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## Synodality as a Way of Being a Church Today: Implications for Spiritan Mission (Supplemental content)

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## SYNODALITY AS A WAY OF BEING A CHURCH TODAY: IMPLICATIONS FOR SPIRITAN MISSION

### INTRODUCTION

In 1965, immediately after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI announced the establishment of the synod of bishops. His intention was that such a platform of bishops should be helping him in deciding on some crucial matters of the Church.<sup>1</sup> This meant deciding on matters of urgency to be discussed, deliberating on such issues and finally recommending some resolutions to the Pope. Perhaps, Pope Paul VI came up with such an initiative based on how the bishops who participated in the Second Vatican Council helped during the deliberations and resolutions of the Council. When establishing the synod of bishops, Pope Paul VI left the idea open for possible improvements. Over the years, the concept of a synod has undergone a lot of developments. During his papacy, John Paul II used it as a tool for continental Churches to renew their Christian commitment as they were approaching the second millennium. This can be evidenced by the convocation of the first African synod in 1994, the American synod in 1997 and the Asian synod in 1998.

Pope Francis too has used the synod to deliberate on crucial issues relevant to our time such as the family and the youth. At the moment, Pope Francis has already launched another synod, the synod on synodality, which held its initial sessions in Rome in October 2023 and will convene again for the final sessions in October 2024. When he announced the theme for the current synod, in his remarks, Pope Francis stated that “from the beginning of my ministry as bishop of Rome, I sought to enhance the synod, which is one of the most precious legacies of the Second Vatican Council. It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”<sup>2</sup> True to his words, the synod has become an im-

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1. Pope Paul VI, *Apostolica Sollicitudo, Apostolic Letter on Establishing the Synod of Bishops for the Universal Church* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1965), 15<sup>th</sup> September, 1965.

2. *Vatican News*, “Synod of Bishops to Take up Theme of Synodality

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portant platform in the papacy of Pope Francis. Under his reign as Pope, the synod has not just remained a platform where bishops meet to discuss ideas that they feel are relevant for Church. It has rather become a platform where all members of the Church are consulted for contributions, either directly or through chosen representatives. The current synod on synodality has done very well in this regard as its time was extended further to allow thorough consultations with the faithful especially the laity. The synod has also become a platform where continental Churches express concerns particular to them and express their right to be heard. The synod of bishops of the Pan-Amazon region which was held in Rome in October 2019 is one of the examples of such. As such, the International Theological Commission was right when it states that with synodality, there is “something new that has been maturing in the ecclesial consciousness starting from the Magisterium of Vatican II.”<sup>3</sup> In a way, the synod is becoming an emerging and a new model of the Church. Indeed, a synodal Church is the future of the Church and the Church of the future. This article examines the implications, in the Pope’s own words, of synodality as a new way of being Church. It also outlines the challenges and prospects that such a model offers. Particularly, the article seeks to examine what the synod on synodality implies for the Spiritan congregation in its life and mission. As agents of evangelization, what changes are we challenged to undergo on our part in order to be worthy agents? What is our responsibility in preaching and reinforcing a synodal spirit in the Congregation and the wider Church?

## **FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPT OF A SYNOD**

The term synod derives from the Greek words *sun-* meaning ‘together’ and *hodos* meaning ‘way.’<sup>4</sup> Therefore, from its etymological definition, the term ‘synod’ connotes ‘walking together.’ The International Theological Commission affirms this as it defines

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in 2022.” Accessed on 7th July, 2023. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/synod-of-bishops-to-take-up-theme-of-synodality-in-2022.html>

3. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2018), no. 5.
4. William Fanning, “Synod,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 14, (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912). <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14388a.html>

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a synod as indicating “the path along which the people of God walk together.”<sup>5</sup> However, according to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, a synod is “a general term for ecclesiastical gatherings under hierarchical authority, for the discussion and decision of matters relating to faith, morals, or discipline.”<sup>6</sup> The document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* states that the word “synod” has been widely applied, with a specific meaning, to the ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels whether 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.<sup>7</sup> However, this article is only interested in the synod of bishops.

The *Code of Canon Law* states that the “synod of bishops is a group of bishops who have been chosen from different regions of the world and meet together at fixed times to foster closer unity between the Roman Pontiff and the bishops, to assist the Roman pontiff with their counsel regarding the preservation of faith, morals and ecclesiastical discipline.”<sup>8</sup> This is in line with Pope Paul VI’s motive for establishing the synod of bishops in 1965. The synod of bishops, as stated earlier, is subject to the authority of the Pope. He, therefore, is the one who convokes the synod, chooses participants, determines the agenda, presides over it and approves its resolutions.<sup>9</sup> This means that the Pope has the authority too to disapprove some resolutions and recommendations made by the bishops at a synod. There are three main types of synods of bishops: an ordinary general assembly which is convened to reflect on matters pertaining to the good of the universal Church; an extraordinary general assembly which treats issues or matters that are urgent to the universal Church; and a special assembly which deals with matters pertaining to the Church in a specific geographical area.<sup>10</sup> Worth-noting is the fact that a synod is held in phases. Such phases may include breaks for further consultations and reflections. At the end of every synod, the Pope issues a post-synodal exhortation.

As already pointed out, the synod of bishops was estab-

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5. International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, no. 3.

6. Fanning, “Synod” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.

7. International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, no.4.

8. *Code of Canon Law* no. 342.

9. *Code of Canon Law* no. 343.

10. *Code of Canon Law* no. 345.

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lished by Pope Paul VI in 1965 after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. He officially launched the synod of bishops first with the issuing of the Apostolic Letter *Apostolica Sollicitudo*. In the Letter, Paul VI explicitly states that the idea of the synod was born out of apostolic concern. He adds that the synod of bishops is meant to provide information and offer advice to the Pope. It can also enjoy the power of making decisions when such power is conferred upon it by the Roman Pontiff.<sup>11</sup> However, he left it open that the idea of the synod could be improved with the passing of time depending on the needs and demands of the time. And indeed, the synod has undergone changes throughout the years. Paul VI himself issued *Ordo Synodo Episcoporum* in 1966 which contains all the Norms regarding the manner of conducting the synod of bishops. The 1983 *Code of Canon Law* also devotes a chapter on the synod. The latest update on the synod is by Pope Francis, who, in *Episcopalis Communio* articulates the purpose of the synod and its various components.<sup>12</sup>

The importance and relevance of synods in the life of the Church cannot be underestimated. On one hand, they act as fountains from which the universal Church is enriched with faith experiences from local churches across the globe. From that point of view, synods become wellsprings from which the Christian community is sustained through the generosity of local churches who share faith experiences for the benefit of others and also to express how the faith is lived in their particular localities. Thus, local churches learn from others how to deal with challenges similarly faced in other parts of the world. On the other hand, however, through synods the Church community members also renew their faith by strengthening and reaffirming it with timeless Christian teachings amid threats and an atmosphere of a false sense of progressive ideologies. This is because synods are primarily convened to assist the Roman Pontiff with their counsel in the preservation and growth of faith and morals and in the observance and strengthening of ecclesiastical discipline.<sup>13</sup> In this case, while synods act as a platform where the Christian community is challenged to grow and accommodate new experiences, there is a need to remain firm in the unchanging truths of the Christian teaching. The synod on the family acts as a good example on this. By highlighting theologi-

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11. Pope Paul VI, *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, (15<sup>th</sup> September, 1965).

12. *Vatican News*. "What is a Synod of Bishops?" accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> July, 2023.

13. *Code of Canon Law*. no. 342

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cal issues surrounding topics such as divorce and remarriage, polygamy, unity and indissolubility of marriage, the synod put into consideration contemporary realities viewed through the lens of divine and natural law expressed in the teaching of the Church.

Moments of synods of the Church also accord Church members a rare opportunity of introspection and discernment both at individual and communal level in order to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in reading the signs of the times. The Nigerian Jesuit theologian, Orobator, in his book called *The Church as Family: African Ecclesiology in Its Social Context* recounts that when the first African synod was held, the African continent was undergoing various social experiences, both good and bad. Thus, most African countries were transitioning from dictatorship or one party system of government to democracy as well as owning the political and economic direction of their countries. During the same period, with the release of Nelson Mandela, the apartheid system was drawing to an end while regrettably Rwanda took a step backward with its launch of genocide attacks. This prompted the synod participants led by the late Cardinal Hyacinthe Thiandoum of Dakar, Senegal to ask “Church of Africa, what must you now become so that your message may be relevant and credible?”<sup>14</sup> This was a question pointing to discernment and reading the signs of the times. The synod participants felt that God was beckoning the Church in Africa to be a family. As a Church in general, and especially as a congregation, we are faced with the same opportunity of self-introspection at this point of the synod on synodality.

## **DEFINITIONS AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS OF SYNODALITY**

Synodality could be defined as “the involvement and participation of the whole people of God in the life and mission of the Church.”<sup>15</sup> This means that everyone participates by the virtue of being a member of the Church rather than his or her status in the Church. Thus, synodality 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

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14. Orobator, *The Church as Family: African Ecclesiology in Its Social Context*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000) 12.

15. International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, no. 6.

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Spirit. This implies that consulting and listening to all members of the Church is essential for discerning a path forward. For instance, Martin Coffey recalls that during the preparations of the first African synod, “in the local parishes and the small Christian communities the people met to reflect on their Christian experience to review the past and to dream of the future.”<sup>16</sup> He goes on to say that even during the synodal deliberations, while the bishops were meeting and deliberating in Rome, the people back home were watching, waiting and praying for an outcome that would give new life and vigor to the Church in Africa.<sup>17</sup> The connection between the deliberating Bishops and the faithful who keep interested in the synodal process postulates a Church that is united by the virtue of belonging to one community without interfering with one another’s position within the Church community. In other words, the bishops and priests remain fully Christian and full cleric, while the laity remain fully Christian and fully lay and yet everyone of them fulfills their Christian responsibility. This is the kind of Church community that synodality seeks to promote.

Synodality does not, however, seek to do away with Church hierarchy. In fact, synodality leans on two pillars: the *sensus fidei* of the entire People of God and the sacramental collegiality of the episcopate in communion with the See of Rome.<sup>18</sup> It leans on the entire people of God in as much as every member participates and contributes in the Church and it leans on the collegiality of the bishops in as much as the bishops are the ones who convene for deliberations and forward the resolutions and recommendations to the Pope. Synodality could rightly be described as the fruit of the renewal promised by Vatican II in its promotion of ecclesial communion and episcopal collegiality.<sup>19</sup>

The Sacred Scriptures have a number of references which can be considered as connotations of synodality. In Acts of the apostles, for instance, we encounter a Church that really makes use of the model of the Church as the body of Christ. The members make decisions together, contribute to the well-being of the Church

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16. Martin Coffey, “Introduction,” In *The African Synod a Step Forward: Post-synodal Special Assembly Held at the Carmelite Centre*. (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995), 6.

17. Coffey, “Introduction,” 6.

18. Ed Condon, “What is ‘Synodality’? Experts Explain,” Catholic News Agency. Accessed on 10th July, 2023. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/what-is-synodality-experts-explain-60147>.

19. International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, no. 8.

and take care of the sidelined by the larger community (Acts 5:19-21; 8:26, 29, 39; 12:6-17; 13:1-3; 16:6-7, 9-10; 20:22). This is evident from the introduction of the ministry of diaconate after the complaint from some of the widows (Acts 6:1-6). This symbolizes a listening Church at its best, a Church that cares for the needs of each member of the community, a Church that walks together with every member.

The idea of synodality in its basic and fundamental sense is also not opposed to Catholic theology. In the long run, it actually affirms true Catholic ecclesiology. Theologically, therefore, synodality is inspired, first of all by the Holy Trinity itself. In the mystery of the Holy Trinity, all the three persons are distinct from one another and yet remain one. The presence of one person does not diminish the existence of another. The idea of synodality is to make every member of the Church feel heard and seen. It is about discerning together as members of one community, the Church, and yet each maintains their distinctness in identity. And so, the Church is one because she has her source, her model and her goal in the unity of the Holy Trinity.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, the concept of synodality also resonates with the model of the Church as a mystical communion. Of this model, Avery Dulles states that the Church is seen on the analogy of a human body equipped with various organs. Alluding to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he further adds that such a community is constituted by a complete self-forgetfulness of love.<sup>21</sup> Here too the emphasis is on the baptismal consecration that each Christian shares by the virtue of belonging to the Christian community. It is a community that prioritizes love and self-forgetfulness by choosing to walk together and listen to one another.

## **THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY: THE PHASES AND SESSIONS**

Since its launch in 2021, the synod on synodality begun with consultations at the Small Christian community level, parish, diocese, national and continental level. The final phase was the universal Church gathering during which the continen-

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20. International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, no. 45.

21. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church: A Critical Assessment of the Church in All its Aspects*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd, 1976), 46.

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tal Church experiences were shared. As previously noted, unlike previous synods, the synod on synodality gave room for thorough consultations by extending the timeframe. As it is always the case, during the October 2023 session that was held in Rome, the universal Church was furnished with experiences from all continents revealing the di-versity of faith experiences and yet united in the one Baptismal community. Despite all the different experiences, the issues that made headlines during the synodal session were women ordination and their increased participation in Church life, the possibility of optional celibacy, accompanying people with LG-BTQI+ sexual identity. These and a number of other issues were given more time for theological reflection until the next synodal session in October 2024. What was so impressive about the October 2023 synodal session is the manner in which it was held. First of all, the sitting arrangement in the Paul VI Hall was not the usual hierarchical arrangement of an amphitheater where the Pope and synod organizers sat at high tables. This time, there were 35 tables arranged in a round manner. Everyone, including the Pope, was an “equal” participant and belonged to a table during discussions.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, for the first time, there were more non-cleric attendants and al-most all of them had voting rights. This was different from previous synods where mostly Bishops took part in voting.<sup>23</sup> The experience at the 2023 session was therefore seen as a synodal Church already in practice.

In Taiwan, where I currently work as a missionary, the synod was successfully launched too and the faithful were engaged in the consultations in all the dioceses. The catchphrase among the faithful is “walking together” which is also a central phrase in synodality. By emphasizing this phrase, the Taiwanese Church is yearning for a Church community that walks together. As a Church with Catholic population as low as about 2% of the 23 million total population, the Church of Taiwan is called to embrace renewal of the missionary commitment and interreligious dialogue with the majority Buddhist and Taoist population to seek areas of intersection. Taiwan also hosts migrants pre-dominantly from Vietnam and Philippines, most of whom are Catholics and boost the Catholic population, as well as Indonesians. All these primarily seek job employment opportunities. The walking together, therefore, is also

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22. A Synodal Church in Mission: XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Bishops, First Session (4<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> October 2023), Synthesis Report, 20 (a).

23. A Synodal Church in Mission: Synthesis Report, 20 (d).

a call to embrace and take advantage of religious and cultural diversity to preach the Gospel of Christ.

*What does  
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our mission?*

## SYNODALITY AND SPIRITAN MISSION

What implication, then, does synodality have on Spiritan Mission? What must we become as a congregation in the light of synodality? What does a synodal Church mean for our mission? What is our role in fostering establishing a synodal Church? Our congregation is indeed part of the wider Church and, as stated in SRL 11, our mission is a participation in the mission of Christ within the Church.<sup>24</sup> That is why what happens in the Churchchurch directly and inevitably affects us.

A look at the history of the congregation reveals that after some crucial councils of the Church such as the Second-second Vatican Council, the congregation too had to undergo necessary adjustments. For instance, few years after the conclusion of the Secondsecond Vatican Council, the then Superior General, Fr. Joseph Lacuyer, wrote to the confrères worldwide that the General Councilgeneral council had started exercising more perfectly the duty of participating in the work of renewal as required by the Second Vatican Council. This included re-planning the missionary activity of the congregation, and as directed by the document *Perfectae Caritatis*,<sup>25</sup> adaptation to the conditions of our time and a return to the sources of the congregation.<sup>26</sup> The same can be said of the synods. The congregation adapts its mission and evangelization strategies in accordance with decisions of councils and synods often promulgated in various Church documents.

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Just like any change that takes place in the Church necessitates that the members of the Church adjust in whatever way depending on the path that the Church has taken, synodality too requires that we adjust in our way of life and way of doing things in order to adhere to the synodal spirit. As pointed out in the preparatory document for the synod on synodality, a synodal spirit is marked by notable terms such as communion, participation, collaboration, listening and mission. Listening as

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24. *Spiritan Rule of Life* (SRL) no. 11.

25. Second Vatican Council, *Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 2

26. James Chukwuma Okoye, (ed.), *Charism and Mission Since Vatican II: Superiors' General Letters to the Spiritan Congregation, 1968-2020*, (Pittsburgh: Centre for Spiritan Studies, 2021), 6-7.

*Our listening is directed towards those we live with and serve. It is through listening to them that we get to know their struggles, sorrows and joys. Listening to the people we serve accords us an opportunity to serve them better as their life stories become part of our mission.*

a pivotal term of synodality is not merely listening with the sole aim of responding back. It is rather listening with the aim of engaging and encountering the other. One ought to attentively listen to hear what the other is saying and is not saying. For us Spiritans, since the Holy Spirit gives life and direction to the entire apostolic life and mission,<sup>27</sup> our listening is and ought to be two-fold. Our listening, first and foremost, begins with listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit to hear afresh the Gospel and where the Holy Spirit is leading us to do mission depending on the signs of the time. That is why we cannot undertake our mission minus the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Without listening to the Holy Spirit, our mission becomes a mere human enterprise, mere philanthropy filled with good will and human effort. This kind, though good in the worldly way of handling affairs, may not profit us for salvation. It does not teach us to rely on God and persevere the crosses that we have to carry. The mission becomes merely a theatrical stage for showcasing our abilities and not for testifying what God is able to accomplish through us. We become our own directors of our work.

Secondly, our listening is directed towards those we live with and serve. It is through listening to them that we get to know their struggles, sorrows and joys. Listening to the people we serve accords us an opportunity to serve them better as their life stories become part of our mission. *Gaudium et Spes* also mentions that the joys and hopes of the people of God are the same for the Church.<sup>28</sup> In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis states that “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, he prefers a Church that goes out of its way to encounter the other. Here, the Pope is pointing to a Church that takes the pains and risks to listen amid an atmosphere of rejection and discrimination. As agents of evangelization, and as Spiritans in particular, if we don’t listen to the people we serve, we risk preaching a Gospel that is so closed and that doesn’t touch the lives of the people, a Gospel that does not have any practicality among the people. We also risk making ourselves busy providing solutions to problems that the people don’t have and providing answers that are not in line with questions that people are asking. With its emphasis on listen-

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27. SRL no. 8.

28. Second Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1.

29. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 49.

ing, therefore, synodality gives us an opportunity to pause and reflect to what extent we are listening to the Holy Spirit and the people we serve.

Listening to others also necessitates dialogue. Such synodal dialogue depends on courage both in speaking and in listening.<sup>30</sup> To be able to listen to other better, we ask questions and present to the other our faith experiences as well. Dialogue as a component of listening enables the dialogue partners and participants to overcome prejudices, biases that result from misinformation and lack of understanding towards one another. In order to bear its desired fruits, such dialogue should give participants equal chances of being heard, it must be characterized by mutual respect. As Spiritans, Inter-religious dialogue is a crucial aspect of our mission.<sup>31</sup> In some places where we work, our mission becomes almost impossible if it does not take into account getting into dialogue with brothers and sisters of other faiths in order to find common grounds of engagement. The Bagamoyo II Chapter also noted that interconfessional dialogue remains indispensable for the Spiritan mission and that dialogue as a tool for Spiritan mission is not only crucial for confreres working in countries whose majority population is non-Christian, but also all other mission lands.<sup>32</sup>

As an extension, dialogue also involves fitting the Gospel in the cultural context in which we do mission. This is technically called inculturation and it aims at discerning areas which the Gospel and the people's culture intersect. SRL articles 16, 16.1 and 16.2 state that incarnating the Gospel in the people's culture and learning their way of life with a view to doing mission is part and parcel of Spiritan mission. SRL 16.2 particularly mentions that in making such an effort, we must respect and accept people's human experience in all its depth with no aim of forcing anything on them. As Spiritans, synodality offers us a chance to renew our sense of dialogue with cultures in doing mission. Paraphrasing the Biblical story of the burning bush (Ex. 3:1-6), in order to properly evangelize the local people, when we step into a new culture, we must take off our shoes as we are stepping on "holy" ground. We must

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30. International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, no. 111.

31. SRL no. 13.1 and 16.3.

32. Bagamoyo 2021 XXI General Chapter Document, "Inter-religious Dialogue."

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put aside our stereotypes, prejudices and preconceived ideas. Our attitude, therefore, must be that of learning. This is exactly what our co-Founder Francis Libermann meant when he advised the first Spiritans embarking on mission in Africa thus: “Empty yourselves of Europe, of its customs and its mindset. Make yourselves Negroes with the Negroes [...] be to them as servants are to their masters.”<sup>33</sup> Above all, our dialogue with religions and culture is an acknowledgement and respect towards diversity with an aim of achieving inclusivity. In this re-gard, our Spiritan religious community life becomes evangelical as it must act as a tool for practically living out diversity and dialogue before we preach it to others. Thus, our religious communities are made up of confreres from different racial and national backgrounds, generations and mindsets. As the SRL 28.1 states, our community life is, therefore, a sign that in the midst of diversity, genuine fraternal unity in Christ is possible.

Another aspect of synodality that impacts on Spiritan mission is collaboration. Synodality as a way of being a Church thrives on collaboration of members of the whole Church as a faith community. Each of the members is called to rediscover their baptismal dignity and make use of their God-given gifts in preaching the Gospel of Christ. This calls for a realization that every member of the Church has something to offer in fulfilling the Godly mandate to preach the Gospel. Both the laity and clerics alike have a role to play in the preaching of the Gospel. In fact, this had already been stated previously by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*<sup>34</sup> and also by Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio*<sup>35</sup>. The idea of collaboration hinges on participation of all. For us Spiritans, this is an opportunity to see how we can collaborate with those we serve to carry out our evangelization effectively. Above all, right in the Spiritan family, we can also look for more ways that enhance the collaboration between cleric and lay members of the congregation. Collaboration and participation enable us to benefit from one another’s giftedness and members of the Church of Christ. Definitely, then, enhancing the spirit of collaboration encourages participation, walking together and inclusivity of all members of the Church in the mission of the Church.

Apart from the many things that synodality is asking us to learn in order to evangelize better, it is simply demanding us to re-

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33. *Spiritans Life and Mission: A Short Life of Francis Libermann*, 12.

34. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 59.

35. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 71

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new ourselves in our identity and vocation. Just as the whole synod is about the renewal of the whole people of God to adapt to living in the synodal way, it calls on us particularly as Spiritans, to renew our sense of mission and commitment to consecrated life. Such a call is similar to the one made by *Perfectae Caritatis* of Vatican II. SRL no. 10 also states that in fact the Spirit calls us to continual conversion.<sup>36</sup> Such conversion enables us to do a stock-taking of ourselves and see if we are still faithful to the intuitions of our founders, truly living the demands of our consecrated life and listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. At the end of it all, necessary adjustments ought to be done especially in cases of falling short of any of these.

### **SYNODALITY IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD: SOME CHALLENGES**

Synodality as a way of being a Church is not short of challenges. The first challenge of synodality, that comes with its emphasis on participation, is the risk of engaging the Church in a democratic process. With the influence of democracy, people from all walks of life are preoccupied with the right to participate in matters affecting them. However, there have been many occasions when the right to participate has been abused, demanding for it without any sense of responsibility. With such a mindset hovering all over, a synod can be mistaken for a forum where people express their preferences by imploring the game of numbers while foregoing the discernment which comprises the process. Avery Dulles also recalls that in nations accustomed to the liberal democratic tradition, there has been a movement to introduce into the Church the principles of the constitutional government and something corresponding to the bill of rights.<sup>37</sup> Marie-Dominique Chenu refers to the challenge as public opinion. He writes that “public opinion with its associated problems only became prominent in society and within the church from the birth and expression of popular awareness in social and political life<sup>38</sup>.”

Secondly, the other challenge can be an erratic understanding of synodality. Even though synodality implies that every mem-

36. SRL no. 10.

37. Avery Dulles, *The Resilient Church: The Necessity and Limits of Adaptation*, (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1977), 35.

38. Marie-Dominique Chenu, “Public Opinion in the Church,” In *Rethinking the Church*, Edited by Mario Cuminetti and Fernando Vittorio Joannes, Translated by Edmund Burke (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan Ltd, 1970), 112.

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ber of the Church should participate in the affairs of the Church, there are other areas that do not need the consultation of the laity. And so, synodality has its own limits. In line with this, Jessica Murdoch, associate professor of fundamental and dogmatic theology at Villanova University, also cautions against interpretations of synodality which negate the importance of the Church's order of authority. According to her, "good ecclesiology preserves the distinctions in the hierarchy and in the Church as a body."<sup>39</sup> In other words, it must always be remembered and respected that the Catholic Church constitutes a necessary hierarchy willed by God Himself.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS AND PROSPECTS OF SYNODALITY**

Synodality as an emerging model of the Church, first of all, is faithful to the fundamental calling of Christians. Thus, all Christians attain their identity by the virtue of Baptism and through this sacrament all are members of the same family. It is after the reception of other sacraments that their roles are distinguished. The International Theological Commission also adds that "the ecclesiology of the People of God stresses the common dignity and mission of all the baptized, in exercising the variety and ordered richness of their charisms, their vocations and their ministries."<sup>40</sup>

Ladislav Örsy describes synodality in terms of the teaching and learning Church which, in Latin, he calls *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens*. According to him, the whole Church, no one excepted, is a learning Church. There is no person who does not have the invitation and duty to learn more and more about the word of God.<sup>41</sup> Örsy too does not intend to do away with Church authority as he notes that there is a distinction between the clergy and lay. He, however, cites that when an ecumenical council solemnly proclaims the Catholic doctrine, it teaches in the name of the whole Church. But the bishops also learn a lot from the reflections of theologians, for instance, from the commentaries on the documents after the Second Vatican Council.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, Örsy proves that synodality is in fact not a strange idea or one incom-

39. Condon, "What is 'Synodality'? Experts Explain," Catholic News Agency.

40. International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, no. 6.

41. Ladislav Örsy, *The Church: Learning and Teaching* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987), 40.

42. Örsy, *The Church: Learning and Teaching*, 40.

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patible with Church doctrine.

Örsy further shows some optimism as he notes that since the Second Vatican Council a better balance has been sought and there is a gradual progress in involving the laity in contributing to the crucial matters of the Church. As such, synodality is in fact already in practice.<sup>43</sup> According to Örsy, the Church can no longer challenge this world out of its own institutional aspirations. There is a need for a listening Church rather than a promulgating Church.<sup>44</sup> O'Brien is also for the idea that synodality is in fact already in force. He, however, suggests that before a questionnaire stage is reached during the preparations for a synod, there has to be a less formal but a deeper kind of listening to the joys and hopes and struggles and anxieties of the people of God.<sup>45</sup> Otherwise, synodality risks being a shallow idea.

*Gaudium et Spes* too affirms that from the beginning of her history the Church has learned to express the message of Christ with the help of the ideas and terminology of various peoples, and has tried to clarify it with the wisdom of philosophers and with the help of the Holy Spirit.<sup>46</sup> The Constitution further states that to ensure that such messages are helpful to the people of God, it is the task of the entire people of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age and to judge them in the light of the divine Word.<sup>47</sup>

Dulles proposes that the Church must adopt the idea of creative interaction and resourcefully respond to the initiatives of others. This does not entail taking over the slogans of secular nature but by sifting and reshaping them to fit the Christian message. Such creative interaction refers to the exchange of ideas between the laity and clergy. He adds that the creative interaction that was brought about by Vatican II has brought positive fruits.<sup>48</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Since Vatican II, the Church has experienced a lot of changes. Just as Popes John XXIII and Paul VI desired that the Church

43. Örsy, *The Church: Learning and Teaching*, 41.

44. Örsy, *The Church: Learning and Teaching*, 140.

45. John O'Brien, *Seeds of a New Church*, (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1994), 149.

46. *Gaudium et Spes*, #44.

47. *Gaudium et Spes*, #44.

48. Dulles, *The Resilient Church*, 33.



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should renew herself internally and externally in her interaction with the world, there have been efforts to realize the same. The establishment of the synod after the Second Vatican Council was a step-ahead on this. With so much talk about synodality and active participation of the laity in crucial matters concerning the Church nowadays, the Church cannot avoid more introspection on it. Synodality simply means that the whole Church is a subject and that everyone in the Church is a subject.<sup>49</sup> In the words of Theodore Steeman the Church as it is today is a Church in movement, a Church in change, in search of something.<sup>50</sup> And indeed, since Vatican II there was born a new Church striving to retain its baptismal community definition. As for the Spiritan congregation, synodality is an opportunity for us to assess, adjust, listen, collaborate as many times as possible our life and our mission in order to be faithful to who we are and what we do.

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Spiritans Group, Taiwan.*



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49. International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, no. 55.

50. Theodore Steeman, "Conflict in the Conciliar Church," In *Rethinking the Church*, Edited by Mario Cuminetti and Fernando Vittorino Joannes. Translated by Edmund Burke (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan Ltd, 1970), 129.