

THE RELEVANCE OF SYNOD IN THE CHURCH VIZ-A-VIZ SYNOD ON SYNODALITY

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Abstract

The path of Synodality is very crucial to the Church in our time because it constitutes the essential dimension of the Church.

Although, this dimension is kerygmatically aimed, our time demands the adoption of modern techniques to combat the widening gap in the church, especially between the laity and clergy, and the laxity towards evangelization. Hence, the current Synod on Synodality is targeted toward bridging the gap between the people and her minister. Having realized the effect of the laity in modern time evangelization, participation, communion, and mission, it appears to be a means through which the people can exercise the variety and ordered richness of their charisms, and their vocation, since the notion of Synodality refers to the connection and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church. This mission ought not to be relegated to those in the clerical and religious state alone but should be a collaborative effort with the people. This work seeks to theologially analyze the new Synod on Synodality and its prospective fruits for the Church.

Key Words: Synodality, Bishops, Church, Communion, Participation, Mission.

Introduction

Pope Paul VI constituted the Synod of Bishops in 1965, not as an instrument of governance, but as a tool of the widest possible consultation. Then it consisted of Bishops and other officials of the Western Church including Bishops and representatives of the Eastern Churches. Fifty years later, Pope Francis introduced the possibility of the Synod of bishops sharing in the ordinary papal magisterium, with the people. In sixty years that have passed since Vatican II Council, the responsiveness of the Church as communion has developed in broad sectors of the People of God and there have been encouraging experiences of synodality at diocesan, regional and universal levels.

Hence, this discourse centers on the new Synod on Synodality, and its central themes, namely communion, participation, and mission.

It begins by giving a brief definition of the concept of Synod before exposing the historical development of Synod. It reveals the fundamental role of Synod in the Church, as well as evaluates the current Synod on Synodality and its themes. This paper also seeks to scrutinize the three core dimension processes laid out in bringing about the fruitfulness of the Synod. The crust of the discourse which is the relevance of the Synod on Synodality is exposed, especially the benefits of the Synod on Synodality in the life of the Church today.

Definition of Synod

The term "synod" stems from two Greek words: "*syn*," which means "together," and "*hodos*," which means "way," in other words, to "come together," to "walk together." It is composed of the preposition *συν* (with) and the noun *ὁδός* (path). The Greek *σύννοδος* is translated into Latin as *synodus* or *concilium*. *Concilium*, in its **banal** use, refers to an assemblage convoked by an appropriate authority. Although the roots of "synod" and "council" are different, their meanings unite. In fact, "council" enriches the semantic content of "synod" by its locus to the Hebrew *קָהָל* (*qahal*), the assembly convoked by the Lord, and its translation into Greek as *ἐκκλησία*, which, in the New Testament, refers to the eschatological convocation of the People of God in Christ Jesus.

Historically, Synod is an ancient and venerable word in the

Tradition of the Church; it is deeply rooted in the scriptures and early church. Since the first centuries, the word “synod” has been applied, with specific reference to the ecclesial assemblies convoked at various levels (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.¹

Historical Development of Synod

Pope Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops in 1965 when the Church had just concluded the Second Vatican Council. His motivation was the experience of the Council itself, Paul VI desired to: “permanently establish a Council of Bishops, to provide for a continuance after the Council.”² Hence, the aim of Synod is in keeping with the request of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, to maintain the collegial spirit fostered by the council.

In synodal assemblies, the Pope and the bishops generally discuss questions relating to the universal Church, although they can also address issues of local Churches. Usually, the participants are representatives of the episcopate. The synod exercises its function primarily as a consultative body under the direct authority of the Pope. He convokes the synod; chooses the topic; designates its members; in general, presides over the assembly; and decides how to implement suggestions made by the bishops.

Three main documents govern the synod. First, the Apostolic Letter *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, published in 1965, by Pope Paul VI, established the Synod of Bishops. From the outset, he foresaw that the Synod, “like all human institutions, can be improved upon with time.”³ This document contains the essential components in an outline form which were developed in successive documents.

Secondly, the document *Ordo Synodi Episcoporum*, published in 1966, contains all the norms regarding things as general as to how themes are chosen, how the Synod of Bishops is organized, who presides over the Synod sessions, how participants are elected, how information is gathered and communicated; and things as specific as what ecclesiastical garb the Bishops are to wear in the

assembly.

This document was subsequently revised in 1969 and 1971 by Pope Paul VI, and in 2006 by Pope Benedict XVI. Thirdly, the new 1983 Code of Canon Law, devoted a chapter to the Synod of Bishops, this appears for the first time under Part II, of the Book II of The People of God, which centers on the Hierarchical Constitution of the Church.

There are three types of Synod, namely, the Ordinary general assemblies, which attend to matters concerning the whole Church; the Extraordinary general assemblies, which address issues that need rapid resolution; and the Special assemblies, which focus on problems relating directly to specific Churches or regions. The Holy Father is the president of the synod. There is also a secretary-general, assisted by an ordinary Council of the General Secretariat, composed of bishops. There have been 19 synods: nine ordinary, two extraordinary, and eight special.

The Role of the Synod of Bishops

The synod of bishops is a group of bishops who have been chosen from different regions of the world to meet together at fixed times to foster closer unity between the Roman Pontiff and bishops, to assist the Roman Pontiff with their counsel in the preservation and growth of faith and morals and the observance and strengthening of ecclesiastical discipline, and to consider questions about the activity of the Church in the world.⁴

Furthermore, Pope Francis expresses that the Synod of Bishops is a body that “manifests the solicitude of the College of Bishops for the needs of the People of God and communion among the Churches”.⁵ The Synod is a means of gathering information on a particular theme from the local Churches. It provides counsel to the Roman Pontiff in the Synodal Assembly. Pope Francis, repeating what his Predecessor, Paul VI said, stated that the Synod has a “consultative role, offering information and counsel to the Roman Pontiff on various ecclesial questions, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit”.⁶ Furthermore, the role of the Synod of Bishops is primarily that of 'listening to the People of God'. The Synod, therefore, is the 'suitable instrument to give voice to the entire People of God'.

Synod on Synodality

Although the term Synodality is not explicitly found as a term or as a concept in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, it is fair to say that Synodality is at the heart of the work of renewal the Council was encouraging. 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.⁷ Synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* (The way of life) of the Church, the People of God; it reveals and gives essence to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly, and take an active part in her evangelizing mission.

Synodality denotes the particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church's ordinary way of living and working. In this sense, synodality enables the entire People of God to walk forward together, listening to the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, in order to participate in the mission of the Church in the communion that Christ establishes between us. Ultimately, this path of walking together is the most effective way of manifesting and putting into practice the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God.⁸

Hence, on 10th October 2021, Pope Francis officially declared the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, a two-year process called “a synod on Synodality,” officially known as “Synod 2021-2023: *For a Synodal Church*.”⁹ In brief, the process involves an expansion of an established institution, called the “Synod of Bishops.” This implies that the Synod will consult with everyone from parishioners to monks, nuns, and Catholic universities before coming together for a discussion for the 1st Session XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of bishops from 4-29 October 2023, and for the 2nd Session XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of bishops in October 2024.

The Synodal Theme

The theme of the Synod is *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*. The three dimensions of the theme, namely, Communion, Participation, and Mission are interrelated. They are the vital pillars of a Synodal Church. A Church where hierarchy is less emphasized, where each one enhances and familiarizes with the other. Hence, there is a dynamic relationship between the three dimensions in the theme of the synod.

1. Communion: God gathers his people together as diverse peoples of one faith through the covenant that he offers to his people. The communion finds its deepest roots in the love and unity of the Trinity. It is Christ who reconciles us to the Father and unites us with each other in the Holy Spirit. Together, we are inspired by listening to the Word of God, through the living Tradition of the Church, and grounded in the *sensus fidei* that we share. Theologians such as Johann Adam Möhler, Antonio Rosmini and John Henry Newman (1801-1890), stressed that a primary and fundamental element in the life of the Church is the dimension of communion, which implies an ordered synodal practice on every level, giving due importance to the *sensus fidei fidelium*, fundamentally related to the specific ministry of the Bishops and the Pope.¹⁰ The entire faithful all have a role to play in discerning and living out God's call for his people.

2. Participation: This dimension is a call for the involvement of all who belong to the People of God, the laity, consecrated and clergy, to engage in the exercise of deep and polite listening to one another. This listening creates space for us to hear the Holy Spirit together and guides our aspirations for the Church of the Third Millennium. The concept of participation is based on the fact that all the faithful are qualified and are called to serve one another through the gifts they have each received from the Holy Spirit. In a synodal Church the whole community, in the free and rich variety of its members, is called together to pray, listen, analyze, dialogue, discern and offer advice on making pastoral decisions that correspond as closely as possible to God's will.¹¹ Candid efforts must be made to ensure the inclusion of those at the margins or those who feel

excluded.

3. Mission: The dimension of mission focuses on the very essence of the Church, which is her kerygmatic task. The mission is to witness the love of God in the midst of the whole human family. This synodal process has a deep missionary dimension to it. It is intended to enable the Church to better witness to the Gospel, especially with those who live on the spiritual, social, economic, political, geographical, and existential peripheries of our world. In this way, synodality is a path by which the Church can more productively fulfill its mission of evangelization in the world. Hence, Synodality is lived out in the Church in the service of the mission. *Ecclesia peregrinans naturasua missionaria est*; the Church exists in order to evangelize.¹²

The Synodal Processes

The synodal process in this context is no longer only an assembly of bishops but a journey for all the Christ faithful, in which every local Church has an essential part to play. The whole synodal process aims at fostering a lived experience of listening, discernment, participation, and co-responsibility, where diversity of gifts is brought together for the Church's mission in the world. Every synodal assembly evolves in successive phases: preparation, celebration and implementation.

1. The Diocesan Local Phase: The first phase of the Synodal Process is a listening phase in local Churches. The aim is to nurture a broad discussion process in order to gather the wealth of the experiences of lived synodality, it comprises the Pastors and the Faithful of the local Churches at all the levels. Religious communities, lay movements, associations of the faithful, and other ecclesial groups are encouraged to participate in the Synodal Process in the context of the local Churches. This stage provides the foundation for all the other phases that follow. More than simply answering to a questionnaire, the diocesan phase is intended to offer as many people as possible a truly synodal experience of listening to one another and walking forward together, guided by the Holy Spirit.

The diocesan phase of the Synodal Process is coordinated by the diocesan Bishop. This phase is an opportunity for parishes and dioceses to encounter, experience, and live out the synodal journey together, consequently developing synodal tools and ways that are most suited for their local context, which will ultimately become the new style of the local Churches on the path of synodality. Once the diocesan phase has elapsed with a Diocesan Pre-Synodal Meeting and diocesan synthesis, the episcopal conferences will collate the input and feedback that they have received from the dioceses in order to convey syntheses that aptly capture the contributions of participants at the local level. These syntheses will then serve as the basis for the first edition of the *Instrumentum Laboris*, (Working Document) which will be published by the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops.

2. The Regional/Continental Phase: For the Continental Stage, religious, clergy and lay people will meet in gatherings called “Ecclesial Assemblies” to reflect on the Working Document in their regional and continental contexts. The assembly groupings will correspond to existing organizations that bring together episcopal conferences across each continent, such as CELAM the council of the Roman Catholic bishops of Latin America, and Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. There will also be a special gathering for representatives from the Middle East and the *sui iuris* Eastern Catholic Churches.

3. The Universal Phase: Synodality as an essential dimension of the Church is expressed on the level of the universal Church in the dynamic circularity of the *consensus fidelium*, episcopal collegiality, and the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. Bishops will gather with the Holy Father Pope Francis in the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 2023 and 2024 to speak and listen to one another on the proceedings that emerged from the synodal process that began at the local level.¹³

Relevance of Synod on Synodality

1. A Church who listens: A Synodal Church is a Church that

listens. It is a process of mutual listening in which each person has something to learn. The faithful, the Episcopal College, the Bishop of Rome; each one listening to the others and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth. Pope Francis explains that the Synod of Bishops is the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church's life. The Synod process begins by listening to the people of God, who share also in Christ's prophetic office.¹⁴

2. A Classless Church: Synodality as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the best interpretative framework for understanding her hierarchical ministry, in which no one may be higher than the others.¹⁵ Although, Christ constituted the Church, placing at the summit the apostolic College, in which the apostle Peter is the rock, in this Church, as in an upturned pyramid, the summit is below the base. Therefore, those who exercise authority are called ministers, because in accordance with the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all.

3. Fostering Participation: If listening is the method of the Synodal Process, and discerning is the aim, then participation is the path. Fostering participation leads Christ's faithful out of themselves to involve others who hold different views from theirs. Fostering participation leads us as Christ's faithful out of ourselves to involve others who hold different views from ours. Dialogue involves coming together across diverse opinions. Indeed, God often speaks through the voices of those that are neglected. Hence, asynodal church is a participatory and co-responsible Church.

4. Universal Priesthood: The entire People of God shares a common dignity and vocation through Baptism. All are called in virtue of our Baptism to be active participants in the life of the Church. In parishes, lay movements, religious communities, and other forms of communion, all are invited to listen to one another in order to hear the promptings of the Holy Spirit, who comes to guide our human efforts. The Second Vatican Council revived the sense that all the baptized, both the hierarchy and the laity, are called to be active

participants in the saving mission of the Church. The faithful have received the Holy Spirit in baptism and confirmation, and are gifted with charisms for the renewal and building up of the Church. Thus the teaching authority of the Pope and the bishops are in dialogue with the *sensus fidelium*, the living voice of the People of God.¹⁶

5. An integral part of her very nature: The Church recognizes that synodality is an integral part of her very nature. Being a synodal Church finds expression in ecumenical councils, Synods of Bishops, diocesan Synods, and diocesan and parish councils. There are many ways by which we experience forms of “synodality” already across the Church. Yet being a synodal Church is not limited to these existing institutions. A synodal Church walks forward in communion to pursue a common mission through the participation of every one of its members. The aim of this Synodal Process is not to offer a temporary or one-time experience of synodality, but rather to allow the entire People of God to discern together how to move onward on the path towards being a more synodal Church in the long term.

6. A Fruit of the Second Vatican Council: One of the fruits of the Second Vatican Council was the institution of the Synod of Bishops. Though the Synod of Bishops has taken place up until now as a gathering of bishops with and under the authority of the Pope, the Church increasingly realizes that synodality is the path for the entire People of God. Therefore the synodal process is not just a gathering of bishops anymore but a journey for all the faithful.

7. Pastoral Dimension: The path of synodality seeks to make pastoral decisions that reflect the will of God as closely as possible, grounding them in the living voice of the People of God.¹⁷ It is noted that cooperating with theologians, lay, ordained, and religious can be supportive in expressing the voice of the People of God and expressing the reality of the faith on the basis of lived experience.

8. Not oriented towards a Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation: It is clear that the purpose of this Synod is not to produce more documents. Rather, it is projected to encourage people

to dream about the Church we are called to be, to make people's hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, to warm hearts, and reinstate strength to our hands for our common mission.¹⁸ Hence, the objective of this Synodal Process is not only a series of exercises that start and stop but rather a path of growing authentically towards the communion and mission that God calls the Church to live out in the third millennium.

9. Spiritual Benefit: The Synodal Process is first and foremost a spiritual process. It is not an automated data-gathering exercise or a succession of meetings and deliberations. Synodal listening is oriented to discernment. It requires us to learn and exercise the art of personal and communal discernment. We listen to each other, to our faith tradition, and to the signs of the times in order to discern what God is saying to all of us. Pope Francis describes the two interrelated goals of this method of listening: “to listen to God, so that with him we may hear the cry of his people; to listen to his people until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us.”¹⁹

10. A Formation Process: Synodality involves openness to change, formation, and ongoing formation. It exposes how the Church community forms people to be more capable of 'walking together,' listening to one another, participating in the mission, and engaging in dialogue. It presents the type of formation needed to foster discernment and the exercise of authority in a synodal way.

11. A Means of Evangelization: Synodality is established to energize the life and evangelizing mission of the Church in union with and under the guidance of Christ. Although the synodal renewal of the Church happens through the re-vitalization of synodal structures, it expresses itself first and foremost in response to God's call to live as His People, who journey through history towards the fulfillment of the Kingdom. Synodality is at the service of the mission of the Church, in which all members are called to participate. Pope Francis states that “all members of the Church are agents of evangelization. Consequently making a synodal Church a reality is

an indispensable precondition for new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God,"²⁰ since we are all missionary disciples.

12. Communion of Christ's Faithful: Synodality does not exist without the pastoral authority of the College of Bishops, under the primacy of the Successor of Peter, as well as the pastoral authority of each diocesan Bishop in the diocese entrusted to his care. The fullness of the Synodal Process can only truly exist with the involvement of the local Churches, requiring the personal involvement of the diocesan Bishop.

Conclusion

Today in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, the entire Church is walking together in synergy with and under Peter (and his College) under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In this situation, the role of the layperson in the history of the church as well as their contribution to the mission of the church is significant. For this, structures are needed. The forms of synodal practice may vary. But structures will not function in the spirit of synodality without discernment and conversion. Synodal Process is not only a series of exercises that start and stop but rather a journey of growing authentically towards the communion and mission that God calls the Church to live out in the third millennium.

The fruits of the renewal promised by the Second Vatican Council in its promotion of ecclesial communion, episcopal collegiality, and thinking and acting in a synodal way have been rich and precious. The current Synod on Synodality is the culmination of all the efforts to bring about a greater degree of openness, collaboration and mutual listening in the Church. Unlike previous synods, this one legitimately begins in dioceses all over the world, with opportunities for mutual consultation at every level and among different Church organizations. When the General Assembly meets in October 2023 and 2024, its task will be to prayerfully consider how to move forward as a more synodal Church in the longterm, a Church that walks together

ENDNOTES

- 1 International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, (Vatican City: LibreriaEditriceVaticana, 2021), no. 4.
- 2 Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, 15 September 1965, (Vatican City: LibreriaEditriceVaticana). no. 57.
- 3 Paul VI, Apostolic Letter, *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, 15th September, 1965
- 4 *Code of Canon Law*, (Nairobi: St. Pauls, 2005), Can. 342.
- 5 Vatican New.com “What is a Synod of Bishops?” accessed from <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2019-10/what-is-synod-bishops-faq.html>, on 12th November, 2022
- 6 Vatican New.com “What is a Synod of Bishops?”
- 7 International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 6.
- 8 Synod on Synodality, *Preparatory Document*, no. 1.
- 9 Initially, the Synod on Synodality was between 2021-2023, but on October 2023, Pope Francis announced his decision to divide the church's Synod of Bishops into two sessions, one in October 2023 and a second in October 2024, in order to promote the understanding of synodality as a constitutive dimension of the church and help everyone to live it as the journey of brothers and sisters who proclaim the joy of the Gospel. The decision, which the pope, was made in order to have a more relaxed period of discernment.
- 10 International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, 38.
- 11 International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, 67-68.
- 12 International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, 53.
- 13 International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, 94.
- 14 General Secretariat of the Synod, *Working Document for the Continental Stage*, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf>
- 15 Pope Francis, *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17 October 2015).
- 16 Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Councils (325-787): Their History and Their Theology*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1983), 420-441.
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- 19 International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, no. 68.
- 20 Synod on Synodality, *Preparatory Document*, no. 32.
- 21 Pope Francis, *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*.
- 22 Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, (Nairobi: Paulines, 2013), no. 105.