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For a Synodal Church: To live Communion, Achieve Participation, to Open Herself to Mission



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THE SYNODAL PATH

IN ROME, ON OCTOBER 9–10, 2021, Pope Francis opened the current synodal path for the church. As from October 17, the journey continues in the local churches, and the synodal process will come to term in two years in the Synod of Bishops in October 2023. The word, synod, derives from two Greek words, *sun* (together, with), and *hodos* (path, way). It means “journeying together.” Synodality is not so much an event or slogan as it is “the form, the style, and the structure of the church.”¹ It is the church’s manner of being and mission in which all the faithful journey together as the one People of God. The entire church is a communion (*koinōnia*), “a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”² As “the *nexus amoris* [the bond of love] in the life of God as Trinity, the Spirit gives this same love to the church, and she is built into the *koinōnia tou hagiou pneumatos* the communion of the Holy Spirit.”³

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1. *Preparatory Document for the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (henceforth, PD), Sept 07, no. 2.
 2. St. Cyprian, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 23. See also Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* [henceforth, LG], 4
 3. International Theological Commission (henceforth, ITC), *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (March 02, 2018), no. 46. See 2 Cor 13:13 and LG, no. 4.

Paradigms of the church living and acting synodally occur in the Acts of the Apostles. In the Upper Room before Pentecost, there were Peter and the apostles, but also some women and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers, all devoting themselves with one accord [*homothumadón*, with one mind, purpose, or impulse] to prayer (Acts 1:13-14).⁴ Upon Peter's suggestion, this group proposed two persons and cast lots for them and the lot fell upon Matthias and he was counted with the eleven Apostles (Acts 1:26). On the day of Pentecost, "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim" (Acts 2:4). After three thousand persons accepted Peter's message and were baptized, "they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

In Acts 10, the church had "the experience of the Spirit in which Peter and the early community recognize the risk of placing unjustified limits on faith sharing" (PD, 17b). Those who accompanied Peter to the home of Cornelius "were astounded that the gift of the holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also..." (Acts 10:46). In Jerusalem, the circumcised believers took Peter to task but he was able to show that he was following the lead of the Holy Spirit.⁵

The ultimate paradigm is Acts 15, the so-called Council of Jerusalem. When Paul and Barnabas disagreed with the Judaizers in Antioch about the necessity of circumcision for salvation, the Church of Antioch sent them and some of the others to the apostles and presbyters in Jerusalem. The leader of the Jerusalem Church was James, not one of the Twelve. Peter spoke about his experience with Cornelius. "The whole assembly fell silent, and they *listened* while Paul and Barnabas described the signs and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles through them" (Acts 15:13, emphasis mine). James summarized the discernment, suggesting that Gentiles not be forced to circumcise, but to observe certain precepts in order to facilitate communion with Jewish Christians. A letter was drafted by the apostles and presbyters, in agreement with the whole church, and they sent representatives to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas: "it is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us, not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities..." (15:28). This assembly of apostles, presbyters and the whole church

4. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture citations follow the New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE).

5. "If then God gave them the same gift he gave to us when we came to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to be able to hinder God?" (Acts 11:17).

exemplifies how “a synodal church is a participatory and co-responsible church”; “in a synodal style, decisions are made through discernment, based on a consensus that flows from the common obedience to the Spirit.”⁶ Thus “a synodal church is a church which listens [...] The faithful People, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other; and all listening to the Holy Spirit.”⁷

A GLANCE AT SYNODALITY IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

In the second and third centuries, bishops of a given region began meeting (synods) to address questions of common concern, for example, discrepancies in the date of Easter and what to do with Christians who lapsed during the persecutions.⁸ In fact, an apostolic canon of the end of the third century required that “any decision that is beyond the competency of the local bishop must be taken by a synod.”⁹ The Council of Nicea, 325, convoked by the emperor, decided the preeminence (*prēsheia*) of the Sees of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. The Council of Constantinople, 381, added the see of Constantinople, while that of Chalcedon, presided over by the Bishop of Rome, added the see of Jerusalem.¹⁰ Such preeminence served unity and communion, however, only bishops took part in these councils. “In the East the church’s complex relationship to the emerging Byzantine empire led it to see the emperor rather than the pope as the principal guarantor of the church’s unity;”¹¹ this created conditions for a more synodal form of church government. By the fourth century, the authority of the church and Bishop of Rome increased in the West. When the Roman empire split, Rome, as the only patriarchal see in the West, enjoyed unparalleled authority. Popes, from Damasus to Gregory, made claims to unique papal authority over the whole church.¹² However, for most of the first 1000 years, the popes did not appoint bishops (except for the suffragan dioceses of Rome), did not convene, preside over, or set the agenda for ecumenical councils, did not canonize saints, did not write encyclicals, or call bishops to Rome for *ad limina*

6. PD, 30

7. Pope Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 2015.

8. Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church. A People Called and Sent* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), 91.

9. ITC, 27.

10. ITC, 26.

11. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology*, 93.

12. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology*, 93.

visits, were never referred to as “sovereign pontiff.” “Pope” and “vicar of Christ” were used for the pope and other bishops, and even for emperors, until the eleventh century.¹³ The reforms of Pope Gregory VII (1073-85), especially against the abuse of benefices (lands tied to the ordination of bishops, making quite a few to seek the benefice, not the pastoral care), increased the concentration of all ecclesial authority in the pope. He began to standardize canon law for the whole church and laid claim to sovereign power over all matters, spiritual and secular. Now “Vicar of Christ” is reserved to the pope alone.¹⁴

The Council of Trent, between 1545 and 1563, mandated annual diocesan synods, and provincial synods every three years—no lay participation. Pius IX (1846–1878), fearing that national churches were subject to political manipulation, shifted ecclesial powers from local churches towards Rome; the authority of bishops decreased. Vatican I, 1869-70, declared the doctrine of papal infallibility, but dismissed because of war before it could address the position of bishops. Papal control of the appointment of bishops dates only after Vatican I; through much of church history, bishops were locally elected and only confirmed by the Pope.¹⁵ Vatican I saw the church on the model of a “perfect society” (*societas perfecta*), divided into the teaching church and the learning church (*ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens*).¹⁶

RE-DISCOVERY OF SYNODALITY IN VATICAN II

Vatican II rediscovered ancient ideas of the church as mystery of communion. It proclaimed the sacramentality of the episcopate and its collegiality with the Bishop of Rome. By virtue of sacramental consecration¹⁷ and hierarchical communion with the head and other members of the College, a bishop becomes part of the episcopal body.¹⁸ Hence, a diocese or local church is not a branch office

13. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology*, 93-94.

14. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology*, 96-97. In 1140, Gratian compiled the Decretals, a collection of papal decrees, canons of councils, decisions of the church fathers and so on. This embraced the so-called Donation of Constantine, that back-dated the very expansive view of papal authority.

15. However, some dioceses in Europe still elect their bishops, for example, Austria.

16. ITC, 37.

17. Bishops enjoy the fullness of the sacrament of orders (CD, 15). They are neither priests with increased jurisdiction nor deputies of the pope, rather successors of the apostles who in collegiality share pastoral responsibility in communion with the Bishop of Rome.

18. Vatican II, Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church *Christus dominus* (henceforth, CD), 4

of the universal church,¹⁹ rather the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of Christ is present and operative in it.²⁰ “The ministry of Peter, the *centrum unitatis* [center of unity], protects legitimate differences, while at the same time assuring that such differences do not hinder unity but rather contributes toward it.”²¹ As such, “the dynamic of synodality thus joins the communitarian aspect which includes the whole People of God, the collegial dimension that is part of the exercise of episcopal ministry, and the primatial ministry of the Bishop of Rome.”²²

Vatican II also rediscovered the ancient images of the church: Body of Christ, Bride of Christ, Temple of the Holy Spirit, Family of God, and especially People of God, images that complete one another.²³ Because the church is an outflow of the communion between the Father, Son, and Spirit, “the concept of *communio*, ‘lies at the heart of the Church’s self-understanding.’”²⁴

“The eucharist makes the church and [in turn] the church makes the eucharist.”²⁵ Hence, “for the early church, the sacrament of the eucharist brought about not only the communion of those gathered at each altar but the communion of all local churches.”²⁶ Communion is vertical (communion with God) and horizontal (communion among people),²⁷ and both invisible and visible (teaching of the apostles, sacraments, hierarchical order). The universal church and the local churches have a special relationship of “mutual interiority,”²⁸ whereby “in and from such individual churches there comes into being the one and only Catholic Church.”²⁹

The pilgrim church is missionary by her very nature.³⁰ “Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the church, her deepest identity. She exists

19. Term borrowed from Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology*, 117.

20. CD, 11.

21. ITC, 61. See also LG, 13.

22. ITC, 64.

23. *Second Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, 1985: Final Report, IIa.2.

24. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (henceforth, CDF), *Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion* (Vatican: May 28, 1992) 3.

25. *Eucharistia facit ecclesiam*. Henri de Lubac, *Corpus mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Paris, 1949)

26. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology*, 86.

27. CDF, *Some Aspects*, 3.

28. John Paul II, Address to the Roman Curia, December 20, 1990, no. 9.

29. LG, 23.

30. Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, *Ad gentes* (henceforth AG), 2

in order to evangelize.³¹ Pope Francis insists that “the entire people of God proclaims the Gospel.”³² “The obligation of spreading the faith is imposed on every disciple of Christ, according to [their] ability.”³³ The Holy Spirit scatters gifts in the church; everyone has a particular gift from God (1 Cor 7:7). As such, “the faithful a[re] *sunodoi*, companions, on the journey...and are meant to receive various charisms given by the Holy Spirit in view of the common good.”³⁴ All the baptized have equal dignity, all are called to holiness and have received an equal privilege of faith,³⁵ all participate in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Jesus Christ.³⁶ The church walks its synodal path confident that,

the body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One (cf. John 2:20, 27), cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith which characterizes the People as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when “from the bishops down to the last member of the laity,”³⁷ it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.³⁸

All baptized have equal dignity, yet there is a diversity of ecclesial functions. “Some people God has designated in the church to be, first, apostles, second, prophets, third, teachers; then, mighty deeds, then, gifts of healing, assistance, administration, and varieties of tongues” (1 Cor 12:28; cf. Eph 2:20). The synodal process, therefore, takes place “at the heart of a hierarchically structured community.”³⁹

VATICAN II AND THE JOURNEY TOWARDS A SYNODAL CHURCH

The seeds of synodality sown at Vatican II germinated without delay. At the beginning of the fourth session, on September 15, 1965, Paul VI's *Motu Proprio Apostolica Sollicitudo* created the Synod of Bishops as a permanent, but advi-

31. Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (henceforth EN), 14.

32. (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* (henceforth EG), 111.

33. LG, 17.

34. ITC, Synodality, no. 55.

35. LG, 32.

36. ITC, 46.

37. St. Augustine, *De praed. sanct.*, 14, 27.

38. LG, 12.

39. PD, 14.

sory, organ of collegiality and shared responsibility with the supreme pontiff—incorporated into *Christus dominus* 5. Before this, *synodus* (synod) and *concilium* (council) were used interchangeably, now no longer. The distinction was written into the 1983 Code of Canon Law.

Vatican II created the senate or council of priests in every diocese,⁴⁰ the diocesan pastoral council, and the parish financial council. Episcopal Conferences existed before Vatican II in an informal manner. For example, the Swiss Bishops' Conference was founded in 1863. Leo XIII in 1899 convoked a plenary Latin American Council of Metropolitan Bishops of the continent.⁴¹ Vatican II encouraged the reinvigoration of such groups;⁴² they were further defined by Pope Paul VI's 1966 *Motu Proprio, Ecclesiae Sanctae*. Today national Episcopal Conferences exist everywhere.

Regional and continental Episcopal Conferences have also been formed. In Latin America, the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) met for the first time at Medellin, Colombia, 1968 for a more collaborative and inclusive *pastoral de conjunto*, reading the “signs of the times.” CELAM has continued such meetings every decade; Pope Francis comes from this tradition. Its effort to institutionalize synodal structures recently abutted in the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon Region (CEAMA), whose system of governance involves bishops, other ordained ministers, vowed religious, and laity.⁴³ During Paul VI's visit to Kampala (Uganda), the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) was founded (July 29, 1969), and confirmed by Paul VI on July 31, 1969. In 1970, Paul VI at Manila encouraged the bishops to develop an authentically Asian vision of the church. Thereafter, in 1972, they formed the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), later announcing for Asia a threefold dialogue—with the poor, with indigenous cultures, with other religious traditions.⁴⁴ Gradually other regional and continental episcopal conferences were formed.

Cardinal Carlo Mario Martini of Milan (a Jesuit like Pope Francis), who died in 2012, seemed to have been the first to dream (1999) of a permanent synodal church, with collegial and authoritative exchanges among all the bishop

40. CD, 27.

41. ITC, 39.

42. CD, 18, 24.

43. Hosffman Ospino, “A Closer Look at Synodality and its Promise for a more inclusive Church,” NCR online. August 23, 2021. Print: *NCR* (Sept 3-16, 2021).

44. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology*, 120.

on some key issues.⁴⁵ Among the issues would be, “the shortage of ordained ministers, the role of woman in society and in the church, the discipline of marriage, the Catholic vision of sexuality, penitential practice, relations with the sister Churches of Orthodoxy and more in general the need to revive ecumenical hopes, the relationship between democracy and values and between civil laws and the moral law.” In 2004, he opined that the Synod of Bishops (rather than a third Vatican Council) could be an important element in a less centralized form of church governance.⁴⁶

Pope Francis in his very first Encyclical, *The Joy of the Gospel* said:

Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound “decentralization.”⁴⁷

He noted that some ecclesial structures hamper efforts at evangelization, and even good structures need continual assessment.⁴⁸ A juridical status of Episcopal Conferences would see them as subjects of specific attributions, including genuine doctrinal authority.⁴⁹ “When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to church unity [...] It is he [the Spirit] who brings forth a rich variety of gifts, while at the same time creating a unity which is never uniformity but a multifaceted and inviting harmony.”⁵⁰

Pope Francis tried out the synodal idea during the Synod on the Family held in two consecutive years, 2014 and 2015, within the current structure of the Synod of Bishops. The sharp exchanges of the first session mellowed somewhat into broader consensus in the second. Though disagreements remained on several topics (the internal forum for divorced and remarried, same sex couples and their pastoral care, conscience and positive law...), the bishops found common

45. Edward Pentin, “Permanent Synodal Church — A Progressive Jesuit Cardinal’s ‘Dream’ Come True.” *National Catholic Register*, (ncregister.com), accessed Nov 26, 2021.

46. Pentin, “Permanent Synodal Church.”

47. EG, 16.

48. Cf. EG, 26.

49. EG, 32. On the contrary, then Cardinal Ratzinger, *Report on the Faith: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church* (Ignatius Press, 1985), spoke of the: the new “bureaucracy” of national episcopal conferences, with no theological standing.

50. EG 117.

language enough to reach the required two-thirds majority on many topics. Pope Francis wrote: “we have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.”⁵¹ He spoke of the need to be humble and acknowledge that at times the way we present our Christian beliefs and treat other people has helped contribute to today’s problematic situation. We often present marriage in such a way that its unitive meaning and ideal of mutual assistance are overshadowed by an almost exclusive insistence on the duty of procreation.⁵² In short, the church needs to *listen* to the concrete experiences of the faithful and discern accordingly.

Pope Francis was concerned by the polarization, even among bishops. A faction of bishops and Cardinals called for his resignation and threatened to condemn him for heresy. In the United States, the journal, *First Things*, and the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) constantly attack him and his pontificate.

The polarization sharpened during the 2018 Synod on Amazonia, especially around footnote 351 of *The Joy of Love*. This note says: “it is possible in an objective situation of sin—which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such—a person can be living in God’s grace [...] while receiving the church’s help to this end,” a help, the footnote adds, that in certain cases can include the help of the sacraments. Amazon Synod Propositions 110 and 111 outlined how “sometimes it takes not just months but even several years before a priest can return to a community to celebrate the eucharist, offer the sacrament of reconciliation or anoint the sick in the community.” They called for ordaining stably married men who have had a fruitful permanent diaconate and received adequate formation for the priesthood. The Proposition garnered 128 votes for to 41 against, more than the required two-thirds. The Papal Post-Synodal Exhortation was still in writing when Benedict XVI and Cardinal Sarah issued *From the Depths of our Hearts. Priesthood, Celibacy, and the Crisis of the Catholic Church*⁵³ arguing that celibacy was a necessary quality of Catholic priesthood. Cardinal Sarah insisted that allowing a married clergy would be “a pastoral catastrophe” and would generate similar demands in other churches. In his Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, Pope Francis did not even mention celibacy or ordination of married men, but endorsed the public accreditation of the women running ecclesial communities and their commissioning by the bishop. He encouraged their being brought into

51. *Amoris laetitia, The Joy of Love*, 37.

52. AL, 36.

53. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020).

pastoral organization and important decisions. He praised the Final Report of the Synod, recognizing it as the discernment of the Amazon church, and urging all to read it. But, his discernment process was unable yet see how to break the impasse between the differing polarities; he was willing to wait for a “third way” that the Holy Spirit will in time reveal.⁵⁴

The synodal process has lessons from the Amazon Synod. Apprehension has grown about the German “synodal path” being held since December 1, 2019 and originally intended to last two years to 2021. A bishop presides over each of the four forums (power, participation, and separation of powers; sexual morals; form of priestly life; and women in the services and offices of the church), but the votes are strictly egalitarian.⁵⁵ On power in the church, it holds that “the access of married priests and women to these ministries, including the ordained ministry, must be openly debated.”⁵⁶ For genuine participation, “effective procedures in a clear separation of powers should be introduced for all forms of the exercise of power by the church... Specifically, this means that the direction, legislation, and jurisdiction of the church not be solely in the hands of the bishop... All the People of God must be involved in legislation.”⁵⁷ Nearly 80% (168 of 214 delegates) voted for further discussion and “re-examination” of the church’s teaching on sexual morality and include a call for the liturgical blessings of same-sex couples.” In the summer of 2019, Pope Francis wrote to the church in Germany warning against the temptation “to get out of its problems alone, relying solely on its own strengths, methods and intelligence,” which can end up “multiplying and nurturing the evils it wanted to overcome.”⁵⁸ Concerned world church leaders began to speak of German schism. Cardinal Marx, the leader of the German church, tendered his resignation, but Pope Francis turned it down. After the CDF declaration, approved by Pope Francis, that “God does not and cannot bless sin,” and that “gay people must be treated with dignity and respect, but that gay sex is ‘intrinsically disordered,’” many pastors in Germany chose one day to simultaneously bless same sex couples.

In the United States of America, the Episcopal Conference in its meeting

54. See Austen Ivereigh, “Let Us Not Clip the Wings of the Holy Spirit,” *The Tablet* (February 20, 2020).

55. The Synodal Path to a German National Church (10): First Working Document—FSSPX.Actualités / FSSPX.News accessed Dec 02, 2021.

56. The Synodal Path to a German National Church.

57. The Synodal Path to a German National Church.

58. “The German Synodal Way, Explained” *America Magazine* accessed Dec 2, 2021.

of June 2021 planned a document forbidding the eucharist to Catholic politicians who allow abortion in their platforms. The President of the Conference, Archbishop José Horacio Gómez, the archbishop of Los Angeles, had fired the opening shot on President Joseph Biden's Inauguration Day on January 20. The CDF counseled consulting with the other Episcopal Conferences, also among the US bishops themselves, to reach some consensus. The Conference eventually deferred decision to the November meeting. There they issued a broader instruction on the eucharist, with a phrase about the responsibility of Catholic public figures to avoid causing scandal.

These birth-pangs of synodality point to both the risk and the opportunity.

SIGNPOSTS OF SYNODALITY

On September 3, 2017, Pope Francis, with his *Motu Proprio Magnum principium*, modified canon 838 of the Code of Canon Law concerning vernacular translations of the liturgy, as follows.

It pertains to the Episcopal Conferences to *faithfully* prepare versions of the liturgical books in vernacular languages, suitably *accommodated* within defined limits, and *to approve and publish the liturgical books for the regions for which they are responsible after the confirmation of the Apostolic See.*⁵⁹

Henceforth, the competent Episcopal Conference prepares and *approves* the vernacular versions, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments *ratifies* the approval of the bishops. Canon 838.2, as now read, clarifies this latter role as “recognizing on the part of the Apostolic See legitimate liturgical adaptations, including those that are ‘more radical.’”⁶⁰ Pope Francis believes the Episcopal Conference is more competent to judge prayers in the mother tongue, while the Apostolic See oversees areas of unity and fidelity to the tradition.

Pope Francis recently appointed Sr. Raffaella Petrini as the first female secretary general of the administration of the Vatican City State. He had, in February 2021, appointed Sr. Nathalie Becquart as the first female Undersecretary at the

59. CIC 1983, 838.3. Italics denote the modifications.

60. Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, (Henceforth SC) 40. See Archbishop Arthur Roche, Comment on the Motu Proprio by the Secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

Synod of Bishops, hence an *ex officio* voting member⁶¹ of that body. He has now appointed Sr. Alessandra Smerilli as the first female interim secretary at the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, a number two position in the Roman Curia.⁶² These appointments stir hope that married women and men will soon follow. Synodality recognizes the charisms of the faithful and reserves for the clergy only what is tied to the charism of ordination and pastoral care. Whatever “sacred power” (hierarchy) functions above and beyond this is clericalism.

Synodal processes usually give birth to structures. A synod, an assembly, a council cannot take decisions without its legitimate pastors. The ITC distinguishes decision-making through a joint exercise of discernment, consultation, and co-operation from decision-taking which is within the competence of the bishop, the guarantor of apostolicity and catholicity; it suggests that working things out is a synodal task, decision a ministerial responsibility.⁶³ Is this distinction too sharp? The ITC rightly denigrates “the concentration of responsibility for mission in the ministry of pastors; insufficient appreciation of the consecrated life and charismatic gifts; rarely making use of the specific and qualified contribution of the lay faithful, including women, in their areas of expertise.”⁶⁴

The Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, On the Roman Curia and its Service to the Church and to the World (Preach the Gospel), issued by Pope Francis on March 19, 2022 and taking effect on June 05, 2022, reformed the Roman Curia along synodal lines.⁶⁵ In the making for all nine years of his pontificate, it caps the mandate he received from the College of Cardinals. “The Roman Curia does not stand between the pope and the bishops, but rather places itself at the service of both in ways that are proper to the nature of each.”⁶⁶ There no longer are Congregations or Pontifical Councils, all are “Dicasteries” All, except the Dicastery for Bishops and the Dicastery for the Clergy,

61. Superiors General elected to represent the Unions of Men and Women Religious and Congregations of Common Life voted as such with the bishops.

62. *The Tablet* (November 13, 2021), 26.

63. ITC, 69. Besides, ITC, 104 calls for renewing mentalities, attitudes, practices and structures, in order to be ever more faithful to her vocation, and for intensifying the mutual collaboration of all in evangelizing witness *based on everyone’s gifts and roles* (emphasis mine) without clericalizing lay people and without turning the clergy into lay people...avoiding the temptation of “an excessive clericalism which keeps them [lay people] away from decision-making.”

64. ITC, 105.

65. It replaced John Paul II, *Pastor Bonus* (The Good Pastor), 1988.

66. *La Curia Romana non si colloca tra il Papa e i Vescovi, piuttosto si pone al servizio di entrambi secondo le modalità che sono proprie della natura di ciascuno* (Preamble, no. 8).

may be headed by a qualified lay Catholic. The Dicastery for Evangelization is listed first,⁶⁷ with the pope himself as Prefect, the new name for the Head of every dicastery; he is assisted by two Pro-Prefects, “officials who, as far as possible, come from the different regions of the world so that the Roman Curia may reflect the universality of the church, are chosen from clerics, religious, members of Societies of Apostolic Life, and laity.”⁶⁸ This seems to separate the power of governance in the church from the sacrament of orders; canonical mission from the pope suffices.⁶⁹ Clerics and religious/members of Societies of Apostolic Life are appointed for five years, renewable once, if the Superiors of the Roman Curia deem it opportune.⁷⁰ Adequate equilibrium between diocesans priests and religious/members of Societies of Apostolic Life is to be observed.⁷¹ Consultors of the Curial Institutions and Offices are appointed from among qualified faithful, respecting the criterion of universality.⁷² Episcopal Conferences, mentioned sixty-six times beside particular churches, receive greater functionality as a structure of synodality. In conformity with the changes of canon 838.3 (see above), the Dicastery for Cult and Sacraments confirms liturgical translations into current languages, and gives “*recognitio*” to their adaptations to local cultures legitimately approved by the Episcopal Conferences. *Recognitio* suffices for particular Calendars, Proper of the Mass, and Liturgical Hours of particular churches and Institutes of Consecrated Life/Societies of Apostolic Life approved by the respective competent authority (89.2)

67. Combines the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization (created by Benedict XVI in 2010) with the Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples.

68. *Gli Officiali, che per quanto possibile provengono dalle diverse regioni del mondo così che la Curia Romana rispecchi l'universalità della Chiesa sono assunti tra chierici, membri degli Istituti di Vita Consacrata e delle Società di Vita Apostolica e laici* (Art. 14.3).

69. Some critics point to canon 129 §1, “Those who have received sacred orders are qualified, according to the norm of the prescripts of the law, for the power of governance, which exists in the Church by divine institution and is also called the power of jurisdiction.” However, §2 says, “Lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this same power according to the norm of law.”

70. Art. 17.4

71. Art. 14.5

72. Art. 16. “*I fedeli*” includes clerics and laity.

THE PREPARATORY DOCUMENT AND THE HANDBOOK FOR THE
SYNOD ON SYNODALITY⁷³

The *Handbook* lays out the objectives of the synodal process. Because this is an opportunity for the entire People of God to discern together how to move forward on the path of a more synodal church, the synodal process is a journey for all the faithful, no longer an assembly of only bishops. Every local church has an integral part to play. The teaching authority of the pope and the bishops is in dialogue with the *sensus fidelium* [sense of the faith], the living voice of the People of God.⁷⁴ Collaborating with theologians—lay, ordained, and religious—can be a helpful support in articulating the voice of the People of God expressing the reality of the faith on the basis of lived experience.⁷⁵ Communities of consecrated men and women, the movements and new ecclesial communities, used to synodal processes, can offer their experience of discernment and synodal approaches.⁷⁶

Two fundamental questions are proposed for our discernment:

How does this “journeying together” take place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allowing the church to proclaim the Gospel? and what steps is the Spirit inviting us to take in order to grow as a synodal church?⁷⁷

In responding to this question, we are invited to:

Recall our experiences: What experiences of our local church does this question call to mind?

Re-read these experiences in greater depth: What joys did they bring? What difficulties and obstacles have they encountered? What wounds did they reveal? What insights have they elicited?

73. *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality. Official Handbook*, First Phase, October 2021-April 2022 (Henceforth, *Handbook*).

74. ITC, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, 2014, 74.

75. *Handbook* 1.3, page 9

76. ITC, *Synodality*, 74; also *Handbook*, 1.5, page 13.

77. PD, 2; *Handbook* 1.3, page 10.

Gather the fruits to share: Where in these experiences does the voice of the Holy Spirit resound? What is the Spirit asking of us? What are the points to be confirmed, the prospects for change, the steps to be taken? Where do we register a consensus? What paths are opening up for our local church?⁷⁸

The synodal process being first and foremost a spiritual process and not a mechanical data-gathering exercise or a series of meetings and debates, is oriented towards discernment. If listening is the method of the synodal process, and discerning the aim, participation is the path. Fostering participation leads us out of ourselves to involve others who hold different views than we do.⁷⁹

Special care should be taken to involve those persons who may risk being excluded: women, the handicapped, refugees, migrants, the elderly, people who live in poverty, Catholics who rarely or never practice their faith... Creative means should also be found in order to involve children and youth.⁸⁰

A synodal process is a time to dialogue with people from the worlds of economics and science, politics and culture, arts and sport, the media and social initiatives. It will be a time to reflect on ecology and peace, life issues and migration...It is also an opportunity to deepen the ecumenical journey with other Christian denominations and to deepen our understanding with other faith traditions.⁸¹

Temptations and pitfalls to be avoided include: seeing only the problems and fixating on them (we can miss the light if we focus only on the darkness); focusing only on structures; the temptation of conflict and division, or treating the synod as a kind of parliament in which one side must defeat the other; wanting to lead ourselves instead of being led by God.⁸²

IN PRACTICE

A synthesis of not more than ten pages is to be prepared for each diocese and ul-

78. *Handbook* 5.3, page 39-40.

79. *Handbook* 2.2, page 17.

80. *Handbook*, 2.1, page 16.

81. *Handbook*, 2.4, page 20.

82. *Handbook*, 2.4.

timately for each Episcopal Conference. “The synthesis [...] does not only report common trends and points of convergence, but also highlights those points that strike a chord, inspire an original point of view, or open a new horizon. The synthesis should pay special attention to the voices of those who are not often heard and integrate what we could call the ‘minority report.’ The feedback should not only underline positive experiences but also bring to light challenging and negative experiences in order to reflect the reality of what has been listened to.”⁸³

The key role of the bishop is *to listen*. Of course, he may review the feedback from the consultations, discerning what the Holy Spirit is saying through the people entrusted to his care.⁸⁴ He is to appoint a diocesan contact person/team, who may be priests, religious, or lay persons (who are given training and personal support in form of budgets, physical facilities, online platforms) and suggest to parishes and communities to appoint their own contact persons/teams to collaborate in the consultation. It is recommended that the co-leaders be one man and one woman; at least one of them should be a lay person.

The contact persons should be adorned with many spiritual qualities, among which: people of prayer who promote a genuinely spiritual experience of synodality; persons with a living faith; natural collaborators; effective communicators; able to synthesize a variety of information; able to interact well with people of diverse cultural, generational, and ecclesial backgrounds; familiar with diocesan structures and processes; humble in working with a co-leader and/or team; and graciously open to the insights and gifts of others as well as trying new ways of proceeding.⁸⁵

CONCLUSION

A discernment process follows where the Spirit leads. So, Pope Francis said nothing of results, except in terms of conversion and renewal. He is confident in the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Several fruits and pitfalls have appeared in the course of this writing. Would parish councils now set budgets, have a say in hiring and firing parish personnel, including pastors and the Headmaster/mistress of the parish?⁸⁶ May bishops now be elected locally by the diocesan

83. *Handbook*, 4.1, page 28.

84. *Handbook*, page 31.

85. *Handbook*, page 49.

86. In many places, a new pastor begins by firing the school headmaster/mistress and appointing his own!

synod and then confirmed by the Pope?⁸⁷ Competent men and women, including female religious, are already diocesan chancellors and comptrollers here and there. Many female religious run several parishes. Perhaps they will now be part of the decision making for pastoral options? Some wealthy Catholics have founded private Catholic schools and universities. We have lay Presidents of some Catholic schools and universities of dioceses and religious groups. May we dream of an explosion of vocations for different church life styles? A burst of energy for evangelization? Will a differentiated holiness of all the faithful adorn the church of God? A People of God formed to transform world and church? Praedicate evangelium projects a Roman Curia that serves the local churches. Will Rome finally allow various Rites to blossom in various cultural areas, trusting unity in the Spirit (not uniformity)?

Discernment is hard and demands self-possession, but the Spirit opens hearts. The contribution of men and women of the Spirit is crucial.

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87. Cf. Michael Swan, "Understanding 'synodality'" *The Catholic Register* (September 17, 2021) at <https://www.catholicregister.org/item/33506-understanding-synodality> accessed Nov 26, 2021.