



A CHURCH WHICH “JOURNEYS TOGETHER”: SYNODALITY IN THE ERA OF POPE FRANCIS

Uma Igreja que “caminha junto”: sinodalidade na era do Papa Francisco

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ABSTRACT: This article lays out how Pope Francis looks at synodality, as a process of listening and discernment that implies the participation and involvement of the entire People of God. It seeks to highlight the essentially “relational” (rather than “instrumental”) nature of synodality, which should be understood not as a tactic aimed at containing the excesses of clericalism, but as a return to the Church’s true origins and way of proceeding. In fact, as communion, the Church springs from the initiative of God the Father and, through Christ’s gift of the Holy Spirit, “brings the scattered children of God together and makes them one” (Jn 11:52). It thus responds to its founding act of being “constituted as an assembly”, with the will to walk together as one People. Synodality expresses the very identity of the God of communion and of the *mercy* which the Church proclaims to the world. Synodality both elicits and shows the correspondence between what the Church is in itself, and what it does in the world.

KEYWORDS: Church. Vatican II. Synodality. Pope Francisco. People of God.

RESUMO: O artigo delinea o modo como o Papa Francisco enxerga a sinodalidade, como processo de escuta e de discernimento que implica a participação e o envolvimento de todo o Povo de Deus. Procura-se destacar o caráter essencialmente “relacional” (antes que “instrumental”) da sinodalidade, compreendida não como uma tática de contenção dos excessos do clericalismo, mas como retorno às origens autênticas da Igreja e de seu modo de proceder. De fato, enquanto comunhão, a Igreja brota da iniciativa de Deus Pai e, por meio do dom do Espírito Santo de

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Cristo, “reconduz à unidade os filhos de Deus dispersos” (Jo 11,52). Ela responde, assim, a seu ato fundante, “constituída como uma assembleia” com o desejo de caminhar junto como um Povo. A sinodalidade expressa a identidade mesma do Deus da comunhão e da *miserericórdia* que a Igreja proclama ao mundo. A um só tempo, a sinodalidade suscita e mostra a correspondência entre o que a Igreja faz no mundo e o que ela é em si mesma.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Igreja. Vaticano II. Sinodalidade. Papa Francisco. Povo de Deus.

Introduction: synodality comes into view

Pope Paul VI instituted the Synod of Bishops in 1965 to make conciliar deliberation a regular feature in the life of the Church. Now Pope Francis has convened its XVI Ordinary General Assembly on the theme, “For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission” including a diocesan phase (October 2021 — April 2022), a continental phase (September 2022 — March 2023), and a universal phase (October 2023). Throughout the Church, “synodality” has become the word of the moment.

The name synod comes from a Greek expression that means ‘a road walked with others, a shared way or journey’. As a feature of the life of the Church, its origins go back to the first council of Jerusalem, described in chapter 15 of the Acts of the Apostles and possibly in chapter 2 of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. It is

a path followed by the Church in the light of the action of the Spirit in her history, at the service of the people of God. More specifically, it is the result of the insights and seeds that emerged as guidelines for the whole Church in the Second Vatican Council, especially in the constitutions *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* and in the decree *Ad Gentes* (LÓPEZ OROPEZA; SPADARO, 2019).

A synod is a consultative assembly convened by the Pope or a bishop to advise on a topic of particular interest to the local, regional, or universal Church. It is a process that requires involvement, mutual listening, dialogue, consensus and communion, prayer, and spiritual discernment. Synodality arises from the very essence of the Church, it is her constitutive reality, and is thus, like the Church itself, fundamentally oriented towards evangelization. It is an ecclesial way of being in the world and a prophetic way of serving today’s world.

But even if “synod” is a word often used these days, it remains a complex notion, evolving as it has in the vocabularies of theologians and canonists. Now that the term is widely and regularly used in various Church contexts,

there is a risk that it will be misunderstood or watered down (LEGRAND, 2005). Concealed within the Greek word is that etymological meaning of “walking together”: such a lovely and promising image and one to which we wish to give greater prominence.

As Pope Francis said six years ago, on the 50th anniversary of the modern synods:

It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium. What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word ‘synod.’ Journeying together — laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome — is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice (2015).

Without underestimating its challenges and difficulties, the Holy Father has made synodality one of the cornerstones of his magisterium.

In the following seven sections, this paper considers contemporary Catholic synodality as rooted in Vatican II and as expressed in the words, teaching, and actions of Pope Francis — most systematically, in the five apostolic exhortations and the three encyclicals he has written so far¹. After looking at “1. The grace of differences” in the next section, we will explore, in turn, the themes “2. The service of authority”; “3. The Church is synodal”; “4. The ecclesiology of communion, presupposition of synodality”; “5. The People and the Bishops”; “6. Encounter, listening, dialogue”; and, to conclude, “Synodality within reach”. Let us share the Holy Father’s conviction, addressing the opening of the Synod on 9 October 2021, that “the Spirit will guide us and give us the grace to move forward together, to listen to one another and to embark on a discernment of the times in which we are living, in solidarity with the struggles and aspirations of all humanity” (FRANCIS, 2021a).

1 The grace of differences

The perspective from which Francis sees synodality is not instrumental, but relational. There is no question of using synodality to achieve some other goal, such as creating consensus, but of transforming the ecclesial

¹ In this connection, see Michael Czerny and Christian Barone (2021). It provides a synthesis of the magisterium of Pope Francis, in continuity with the pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council, urging universal brother- and sister-hood as a “sign of the times” for our age—a renewed vision for humanity today, including all religious traditions, walking together and joining forces to build a more just and united world. To be published in English: *Siblings All, Sign of the Times: The Social Teaching of Pope Francis* (Orbis Books, 2022). I am happy to acknowledge Rev. Prof. Christian Barone’s very valuable research and writing which form the basis of this paper.

conscience in the light of the Church's synodal identity so that serene encounter, transparent confrontation, and fruitful dialogue are its normal way of being. These words of the Pope as he opened the Synod on youth in 2018 may be applied to every synod:

Let us therefore work to “spend time with the future”, to take from this Synod not merely a document...but above all concrete pastoral proposals capable of fulfilling the Synod's purpose. In other words, to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands, and inspire in [...] people [...] a vision of the future filled with the joy of the Gospel (FRANCIS, 2018a).

Synodality is a catalyst; it helps to get the ecclesial body moving again where it has become inert. At the same time, synodality resists the temptation to let mere custom, form, or habits become an alibi behind which to hide as if to avoid the effort of proclaiming the Gospel to the men and women of our time.

From the Pope's teaching we can derive two fundamental and complementary characteristics of synodality:

- a) The first is its dynamism. Synodality is a process that aims at change. Those who want things to stay as they are will find themselves challenged and stretched when they set out on such a journey.
- b) “Together” is the word that expresses the second characteristic: the synodal process tends towards building an ever more inclusive “we”. Synodality therefore ends up defining the identity of believers and of the Church that we want to be (COSTA, 2021).

If synodality is a dynamism aimed at extending participation, such that out of this reciprocal encounter, a richer Church identity can emerge, then it is performative by its very nature: by setting out on the journey together, we are by that very fact already achieving the goal that we set out to reach. In Francis's vision, synodality “build[s] a people that can accept differences” (FT 217). It is an instrument of participation that seeks to involve everyone. It should not exclude and it should not impose, whether in the name of uniformity or authority or even in the name of reconciliation, but must allow room for diverse identities and approaches.

Christian imagination delights in difference because we are created and loved by the Creator precisely as – not despite being – embodied, unique, and diverse. To say that dialogue must aim at maximizing what unites and minimizing what divides may well be short-sighted and reductive. Recognizing and valuing differences, rather than focusing

only on what is common or uniform, inevitably proves to be the more enriching experience.

This Pope has affirmed as strongly as anyone that Christianity lives and thrives in differences and diversity. He does this by emphasizing the mystery of the Incarnation as the impetus of Christian action: the mystery of Christ speaks to us of the tremendous value of human nature in all its particularities. The Word became flesh, not in some generic form of humanity but in the very concrete and particular person of Jesus Christ, with a birthplace of his own, a family, a language, a trade. The Council of Chalcedon, with its insistence on the genuine humanity of Christ, is thus an affirmation that concrete human uniqueness and diversity is not a defect but a gift.

Developing synodality is possible only if we start from the premise that diversity is a constitutive value of the Church, because the Church is built up by the Spirit from the unending variety of charisms and roles of its members who are “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). The first Pentecost, bringing together so many origins and languages, is a splendid example of this. *Effective* synodality springs from the *affective* reality of fraternity, made up of friendship and respect, acceptance, and the embrace of human identities in all their variety. This spirit of friendship leads to the discovery of the fruitfulness of differences. Disagreements and contrasting points of view, when they arise and are worked out in a context of friendship and respect, can contribute to building a better articulated and more vital unity, one that is more robust, creative, and resilient than superficial uniformity.

2 The service of authority

Celebrating differences and diversity leads to the thorny question of how to understand the exercise of authority and power within the Church and in its relationship with the world.

We are all familiar with a few ways of avoiding the problem:

One is an over-spiritualizing rhetoric that would resolve every tension by reiterating that power is meant for service, thereby postponing any serious examination of the limits and abuses of the current ways in which authority is exercised in the Church.

The danger is that the insistence that power is meant for service, unless it is held to the values of meaningful accountability, transparency and mutual respect, readily becomes a clear separation between a teaching/commanding hierarchy and a learning/obeying laity. This is no longer

a fraternal relationship: far from it. Even if the outcome sought in such a vision of the Church is seldom expressed so starkly, the goal and ideal can implicitly be a laity that is devoutly submissive to the hierarchy, while the primary virtue desired from ordained ministers becomes submission to their bishop ordinary or their religious superior. In such an *ethos* there is a fundamental distrust of the laity's (and lower clergy's) capacity to reflect, to discern, and to act in the world to which the Church is sent.

And so the same distrust can manifest itself in attitudes of distrust and self-sufficiency toward the world as a whole: think of how readily some priests and bishops resort to describing our neighbours, friends, families, and fellow citizens as nothing but secularized, materialist, relativist, and hedonist. This refusal to appreciate the real good that is present in every human being and community is entirely alien to the rich Christian anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes* and the vital positive contribution it makes (*Vademecum* 2.3).

Sadly, a clericalist culture can be reinforced and perpetuated by securing for clergy advantages, status, and security that have nothing to do with service and everything to do with power and privilege. This mindset can be found among some clerics themselves, as well as among some members of the faithful who applaud and promote this behaviour, and who tolerate or even demand this relational style, while other more fraternal ways of embodying the ministerial priesthood are often the object of denigration and derision.

Clericalism arises from an elitist and exclusivist vision of vocation, that interprets the ministry received as a *power* to be exercised rather than as a free and generous *service* to be given. This leads us to believe that we belong to a group that has all the answers and no longer needs to listen or learn anything, or that pretends to listen (FRANCIS, 2018a).

When a certain proportion of clergy adopt this style, and laity accept and condone it, this gives rise to the clerical mindset which in turn strongly shapes and influences new generations of priests. It seems to capture their imagination because it conveys a longed-for sense of doing things just right and of maintaining control and discipline in thinking, speaking, and practice. In the end this becomes nothing more than a strict regulation of the practical aspects of being a Catholic; such a model of priestly ministry no longer shines the light and joy of the Gospel on people's struggles nor on society's real problems.

Vatican II affirmed biblical categories to understand the Church, such as the "People of God" in *Lumen Gentium*. However, in a clerical view of the Church as we have just been describing, the proper baptismal dignity of the laity and their participation in the one priesthood of Christ is not

fully acknowledged and supported. As a result, some, especially older generations, are disillusioned after enthusiastic post-conciliar attempts to recover a meaningful place for the laity in the Church. Many feel marginalized and are unwilling (or not permitted) to assume their real responsibilities within the Church. As for younger generations, it is common and perhaps understandable that so many spontaneously distrust an institution that can appear to them at best sclerotic and inflexible, or even corrupt.

It was not always so.

In the first millennium, “journeying together” — that is, practicing synodality — was the ordinary way in which the Church, understood as “People united in the unity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” acted... Even in the second millennium, when the Church emphasized more strongly the hierarchical function, this way of proceeding did not cease (PD, n. 11).

As far as defining dogmas was concerned, in addition to diocesan and provincial synods and ecumenical councils, “the Popes [consulted] the Bishops in order to know the faith of the whole Church, by appealing to the authority of the *sensus fidei* [sense of the faith] of the entire People of God, which is ‘infallible *in credendo*’ [in believing]” (PD, n. 11). In contrast, a more clericalized model of Church emerged in the 19th century, and crystallized around some of the dynamics of the First Vatican Council and its aftermath.

Grappling with the almost Copernican revolution that in the modern era shifted the focus to subjectivity, and that in the late modern era celebrates the individual’s absolute freedom, a neo-scholastic theology flourished in the Church of the early 20th century. It prioritized the principle of the authority of the revealing God, to which man responds with an act of faith that is an obedience of reason to eternal truths otherwise inaccessible to sensible and rational knowledge. In such a climate, where compliance with and conformity to revealed propositions was often seen as the key value of the Christian life, it was perhaps inevitable that power and status were concentrated in the hands of the ecclesiastical hierarchy whose mission was seen as safeguarding this deposit of faith.

Pope Francis has made it clear that clericalism can no longer reign. “*Clericalism is a perversion and is the root of many evils in the Church: we must humbly ask forgiveness for this and above all create the conditions so that it is not repeated*” (FRANCIS, 2018a)². Clericalism will be countered by people (whether lay or consecrated or ordained) aware

² Italics in original.

of their co-responsibility, as baptized faithful, for the life and future of the Church.

3 *The Church is synodal*

Pope Francis wants the Church to find a synodal style of being that frees it from self-referential and self-perpetuating forms of exercising authority for its own sake (LEGRAND; CAMDESSUS, 2021, p. 23). This rejection of a clerical (and indeed, all too human) attachment to special status must not be caricatured as the introduction of a “lay parliamentarianism” under the guise of synodality.

Episcopalis Communio, the Apostolic Constitution on the Synod of Bishops (15 September 2018) expresses the importance of a synod on synodality. Synodality “offers us the most adequate interpretative framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself” (FRANCIS, 2015) because it is what shared participation in the authority of the Church looks like. The 2021-23 Synod on synodality calls everyone to dialogue; its phases and processes would have us collaborate in a model of mutual participation that is properly ecclesial.

Synodality is a return to the Church’s true origins and sources; synodality is not merely an ecclesiastical strategy aimed at halting the clericalist drift of the last two centuries. Rather, as the Gospel of John makes clear, the Church is born by the initiative of God the Father who pours out the Holy Spirit and “gathers in unity” (Jn 11:52) through the gift of the life of the Son made man (Jn 10:17). The verb “to gather together” (*synágein*) contains that precious prefix *syn* that we find in the term synod: the founding act of God brings together and founds the assembly (*ekklesia*), the faithful remnant, the disciples who “walk together” (*syn-odéuein*).

The International Theological Commission emphasizes this link when it states that “synodality denotes the particular *style* that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel” (2018, 70a). So the principle of synodality is to be traced back to the action of the Spirit, and we may emphasize that the Church is the people united by the Trinity (*plebs adunata de Trinitate*): that is, the Church participates in the life of communion of the Trinity and becomes the instrument through which all humanity is called to take part in the Trinity.

However, it is not enough to grasp in the gift of Trinitarian communion “the source, the form and the scope of synodality” (INTERNATIONAL

THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, 2018, 43). It is also necessary to point out that synodality is the free and logical human response, expressed in the shape of the Church (*forma ecclesiae*), to the grace of the triune God who calls his People together (MARTIN, 2019, p. 21). Synodality thus expresses in the life of the Church something of the nature of the God whom she proclaims to the world, thus testifying to the correspondence between what she is and what she does, starting from the revelation of God in Christ. In this way, as a believing community, she embodies the way of living of the One who came “not to be served but to serve” (Mt 10:45) and towards whom she is returning (REPOLE, 2019, p. 56).

The goal of initiating paths of synodality is also to confront certain pressing challenges of the present, such as recovering the fundamental equal dignity of men and women (NOCETI, 2008); containing the excesses of the profit-driven economy; making democracy more inclusive; bringing forth leadership that reinforces the pursuit of global goals; safeguarding the Earth, our common home; managing migratory flows; and pursuing peace and unity among nations.

Thus synodality is not exclusively concerned with internal matters of the Church, but pertains to the relationship between the Church and the world, proceeding from synodality to fraternity, since the People of God, in their journey through history, wants to share the light of the Gospel with all, including those of other religions, convictions and cultures. Just as “it is impossible to think of a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God’s People” (FRANCIS, 2018c), at the same time, “walking together” as the People of God must entail the resolution to walk as the Church together with the entire human family (*Vademecum* 5.3).

4 The ecclesiology of communion, the presupposition of synodality

We do not find the term “synodality” in the documents of Vatican II. Although the word itself may appear to be a neologism, the fruit of subsequent theological reflection, it nevertheless translates and synthesizes the ecclesiology of communion expressed by the Council. In *Lumen Gentium* it is possible to see its theological presuppositions in the understanding of the Church as “sacrament” (LG, n. 1) and “People of God” (LG, n. 4) — biblical and patristic categories that allow us to overcome the ecclesiological model of the Church as the perfect society (*societas perfecta*) that had been dominant from the Reformation until Vatican II.

One of the most innovative aspects of *Lumen Gentium* is its recovery of the doctrine of the “common priesthood of the faithful” (LG, n. 10), which emphasizes the centrality of the laity in the life of the Church. It affirms that, by virtue of baptism, all its members are invested with the “dignity and freedom of the sons of God” (LG, n. 9) and that their active participation in the mission of the Church is indispensable and necessary. The Council thereby definitively called for an end to the centuries-old custom of counterposing a teaching hierarchy to a listening or learning laity.³

Through baptism, the laity are called to the responsibility of proclaiming the Gospel to all and to participate in the governance of the Church according to their own abilities and roles. The Spirit bestows upon them special charisms and graces that “makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which contribute toward the renewal and building up of the Church” (LG, n. 12).

If the Holy Spirit is the principle of unity that transforms all the members of the Church — diverse in their ministries, vocations, and missions — into one living subject, the Eucharist is the “source and summit” of the believing community (LG, n. 11; SC, n. 10). Here the many grains become one bread. Vatican II thus points to the action of the Spirit who enlivens the Church through sacramental grace, especially in the celebratory moment of the Eucharistic assembly, as the original reality from which the ecclesial “we” springs. The history of the Church shows that, since ancient times, an analogy has been established between synodal events and the Eucharistic celebration. In both cases, in fact, it is the action of the Spirit that makes Christ present and fosters the consensus that allows us to discern what must be done. Even the language of “celebration” as applied to synodal events, as well as the ceremonial guidelines (*Ordo ad Synodum*) — which place the celebration of the Eucharist and the enthronement of the Gospel at the beginning, middle, and end of every synodal assembly — allow us to grasp how every synodal assembly is “Eucharistic” as it moves towards the visible realization of unity in Christ. The expression “the representing of Christ” (*representatio Christi*), introduced by Tertullian, is the essential nucleus of every synodal event: making Christ present through his Spirit. This generation of the presence of Christ in the Church shows the profound analogical connection between the Eucharist and synodality (RUGGIERI, 2017, p. 71–91).

³ This intention of the Council Fathers can also be deduced from the order in which the document was subdivided: the chapter dedicated to “The People of God” (chapter 2) precedes the chapter on “The Hierarchical Constitution of the Church” (chapter 3), so as to convey how the ecclesiastical hierarchy plays a role of service to the totality of the Church and this is its purpose or end. “The whole is greater than the part” (EG, n. 234-37).

5 The People and the Bishops

Let us note two further points here that will allow us to grasp the transformative importance of *Lumen Gentium* for understanding synodality as an ecclesial way of being.

The first concerns the sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the People of God (LG, n. 12). It is called a “supernatural instinct” because it is not primarily the result of rational deliberation, but rather takes the form of a spontaneous and natural knowledge, a kind of perception (*aisthêsis*). The expression has a long history that refers in particular to the proclamation of Marian dogmas by the papal magisterium.⁴ This supernatural instinct for truth is expressed by the faithful as a whole and allows them to judge spontaneously the authenticity of a doctrine of faith and to agree in their adherence to it or to an element of Christian praxis.

The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, (cf. 1 Jn 2: 20,27) cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples’ supernatural discernment in matters of faith when ‘from the bishops down to the last of the lay faithful’ they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals” (LG, n. 12).

The second point concerns the sacramentality of the episcopate (LG, n. 21). The Council teaches that, with episcopal ordination, the fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders is conferred and the offices of sanctifying, teaching, and governing are also conferred in virtue of the unity of the sacred power (*potestas sacra*) of Holy Orders. By their nature, however, these offices cannot be exercised except in hierarchical communion with the Bishop of Rome and with the other members of the episcopal college. Because of the properly collegial character of the episcopal order, the unity of the bishops constitutes a universal reality which precedes the episcopal service (*diakonia*) to the individual particular Churches.

The supreme collegial power over the whole Church can be exercised by the bishops, together with the Pope, either in the solemn form of an ecumenical council, or in various activities in different and scattered contexts throughout the world. The Council specifies that the college of bishops has authority only if it is understood as united with the bishop of Rome, the one who exercises supreme authority in the Church (LG, n. 22). The affirmation that episcopal ordination primarily entails a reference to the universal Church is also enshrined in the 1983 Code of Canon Law (can. 330-341).⁵

⁴ Pius IX, for example in *Ineffabilis Deus*, committed his authority to the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception by appealing to the common feeling of the faithful (*singularis conspiratio antistitum et fidelium*) as the authentic voice of tradition (SARTORI, 1979).

⁵ On this point, according to some scholars, the Council did not sufficiently clarify how to articulate the relationship between the *collegium episcoporum* and the *communio ecclesiarum*.

Paul VI instituted the Synod of Bishops in order to emphasize the link between the universal Church and the local Churches. In fact, it is the episcopal ministry that joins the particular — the portion of the People who are gathered in a local Church — to the universal — namely, the exercise of that ministry in communion with the other bishops and with the Pope. The Appendix added to *Lumen Gentium* regarding Chapter III⁶ was a sound prudential response meant to avoid any possible misunderstanding: every authentic manifestation of synodality requires the exercise of the collegial ministry of the Bishops in communion with, and never independently of, the Pope. Now, however, more than half a century later, it is clear that the Church has moved in a direction opposite to that feared by Paul VI, for synodality had been eclipsed by collegiality and reduced to the assembly of bishops gathered under the Pope.

The same point is made in the *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality:

One of the fruits of the Second Vatican Council was the institution of the Synod of Bishops. While the Synod of Bishops has taken place up until now as a gathering of bishops with and under the authority of the Pope, the Church increasingly realizes that synodality is the path for the entire People of God. Hence the Synodal Process is no longer only an assembly of bishops but a journey for all the faithful, in which every local Church has an integral part to play. The Second Vatican Council reinvigorated the sense that all the baptized, both the hierarchy and the laity, are called to be active participants in the saving mission of the Church (LG, 32-33). (*Vademecum* 1.3).

The recent history of the Church shows a tendency to minimalism on this front. Collegiality was supposed to be manifested through the general implementation of national and regional Episcopal Conferences, which would allow local Churches to express their own cultural identities and to free themselves from a condition of subordination to Rome that eroded their particularity. Pope Francis affirms that “this desire has not been fully realized [...]. Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach” (EG, n. 32). Moreover, the teaching of LG 23 unequivocally clarifies the relationship between local Churches and the Universal Church, no longer allowing

The result is a very rigid conception of collegiality, hard to put into practice, that ends up reintroducing the centralized model adopted by the Catholic Church after Vatican I (LE-GRAND, 2001, p. 210–211).

⁶ The *Preliminary Note of Explanation* provides the key to explaining and understanding chapter III of *Lumen Gentium*. It intends to allay any suspicion of a conciliarist drift in the renewed doctrine of the sacramentality of the episcopate. The exercise of collegiality is entirely subject to the head of the college who has all the power and who collaborates with it “according to his own discretion”. Pope Francis (2015) comments, “The fact that the Synod always acts *cum Petro et sub Petro* — indeed, not only *cum Petro*, but also *sub Petro* — is not a limitation of freedom, but a guarantee of unity”.

catholicity, understood as unity in difference, to be confused with worldwide uniformity.

While synodality implies the participation and involvement of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church, collegiality refers to the specific form in which it is declined through the exercise of the ministry of the bishops *cum et sub Petro*. Hence Francis's insistence on returning to the theme of synodality. From his point of view, the renewed ecclesial consciousness of Vatican II allows us to establish that the concept of synodality is broader than that of collegiality.

In accordance with the teaching of *Lumen Gentium*, Pope Francis affirms that "the path of synodality is the path that God expects of the Church of the third millennium" (2015). He presents the image of a Church that, like "an inverted pyramid" in which the summit is below the base (SIMONELLI, 2019, p. 35), harmonizes all the subjects involved in it: People of God, College of Bishops, Successor of Peter. As Cyprian of Carthage wrote to his presbyters: "Nothing without the bishop, without your counsel, or without the consent of the people" ("*Nihil sine episcopo, nihil sine consilio vestro et sine consensu plebis*") (Letter 14:4). The order reported by Cyprian reflects the Roman societal order that distinguishes between ordained and people (*ordines et plebs*), but it is not intended to introduce an arrangement (taxis) that diminishes lay agency with respect to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Rather, it expresses the complementarity of the actors involved, so that no one can be Church without the others, nor can one ever do without the contribution of the others. The image of the inverted pyramid, therefore, is not intended to abolish the ministerial structure of the Church, placing laity above priests in a kind of reverse clericalism, but is meant to reiterate the idea of a reciprocity that is inalienable and needs to be appreciated anew (SIMONELLI, 2019, p. 35).

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis gave fresh impetus to the doctrine of the faithful's sense of the faith (*sensus fidei fidelium*) (EG, n. 119). Since all members of the Church are active subjects of evangelization and "missionary disciples" (EG, n. 120), the path of synodality is an indispensable prerequisite for infusing the Church with a renewed missionary drive. The *Preparatory Document* uses the expression "active subjects of evangelization" (PD, n. 12): the People of God, as those who bear this commission, are not limited to deliberately handing on the Gospel through explicit evangelization in the strict sense, but they also actively evangelize at a deeper level by living their faith in the world, which is "the activity common to all the Faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ" (LG, n. 32). The laity are the vast majority of the People of God and there is much to be learned from their participation in the various expressions of ecclesial community: popular piety, involvement in ordinary pastoral ministry, and competence in areas of culture, community life, and the social fabric (EG, n. 126).

It is therefore necessary to overcome the obstacles of a lack of formation and the deleterious effects of a clericalist mentality that would relegate the lay faithful to a subordinate role, in order to expand the spaces in which they can share the richness of their experience as disciples and express themselves as evangelizers. Francis reiterates that the laity are not primarily objects of pastoral care, but subjects of evangelization. Precisely because of this active role, their position at the institutional level must be envisioned anew in the face of “an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-making” (EG, n. 102).

Synodality is the primary path for the Church today, called to renew itself by listening to the Word of God under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. Synodality invites us to lift up our eyes and challenges our Christian imagination to envision a different future for the Church and its institutions, a future where it will be capable of living out more fully the mission received from Christ. All this will depend in large part on “the decision to initiate processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every person can participate and contribute” (PD, n. 9).

6 Encounter, listening, dialogue

The shared responsibility of the entire People of God in the mission of the Church requires the initiation of consultative processes that facilitate the presence, participation, and voice of the laity. It is not a question of “democratizing” the Church, since the authority of the College of Bishops does not depend on the faithful delegating authority to them; rather, it is a question of understanding the ecclesial body as a reality diversified by the gifts of the Spirit among the plurality of subjects involved in it, and of making full use of the resources already available to the Church in order to implement the structures of participation.

In light of this, with *Episcopalis Communio*, the Pope expresses in the form of concrete norms all the steps that mark the path of a “constitutively synodal Church”. The Apostolic Constitution marks progress with respect to Vatican II: while we credit the Council with having recovered an awareness of all those who make up the Church and the various ministerial identities of each one, the more recent document attempts to translate such theoretical notions into concrete practice. The keystone is listening: every synodal undertaking “begins by listening to the People of God,” “continues by listening to the pastors” and “culminates in listening to the Bishop of Rome”, commissioned to serve as “Pastor and Teacher of all Christians” (FRANCIS, 2015).

Since collegiality is at the service of synodality, the Pope affirms that “the Synod of Bishops must increasingly become a privileged instrument

for *listening* to the people of God" (EC 6). And "although structurally it is essentially configured as an episcopal body" (EC, n. 6), it does not exist "separately from the rest of the faithful" (EC, n. 6) but, quite the opposite, "it is a suitable instrument to give voice to the entire People of God" (EC, n. 6). For this reason, it is vital that in the preparation of the Synods "special attention be given to the consultation of all the particular Churches" (EC, n. 7).

This consultation of the faithful must be followed by "discernment on the part of pastors" (EC, n. 7). Attentive to the *sensus fidei* of the People of God, bishops must know how to distinguish the promptings of the Spirit "from the often-changing currents of public opinion" (EC, n. 7). The papal magisterium that arises from this, normally in the form of post-synodal Apostolic Exhortations, must be an expression of listening to what has been proposed, and of discernment of the spirit that impelled those proposals, without being swayed by media pressure or majority opinion. In the exercise of his magisterium the Pope must also evaluate whether the process was really a discernment or merely a dispute. If the necessary conditions for a resolution are lacking, the Pope has the responsibility not to proceed and instead, without denying the potential validity of the proposals, to leave the discussion open and encourage a continuation of deliberations with an ongoing willingness on everyone's part to keep on discerning (SPADARO, 2020).

The synodal process as a whole is an experience of personal and community discernment aimed at sifting all the materials and grasping what God is revealing through history (*Vademecum* 1.3). It is not "a corporate strategic exercise" (*Vademecum* 2.4) typical of just any collaborative decision making, but is "first and foremost a spiritual process" (*Vademecum* 2.2) that is grounded in the conviction that God is at work in the world and that we are called to grasp the clues of what is to come that are manifested in the present, "the signs of the times". The present moment is the key theological place (*locus*) where we can engage as a community in a responsible reading of history in the light of the Word of God, seeking to understand from the insights that emerge from all humanity what the Spirit is asking of the Church today. This must move us to discern the expressions and ideas, the paths, the choices, that will allow us to witness more effectively to the joy of the Gospel (CODA, 2019, p. 10).

Discernment has the purpose of helping us "build thriving and resilient communities for the mission of the Church today" (*Vademecum* 2.2), and so listening and participation are the tools with which to undertake this task. This climate of listening and dialogue will allow the faithful to express their shared insight (*consensus fidelium*). The *consensus fidelium* is a condition for the exercise of the *sensus fidei* which translates the People of God's listening to the authentic witness of Tradition into the living sense of the Church (*sensus ecclesiae*).

This ecclesial instinct for communion, according to Cardinal Newman (1859), was what made the contribution of the laity so decisive in the Arian controversy and in various mediaeval disputes. It is an experience of being guided by God as a community, and should not be understood as simply the outcome of a decision-making process in which several wills converge, or as a judgement that emerges from the sum of opinions and the will to agree. In other words, “it is not based on simple unanimity, but rather unanimity makes manifest the action of the Spirit that guarantees infallibility” (PIÉ-NINOT, 2002, p. 607).

In his *Address* on the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis quoted John Chrysostom’s famous remark that “Church and synod are synonymous” (Commentary on Psalm 149). The liturgical context, to which the Archbishop of Constantinople referred, highlights how the convergence in the common feeling of the faithful (*omonoía*) is oriented towards active charity and witness. The ancient synodal practice should not be limited to the resolution of doctrinal conflicts, nor understood as an exceptional occurrence, but should be appreciated in its most original form as a participation that emerges both from the expression of the liturgy and from disciplinary and deliberative practice (RUGGIERI, 2007). It is an indispensable criterion of discernment for the entire life of the Church.

For true discussion to flourish, we must be moved by eagerness to raise questions that go beyond the apathy and indifference of reason that has given up, which is even worse than reason that is too cautious and ineffectual. We must adopt a stance of dialogue that moves us to seek the truth together, without any pretence of mastering it, without separating ourselves off into categories of opinion, without hiding resentfully behind the walls of pre-established identities.

The heart of the synodal experience is that of listening for God by listening to each other. We strive to listen to each other, opening our minds and hearts, freeing them from the preconceptions and prejudices that arise from ignorance and habit and that often generate division. We are called to set aside attitudes of complacency and convenience that lead us to make decisions purely because of the way things have usually been done. The diocesan phase of the Synod should begin by identifying effective ways to achieve the fullest possible participation, including new points of view, listening to “voices of other people in their local context, including people who have left the practice of the faith, people of other faith traditions, people of no religious belief, etc.” (*Vademecum* 2.1). We must personally reach out to the peripheries — to those who experience poverty, to refugees, the excluded, and the voiceless in order to ensure “the inclusion of those at the margins or who feel excluded” (*Vademecum* 1.4). We must have the courage to dialogue with science, art, economics, media, and the secular world generally and, pushing beyond the visible boundaries of the Catholic

community, deepen our knowledge of the treasures of wisdom to be found in other Christian traditions and other religions (*Vademecum* 2.4). Only in this way will we be situated to “serve the dialogue of God with humanity (cf. DV 2) and to journey together to the kingdom of God (cf. LG 9; RM 20)” (*Vademecum* 1.3).

Discernment is not undertaken about the ideal, even about ideals for reform, but always about what is real — real stories, real problems, the real and concrete history of the Church — because reality is always greater and more important than ideas (EG, n. 231-233).

Concluding. Synodality within reach

As a communion (*communio*) that originates in the mystery of the Trinity, the Church is manifested and fulfilled when it gathers as the “People of God” who are walking together. We could say that synodality is the form in which her original vocation and her intrinsic mission unfold through history. The Church’s task is to call together all the people of the Earth, of every age and era, so that they might participate in the salvation and joy of Christ. The Church is on a path of cultural and institutional transformation in which, as St John XXIII said on 24 May 1963, shortly before he died: “It is not that the Gospel has changed: it is that we have begun to understand it better”⁷.

It is precisely this progression in our grasp of Revelation that defines the idea of Tradition given to us by *Dei Verbum* 8. No longer reduced to an immutable doctrinal magisterium, handed down from generation to generation, the tradition of the Church (*traditio ecclesiae*) includes its institutions, its liturgy, and all of Christian life in continuous development. The Church as a whole, and not the hierarchy alone, is identified as the protagonist in this growth in an understanding of the Gospel. All the baptized are active subjects of Tradition, in the variety and irreducibility of their respective charisms.

The People of God, as an active subject of Tradition, may discover in their encounter with the Word of God that things that seem ancient are in truth quite new, while others that appear to be dangerous novelties are traditional forms of ancient wisdom. Those who assume that the Synod on synodality is an empty vessel into which anything can be poured, perhaps owe this misconception to the idea that communion is best understood

⁷ Spoken in the presence of the cardinals Amleto Cigognani and Angelo Dell’Acqua (*apud* HEBBLETHWAITE, 1985, p. 499).

as subordination. A renewal of understanding is called for: communion understood as *de facto* subordination erases the diversity and dignity of those who make up the Church, though it may simplify day-to-day management with a self-serving ‘those who disagree can go elsewhere!’ This is as unhelpful as saying that all that is needed to reform the Church is a strong appeal to more holiness, greater rigour, and stricter canonical discipline. For such personal conversions are never enough to deal with a structural crisis, because the Church is more than the sum of its individuals. It is necessary to move forward together.

Only by standing reverently before the Word of God in a renewed listening, in mutual listening, in inclusive listening, will the exercise of authority once again become a place open to the mystery of God made man. This is not to underestimate how demanding synodality can be as a way of exercising authority, as a culture of decision-making mediated by consensus; allowing all voices to be heard can be rather more difficult than imposing decisions from above.

Listening for a consensus *fidei* is thus an attitude, an ethos, that cannot be improvised on the spur of the moment, but that must be refined over time with dedication to concrete relationships. With *Fratelli tutti* we can say that fraternity constitutes the foundation and goal of the ecclesial transformation so desired by Francis. From the beginning, “fraternity” has been a proper name for the Church, always with the awareness that this does not represent an abstract egalitarianism, but an equality in dignity enriched by a diversity of spiritual gifts and by different forms of service or ministries (1 Cor 12:4-6) (RATZINGER, 1966)⁸.

We are in a time of apprenticeship to synodality, because the ways and shapes of communion are not immediately apparent and we will need to be able to live with the complexity and uncertainties of the present and to venture out with a good amount of courageous creativity. This implies an updating of the juridical structure of the Church. Despite the updating of the 1983 Code for the Latin Church, the current hierarchical and centralized structure is not entirely aligned with the conciliar theology of communion but is sometimes confused nonetheless with the very essence of Catholicism. There is a gap between theological reflections on synodality on the one hand, and the current configuration of canonical norms on synodal bodies on the other. Without an adequate reform of the current Code of Canon Law, which is still marked by a pre-conciliar ecclesiology, synodality risks being reduced to a non-essential expression of hopes and wishes that does not ultimately affect the reality of ecclesial life (DIANICH, 2018). Two examples of this inadequacy may suffice: the current Code devotes only one general and positive canon to the laity,

⁸ Originally published in 1960: *Die christliche Brüderlichkeit*.

exactly as it was in the 1917 Code, and continues to stipulate that the bishop exercises his authority without having to account to anyone other than the Pope.⁹ It is not just a matter of trying to integrate the laity into existing bodies, carving out for them bigger spaces and broader ways in which to act; it is a question of transforming the relationships and structures of governance, so as to recognize the indispensable contribution of the laity and so allow for a real participation of all.

The *Preparatory Document* sets out three objectives for the Synod on Synodality: to live communion, to increase participation, and to relaunch the mission (PD, n. 1). Without the input of the laity, communion will not be adequately oriented towards mission, because it will not be shaped by the realities of life in the world, and the task of safeguarding the faith entrusted to the bishops will remain a museum-type conservation of the relics of tradition. Without communion with the bishops, the mission of the laity is susceptible to being influenced by ideology, leaving little to distinguish it from a generic philanthropic commitment for charitable purposes. Without the participation of the whole People of God in hierarchical communion with the Bishop of Rome, the mission goes on applying abstract principles that try to standardize the process of evangelization while avoiding the imperative to translate the Gospel in each context.

Synodality thus begins with conversion. This conversion is in fact a radical act of governance, the only real guarantee that the institutional structure of the Church will be able authentically to embark on the synodal path of communion.

“If we remain enclosed in our convictions and experiences, the hard shell of our own thoughts and feelings” (FRANCIS, 2021b) said the Holy Father to the Roman Curia just before Christmas 2021,

it will be difficult to be open to that experience of the Spirit, which, as the Apostle says, is born of the conviction that we are all children of ‘one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all’ (*Eph* 4:6) [...]. The Synod wants to be an experience of feeling ourselves all members of a larger people, the holy and faithful People of God, and thus disciples who listen and, precisely by virtue of this listening, can also understand God’s will, which is always revealed in unpredictable ways [...]. Synodality is a ‘style’ to which we must be converted (FRANCIS, 2021b).

⁹ The only exception seems to be the Diocesan Finance Council, whose consent is necessary for the bishop to dispose of the goods of the diocese (can. 1277; 1292). It is, in any case, more of a body for the protection of economic resources (can. 492 § 1) than a real synodal body.

Abbreviations

can. = canon(s)

DV = Dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*

EC = Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio*

EG = Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*

FT = Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*

LG = Dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*

RM = Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*

SC = Dogmatic constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*

PD = Preparatory Document for the Synod on Synodality

Vademecum = *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality

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