

If the Christlike God is at work in and through God's creatures and if God is reconciling all things in Christ (Col 1:16), then wisdom does not consist of power over or of abstract truths to be imposed. Instead, it is found in accompaniment, in coming alongside. Where there are green shoots struggling toward the light, the wise woman waters, weeds and waits in hope. She pays compassionate attention and responds to needs by empowering and encouraging. She has the patience and the courage to hold the tensions while something new surfaces. She taps into her God-given creativity and draws forth the creativity of others. She does not work alone. Deeply aware of the links that make up life's web, she celebrates the life and love that flow through them, repairing weak links, unblocking clogged one, grieving broken ones, and forging new ones. She builds community and is herself nourished and supported by others. She keeps widening the circle. Such a life takes root and grows in hearts that are open, creative, trustful and willing to venture along new paths.

There are two practices that are of particular importance for synodality: knowing when to speak and when to be silent, and the practice of hospitality. The preacher in Ecclesiastes reminds us that *'for everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven,'* including *'a time to keep silence, and a time to speak'* (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7b). It would be so much easier if some actions were always right and others always wrong! But wisdom consists in knowing the opportune time. The synodal path is a process of connecting, of listening and discerning, and of speaking our truth with courage. The time for speech is after we have listened deeply. It is when we open ourselves in truthful vulnerability to the other. Honest speech is authentic presence. It is also a time for speech when our voice can bring the perspective of the excluded into focus. We are to speak against oppressive or careless acts of silencing.

The wrong time to speak is before we have listened - to God, to ourselves and to others. Foolish speech comes from an unreflective, complacent place where we think we know and have nothing new to learn. Words can be a way of drowning out what we do not want to hear, because we are arrogant or fearful, maybe even both. *"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver"* (Prov 25:11). The right word at the right time creates the possibility for connection.

And what of silence? To be silent when we should speak is to refuse connection, or to deprive others of our unique insights. When one perspective on a complex issue is not heard, communal discernment toward a solution can be lopsided and incomplete. To be silent at the wrong time can allow evil to flourish and deprive the needy of an advocate. Good silence is in the service of listening attentively. It creates a space for understanding, for conversion and for growth. Attentive silence is an act of radical hospitality.

Hospitality is one of the hallmarks of the Gospel in action, particularly when it is extended to the stranger (Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2) The practice of synodality mirrors Jesus' own practice of inclusive fellowship at meals; it makes room at the table. Hospitality does not just feed the stranger; it makes room for them in our lives. Hospitality is to be humbly received as well as offered. The wisdom of vulnerability recognises the ways in which we are dependent upon the radical hospitality of others. I am thinking about how Jesus sent out the 72, telling them to take nothing for the journey, and instructing them to stay where they were welcomed and to eat whatever they were offered (Luke 10). Hospitality reminds us that we are not self-sufficient; it weaves threads to overcome division and isolation. Hospitality is essential for synodality because it creates possibilities for transformation through encounter.

5.

I conclude with an extravagantly generous invitation from the letter of James, a New Testament wisdom text:

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind (James 1:5-6 NRSV).

Do you need wisdom? Well, ask and you will receive! God longs for us to walk the synodal journey wisely. Our generous God delights to give us whatever we need as we grow into a synodal way of being and ministering. The invitation could not be clearer: ask for what you need!

We are reminded that we must ask in faith, never doubting. How can we do that? Perhaps even before we ask for wisdom for the synodal journey, we should ask God to help us to trust, to trust that God is at work, to trust that the Kingdom of God is taking root and growing even in the most unlikely places, and to trust that we can hear the Spirit's invitation in the experiences of others, particularly at the margins.

James stresses that faith is not what we *say* we believe, but what we *do*. Faith is seen in action (James 2:17, 26). By implication, to doubt is to refuse to take the action that faith demands. If we ask for wisdom and then do not take the first step, however wobbly it feels, then we will be asking without faith, and we will never discover the wisdom that God offers us. Do not fall into the temptation of thinking that talking about synodality is the same as practising it. Do not study synodality without experiencing it.

To become a synodal church means to journey together. It means to open ourselves to others, to listen and to speak, to reflect and discern, and to take the next step together. The road is made by walking. Wisdom is found in responding to the Lord's invitation to journey with the Spirit, with one another and ultimately with all of creation as we co-create a future which is God's dream for the world.