



**Synodality and the “Synodal Process”: Challenges and Opportunities,
from the Episcopal Collegiality of Vatican II to the Catholic Church of Today**

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Abstract

Synodality is a signature pastoral initiative of Pope Francis. He has been implementing it more robustly not only on the level of the Synod of Bishops but has been promoting it on all levels of the church. This article discusses the current state of the theology of synodality, including its various challenges and opportunities.

Keywords: Synodality, collegiality, Vatican II, Pope Francis

The path of the Catholic Church towards synodality does not begin or end with Pope Francis. Synodality has a history before Francis and a future after the end of his pontificate. First, there is a history of the ecclesiological developments that must become part, once again, of the idea that Catholics have of their church reconstructed; second, the “synodal process” will also produce a communal, deeper understanding of the meaning of synodality in its relationship with Vatican II. But in this context, it is necessary also to address some emerging ecclesiological challenges for a synodal church in the cultural and social context of global Catholicism in the 21st century.

1. From Vatican II to today – from episcopal collegiality to ecclesial synodality

On October 17, 2018, while the bishops' Synod on Young People was underway, the Jesuit-run and Vatican-vetted magazine *Civiltà Cattolica* published the transcript of a dialogue between Pope Francis and the Jesuits he met during his trip to the Baltic States in late September. One passage from the pope's remarks stands out:

“What needs to be done today is to accompany the church in a deep spiritual renewal. I believe the Lord wants a change in the church. I have said many times that a perversion of the church today is clericalism. But fifty years ago, the Second Vatican Council said this clearly: the church is the People of God. Read number 12 of *Lumen Gentium*. I know that the Lord wants the council to make headway in the church. Historians tell us that it takes a hundred years for a council to be applied. We are halfway there. So, if you want to help me, do whatever it takes to move the council forward in the church. And help me with your prayer. I need so many prayers.”¹

This remark exemplifies the situation of the church under Francis's pontificate. After three pontificates that were more concerned with controlling excesses and extravagances in the implementation of the council than with deepening its reception and application, Francis is trying to unleash the potential of Vatican II in a church and a world that are both, in certain important respects, *post-conciliar* if not *non-conciliar*, in the sense of indifferent to the theology of Vatican II. This is both the hope and the constraint of Francis's pontificate. Sixty years after Vatican II, Catholicism has moved beyond it. Some Catholics simply take for granted what Vatican II said and did – forgetting how much and how quickly the church has changed in a few decades – and demand further progressive developments in both doctrine and discipline. Other Catholics want to roll back the reforms of Vatican II for a more traditionalist version of Catholicism.

Vatican II either ignored or failed to anticipate some of the most controversial issues within today's church. For example, the council never addressed the issue of married priests (one of the issues withdrawn from debate by Paul VI) and the role of women in the church's ministry and governance (Vatican II took place too early for this). From an ecclesiological and “church politics” perspective, Vatican II was a victory for both the papacy and the episcopate at the expense of the lower clergy and the religious orders: the “theology of the laity” of Vatican II is largely

¹ FRANCIS, “I believe the Lord wants a change in the Church: A private dialogue with the Jesuits in the Baltics,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* (English edition), 17 October 2018. Available at: <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/i-believe-the-lord-wants-a-change-in-the-church-a-private-dialogue-with-the-jesuits-in-the-baltics/>.

pre-conciliar. The council counted on the episcopate to lead church reform, but the history of the abuse crisis tells a story of systemic failure on the part of the bishops.

At Vatican II, the reconciliation of Catholicism with modernity presupposed a respectful relationship between religion and politics, church and state. It assumed a papacy and an episcopate firmly in control of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and of the laity. There could be no starker difference between the vision of Vatican II and the current situation than on this point. Today many Catholics do not feel at home either in their political community or in their church. They are without a Catholic party or a political culture they can relate to, and many of them no longer feel that they and their children are safe in the church. The cooperative relationship between church and world imagined by Vatican II was a development of the “ecclesiology of the two swords” (church and empire) that assumed a degree of internal cohesion and control within both the church and the political realm – a system that found its most perfect realization in the instrument of Concordats between the Holy See and secular authorities in the nation states. That parallelism between church and state has been radically redefined by globalization and the replacement of traditional elites with technocrats – either liberal or conservative technocrats. Neither governments nor the institutional church are in control of the flow of information in the way that they once were. And the media and media platforms that are in control of that flow feel no obligation to protect the church or cooperate with it. There is no possible Concordat between the Holy See and the media – including a Catholic media system that no longer sees itself as constrained by loyalty to a legitimately elected pope. All of this presents us with a stark picture of how much has changed since Vatican II.

As Francis reminded us many times, it takes a hundred years for a council to be applied. This was certainly true for Trent, in an age when it took the average diocese about a century to build a seminary, and it was in some sense true also for Vatican I: it is not an accident that the major crisis for papal primacy came with Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 – almost exactly one century after *Pastor Aeternus*. But then, Vatican II was different from those two previous councils of the “confessional age” in various ways – especially in the new kind of conciliar teaching it offered and in its recognition that Catholicism was becoming truly global. The world seemed to be changing faster than it used to, and so did the church.

All this is part of a dramatic power shift in the church and in the world. Vatican II took place before the social and cultural upheavals of the late 1960s and 1970s. Francis seems more attentive to developments in the post-Vatican II period when it comes to *ad extra* issues (such as social justice, ecumenism, and interreligious

dialogue) than when it comes to *ad intra* ones (especially the role of women in the church and the model of ordained ministry). For this second category of issues, Francis's teaching is restricted by the limits not only of the final documents of the council, but also by the limits of the theology of Vatican II – for example, the ecclesiology of Yves Congar which is a source of inspiration for the first Jesuit pope.²

The real asset for Francis in overcoming these objective and subjective limits is *synodality*, which is a word that is nowhere to be found in the corpus of Vatican II, where the operational word for dialogue in the Church is “episcopal collegiality” – which concerns the relationship only among the bishops and between them and the pope. Synodality – a fundamental dimension of the church involving the whole people of God and at all levels (universal, continental, national, diocesan, parochial) – is truly a post-Vatican II theological and magisterial development. It is a remarkable fact that until 2013 the Bishops' Synod was synodal in name only. It was created by Paul VI as an expression of episcopal *collegiality*, not of the synodality of the whole church.

At the same time, synodality is the most important institutional reform of Francis's pontificate. The role of the Bishops' Synod has changed and is changing, and synodality at all levels of the church has been encouraged as never before.³ Whatever the apostolic constitution reforming the Roman Curia says, there is no question that the Curia has played a marginal role in this pontificate – much more marginal than its role in any prior pontificate.⁴ The trend toward greater and greater centralization within the church is finally beginning to reverse itself under Francis.

The real parallel here is with the pontificate of John XXIII, the pope who was elected sixty years ago, in October 1958. When John XXIII called for the Second Vatican Council in January 1959, most expected that its function would be to complete the work of the First Vatican Council: but Vatican II turned out to be very different in kind. In a similar way, Francis is appealing to the council in order to open the way for a synodal church that was not quite born at Vatican II but was theologically conceived there. Jorge Mario Bergoglio is a product of conciliar Catholicism and at the same time the first post-Vatican II pope. He was elected as successor of Benedict XVI, who engaged in a critical reexamination of the legacy

² See Christopher M. BELLITTO, “True Reform,” *The Tablet*, 3 January 2015, s. 18-19.

³ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

⁴ See FRANCIS, *The Apostolic Constitution “Preach the Gospel” (Praedicate Evangelium)*. With an Appraisal of Francis's Reform of the Roman Curia by Massimo Faggioli, Collegeville MN: Liturgical, 2022.

of Vatican II – an effort that produced disturbing effects in the theological and ecclesiological culture of so-called conservative and traditionalist Catholicism. In just a few years, the papacy went from a defense of Vatican II as a “a sure compass to guide the course of Peter’s barque” (John Paul II’s words),⁵ through a period under Benedict in which Rome indulged traditionalist dissent from Vatican II to the current pope’s embrace of post-Vatican II synodality. Francis’s emphasis on synodality bridges the gap between his Vatican II theological culture and the new horizon of post-conciliar global Catholicism. It is a bridge that he cannot cross alone.

2. Open questions about the transition from collegiality to synodality

Eight years after he delivered what can be called his magna carta on synodality to the 2015 assembly of the Synod of Bishops, the pope’s persistent push in favor of a synodal church is having effects. In different areas of the Catholic world, there have been or there are ecclesial events of a synodal nature in the context of the “synodal process” 2021-2024: among the most notable, Australia’s Plenary Council (2021-2022) and the “synodal path” in Germany (2019-2023). The editors of the Jesuit-run magazine, *America*, argued for a plenary council for the Catholic Church in the United States.⁶ At the supra-national level, the Latin American bishops launched their own new kind of ecclesial assembly, the first-ever “Ecclesial Assembly of Latin America and the Caribbean” with the first gathering taking place in November 2021. It’s still a map of global Catholicism with very uneven dispositions towards synodality, but this kind of movement is new in modern Catholic history, and it is full of challenges and unknowns.

A two-article dossier published in the Italian Catholic magazine *Il Regno* pointed out that there are theological and institutional dimensions to synodality that need attention.⁷ One particular aspect that will have to be addressed is the role of papal primacy in synodality – both at the universal level and the national/local level. This is a key issue that will have important practical consequences. In one of his first and most important speeches on the model of episcopal leadership, in September 2013, Francis talked about the bishop in these terms:

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Message to the Diocesan Moderators of Italian Catholic Action* (20 February 2003). Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2003/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20030220_azione-cattolica-italiana.html.

⁶ See THE EDITORS, “Time for a U.S. Plenary Council?” *America* 224, no. 6 (2021): 8-9.

⁷ See Rafael LUCIANI – Serena NOCETI, “Imparare un’ecclesialità sinodale,” *Il Regno* no. 8 (2021): 257-264; Hervé LEGRAND, “La sinodalità non s’improvvisa,” *Il Regno* no. 8 (2021): 265-267.

“A pastoral presence means walking with the People of God, walking in front of them, showing them the way, showing them the path; walking in their midst, to strengthen them in unity; walking behind them, to make sure no one gets left behind but especially, never to lose the scent of the People of God in order to find new roads.”⁸

What is the role of the episcopal leadership in the synodal path together with the People of God? Walking in front of them, walking in their midst or walking behind them?

What we have seen from the Synod of Bishops assembly for the Amazon region (October 2019) and its aftermath (the apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia* of February 2020), is that Francis seems to understand his role as the referee of the presence or absence of genuine discernment in a synodal event. This is how he phrased it in a note published in September 2020 by the editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, Antonio Spadaro, SJ:

“There was a discussion [at the 2019 Synod] [...] a rich discussion [...] a well-founded discussion, but no discernment, which is something other than arriving at a good and justified consensus or relative majorities [...] We must understand that the Synod is more than a parliament; and in this specific case the Synod could not escape this dynamic. On this issue the [2019] Synod was a rich, productive and even necessary parliament; but no more than that. For me this was decisive in the final discernment, when I thought about how to write the exhortation [*Querida Amazonia*].”⁹

This way of assessing synodality is more typical of the superior of a religious community who has undertaken a process of discernment than that of a bishop. But the Catholic Church is not the Society of Jesus. Discernment works, if at all, in very rarified spiritual groups. Most bishops have no background or training in it. The same can be said for the People of God who are supposed to be involved in synodality.

It's especially since the late 1990s, also thanks to John Paul II's encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), that we have started talking about a new role for the papacy in the ecumenical ecclesiology articulated at the Second Vatican Council. Peter Hünermann, emeritus professor of theology at the University of Tübingen, formulated

⁸ FRANCIS, “Address to a group of recently appointed bishops,” 19 September 2013. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130919_convegno-nuovi-vescovi.html.

⁹ Antonio SPADARO, “Il governo di Francesco. È ancora attiva la spinta propulsiva del pontificato?” *Civiltà Cattolica*, 5 September 2020, s. 350-364 (English trans. available at: <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/francis-government-what-is-the-driving-force-of-his-pontificate/>).

the concept of the papacy as a "notarius publicus."¹⁰ The primacy's constitutive role, in this sense, would be the task of facilitating and maintaining the unity of Catholic faith and Church communion. Hünemann's essay was a commentary on John Paul II's *motu proprio Ad tuendam fidem* (1998). The German theologian offered a historical perspective on the development of papal primacy, trying to understand the deep changes in the function of primacy for the church in modernity. He noted that the Vatican I paradigm of papal primacy – as one of jurisdiction, in stark legal terms – had been overcome, not just by the ecumenical outlook of Catholicism, but also by the self-understanding of the papacy as "communicative action."

Especially after Vatican II, papal primacy is not really (or no longer) about defining the faith. Rather, it is about witnessing and confirming the faith of the people, as voiced in the consensus of their representatives and in light of Scripture and Tradition. Hünemann wrote the article well before the papacy embraced synodality, but it is still relevant for the current debate. Of course, the approaches to the issue of the role of primacy depend on the kind of synodality we have in mind.

Is synodality a way to renew the pastoral style of the church in the existing institutional and theological system? Or is it a moment for addressing issues, such as the role of women in the Church and ministry, and opening the church to the possibility of institutional and theological developments? This is an essential question that will have to be clarified at some point.

Primacy has emerged in recent years as an ecumenical issue, especially when one looks at the role it plays in the intra-Orthodox rifts between Constantinople and Moscow. Recall the tensions on display in January 2019 when the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew conceded autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine. The specter of a universal, pope-like role for the Patriarch of Constantinople haunts some Eastern Orthodox churches, but the complicated nature of papal primacy should not be too quickly overlooked by Catholics. It now tends to be dismissed as irrelevant because of the friendly, genteel style of Pope Francis.

But if synodality is to be a key aspect of the church in the future of Catholicism, this means that we need to keep in mind that at some point, in the next few years, there will be another pope after Francis. And he could have a way and style of interpreting synodality that is very different from that of Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

¹⁰ See Peter HÜNEMANN, "Die Herausbildung der Lehre von den Definitiv zu haltenden Wahrheiten seit dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil: Ein historischer Bericht und eine systematische Reflexion," *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 21, no. 1 (2000): 71-101.

3. Broader ecclesiological issues surrounding synodality

Besides the institutional issues that will need to be addressed first of all by the papacy and the Synod, there are broader and deeper ecclesiological issues surrounding synodality as it contributes to the relationship between the church and the world - not in a bilateral, *ad intra* vs. *ad extra* modality, but along the lines of the ecclesiology of Vatican II.

3.1 Synodality as a way to live in our common home

The first issue concerns the description of synodality as a journey, as walking together. This is a very effective image that resonates also because it echoes the biblical language on the experience of the people of God. But there are also risks in the use of this image in our cultural context, having to do with the cultural changes in the idea of journey. As the British and Catholic literary critic Terry Eagleton wrote recently:

“Journeys are no longer communal but self-tailored, more like hitchhiking than a coach tour. They are no longer mass products but for the most part embarked on alone. The world has ceased to be story-shaped, which means that you can make your life up as you go along. You can own it, just as you can own a boutique. As the current cliché has it, everybody is different, a proposition which if true would spell the end of ethics, sociology, demography, medical science, and a good deal besides.”¹¹

More than a journey, synodality is about staying and living together. It’s not the adventurous trip, but our living at home and as a family that says something about the Christian character of our being together. In this sense, the language used by the preparatory commission of the Synod for the “Working Document for the Continental Stage” in October 2022 is very appropriate: *Enlarge the space of your tent (Is 54:2)*.¹²

The synodal process, also because of the globalization of the mass-media narratives on the Catholic Church as dominated by political rifts, must avoid falling back into a Rome-centered idea of synodality. Recovering the role of the local church is crucial in order to get synodality right. It is in the local church as a “field hospital”¹³ that we can discover how synodality can help us find the wounded that we must

¹¹ Terry EAGLETON, “What’s Your Story?” *London Review of Books*, 16 February 2023. Available at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/n04/terry-eagleton/what-s-your-story>.

¹² <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf>.

¹³ Antonio SPADARO, “A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis,” *America* 209, no. 8 (2013): 14-38.

tend to: the wounded in the economic wars of our “throwaway economy” ; the wounded of the “culture wars” where the church is presented as an enemy of the aspirations of humankind; the wounded of the dominating disengagement and disenchantment; the victims of new mechanisms of exclusion and self-exclusion – visible and invisible, material and spiritual, cultural and social; those who are part of the culture but excluded from *knowledge* in our knowledge-based economy and society. Synodality in the local church is a much-needed corrective of the emphasis on individual identity and its exclusionary effects. Synodality needs to make the church more representative of marginalized voices, but not in an ideological, identity-driven way.

3.2 *Synodality and polarization*

There is a real challenge to being a synodal church in our current climate of hyper-polarization. The two-party mindset has become part of the cultural DNA in many liberal-democratic societies, where everything is a contest or a choice between two – and only two – options that are mutually exclusive and where each side is tempted to “excommunicate” the other and win over the other.

In the United States, for instance, this has led to the formation of two theological-political parties that mirror the country’s two-party political system – not only in shaping orientations on social and cultural issues, but also in terms of style of communication, of ethics of belonging and relating to the other side. This has created an almost automatic instinct to *talk to* the other side as a group that is different, rather than *talk with* those who – although they do not agree with you – are still part of the same family.

Dismantling this partisan way of understanding synodality is important at a moment in which listening to the voices of the people will have consequences on the representatives to the Synod. Like never before, the members of the Synod assembly will have a sort of ecclesial mandate precisely because the listening is so central to the process and the theology of synodality.

There is an urgent need to revitalize the existing synodal or quasi-synodal bodies in the local churches (pastoral diocesan council, parish councils), while being aware of the risks of politicization of these institutions in the present situation of theological-political polarization.

3.3 *The temptation to decide everything all at once*

There are issues that must be present in the synodal process, like the participation of women in new roles in the life of the church and the consequences of the abuse

crisis. But there are also issues that may be better addressed by postponing them, especially those that do not require new legislation or do not rise to the level of doctrinal decisions.

Synodality has a long history in the Christian tradition, but it is a history full of interruptions, detours, and deviations. The current “synodal process” is, by nature, experimental. If our local communities develop a more synodal way of being, it is an energy that the church – that is, the people of God but also the institutional church – will not give up. There are the synodal moments proper, but there are also “peri-synodal” events that can contribute to the Synod without having to be sanctioned by the hierarchy of the church.

After the Synod assemblies take place, the Catholic Church is likely to look less monarchical and more collegial and synodal, where the monarchical, the collegial, and the synodal moments will relate in new ways. Nonetheless, a hierarchical structure will continue to exist. It is important to remember that the lived experience of many Catholics is not and will not be involved in the synodal process. This is fine: no one should wish for a synodal Jacobinism. To paraphrase what Pope Francis says about holiness in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, there is also a “middle class of synodality.” It would be a mortal risk, and contrary to the very spirit of synodality, to stake our staying or leaving the Catholic Church on the outcome of this two-year synodal process. The role of the local church as a “field hospital” is crucial: it is also a cure for the often delusional and ideological “grand narratives” about Catholicism.

3.4 Synodality and the “paperwork church”

Unfortunately, skeptics often see synodality as just another example of the “paperwork church”, that is, an exercise that ultimately produces documents that will feed a bureaucratic ecclesiastical apparatus but have no impact (or perhaps a negative one) on the spiritual life of Catholics. This is why it is extremely important to see synodality in the context of the Church as “field hospital,” to use Pope Francis’ moving image.

Synodality is about rediscovering the inter-personal and relational experience of the Christian faith, where healing is never just the application of procedures and protocols but always has a human face. Synodality in the church as field hospital is an antidote to the temptation of lifeless, contactless Christianity.

Synodality will certainly have to find a structural way to favor new modes of participation. But it is not only about creating new structures. In some churches, the decision to revive (or give life for the first time to) structures of participation that

should exist already – such as parish and diocesan pastoral councils, for example – would be a synodal event. In many places, this would be like discovering Vatican II for the first time (or starting a reception of Vatican II that was interrupted many years ago). It would not simply be applying structures that were created almost sixty years ago to today. Rather, it would mean living them in a different way.

3.5 Synodality as spiritual process in a culture of the “event”

Synodality is a slow communal and spiritual process that requires patience. It challenges the habits and expectations on our horizon, as well as our ecclesial expectations. We live in a “society of the spectacle,” which emphasizes the “ground-breaking event” or the “paradigm shift” at every moment, and where every election is “the most consequential election in our history”.

But synodality is not the *drama* that puts the individual at the center, the “homo faber” or maker of Promethean decisions that turn his fortune upside down. Neither is synodality one more evidence of the theological *tragedy* of modern Catholicism; that is, the impossibility of church reform, of the inevitable and inescapable fate of decline.

The Catholic Church is, in many local contexts, in transition from territorial to “personal churches” and a diasporic model of presence.¹⁴ This requires on one side a re-thinking of previous synodal models typical of Christendom, and on the other side, in our cultural context, the urgency to create spaces for liturgy and contemplation in synodality as an antidote to semi-Pelagian and semi-Gnostic temptations.

4. Conclusion

Synodality must consider the need of reform not just in the institutional church at three levels – universal or global, continental/national, and local – but must also look at the situation of global Catholicism today. Some of the new forms of Catholic ecclesial communities (the lay movements and new ecclesial communities; the split between different liturgical traditions in the Roman rite) have remained impermeable to the ecclesiological discourse on collegiality and synodality, and have developed their own ecclesiology that helped them flourish also because

¹⁴ See Daniele HERVIEU-LÉGER, “Un catholicisme diasporique. Réflexions sociologiques sur un propos théologique,” *Recherches de science religieuse* 110, no. 3 (2019): 425-440; <https://doi.org/10.3917/rsr.193.0425> Danièle HERVIEU-LÉGER – Jean-Louis SCHLEGEL, *Vers l'implosion? Entretiens sur le présent et l'avenir du catholicisme*, Paris: Seuil, 2022.

of their rejection of the emphasis on institutional reform, and at the same time because of an idea of Christian community that relies more on charisma than on church leadership legitimized by collegial and synodal practices.

One of the signs of our times is the deep distrust of institutions, including ecclesiastical institutions. Any project for a synodal reform must take into account the real situation: the multi-culturalization of Christianity in the global world takes place at the same time of the crisis of globalization, with a Catholic Church and world both more tribal and polarized than during the early post-Vatican II period. This is one of the major differences between the Catholic Church of Francis' pontificate and when the ecclesiological debate on synodality started, in a different post-Vatican II moment.

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