

WALKING TOGETHER AS A SYNODAL CHURCH:  
MINISTERIAL AND SACRAMENTAL PROSPECTS FOR  
COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION, AND MISSION – SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Walking Together as a Synodal Church: Ministerial and Sacramental Prospects for Communion, Participation, and Mission  
 Convener: Ty Paul Monroe, Assumption University  
 Moderator: Megan Effron, University of Notre Dame  
 Presenters: Grace Agolia, Boston College  
 Deepan Rajaratnam, College of Saint Benedict/Saint John’s University  
 Ty Paul Monroe, Assumption University

In keeping with the Convention theme, “One Baptism: Evolving Visions of Catholicity from Nicaea to Vatican II and Beyond,” this panel sought to address questions of synodality, ministry, and sacramentality.

Grace Agolia from Boston College opened the session with her paper, “Proclaiming ‘One Baptism for the Forgiveness of Sins’: The Future of Ministry in a Synodal Church,” in which she argued for the central soteriological focus of baptismal incorporation and ecclesial participation. She then showed how this soteriological framing brings to the fore the need for liturgical formation for synodality, with particular implications for ministry. In short, as “the primary expression of the church’s mediation of grace, the liturgy shapes the practice of ministry.” In light of these two claims, the need for a relational approach to ministry becomes clearer, since it enables the baptized to engage fully in symbolic action grounded in the paschal mystery and ordered toward mission in the world. Agolia traced her reframing efforts back to the Second Vatican Council’s understanding of the church as a sacrament of salvation and of baptism as the basis for ecclesial participation, before showing how this perspective continues to unfold in the synodal efforts recently inaugurated. Agolia proposed a further deepening of this sacramental vision by recalling that at its heart, the church aims to mediate the transformative power of divine grace and mercy. After addressing certain stumbling blocks—e.g., conflating ministry and mission and “instrumentalizing” sacramental grace—Agolia looked to Pope Francis’ understanding of “authentic liturgical formation” as a helpful resource. Lastly, she turned to Richard Gaillardetz’s notion of “ecclesial re-positioning” to promote a more relational understanding of ecclesial ministry and sacramental efficacy that enriches our understanding of the church’s mission.

Deepan Rajaratnam of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University turned his attention to matters liturgical, ministerial, and canonical in his paper, “Disciple by Baptism, Minister by Call: Reframing the Theologian’s Vocation in Light of Synodality, Locality, and Catholicity.” Noting recent developments regarding instituted ministries—i.e., women can now be installed as lectors and acolytes (*Spiritus Domini*, 2021) and the lay ministry of catechist has recently been established (*Antiquum Ministerium*, 2021)—Rajaratnam sought to reappraise the role of the professional theologian in relation to the local ordinary and to the wider local church. In particular, he argued, this would help correct an overly juridical bishop–theologian relationship that tends also to dislocate the theologian from the broader church

community, one framed in large part by *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. Installing the theologian as a minister in the local church with a requisite rite would, Rajaratnam argued, give ecclesial recognition to this person in a manner that rightly highlights their synodal, relational, and ministerial identity.

Ty Monroe of Assumption University concluded the formal presentations with his paper, “Synodality, Sacraments, and the Church as the Prolongation of the Incarnation in History.” He argued that Francis’ and the Synod’s language concerning synodal participation frames this undertaking in thoroughly sacramental terms. By fully appreciating the church’s very identity as a “sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (*Lumen Gentium* §1), Monroe argued, we can more fully appreciate the genuinely transformative nature of sacramental grace, which would, in turn, deepen our understanding of synodal participation as more than merely a procedural or structural reform. Such a shift in thinking would, however, make way for important procedural and structural changes by situating them within a broader theological, soteriological, and specifically sacramental change of mindset. These concrete concerns include issues such as Eucharistic participation for the divorced and remarried and a return to seeing communal discernment as integral to the process of clerical ordination.

A lively discussion moderated by Megan Effron explored questions of practical, lexical, and theoretical import. Several questions were raised about the concrete conditions of local churches and existing approaches and relationships between bishops and lay theologians. Terminological questions aimed to parse important differences between, e.g., “instituted” and “commissioned” ministries, “ministry” and “mission,” and the like, and these discussions examined how to articulate the particularity of ministerial vocations while still advancing the synodal emphasis on the contribution of all of the baptized. Panel participants were able to draw interesting and fruitful lines of agreement and complementarity between the broad outlines of their proposals.

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