

**THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN A SYNODAL CHURCH:
A CANONICAL PERSPECTIVE**

**REV.FR. DR. A. VINCENT
VELLORE**

INTRODUCTION

Pope Francis invites us to partake in a New Jerusalem council experience in the Church today. In the New Jerusalem Council, as depicted in the Acts of the Apostles, the synodal culture of the people of God is explicit. In the Jerusalem Council, we find in the New Testament a listening culture, a discernment process that takes shape among the people of God, under the leaders, the elders listen to the Holy Spirit, and the dynamism of Synodality evolves. Pope Francis says that it is precisely this path of Synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.¹The second session of the 16th Synod of Bishops concluded on 26 October 2024. A final document consisting of 155 sections was immediately published as per the Pope’s directive. It is divided into five parts with maintaining the theme for a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and mission. The third part of this document specifically explains the Decision-making process in a Synodal Church. Decision-making processes need ecclesial discernment, which requires listening in a climate of trust that is supported by transparency and accountability. Trust must be mutual and the decision makers need to be able to trust and listen to the people of God. Formation is needed in order to engage in decision making process grounded in ecclesial discernment and which reflect a culture of transparency, accountability and evaluation. The synodal process, deeply rooted in the tradition of the Church, embodies a collegial and participatory method of decision-making. Canon law provides the framework for this process at various levels of the Church: parish, basic Christian community, diocesan, regional, national, and universal. This paper explores the canonical principles governing the synodal process at each level, stressing on its consultative and deliberative dimensions.

1. PARISH LEVEL

¹Pope FRANCIS, Address on the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, in https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october /documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html (accessed on 18.01.2025).

In order to promote relationships capable of sustaining and orienting the mission of the Church, a priority must be made to exercise the evangelical wisdom that allowed the apostolic community of Jerusalem to seal the result of first Synodal event (*Acts* 15:28). It calls for interior freedom, humility, prayer, mutual trust and open to surrender to the Will of God. At the parish level, the synodal process primarily involves the parish pastoral council and the parish finance council, as outlined in Canon 536 and Canon 537. The parish pastoral council, where established, assists the parish priest in nurturing pastoral activity through consultation. Though advisory, its contributions reflect the voice of the faithful, the finance council, mandatory under Canon 537, supports the priest in financial administration, making sure of transparency and accountability. Together, these councils exemplify synodality by encouraging dialogue and shared responsibility. A vibrant synodal process at the parish level also relies on the active participation of various ministries and groups:

Music and Singing: Guided by Canon 230 §2, lay members contribute significantly to liturgical celebrations. Choirs and music ministries bring about active participation in worship, enhancing the sacred liturgy's solemnity and communal aspect.

Altar Serving: Altar servers, often drawn from the youth and children, play a vital role in assisting the clergy and other ministers during liturgical celebrations. Their service embodies the principles of Canon 231, which calls for proper formation and dedication in ecclesial duties.

Youth Ministry: Inspired by Canon 225, youth groups engage in apostolic work, faith formation, and social outreach, reflecting the Church's mission of nurturing young disciples.

Women's Groups: Women's ministries, rooted in the Church's recognition of the unique contributions of women (cf. *Mulieris Dignitatem*), promote spiritual growth, community building, and charitable initiatives. Some examples of women's groups are: Catholic Women's League (CWL), Legion of Mary, Mother's Union, Ladies Auxiliary, Young Catholic Women's Group, Women's Rosary Group, Widows' Fellowship, Women's Bible Study Groups, Martha Ministry, Ladies Sodality, Catholic Nurses Guild.

Single People's Groups: These groups offer support, spiritual companionship, and avenues for single parishioners to participate actively in parish life, echoing the Church's inclusive vision.

Consecrated Religious: Religious men and women contribute their charisms to parish life, enriching its spiritual, catechetical, and pastoral dimensions in line with Canon 673. These ministries and groups, under the guidance of the parish priest, and other leaders make sure that the diverse gifts of the faithful are integrated into the Church's mission, bringing about a truly synodal spirit.

2. BASIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY LEVEL- *ANBIAMS*

Listening to the Word of God is the starting point and criterion for all ecclesial discernment. The Scripture testify that God has spoken to His people to the point of giving us in Jesus fullness of all Revelation (*DV 2*). They indicate the places where we can hear His voice. God communicates with us first of all in the liturgy (*SC 7*). He speaks through Tradition of the Church, the *Magisterium*, personal and communal meditation on the Scriptures and the practices of popular piety. God continues to manifest Himself through the cry of those who are made poor and in the events of human history. God also communicates with His people through the elements of the cosmos, whose very existence points to the Creator's action and which is filled with the presence of the life-giving Spirit. Finally, God also speaks through the personal conscience of each person, which is "the most intimate centre and sanctuary of a person, in which he or she is alone with God and whose voice echoes within them." (*GS16*). Ecclesial discernment demands the continuous care for and formation of consciences and the Maturing of the *sensusfidei*, so as not to neglect any of the places where God speaks and comes to meet His people. The steps of ecclesial discernment will differ depending on the various places and their traditions. Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) operate within the spirit of Canon 215, which acknowledges the right of the faithful to form associations for nurturing Christian values. While not explicitly regulated by canon law, BCCs – *anbiams* reflect synodality by creating spaces for prayer, discernment, and decision-making at the grassroots. Their participatory nature aligns with the principles of co-responsibility and collaboration taught by the Second Vatican Council.

3. DIOCESAN LEVEL

If the synodal Church wants to be welcoming, then the culture and praxis of accountability must shape its actions at all levels. However, those in positions of authority have greater responsibility in this regard and are called to account for it to God and to His People. While accountability to one's superiors has been practised over the centuries, the dimension of authority's being accountable to the community is in need of restoration. The structures and procedures established through the experience of consecrated life (such as chapters, canonical visitations, etc.) can serve as an inspiration in this regard. Similarly, it is necessary to have structures and methods for regularly evaluating the exercise of ministry. Such evaluation is not a judgement upon an individual. Rather, it allows a way of assisting the minister by highlighting positive aspects of their ministry and bringing to light areas for improvement. The evaluation also assists the local Church in learning from experience, adjusting plans of action, determining the outcomes of its decisions in relation to its mission, and remaining attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Local churches and their groupings (cf. cann. 368-572) are responsible for developing effective forms and processes of accountability and evaluation in a synodal way in addition to adhering to the criteria and oversight of structures already established by canonical norms. These should be appropriate to the context, including the requirements of civil law, the legitimate expectations of society and the availability of experts in the field. It is also necessary to draw on the skills of those, especially laypeople, who have greater expertise regarding accountability and evaluation. Best practices within civil society should be discerned and adapted for use within Church contexts. The way in which reporting and evaluation processes are implemented at the local level should be included in the report presented during the visits ad *limina* (cf. can. 391§1).

When the competent authority has formulated the decision, having respected the consultation process and clearly expressed the reasons for it, by reason of the bond of communion that unites them, all the baptized should respect and implement the decision. They should do this even if it differs from their own opinion, but they should also be free to participate honestly in the evaluative phase. There is always a possibility of making an

appeal to the higher authority according to the provision of the law. Implementing the processes of decision-making correctly and resolutely, and in asynodal style, will further the progress of God's People in a participatory way, especially by utilizing the institutional means provided for in Canon Law, in particular participatory bodies. Without concrete changes in the short term, the vision of a synodal Church will not be credible, and this will alienate those members of the People of God who have drawn strength and hope from the synodal journey. Local Churches need to find ways to implement these changes

The baptised participate in decision-making, accountability and evaluation processes through institutional structures, primarily through those already provided for the local Church set out in the existing Code of Canon Law. In the Latin Church these are: Diocesan Synod (cf. *CIC*, can. 466), *Presbyteral* Council (cf. *CIC*, can. 500 § 2), Diocesan Pastoral Council (cf. *CIC*, can. 514 § 1), Parish pastoral council (cf. *CIC*, can. 536), Diocesan and Parish Council for Economic Affairs (cf. *CIC*, cann. 493, 537). In the Eastern Catholic Churches these are: Eparchial Assembly (cf. *CCEO*, can. 235 ss.), Eparchial Assembly for Economic Affairs (cf. *CCEO*, can. 262), *Presbyteral* Council (cf. *CCEO* can. 264), and Eparchial Pastoral Council (cf. *CCEO* can. 272), Parish Councils (cf. *CCEO* can. 295). Members participate on the basis of their ecclesial role and their differentiated responsibilities and capacities (charisms, ministries, experiences, competencies, etc). Each of these bodies plays a role in the discernment needed for the inculturated proclamation of the Gospel, for the community's mission in its milieu, and for the witness of the baptized. They also contribute to the decision-making processes through established means. These bodies themselves become the subject of accountability and evaluation, as they will need to give an account of their work. Participatory bodies represent one of the most promising areas in which to act for rapid implementation of the synodal guidelines, bringing about perceptible changes speedily.

At the diocesan level, the synodal process is institutionalized through the diocesan synod (Canons 460-468). Convened by the diocesan bishop, the synod gathers clergy, religious, and laity to deliberate on matters affecting the diocese. Canon 463 specifies the members who must be invited, ensuring broad representation. The synod's consultative

role supports the bishop in exercising his governance while respecting the diversity of opinions within the diocesan community.

The diocesan pastoral council (can. 511) also plays a vital role, advising the bishop on pastoral initiatives. Can. 512 mandates its composition to reflect the entire diocese, nurturing inclusivity and dialogue. Specific groups include diocesan youth forums, associations for catechists, clergy councils, committees for family and social justice ministries, and associations for consecrated life, including orders and congregations.

4. REGIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVELS

A synodal Church is based upon the existence, efficiency and effective vitality of these participatory bodies, not on the merely nominal existence of them. This requires that they function in accordance with canonical provisions or legitimate customs and with respect to the statutes and regulations that govern them. For this reason, the Synod insists that they be made Mandatory, as was requested at all stages of the synodal process, and that they can fully play their role, and not just in a purely formal way, in ways appropriate to their diverse local contexts.

Regionally, Episcopal conferences facilitate syndality, as mandated by can. 447. These conferences, composed of bishops from a given territory, discuss pastoral issues of common interest, forming unity and coherence in their directives. Can. 455 permits such conferences to issue binding decrees, subject to review by the Holy See, reinforcing the principle of subsidiarity. Key groups at the regional level include regional Caritas bodies, liturgical commissions, regional tribunals, and theological forums, along with associations of Catholic educators and healthcare professionals.

At the national level, Episcopal assemblies or plenary councils, governed by Canons 439-446, address broader ecclesial matters. These councils, requiring papal approval, reflect the collective discernment of the bishops and other participants, embodying synodality in action. National Catholic organizations, such as those for education, health, justice, and family ministries, play a significant role in these deliberations, alongside networks like national Caritas and Catholic Charismatic Renewal groups.

5. UNIVERSAL CHURCH LEVEL

The universal Church's synodal process is exemplified in the Synod of Bishops, established by Pope Paul VI. Can. 342 outlines its purpose: to assist the Pope in addressing issues affecting the universal Church. The synod's structure includes preparatory, consultative, and deliberative phases, engaging bishops, experts, and the laity. While its decisions are not binding, the Synod's recommendations significantly influence papal decisions, exemplifying collegiality and communion. Specific groups involved include the College of Cardinals, dicasteries of the Roman Curia, and international Catholic organizations such as Caritas Internationalis, Pax Christi, and the International Union of Superiors General (UISG).

CONCLUSION

Synod on Synodality is a dynamic reality gripping the Church at the initiative of Pope Francis, moved by the Holy Spirit, challenging every member of the people of God to be involved in the listening process of the Church at present to make it even more vibrant and meaningful. The processes on Synod on Synodality must make the people of God own their Church and be in communion, and participation and continue the mission with renewed vigour.

The synodal process, grounded in the Church's canonical framework, fosters participation, discernment, and shared responsibility at every level. By embracing synodality, the Church not only honours its tradition but also responds dynamically to contemporary pastoral challenges, ensuring that all the faithful participate in its mission of communion and evangelization. Therefore the Assembly proposes that the diocesan Synod and eparchial Assembly be more highly valued as bodies for regular consultation between the Bishop and the portion of the People of God entrusted to him.

A synodal Church is based upon the existence, efficiency and effective vitality of these participatory bodies, not on the merely nominal existence of them. This requires that they function in accordance with canonical provisions or legitimate customs and with respect to the statutes and regulations that govern them. For this reason, they insist that they be made mandatory, as was requested at all stages of the synodal process, and that they can fully play their role, and not just in a purely formal way, in ways appropriate to

their diverse local contexts. Furthermore, the structure and operations of these bodies need to be addressed. It is necessary to start by adopting a synodal working method.

The suitability of conversation in the Spirit for adaptation may constitute a reference point. Particular attention should be given to the way members are selected. When no election is envisaged, a synodal consultation should be carried out that expresses as much as possible the reality of the community or the local Church, and the relevant authority should proceed to the appointment on the basis of its results, respecting the relation between consultation and deliberation described above. It is also necessary to ensure that members of diocesan and parish pastoral councils are able to propose agenda items in an analogous way to that allowed for in the presbyteral council.

Equal attention needs to be given to the membership of the participatory bodies so as to encourage greater involvement by women, young people, and those living in poverty or on the margins. Furthermore, it is essential that these bodies include the baptized who are committed to living their faith in the ordinary realities of life, who are recognizably committed to an apostolic and missionary life, not only those engaged with organizing ecclesial life and services internally. In this way, the ecclesial discernment will benefit from a greater openness, an ability to analyze the reality in which it finds itself and a plurality of perspectives. It may be appropriate to provide for the participation of delegates from other Churches and Christian Communions, as happened during this synodal assembly, or representatives of the religions present in a territory. Local Churches and their groupings can more appropriately indicate criteria for the composition of participatory bodies suitable to each context.

This should be the place for listening, prayer and discernment, particularly when it comes to choices pertaining to the life and mission of a local Church. Moreover, the diocesan Synod may provide scope for the exercise of accountability and evaluation whereby the bishop gives an account of pastoral activity in various areas: the implementation of a diocesan pastoral plan, reception of the synodal processes of the entire Church, initiatives in safeguarding and the administration of finances and temporal goods. It is, therefore, necessary to strengthen the existing canonical provisions in order to better reflect the missionary synodal character of each local Church, making provision that these bodies meet on a regular, and not rare or infrequent, basis. Therefore the New

Jerusalem Synodal experience that may happen in this Synod revive our Mother Church so that it becomes more and more relevant in today's context.