The Catholic Church Should Host an Interfaith Synod on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Guinevere Keith

Theology

How can synodality be used to facilitate interfaith dialogue at a violent political impasse like the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict? Pope Francis has reinvigorated the Catholic Church's commitment to communal discernment by calling for a series of synods–or discursive assemblies of clergy and laity–that address the deepest wounds felt by people today. Nowhere is this need more pressing than in the war torn land at the heart of the Abrahamic world, where two seemingly irreconcilable cries echo: one for a unified Israel and another for a liberated Palestine. Firstly, historical perspectives on the conflict will be analyzed with attention to how inviting Jewish, Christian, and Muslim voices to the synodal table is critical to discernment in this region. Next, a literature review on synodality and the 'see, judge, act' method will identify the theological premises of these Catholic dialogical traditions and determine what adaptations are necessary to promote multifaith participation. Lastly, the argument for including representatives from other faiths in synodal dialogue will be framed through the lens of strengthening the Church's ability to serve the entire Abrahamic community. Through this analysis, I shall argue that hosting an interfaith synod would position the Church to have a significant impact on the peacebuilding process in Israel and Palestine by modeling the efficacy of encounter in resolving even the most emotional and existential of conflicts.

Historical Context: The Necessity of a Synod on Israel and Palestine

The wound of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is deep, historical, and alive with modern suffering. Prior to exploring how the Church could respond through *synodality*–the process of the Church coming together in dialogue, collaboration, and spiritual discernment–it is critical to understand the conflict at the heart of this discussion. This section provides a brief historical analysis that establishes the geopolitical history of the conflict in reference to how and why the Israel-Hamas War commenced. Next, Catholic Zionism and Catholic support of the Palestinian Liberation Movement are evaluated to determine their theological divergences. Finally, this section explores how these theological differences have been addressed by regional interfaith dialogue historically and in the modern day.

The most recent wave of this centuries-long violent exchange between Jewish and Palestinian Arab communities officially began on October 7th, 2023. On this date, the Gaza-based terrorist group Hamas attacked Israeli civilians, killing 1,200, injuring over 6,900, and abducting 240 hostages (Field 161). Shortly afterwards, the Israeli Defense Force launched a complete military siege on civillians in the Gaza Strip with strategies including indiscriminate ballistic bombardment, limiting the ingress of food, and cutting off the water and electricity utility grids (Field 162). The conflict has claimed over 45,000 Palestinian lives, and on the 11th of December, 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution demanding immediate ceasefire in Gaza (UNGA 2). While the region is in the early stages of a ceasefire, civilian infrastructure continues to be destroyed and aid continues to be blocked sporadically (OCHA 1).

This wave of warfare is the most recent installment in the longstanding contentious relationship between Israel and Palestine. While ancient and biblical claims to indigeneity shall be analyzed shortly, the modern conflict took root in the 1880s as diasporic Jewish settlers began

to immigrate from Europe into Ottoman-occupied Palestine (Gilbert 15). As Jewish colonies disrupted Arab labor and agricultural markets, tensions grew between these communities resulting in small violent clashes on the local level (Gilbert 41). Aside from these clashes, Palestinians under Ottoman rule experienced a high degree of self-governance as they were permitted to practice Islam, work the majority of arable land, and maintain their cultural customs (Gilbert 47).

However, when the Ottoman Empire lost World War I, its territories were distributed amongst the victors of the war at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. Great Britain awarded itself the pseudo-colonial Mandate of Palestine, making public its intentions behind this land acquisition in the 1922 Balfour Declaration (Gilbert 63). This White Paper affirmed that Great Britain has taken on the Mandate of Palestine for the purpose of creating a Jewish national home, a decision which would alienate the Arab Muslim majority in Palestine and disrupt their relatively independent status quo. The Rutenberg Concession of 1924 even permitted Jewish-owned companies to expropriate Arab land if it was needed for development purposes (Gilbert 151). Thus, Palestinian self-determination began to shrink far beyond their relative cultural, spiritual, governmental, and agricultural independence under Ottoman control (Ateek 22).

Great Britain contributed to the tense competition between Arabs and Jews by fluctuating between policies that favored either group depending on what was most advantageous to the British Empire. By 1937, Arab Palestinians had effectively leveraged their participation in the oil trade to influence Great Britain towards capping Jewish immigration into the Mandate of Palestine (Gilbert 147). This volatie status quo encouraged fierce rivalry between Jewish and Arab communities in the Mandate of Palestine, and when World War II broke out, each ethnic group chose a different alliance to support in exchange for their future sovereignty. While the

Jewish settler colonies in Palestine sent 30,000 troops to fight for the British Army's Allied Powers, the Palestinian Arabs served the Ottoman Empire in its collaboration with Germany and Austria-Hungary's Axis Powers. This ill fated decision was made in the hopes of gaining Palestinian sovereignty once the dust had settled (Gilbert 158).

When the war was won, the victorious Allied Powers chose to reward the Jewish people for their loyalty by dramatically increasing their immigration quotas into the Mandate of Palestine (Gilbert 163). The United Nations' passed a Partition Plan in 1947 to allocate specific land to growing Jewish settlements, and Arabs already on that land experienced ethnic cleansing as Jewish forces attemted to sieze it (Ateek 22). Beyond the United Nations' promise of land, Jewish immigration was also hugely influenced by the shared trauma of the Holocaust, and unprecedented numbers of Jewish refugees from Europe poured into the region.

Arab Palestinians resisted Jewish immigration for several years, and when British forces could no longer contain the violent attacks and counter-attacks between Palestinian Arabs and Jews, they withdrew their military presence in the region (Gilbert 171). This triggered the 1948 War of Independence that resulted in the statecraft of Israel, with 23% of the disputed territory being allocated to Egypt and Jordan for their military stewardship of a Palestinian territory (Gilbert 232). However, the Israeli military captured this remaining land during the Six Days War in 1967, ousting Egyptian and Jordanian forces to occupy this territory (Vital 804). Palestinians have "lived under Israeli occupation for fifty-five years" since, and their living conditions under Israeli rule have caused great friction between these ethnic groups (UNHCR 3).

Prior to the attack on October 7th, 2023, resentment towards these occupied living conditions had grown palpably in Palestine. The military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank restricted the free movement of Palestinians through Israel by subjecting them to expensive and

dangerous security checkpoints that over-police Palestinian communities (France24). Palestinians are depicted by Israeli media sources as terrorists and dehumanized in popular culture as well, contributing to a social tension that extends far beyond the logistical issues with occupation (Brockhill and Cordell 990). This tension underpins the ongoing Israel-Hamas War, and there are two main Catholic perspectives on peacebuilding: Catholic Zionism and Catholic supporters of the Palestinian Liberation Movement.

What is Zionism? Jewish political theologian Theodor Herzl first used this term in his 1895 publication *Judenstaat,* a reflection on solutions to the antisemitism his community experienced in Austria (Gottheil 84). Herzl called for the statecraft of a Jewish national home in order to escape the violent persecution Jews faced across Europe (Gottheil 86). However, a Jewish state had not been politically or geographically independent since the fall of Judah in 587 BC (2 Kgs. 25:1). While some might argue that the Maccabean Revolt resulted in a relative degree of Jewish self-governace several centuries later, infighting amongst Jerusalem's leaders in 63 BC snuffed out these lingering embers of Jewish territorial governace (Boadt 452). Thus, the pursuit of Zionism in Herzl's time would require seizing control of land from another group. As explored above, Jewish settlers began to immigrate into Ottoman Palestine around this time and establish settler-colonies, though their intention was not to overthrow Ottoman rule as they were purchasing land with permission from the Ottoman government. Zionism did not officially take root as an attempt to create a new independent and sovereign nation until the British claimed that the Mandate of Palestine would one day become one. However, Arab Palestinians saw this era of Jewish immigration as a disruption to their self-determination, recognizing immediately that an increased Jewish presence meant a decrease in land for local Arab populations (Ateek 21).

Catholics relate to the Zionist mission in two ways: through a spiritual belief in the Hebrew Bible and a theological commitment to harmonious coresponsibility amongst the Abrahamic faithful. Scripturally, the book of Genesis is a critical part of both the Jewish and Catholic canons because it narrates the foundational covenant of the Abrahamic world. Abram, the first patriarch of Judaism, was called by God to create a great nation in the promised land of Canaan (Gen. 12:1-3). Generations later, Moses and the Israelites were called out of Egypt to seek a new home in the promised land as well (Ex. 3:17). While their tenure as an independent Jewish nation was limited by conquest, Hebrew Bible prophets like Nehemiah interpreted the conquest of Israel by powerful empires like Assyria as a sign from God that Israel's actions warranted divine punishment (Neh. 9:26-7). To him and his contemporaries, rightful ownership of land was dependent on the will of God. Thus, Zionism is explicitly rooted in the scripture of the Hebrew Bible to which Jews and Catholics alike are spiritually connected.

Theologically, Catholic Zionists support the creation of a Jewish national home in the land of Israel because "the Church recognizes that God's promises to his people are irrevocable (Romans 11:29)" (D'Costa 438). However, the Pontifical Biblical Commission concluded in 2002 that "The Land was unconditionally promised, but living there requires the 'chosen' to live justly and righteously, serving the nations" (D'Costa 441). This argument highlights the necessity of coresponsibility between the Abrahamic faithful to steward both the holy land and each other. Thus, the Vatican has insisted that while a Jewish state is theologically significant to the Abrahamic world, it cannot come at the cost of a Palestinian homeland. By recognizing both the states of Palestine and Israel in 2015, the Vatican communicated the necessity of a harmony between these communities. While this perspective may seem limited in the freedom it grants

Jewish statecraft, it is still a Zionist perspective because it supports the existence of a Jewish state upon land that had not featured one for centuries.

In contrast, Catholic supporters of the Palestinian Liberation Movement draw on liberation theology to assert that the Israeli government is committing a grave sin by oppressing the Palestinian people. In his piece *Theology of Liberation,* Gustavo Gutierrez asserts that the faithful are called to directly fight oppression with pastoral activity and service (Gutierrez 36). He frames oppression through the lens of sin, inspiring Christians to associate their faith with social justice because “sin is a personal and social intrahistorical reality [and] an obstacle to life's reaching the fullness we call salvation” (Gutierrez 87). He also grounds his work in the gospel by applying the Beatitudes–blessings from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount–to modern political oppression, reminding suffering Catholics that “blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Mat. 5:10). Gutierrez’s work was extremely effective for increasing faith-based political mobilization against the twentieth century socialist regimes in Latin America, demonstrating the merits of a lived experience approach to theological reflection (Levine 241).

Using Gutierrez’s theology of liberation as a model, Palestinian theologians like Naim Stifan Ateek have conceptualized their oppression as a privileged relationship to God (Masalha and Isherwood 33). Ateek finds a preferential option for Palestinians in theological reflection on their current conditions. Applying liberation theology to these conditions reveals the sinful nature of the military aggressor while reinforcing the blessed status of those currently facing oppression. The outcome of this approach in Palestine has been politically mobilizing for the Christian community, as it has inspired grassroots resistance to Israeli occupation (Ateek 50). Ateek has also garnered international support for the Palestinian cause by calling on Catholics

everywhere to apply a spiritual lens to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, inspiring Catholics abroad to protest in solidarity (Ateek 6).

One of the main points of contention between these views is a difference in method. Zionism begins with a ‘theology from above’ that prioritizes the divine revelation of the promised land as articulated by the Israelites’ covenant with God. While the political belief in Zionism as a statecraft project was developed in response to facing antisemitic oppression, the ideology itself is rooted in supernatural appeals to God’s overarching plan for humankind since the ancient days. Contrastingly, the Palestinian Liberation Movement operates from a theology of liberation focused on the here-and-now experiences of the oppressed. This ‘theology from below’ applies scriptural and theological reflections to the experiences of their modern day life, placing more emphasis on God’s presence in the lives of Palestinians under occupation today.

However, it is critical in this analysis to avoid taking on a supersessionist tone in one’s understanding of Zionism. Just because the scriptures detailing the promised land were interpreted and passed down to us by ancient Israelite thinkers centuries ago, it does not mean that Zionism is an outdated theology meant to be replaced by a modern theology of liberation. To say this would dismiss the validity in a belief in the older scriptures, a very un-Catholic thing to do. Rather, the point of the following analysis is to highlight that different perceptions of land ownership–one from the ancient Israelite culture and another from the modern anticolonial culture–will arrive at different conclusions when deciding to whom the land belongs.

Both Zionism and Palestinian liberation theology meet the spiritual-liberative needs of the people they represent, but these approaches do not engage one another well because they conceptualize the spirituality of land ownership differently. For instance, a modern anticolonial thinker concerned with a theology of liberation for the Palestinian people will root their

argumentation in a modern conceptualization of land ownership. Looking at the oppression of Palestinians today, it is difficult to deny that the Israel-Hamas War in some way oppresses the indigenous Palestinians. Seeing this, they might argue against Zionism by asserting that land unequivocally ought to belong to its indigenous peoples, or "a place-based human ethnic culture that has not migrated from its homeland, and is not a settler or colonial population" (Stewart 740). Thus, they may feel the impulse to trace back as far as possible to determine which ethnic group is 'most indigenous' to Israel today, deciding that the result of that inquiry is the most liberative praxis through which to fight oppression as the scripture calls them to.

However, when put in conversation with a perspective rooted in ancient Israelite thought, this approach is limited because it places a modern negative heuristic upon the movement of ancient peoples. Several ancient Near Eastern cultures, including that of the Isrealites, had a spiritual conceptualization of what their 'homeland' was. Scripturally speaking, Abram was called out of his indigenous land–Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 15:7) in modern day Iraq–to develop a new ancestral relationship with the land of Canaan (Gen. 11:31). His covenant with God thus established a new 'homeland' for his people, and it is not our place in the modern world to condemn ancient spiritual theories of migration. Moreover, the political geography of the ancient world was constantly in flux as empires rose and fell (Boadt 383). Thus, the thinkers of the ancient world that experienced the spiritual events of the scripture did not perceive the right to land in the same way that a modern anticolonial thinker would.

This discrepancy between how humans from different time periods, cultures, and spiritual understandings of migration conceptualized the 'right' to land ownership is at the heart of the modern Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Communal discernment between these seemingly opposed views becomes possible when we understand the source of this tension, identify shared themes,

and compare how those themes manifest in the lived experiences of all peoples impacted. The resounding theme shared between both the Catholic Zionist and Catholic pro-Palestinian liberation perspective is a strong, passionate longing for access to the land they call 'home.' No matter what methodology they use to arrive there, the prominent theme in these two spiritual outlooks is the theme of belonging somewhere that your people are allowed to claim as their own.

This mutual cry would be most comprehensively addressed by expanding the dialogue on it beyond the Catholic world. In fact, it is impossible for Catholics alone to discern a solution to this deep and painful conflict without inviting Jewish, Christian, and Muslim voices into discernment with them. This is because Catholics represent a small fraction of the Palestinian population, and while there is ample literature that explores the faith's diverse theological positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that Catholic literature barely scratches the surface of other faith traditions' lived experiences. Any dialogical analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that does not consider this data with full, dignified inclusion of its primary sources–representatives of the diverse Abrahamic communities present in Israel and Palestine–has failed to accurately capture the conflict itself. Furthermore, an oversight of this nature would ignore the long held regional tradition of interfaith dialogue.

Despite clashing theologies, there is a strong regional history of interfaith dialogical initiatives to address "the creedal and communal challenges in colloquies both religious and philosophical" as neighboring "communities strove to articulate their confessional identities vis-a-vis one another" (Griffith 23). Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities have been relating to one another for thousands of years in the land that is known today as Palestine. This dialogue began with the early Church's quest to form a new Christian identity from within the larger

Jewish community (Kessel 30). This process involved much debate and internal argumentation about what it meant to be Jewish and how that identity related to the birth of Christianity (Kessel 31). A similar pattern of debate began in the seventh century when Muslim communities began to theologically distinguish themselves from nearby Abrahamic traditions as well (Griffith 27). These endeavors laid the groundwork for modern discourse that promotes mutual understanding through exploring theological contrast.

In the twentieth century, Palestinian philosophers like Ismail al-Faruqi developed interfaith solidarity by appealing to broad spiritual values like doing good works to fulfill God's will as encapsulated in divine law (Fletcher 87). While remaining deeply loyal to his Islamic moral paradigm, al-Faruqi established common ground with other spiritual groups in Palestine through the interfaith philosophy literature he produced. Pope John Paul II also contributed significantly to interfaith thought in the context of Palestine by visiting Jerusalem to meet with religious leaders from local Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities (Landau 58). In this meeting he identified shared peacebuilding themes within the different faiths' holy texts, even quoting the Qur'an to create a space for interfaith dialogue rooted in shared values (Landau 59). Pope Francis continued this important spiritual and political work in his book *Let Us Dream* by poignantly commenting on the power of encounter in soothing political conflict by artfully articulating that:

> "A people is not the same as a country, a nation, or a state, important though these entities are. A country is a geographical entity; the nation-state is the juridical and constitutional scaffolding that gives it force. But these boundaries and structures can change. A country that has been amputated or lost a war can remake itself. A nation that undergoes a constitutional crisis can rebuild itself. But to lose the feeling of being part of

a people is very hard to recover from. It is a loss that takes place over decades, eroding our capacity for encounter" (Francis 100).

Thus, spiritual thinkers and theologians of all Abrahamic faith traditions have identified encounter as a critical tool for peacebuilding in response to deep theological and lived wounds. Today, the Catholic Church has a valuable opportunity to apply its masterfully developed dialogical methods to the historically painful Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The following section explores Catholic dialogical methods in peacebuilding, constructing an argument for their interfaith application in this devastating political context.

Catholic Dialogical Methods

In his address on the fiftieth anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis defined *synodality* to his audience as "a reciprocal listening in which everyone—faithful people, the episcopal college, the Bishop of Rome—has something to learn, each one listening to the others; and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth' (John 14:17), in order to know what he 'is saying to the Churches' (Rev 2:7)" (Francis). Inherent to this kind of listening is the participants' willingness to accept information from a variety of sources. They must grant equal dignity to other participants with ranging opinions while listening to the movement of the Holy Spirit. This endeavor is best supported by a noncompetitive theology of the Church wherein all believers are seen as equally capable of receiving the Word and contributing to the creation of new Church best practices (Luciani 91).

This noncompetitive theology has been a historical work in progress, only recently incorporating the perspectives of the laity–all non-clergy members of the Church–into its discernment. The first example of synodality in the early church takes place in the book of Acts

when the apostles debated if adherence to Mosaic law is required for gentile Christians to achieve salvation (Acts 15:6-8). They modeled a style of discussion wherein all participants were granted access to the Holy Spirit to determine how the Church should progress in response to that disagreement (Acts 15:9). After the generation of the apostles had passed, the early Church continued this tradition by convening councils of bishops to respond to the cries of their time (Gaillardetz 10). However, the voices of the laity were often not included in conciliar discernment until Vatican II took decisive steps towards reviving Catholic *pneumatology*, or the study of the Holy Spirit as it is revealed to every baptized person. This effort recovered the stance that all Catholics are–by virtue of their baptism in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ–capable of interpreting the movement of the Holy Spirit (Gaillardetz 91). This assertion expanded the agency of the laity to participate in the synodal task of voicing different opinions, granting legitimacy to their contributions and opening the door for them to weigh in on ecclesial matters (Gaillardetz 122).

Today, the Catholic Church allows nominated lay people to contribute to communal discernment on critical issues by participating as full delegates in a *synod*, or a classical institutional form of 'walking together' through which a council meets to discern an ecclesial way of proceeding through a presenting conflict (Luciani 25). However, synodality as a concept is not limited to its direct application in the celebration of synods convened by the Pope (Luciani 27). One of the pneumatological implications of the noncompetitive theology explored above is that every local Church has the power to implement a "circular relationship linking pastoral ministry, lay participation and coresponsibility, and the impulses coming from charismatic gifts," (International Theological Commission 106). Thus, all members of the church are empowered to

express synodality by intentionally listening to and walking with those around them, meaningfully shaping their community in Christ by modeling that approach.

One way in which everyday Catholics are invited to practice synodality is through exploring the ‘see, judge, act’ dialogical method. Cardinal Cardjin named and popularized this long-practiced method of discernment, using Catholic Social Teaching to develop three concrete steps for decision-making that are adaptable to a wide variety of situations (Sheppard 103). To ‘see’ requires understanding how our ideological leanings cause us to ignore certain facts, challenging us to acknowledge our human bias by genuinely considering data presented from all other perspectives (Sheppard 104). ‘Seeing’ is critical to synodal discernment because it gives equal status to the perspectives of all participants in the discernment process, whether they be synod delegates or students in a classroom. The synodal project thus responds to a history of voices unheard and experiences unseen by beginning on the premise that ignoring the lived reality of someone at the table is not fruitful. Beyond that, ignoring the reality of someone intentionally situated *not* at the table also blocks discerners from peering towards the margins. Thus, to ‘see’ is to consider all contributions equally, to be mindful of how one’s own perspective could hinder their understanding of another’s experience, and to dismantle barriers that may prevent people from contributing at all.

‘Judging’ the observations ‘seen’ in the previous step involves communal discernment that moves towards a consensus in the group (Sheppard 104). In the model of the ‘see, judge, act’ method, consensus is achieved through a shared desire to confront the participants’ lived realities with the ideals of the gospel, gradually formulating a common response to the world around them through listening to the movement of the Holy Spirit (Sheppard 104). This approach promotes a style of discernment that roots all participants in the same goal; even if participants

experience conflict or hear a contradictory viewpoint to their own, their task is to 'judge' the situation in a way that transcends their individual opinions. Thus, inherent to the 'judging' aspect of synodality is a strong group commitment to humility; self-denial only works as a strategy for achieving consensus if everyone else is committed to self-denial too.

To 'act' on the consensus achieved through the 'judgement' of the group is to implement next steps that all participants approve of (Sheppard 105). It must be noted that a participant's approval of an 'action' ought to transcend their personal opinion, as communal discernment is an opportunity to evaluate the perspectives of others in light of the gospel, not in comparison to one's own personal bias. While the chosen 'action' will likely not match every participant's personal preference for what ought to be done, it is the hope of the 'see, judge, act' method that the group will choose to 'act' in light of how they feel the conversation going as a whole. Thus, participants are invited to engage in a style of decision making that de-centers the self for the sake of a carefully discerned consensus, informed by a sincere effort to equally see all perspectives offered on the matter at hand.

While the 'see, judge, act' method is easier explained than practiced–especially on contentious topics like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict–these theological and lived wounds are the very kind that synodality is designed to heal. Pope Francis has held several synods on urgent topics facing the faithful since his assumption of the papacy. The Synod on the Amazon came closest to this topic by uplifting the voices of indigenous peoples experiencing violence and displacement (Barros 135). This decision demonstrated the Holy See's willingness to go to margins experiencing violent and existential political conflict. Pope Francis even argued in his piece *Let Us Dream* that "the task of the reconciler is to 'endure' the conflict, facing it head-on, and by discerning see beyond the surface reasons for disagreement, opening those involved to

the possibility of a new synthesis, one that does not destroy either pole, but preserves what is good and valid in both in a new perspective" (Francis 80). Not only is synodality up to the task of discerning the deescalation of complex conflicts, but Pope Francis has identified here the necessity of this task in the Church's mission to heal the world's greatest wounds.

At the local level, the *truth and reconciliation* dialogical method has been applied in post-genocide landscapes to discern how a community can heal together from mass violence that pitted neighbor against neighbor. Post-genocide discussions conducted in Rwanda by individual Catholic parishes successfully heard "the testimonies of victims, allowed perpetrators to ask forgiveness and repent, and allowed survivors the opportunity to forgive them" (Kambanda 57). While it would be anachronistic to characterize this initiative as synodal, the truth and reconciliation method was based on a similar spiritual commitment to "see and identify the image of God in others so that ethnic differences can be overcome" (Kambanda 59). These truth and reconciliation circles worked through the steps of the 'see, judge, act' method, but added on their own discernment goal of identifying actionable steps for reintegrating Rwandan society (Kambanda 60). Thus, existing methods of Catholic dialogue were adapted to fit unique situational needs of a hurting community. Bearing this example in mind, the following section invites you to imagine what could be achieved if the Catholic Church took up the cause of convening a large-scale interfaith synod on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Adapting Catholic Dialogical Method to an Interfaith Synod

The Catholic faith calls the living Church to intervene in the persecution of others because of a strong doctrinal commitment to peacemaking (Matthew 5:9). The Pauline epistles in the New Testament appeal to the "God of Peace" directly, encouraging the faithful to seek refuge

in Him from conflict (Rom. 15:33). Thus, the Church is inherently inspired and incentivized to promote peace however possible as part of its mission. But could the Catholic dialogical approaches explored above be applied in an interfaith manner? Synodality, the 'see, judge, act' method, and the truth and reconciliation method all rely on a coherence of spiritual commitment amongst their participants. Their shared cornerstone is accepting that every baptized person has access to feeling the movement of the Holy Spirit, and can thus contribute spiritually informed insights to the communal discernment process. This theological premise must be adapted to accommodate interfaith participation in synodal discernment. What would synodality look like if not every participant had experienced a baptism in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ? How would the goal of discernment have to change to meet the unique interfaith needs of this hurting community?

For a Catholic, the goal of an interfaith synod would be allowing their encounters with people of other faiths to inform their spiritual reflections on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Opening oneself up to being moved by the contributions of others is a critical part of the synodal process (Sheppard 104), and a Catholic is absolutely capable of being moved by the Holy Spirit while listening to an interfaith testimony. Instead of listening to the movement of the Holy Spirit within *every participant*, the synod would need to adapt towards reflections on how the *experience of interfaith encounter moves the Holy Spirit within oneself.* While this inward orientation might initially feel unsynodal, it is the only way to protect the spiritual independence and dignity of non-Catholic participants' contributions.

But how can Catholics take the shared experience of the Holy Spirit out of the equation? The point of interfaith dialogue is not to make it secular, but rather to create space for different faith traditions to be respected. Catholics would of course continue to orient their discernment to

the Holy Spirit's movement within themselves, but they ultimately must not expect that all other participants experience spirituality in the same way they do. Instead, dialogue facilitators could adapt the 'see, judge, act' methods towards an interfaith application that centers individualized yet communal spiritual reflection. By encouraging each participant to 'judge' the testimonies they have 'seen' in light of their own faith tradition, the 'see, judge, act' method can empower synod participants of other faiths to share how their interfaith dialogue experience is uniquely resonating with their spirituality.

This difference in spiritual experience does not detract from the communal element of the discernment, but instead provides useful and enlightening insights on different faith traditions' responses to the same conflict. This is indeed a more communal approach than an insular, Catholic-only dialogue because it invites non-Catholics to the table. Characteristic of the 'judge' phase is the participants' shared commitment to formulating a common response to the world around them through listening to one anothers' spiritual insights. While amongst Catholics this conviction is rooted in shared access to the Holy Spirit, these same values can be achieved by a multifaith pre-participation agreement. In lieu of every participant agreeing to listen to the Holy Spirit during the dialogue, participants of all faiths would agree in advance to the holistic listening values of the 'see, judge, act' method. As their task remains to 'judge' the situation in a way that transcends their individual opinions, participants should prioritize humility while reflecting on what others have contributed.

For a non-Catholic, participation in an interfaith synod hosted by the Catholic Church would be an opportunity to testify to their experience of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a space geared towards both theological and practical reflection. In the case of the truth and reconciliation method in Rwanda explored above, testimony was a powerful healing tool that

fostered dialogue by rooting it in lived experience. Synods often break up into sub-committees, and this unique setting would provide an opportunity for interfaith dialogue that spans a wide variety of this conflict's nuanced elements. It is also an opportunity to be meaningfully impacted by the testimonies of others, allowing for increased empathy between the participants. Aside from the opportunity to heal through testimony, dialogue, and empathetic growth, what is the peacebuilding utility of the synodal process?

Typically, the end result of a synod is to produce a final document with summarized discussions and recommendations brought forth from the communal discernment process. While only Catholics would be expected to author this final document on behalf of the Catholic Church–as they are representatives of their own Church–summarizing this interfaith dialogue would meaningfully increase the world's knowledge of what is happening in Israel and Palestine. Jewish, Muslim, and Christian delegations could also author their own final documents with summaries and recommendations developed through their own spiritual and dialogical experiences at the interfaith synod. If these documents were published together, it would create a wealth of knowledge on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that could be compared and contrasted in peacebuilding efforts.

How might this initiative impact non-participants? Primarily, an orgnization as large as the Holy See initiating interfaith dialogue would send an international message supporting tolerance, mutual respect, and hope even in situations of stark political disagreement. It also goes without saying that the documents produced would have a massive impact on the fields of theology, politics, history, and all other disciplines concerned with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The opportunity to analyze different fruits of the same interfaith dialogue tree would reveal a plethora of useful and fascinating information that would inspire future policy and

scholarship. Beyond the academic world, the forthcoming recommendations could mobilize faithful populations worldwide to lend a helping hand however possible. From donation drives to volunteer work, recommendations coming from an interfaith dialogue initiative would foster solidarity between these groups and significantly bolster relief efforts.

From the angle of the Catholic Church, the opportunity to host an interfaith synod would skyrocket the Church's influence on the geopolitical outcome of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a positive way. The Church is called to address the world's deepest wounds and has developed the dialogical infrastructure to do so. Convening a synod on behalf of the Abrahamic world, inviting brothers and sisters from different faith traditions into the Vatican, and listening to them would model a radical form of peacebuilding rooted in Catholic Social Thought. Not only is an interfaith synod theologically possible and spiritually inspired, but it is absolutely necessary if the Church wishes to facilitate any form of healing in the violent political impasse of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Most importantly, the populations of Israel and Palestine would benefit from this initiative by having access to increased aid, decisive spiritual leadership, and a tested framework to facilitate local interfaith encounter. The opportunity to feel loved and listened to by other faith communities would also be transformative in and of itself. The mutual cry from every mouth involved in this conflict is a desire to regain the feeling of being home: belonging to a people peacefully rooted in their land. The tension has eroded both sides' capacity for encounter, with the most recent result of that erosion being the tragedy of the Israel-Hamas War. Rather than facing the issue of to whom the promised land belongs in an oppositional way, engaging in a synodal encounter would help ease the tension by emphasizing the sharedness of their cries to go

home. Thus, it is incumbent upon the Catholic Church to host an interfaith synod on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Works Cited

Ateek, Naim Stifan. A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017.

Bachman, Jeffrey S. *The Politics of Genocide : From the Genocide Convention to the Responsibility to Protect.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2022.

Barros, Marcelo. "The Synod for the Amazon." *Sur - International Journal on Human Rights* 16 (2019): 133-140.

Boadt, Lawrence. *Reading the Old Testament,* 2nd edition. (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2012), 383.

Brockhill, Aneta, and Karl Cordell. “The Violence of Culture: The Legitimation of the Israeli Occupation of Palestine.” *Third world quarterly* 40, no. 5 (2019): 981–998.

D'Costa, Gavin. "DEVELOPING THE CONVERSATION: A Divine Messiah and a Catholic Zionism." *Pro Ecclesia* 27, no. 4 (2018): 437-443.

Field, R. "The International Law of Siege and Starvation: The Case of Gaza After October 7, 2023." *Buffalo Human Rights Law Review* 30 (2023): 161-206.

Fletcher, Charles D. *Muslim-Christian Engagement in the Twentieth Century: The Principles of Interfaith Dialogue and the Work of Isma'il Al-Faruqi.* London: I.B. Tauris, 2015.

France 24. "Israeli checkpoints paralyze West Bank life as Gaza war rages." France 24, February 9, 2024, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240209-israeli-checkpoints-paralyse-west-bank-life-as-gaza-war-rages.

Francis. "Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops." Oct. 17, 2015. Holy See.http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en /speeches/2015/october/documents/papafrancesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

Gaillardetz, Richard R. An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015.

Gilbert, Martin. *Israel : A History*. Place of publication not identified: RosettaBooks, 2014.

Gottheil, Richard J. H. (Richard James Horatio). *Zionism*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1914.

Griffith, Sidney H. "Between the Cross and the Crescent: Co-Existence, Clash of Theologies and Interreligious Dialogue" In *Towards a Culture of Co-Existence in Pluralistic Societies: The Middle East and India* edited by Dietmar Winkler, 9-42. Piscataway, NJ, USA: Gorgias Press, 2021. https://doi.org/10.31826/9781463242541-006

Gutiérrez, Gustavo. A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988, 39.

International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church," no. 106.

Kambanda, Antoine Cardinal. “The Role of the Church in the Process of Reconciliation in Rwanda.” In R*einventing Theology in Post-Genocide Rwanda: Challenges and Hopes*, edited by Marcel Uwineza, Elisée Rutagambwa, and Michel Segatagara Kamanzi, 55–62. Georgetown University Press, 2023. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv31nzjvq.10.

Kessler, Edward. *An Introduction to Jewish-Christian Relations.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=be6073a0-097a-32f8-b712-9b8325fa36a1.

Laidlaw, Zoë and Alan Lester. *Indigenous Communities and Settler Colonialism: Land Holding, Loss and Survival in an Interconnected World*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Landau, Yehezkel, Michael B. McGarry, Lawrence Boadt, and Kevin Thomas Patrick Di Camillo. *John Paul II in the Holy Land-- in His Own Words: With Christian and Jewish Perspectives.* Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2005.

Levine, Daniel H. "Assessing the Impacts of Liberation Theology in Latin America." *The Review of Politics* 50, no. 2 (1988): 241.

Lemkin, Raphael. *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe : Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Division of International Law, 1944.

Luciani, Rafael, foreword by Peter Hünermann. *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church.* Paulist Press; 2022.

Masalha, Nur, and Lisa Isherwood. *Theologies of Liberation in Palestine-Israel: Indigenous, Contextual, and Postcolonial Perspectives.* Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014: 99.

Sheppard, Jim. "'See, Judge, Act' and Ignatian Spirituality." *The Way* 56, no. 1 (January 2017): 102–111.

Stewart, Georgina. 2017. "What Does 'Indigenous' Mean, for Me?" *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 50 (8): 740–43. doi:10.1080/00131857.2017.1302050.

The Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949. Geneva, Switzerland: International Committee of the Red Cross, 2008.

The Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon, Final Document, (The Holy See, 2017)

United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 260 A (III), "Demand for a Ceasefire in Gaza," A/ES-10/L.33 (December 5th, 2024).

United Nations Human Rights Council. "Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967." Accessed 12/1/2024.

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2025, January 31). "Today's News: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria, Ukraine." Retrieved from https://www.unocha.org/news/todays-top-news-democratic-republic-congo-occupied-palestinian-territory-syria-ukraine

Vital, David. "The Road to War 1967: The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict and The Israel-Syria Armistice: Problems of Implementation, 1949–1966." *International affairs (London)* 44, no. 4 (1968): 802–804.