

SYNODALITY: A PARADIGM SHIFT

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INTRODUCTION

In Vatican II, in LG the Church came out with a new vision of the Church. The nature and form of the Church drastically changed. The Church was understood not as Pope, Bishops and Priests but as “People of God”. In the first draft prepared for LG there was no topic on “People of God”. A usual hierarchical structure of the Church was envisioned in the first draft. It was criticised on three grounds: clericalism, juridicalism and triumphalism. The second draft was prepared with the topic on “People of God” at the end. After much discussion and deliberation, the topic on “People of God” came to the forefront and became the second chapter of LG. This is history.

Lumen gentium was promulgated by Pope Paul VI on 21 November 1964, following approval by the assembled bishops by a vote of 2,151 to 5. After Vatican II a great renewal took place in different areas of the Church both at the local and universal level. Many changes came in the life and mission of the Church: Liturgical changes, the role of the Laity, the place of religious men and women in the Church, the hierarchical nature of the Church, etc

One concept that became prominent in all these changes was the “People of God.” Basing on the sacrament of Baptism equality among all the categories of the “People of God” - Pope, Bishops, Priests, Religious, and the Laity - was stressed. The role of the Laity hitherto understood as below the Pope, Bishops and Priests was changed. Their participation in the life and mission of the Church was stressed. Hence participatory structures like Diocesan Pastoral Council, Parish Pastoral Council. Diocesan Finance Committee, Parish Finance Committee were formed and Laity were enabled to become members; Lay ministries were formed and trainings were given to them for their active participation in the mission of the Church.

In spite of all these developments, even after 61 years of the promulgation of LG we are still struggling with the idea of “People of God.” Though the Church had officially clarified the role and the mission of the “People of God” in LG the clerical domination still continues. The laity are not given proper place in the pastoral governance of the Church; women are still treated like second class citizens. Here and there some cosmetic changes are done to show that the Laity are given proper place in the life and mission of the Church. This must change radically and the Church has to blossom in its full form.

A NEW THRESHOLD IN THE WAKE OF VATICAN II

The fruits of the renewal promised by Vatican II in its promotion of ecclesial communion, episcopal collegiality and thinking and acting ‘synodally’ have been rich and precious. There is, however, still a long way to go in the direction mapped out by the Council.¹ In fact, today the drive to find an appropriate form for a synodal Church – although it is widely shared and has been put into practice in positive ways – seems to be in need of clear theological principles and decisive pastoral orientations.

¹ Cf. Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 6 January 2001, 44: AAS 93 (2001) 298

Hence the new threshold that Pope Francis invites us to cross. In the wake of Vatican II, following in his predecessors footsteps, he insists that synodality describes the shape of the Church that emerges from the Gospel of Jesus, which is called to become incarnate today in history, in creative fidelity to Tradition.

In conformity with the teaching of *Lumen Gentium*, Pope Francis remarks in particular that synodality "offers us the most appropriate framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself"² and that, based on the doctrine of the *sensus fidei fidelium*,³ all members of the Church are agents of evangelisation. Consequently, making a synodal Church a reality is an indispensable precondition for a new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God.

Besides, synodality is at the heart of the ecumenical commitment of Christians: because it represents an invitation to walk together on the path towards full communion and because – when it is understood correctly – it offers a way of understanding and experiencing the Church where legitimate differences find room in the logic of a reciprocal exchange of gifts in the light of truth. Therefore, Pope Francis called for a Synod on Synodality.

Pope has said: "Synodality is not a chapter in an ecclesiology textbook, much less a fad or a slogan to be bandied about in our meetings. Synodality is an expression of the Church's nature, her form, style and mission." The Pope is very emphatic that the Church should be synodal and therefore he says, "It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium."⁴

"Synod" is an ancient and venerable word in the Tradition of the Church, whose meaning draws on the deepest themes of Revelation. Composed of a preposition συν – syn (with) and the noun ὁδός – hodos (path), it indicates the path along which the "People of God walk together." Equally, it refers to the Lord Jesus, who presents Himself as "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14, 6), and to the fact that Christians, His followers, were originally called "followers of the Way" (cf. Acts 9, 2; 19,9.23; 22,4; 24,14.22).

In ecclesiastical Greek it expresses how the disciples of Jesus were called together as an assembly and in some cases, it is a synonym for the ecclesial community.⁵ Saint John Chrysostom, for example, writes that the Church is a "name standing for 'walking together' (σύνωδος - synodus)"⁶. He explains that the Church is actually the assembly convoked to give God thanks and glory like a choir, a harmonic reality which holds everything together, since, by their reciprocal and ordered relations, those who compose it converge in common mind.

Since the first centuries, the word "synod" has been applied, with a specific meaning, to the ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels (diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal or universal) to discern, by the light of the Word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by.

² Pope Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015, AAS 107 (2015) 1141.

³ International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014), 91.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015, AAS 107 (2015) 1139.

⁵ Cf. G. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford (Clarendon Press) 1968, 1334-1335.

⁶ cf. Pope Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, AAS 107 (2015) 1142.

The Greek σύνοδος is translated into Latin as synodus or concilium. Concilium, in its profane use, refers to an assembly convoked by some legitimate authority. Although the roots of “synod” and “council” are different, their meanings converge. In fact, “council” enriches the semantic content of “synod” by its reference to the Hebrew “qahal”, the assembly convoked by the Lord, and its translation into Greek as ἐκκλησία, which, in the New Testament, refers to the eschatological convocation of the People of God in Christ Jesus.

In the Catholic Church the distinction between the use of the words “council” and “synod” is a recent one. In Vatican II they are synonymous, both referring to the council session.⁷ A precise distinction was introduced by the *Codex Iuris Canonici* (CIC) of the Latin Church (1983), which distinguishes between a particular (plenary or provincial) Council⁸ and an ecumenical Council⁹ on the one hand, and a Synod of Bishops¹⁰ and a diocesan Synod¹¹ on the other hand.¹²

In the theological, canonical and pastoral literature of recent decades, a neologism (new word) has appeared, the noun “synodality”, a correlate of the adjective “synodal”, with both of these deriving from the word “synod”. Thus, people speak of synodality as a “constitutive dimension” of the Church or tout court of the “synodal Church”. This linguistic novelty, which needs careful theological clarification, is a sign of something new that has been maturing in the ecclesial consciousness starting from the Magisterium of Vatican II, and from the lived experience of local Churches and the universal Church since the last Council until today.

THE SYNODAL CALLING OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

The entire People of God is challenged by its fundamentally synodal calling. The circularity of the *sensus fidei* with which all the faithful are endowed, the discernment carried out at the various levels on which synodality works and the authority of those who exercise the pastoral ministry of unity and governance shows the dynamic of synodality. This circularity promotes the baptismal dignity and co-responsibility of all, makes the most of the presence in the People of God of charisms dispensed by the Holy Spirit, recognises the specific ministry of Pastors in collegial and hierarchical communion with the Bishop of Rome, and guarantees that synodal processes and events unfold in conformity with the *depositum fidei* and involve listening to the Holy Spirit, for the renewal of the Church’s mission.

In this perspective, the participation of the lay faithful becomes essential. They are the immense majority of the People of God and there is much to be learnt from their participation in the various forms of the life and mission of ecclesial communities, from popular piety and

⁷ Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* 1; Constitution on the Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1.

⁸ CIC 439,1; 440,1.

⁹ CIC 337,1.

¹⁰ CIC 342.

¹¹ CIC 460

¹² The Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches (1990) mentions, on the one hand, the Ecumenical Council (CCEO 50), on the other the Synod of Bishops (CCEO 46,1), the Synod of Bishops of the Patriarchal Church (CCEO 192), the Synod of Bishops of the major archiepiscopal Church (CCEO 152), the Metropolitan Synod (CCEO 133,1) and the Permanent Synod of the Patriarchal Curia (CCEO 114,1).

generic pastoral care, as well as their specific competency in various sectors of cultural and social life

Consulting them is thus indispensable for initiating processes of discernment in the framework of synodal structures. We must, therefore, overcome the obstacles created by the lack of formation and recognised spaces in which the lay faithful can express themselves and act, and by a clerical mindset which runs the risk of keeping them on the edges of ecclesial life.¹³ This requires a priority commitment in the task of forming a mature ecclesial sense, which, at the institutional level, needs to be transformed into a regular synodal process.

There also needs to be a decisive promotion of the principle of co-essentiality between hierarchical gifts and charismatic gifts in the Church on the basis of the teaching of Vatican II¹⁴. This entails involving communities of consecrated women or men, the movements and new ecclesial communities. All of these, many of which have come into being spurred on by charisms given by the Holy Spirit for the renewal of the Church's life and mission, can offer significant experiences of synodal approaches in the life of communion and of the dynamics of communal discernment at the centre of their lives, as well as stimuli to discovering new methods of evangelisation. In some cases, they also offer examples of integrating different ecclesial vocations in the perspective of the ecclesiology of communion.

In the Church's synodal vocation, the charism of theology is called to offer a specific service: it involves listening to the Word of God, understanding faith in sapiential, scientific and prophetic ways, discerning the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel and being in dialogue with society and cultures, all at the service of the proclamation of the Gospel. Together with the faithful People's experience of faith and contemplation of the truth, and with the preaching of the Pastors, theology contributes to an ever-deeper penetration into the Gospel. Furthermore, "As is the case with all Christian vocations, the ministry of theologians, as well as being personal, is also both communal and collegial".¹⁵ Ecclesial synodality therefore needs theologians to do theology in a synodal way, developing their capacity to listen to each other, to dialogue, to discern and to harmonise their many and varied approaches and contributions.

The synodal dimension of the Church must be brought out by enacting and directing discernment processes which bear witness to the dynamism of communion that inspires all ecclesial decisions. Synodal life is expressed in structures and processes which lead, through various phases (preparation, celebration, reception), to synodal events in which the Church is called together in accordance with the various levels of implementing her essential synodality.

This task demands listening carefully to the Holy Spirit, fidelity to the teaching of the Church and, at the same time, creativity, in order to discover and set in motion the most suitable instruments for the ordered participation of all, for the mutual exchange of gifts, for an incisive reading of the signs of the times, for effective planning for mission. To this end, implementing the synodal dimension of the Church must integrate and update the heritage of

¹³ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* 102, AAS 105 (2013) 1073.

¹⁴ Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* 4; cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia* 10.

¹⁵ International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria* (2012) 45.

the ancient ordering of the Church by means of the synodal structures inspired by Vatican II, and must be open to the creation of new structures.¹⁶

The first level on which synodality is exercised is the local Church. Here "the pre-eminent manifestation of the Church consists in the full active participation of all God's holy People in these liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in a single prayer, at one altar, at which the Bishop presides, surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers".

In the local Church, it is laid down that there should be various permanent organisms whose task it is to assist the ministry of the Bishop in various ways in his ordinary pastoral leadership of the Diocese: the Diocesan Curia, the College of Consultors, the Chapter of Canons and the Financial Council. Vatican Council II stipulated that the Council of Priests and the Diocesan Pastoral Council be set up as permanent bodies for the exercise and promotion of communion and synodality.

The Council of Priests was presented by Vatican II as a "council or senate of priests who represent the *presbyterium*" and its aim is "to help the Bishop in governing the Diocese". The Bishop is, in fact, called to listen to the priests, to consult them and to dialogue with them "about the pastoral needs and the good of the Diocese"^[97]. The *presbyterium* has a specific place in the local Church's overall synodal dynamic, whose spirit animates it and whose style shapes it.

The Diocesan Pastoral Council's task is to offer a qualified contribution to the overall pastoral approach promoted by the Bishop and his *presbyterium*; on occasions it also becomes a place for decisions under the specific authority of the Bishop^[98]. Given its nature, the frequency of its meetings, its procedure and the objectives to which it is committed, the Diocesan Pastoral Council is proposed as the most appropriate permanent structure for implementing synodality in the local Church.

In various local Churches, to boost the implementation of the teaching of Vatican II, there are Assemblies which express and promote communion and co-responsibility and contribute to integrated pastoral planning and its evaluation. These Assemblies are of great significance in the ecclesial community's synodal journey, as the setting and ordinary preparation for enacting the diocesan Synod.

OUTCOME OF THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY

The *Final Document* expresses awareness that the call to mission is, at the same time, the call to conversion of each local Church and of the whole Church in line with the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (cf. EG 30). There are five parts with an Introduction and Conclusion:

- I. Introduction – it introduces the whole scheme of the Final Document.
 1. The Heart of Synodality – it outlines the theological and spiritual foundations that enlighten and nourish what is to come.

¹⁶ Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, AAS 107 (2015) 1143.

2. On the Boat, Together – it speaks about the conversion of the relationships that are formed in the intertwining of vocations, charisms and ministries, building the Christian community and shaping mission.
 3. Cast the Net – it identifies three practices that are intimately connected: ecclesial discernment, decision making processes, and a culture of transparency, accountability and evaluation. With respect to these we are also asked to initiate pathways of ‘missionary transformation’, for which a renewal of participatory bodies is urgently needed.
 4. An Abundant Catch – it outlines how we can cultivate new forms of the exchange of gifts and renew the intertwining of the bonds that unite us in the Church at a time when the experience of being rooted in a place is changing profoundly.
 5. So I Send You – It enables us to look at a particular step we need to take: caring for the formation of all, of the People of God, all as synodal missionaries.
- II. Conclusion – A Feast for All Peoples – it speaks about the miraculous catch of fish in the Resurrection narrative which points to the eschatological banquet that had already begun and ends in entrusting the results of the Synod to the Virgin Mary.

Note: The development of the *Final Document* is guided by the Gospel Resurrection narratives. With this document, the Assembly recognises and bears witness that synodality, a constitutive dimension of the Church, is already part of the experience of many of our communities. At the same time, it suggests pathways to follow, practices to implement and horizons to explore. Some highlights of the new paradigms:

1. Synodality is not an option to be followed or rejected but a constitutive dimension of the Church. It “is the walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God’s kingdom, in union with all humanity”.¹⁷ In simple and concise terms, “synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary, so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ”¹⁸.
2. It is interesting to note that this is the first time in the history of the Synod of Bishops that the Holy Father approved this document, signed it and ordered its publication. Thus, he joined the “we” of the Assembly, which through the Final Document addresses the holy faithful People of God. The Holy Father believes in this. Believes in the *sensus fidelium*. And what he did when he decided to approve to make his own this document proves that he believes in the authority of the Synodal Assembly. The Holy Father states, “The Final Document is part of the ordinary Magisterium of the Successor of Peter (cf. EC 18, 1; CCC 892)”. So, he asks the people to welcome and receive it.¹⁹
3. The Final Document is not ‘strictly normative’ and its application will need various mediations. The local Churches and groupings of Churches are now called upon to implement, in their different contexts, the authoritative proposals contained in the Document through the processes of discernment and decision making provided for by law and by the Document itself.²⁰

¹⁷ *Final Document (FD)*, no. 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, no.28.

¹⁹ Accompanying note by the Holy Father, 24 November 2024.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

4. Even though we have this Final Document and the synod is over, synodality is not over. It's not a Final Document on synodality, but it's a Final Document on the session of the synod, with recognition that more work on synodality is going to continue.²¹
5. This synod - formally themed "For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission" - was the first synod to include lay men and women as voting members. The synod's final document states that the delegates hope to be "synodal missionaries" within the communities they serve.
6. The Final Document addresses a wide array of topics, including the responsibility of the baptized, the role of consultative bodies such as bishops' conferences, women's leadership in the Church and the importance of missionary discipleship.²²
7. We live in a world of different contexts, cultures and diversities; with people of different faiths practising their religion. The appreciation of these diversities, contexts and religions is the key to growing in missionary synodal Church.²³ The recognition of these diversities should help us to "resist the temptation of being at the centre and open oneself to the acceptance of other perspectives."²⁴
8. "The Synodal style enables the Church to be a prophetic voice in today's world."²⁵ Our age is marked by ever-increasing inequalities, disenchantment with the functioning of democracy, increasing autocratic and dictatorial tendencies, predominance of market economy, the poor becoming poorer, religious fanaticism, alarming situation of fake news, etc. In this situation the authentic practice of synodality calls us to be critical and prophetic over against the prevailing culture.²⁶
9. In synodality the Pope is trying to get us all to honour each other's dignity and doing that through a way that's centered on listening and sharing. The invitation has been for all the people of God, and the Pope means it. Attention has to be given to children, young people, persons with disabilities and married persons.²⁷
10. Real difficulties encountered by pastors in their ministry were mentioned in the synodal process. For example, a sense of isolation and loneliness, feeling of being overwhelmed by the expectation that they are required to fulfil every need. The Synod also gave a response to it: Rediscovering co-responsibility in the exercise of ministry, wider distribution of tasks and responsibilities, courageous discernment of what properly belongs to the ordained ministry, the roles that can be delegated in a more spiritually sound and dynamic manner. The Document also notes that "this perspective will surely have an impact on decision-making processes, enabling them to have a more clearly synodal character. It will also help to overcome clericalism, understood as the use of power to one's own advantage and the distortion of the authority of the Church that is at the service of the People of God. This expresses itself above all in forms of abuse, be they sexual or economic, the abuse of conscience

²¹ Cf. *FD*, no.9

²² Cf. *Ibid.* no. 60.

²³ *Ibid.*, nos. 39-41.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 47.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, nos. 61-64.

and of power, by ministers of the Church. ‘Clericalism, whether fostered by Priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to an excision in the ecclesial body that supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today’ (Francis, *Letter to the People of God*, 20 August 2018).”²⁸

11. “The lay faithful, both men and women, should be given greater opportunities for participation, also exploring new forms of service and ministry in response to the pastoral needs of our time in a spirit of collaboration and differentiated co-responsibility. In particular, some concrete needs have emerged from the synodal process. These, ought to be responded to according to the various contexts:
 - a) increased participation of laymen and laywomen in Church discernment processes and all phases of decision-making processes (drafting, making and confirming decisions);
 - b) greater access of laymen and laywomen to positions of responsibility in dioceses and ecclesiastical institutions, including seminaries, theological institutes and faculties, more fully enacting existing provisions;
 - c) greater recognition and support for the lives and charisms of consecrated men and women and their employment in positions of ecclesial responsibility;
 - d) a greater number of qualified lay people serving as judges in all canonical processes;
 - e) effective recognition of the dignity and respect for the rights of those who are employed in the Church and its institutions.”²⁹
12. “In the synodal Church ‘the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called together to pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and offer advice on taking pastoral decisions’ (ITC 68) for mission. The way to promote a synodal Church is to foster as great a participation of all the People of God as possible in decision-making processes.”³⁰ If the decision making has to bear fruit it must be conducted in an orderly manner and the people involved must take responsibility.³¹
13. Participatory structures have to be established everywhere in forms appropriate to different contexts.³²
14. Formation of Christian community and that too a common and shared formation was very much requested in the Synod.³³
15. “Throughout the synodal process, a widely expressed request was that the discernment and formation of candidates for ordained ministry be undertaken in a synodal way. There should be a significant presence of women, an immersion in the daily life of communities, and formation to enable collaboration with everyone in the Church and in how to practise ecclesial discernment.”³⁴

CONCLUSION

Embracing the style of synodality three types of transformation are required on our part:

²⁸ Ibid, no.74.

²⁹ Ibid, no.77

³⁰ Ibid, no.87.

³¹ Ibid, no.93.

³² Ibid, no. 102.

³³ Ibid. no. 143.

³⁴ Ibid, no.148.

- a renewal of attitudes and behaviour,
- a reform of ecclesial structures and procedures, and
- the adoption of synodal practices.