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Journeying Together to Evangelize

A Look at the Synodal Church of Pope Francis

From the beginning of his ministry as Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis has consistently outlined and pursued a synodal vision of the Church. His first appearance at the papal window, immediately after his election in March 2013, signalled a new path for the Church. Through his writings, speeches and his symbolic actions he has clarified his intention to usher in a missionary-synodal Church with bottom-up and participatory communication. His important synods on evangelization, family and youth replicate the synodal process and are intended to reform the Church in the line of synodality. Pope Francis firmly believes “the world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this *path of synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”¹ A synodal church, in which the entire people of God *journey together* to evangelize and to bring about the Kingdom of God, according to him, is the best form of the exercise of collegiality which includes a process of common listening and communal discernment to the Spirit for fulfilling the mission of the Church.

By taking the Church back to the Gospel and leading her ‘out’ to the peripheries of the world, in his own emblematic style, Pope Francis calls our attention to the ecclesial reform introduced by the Second Vatican Council. In line with the ecclesiology of *sensus fidei* of all the Christians, Pope believes in involving all the baptised in

discerning God’s will by listening to the Holy Spirit to bring about the Kingdom of

God. With this intention, he has “sought to enhance the Synod, which is one of the most precious legacies of the Second Vatican Council.”² Synodality is a concept more, or less, alien to the western Church, except for the Synod of Bishops, which is currently a purely advisory body for the universal Church, under the direction of the Pope. Although the Oriental Churches have the synodal exercise of collegiality for church governance, Synod for them is more or less a law-making body. Pope Francis has consistently elaborated a synodal path for the Church in the third millennium. Synodal church of Pope Francis is a new model of Church, along with, or in integration of, different models, in imitation of the Early Church and adapted to contemporary situation. However, what “synodality” means for the Catholic Church today is a matter of debate and further reflection. Synodal re-conception of the Church opens up new questions on the role of Pope and papal primacy, the role of the local and regional bishops’ conferences, lay participation in doctrinal formulation and ecclesiastical administration, and role of women in the Church.

In this paper, I propose to outline and explain Pope Francis’ vision of a synodal church on the basis of his own teachings. The Pope’s vision of the synodality is rooted in the ecclesial reform of second Vatican council, which is, in itself, an attempt to return to the spirit of the Early Church.

¹ “Address of his Holiness Pope Francis at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the synod of bishops,” Paul VI Audience Hall, Saturday, 17 October 2015.

² Cf. Pope Francis, “Letter to the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, on the elevation of the Undersecretary, Mgr. Fabio Fabene to the episcopal dignity,” 1 April 2014.

1. Continuing with the Discontinuities in Vatican II

Pope Francis' call for a truly synodal church has its roots in the reform and renewal project of the second Vatican Council. *Lumen Gentium* declared Church as the pilgrim people of God journeying together and as a communion of the faithful, mirroring the inner life of the blessed Trinity. *Lumen Gentium* 12 went to the extent of stating that the charism of inerrancy (infallible in *credendo*) resides in the people of God as a whole, by virtue of the baptismal presence and action of the Holy Spirit. Going a step further, Vatican II expressed earnest desire to be open to the world and to the other churches, rooted in what we share in common as humans (GS 1; 40–45), as it is the Holy Spirit who leads both the Church and humankind. Synodality is an attempt to create a Church which is literally “catholic” or “all-embracing.”

Vatican II endeavoured to reform and renew the Church in the twentieth century, drawing inspiration from the New Testament and the Early Church, but nothing much happened in the post-conciliar period to build on the reform ideas of the Council. The majority of Bishops favoured reform and they left with a sense that significant change occurred, but the Curia people who were to implement reform were from the minority in the Council who opposed radical reform and firmly stood for continuity. In short, Conciliar affirmation of theological principles did not translate into action or social reality, primarily because, as O'Hanlon puts it, “cultural and theological development happened” but “not enough structural, legal and institutional grounding.”³ Besides, as scholars opine, the

text of *Lumen Gentium* and other documents, despite reformed tone and language, are compromise documents accommodating views of the minority who wanted continuity along with open-ended documents with a parallel presentation of hierarchical and collegial vision of the Church.⁴ Post-conciliar developments under Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict saw a return to the centralized church firmly rooted on papal primacy and hierarchical authority.

However, faced with new challenges in the twenty-first century, there was a sense of crisis and call for reform already in the pre-conclave assemblies prior to the election of Pope Francis. Pope Francis seems to be determined to complete the unfinished

agenda of Vatican II in church reform, adding his own original style and stamp of synodality to it. In an interview marking the beginning of the fifth year of the pontificate of Pope Francis in 2018, Cardinal Wuerl said:

“Now comes Pope Francis who's saying, ‘Why don't we pick up where we left off: collegiality, synodality.’” He continued, “the synodality that Paul VI initiated has flowered under Francis.”⁵ Pope Francis picks ‘synodality,’ a crucial lead from the Council, to return to more collegial church.



³ Gerry O'Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis. A Synodal Catholic Church in Ireland*, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2018. Chapter one traces the background of the reforms of Pope Francis.

⁴ O'Malley says “collegiality was lightning rod” of council—between ‘hard’ collegiality and ‘soft’ collegiality and the Council leaves statements on collegiality side-by-side with pre-conciliar papal primacy and infallibility without reconciliation. Cf. O'Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis*.

⁵ Gerard O'Connell, “Cardinal Wuerl: Pope Francis has Reconnected the Church with Vatican II,” (interview given to the *America Magazine* on the beginning of the fifth year of the pontificate of Pope Francis in 2017). Cf. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/03/06/cardinal-wuerl-pope-francis-has-reconnected-church-vatican-ii> (accessed January 21, 2020). In the words of Cardinal Wuerl, “his [Pope Francis'] great contribution to date has been, the reconnecting of the church with the energy of the Second Vatican Council.”

2. Synod of Bishops as a Stepping Stone to more Synodal Church

Pope Francis considers the Synod of Bishops as the only post-conciliar institution that reflects the true spirit of collegiality, which Vatican II advocated, and wants to set in motion his vision of a synodal church by improving the Synod into a truly synodal process.⁶ He revealed his intention to reform the Synod of Bishops during an interview with *La Civiltà Cattolica*, a few months after being elected to the throne of Peter, saying, “May be the time has come to change the working method of the synod, for the current one seems static to me.”⁷ He clarified his vision further in his address on 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops: “From the beginning of my ministry as Bishop of Rome, I sought to enhance the Synod, which is one of the most precious legacies of the last Council.”⁸ He continues, “For Blessed Paul VI, the Synod of Bishops was meant to reproduce the image of the Ecumenical Council and reflects its spirit and method.” Synod of Bishops is nothing like an ecumenical council, as the Synod is merely a consultative body today, yet, according to Pope Francis, the Synod echoes the path of true collegiality with vital changes.

Pope Francis points out how his predecessors sought to improve the synodal process. Instituting the Synod in 1965, Pope Paul VI said that it could “be improved upon with the passing of time.” Twenty years later, St. John Paul II echoed the same when he stated that “this instrument might be further improved. Perhaps *collegial pastoral responsibility could be more fully expressed* [italics mine]

in the Synod.”⁹ Although in 2006, Pope Benedict XVI approved several changes to the *Ordo Synodi Episcoporum*, in the light of the provisions of the *Code of Canon Law* and the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, not much has been achieved. Pope Francis believes that it is by “synodality,” namely, “journeying together” of laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome,” that collegiality can be fully expressed and practised. For Pope Francis, “In a synodal Church, the Synod of Bishops is only the most evident manifestation of a dynamism of communion which inspires all ecclesial decisions.”¹⁰

3. The Synodal Vision of Pope Francis

His vision is best outlined in his “Address to the bishops on the 50 anniversary of Synod of Bishops” and further clarified on several occasions. His Synods, especially the synod on Family and the one on Young People, were experiments in updated synodal method and synodal process, in order for the whole Church to emulate. The International Theological Commission (ITC) document of 2018¹¹ is a great step forward to give theological and historical grounding to the updated synodal vision.¹² His own new Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* on the Synod of Bishops, published on September 18, 2018, turns into norms all the steps of the path of a “constitutively synodal Church” that “begins listening to the People of God,” “continues with listening to the Pastors” and “culminates in listening to the Bishop of Rome,” who is called to speak as ‘Pastor and

⁶ Alphonse Borras lists three expressions of synodality already in practice such as the diocesan synod, the pastoral council and the synod of bishops. Alphonse Borras, “Trois expressions de la synodalité depuis Vatican II,” in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 90, 4 (2014) 643-666.

⁷ “Forse è il tempo di mutare la metodologia del Sinodo, perché quella attuale mi sembra statica.” A. Spadaro, “Intervista a papa Francesco,” *Civiltà Cattolica*, III, 2013, 449-477, at 466.

⁸ “Address of Pope Francis at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary.”

⁹ Blessed Paul VI, Motu proprio *Apostolica Sollicitudo* (15 September 1965), Proemium; Saint John Paul II, *Address for the Conclusion of VI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, 29 October 1983 as quoted in Address of his Holiness Pope Francis at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the synod of bishops.

¹⁰ “Address of Pope Francis at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary.” In this section, he has quoted from various Vatican sources.

¹¹ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html.

¹² ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*.

Doctor of all Christians.’ These efforts will be crowned by the forth-coming Synod on Synodality, scheduled to take place in 2022.¹³ Pope Francis is consistently working to relocate the Church to the synodal path.

Synod on Family: Crucible of Synodal Process

In an article, “A Church on a synodal Journey,”¹⁴ written in the context of the Synod on Family in 2014, Antonio Spadaro argues that Pope Francis had already announced this principle in the interview that he granted to *Civiltà Cattolica* (published on September 19, 2013): “We must walk together: the people, the bishops and the pope. Synodality should be lived at various levels. Maybe it is time to change the methods of the Synod of Bishops, because it seems to me that the current method is not dynamic.”¹⁵ In Spadaro’s view, the Synod on Family (2014) is a good example of a courageous “synodal process.” Three things in Synod indicate Francis’ “dynamic of synodality,” namely, (1) an updated methodology of Synod, (2) option to speak with *parrhesia* and to listen with humility and (3) the understanding ‘united in difference as true Catholic spirit.’¹⁶

First of all, the Synod on Family followed an “updated methodology.”¹⁷ The Synodal process began with the circulation of a preparatory document in November 2013, which included an extensive questionnaire for the individual faithful and local churches.

The responses to the questionnaire were then developed into the text of the *Instrumentum laboris*, which set the agenda of the Extraordinary Assembly. It included 15 sessions of debates, discussions and testimonies of couples, in which all challenges facing families were explored and discussed with pastoral courage. The Pope was present in all sessions and was interacting with the members. The “official document,” as such a “faithful and clear summary of all that was said and discussed in this Hall and in the *Small Groups*,” was read and reformulated collecting all amendments and integrating all the views that had emerged; it was *voted and passed and included even quaestiones disputandae, despite the view that it would produce an image of a multifaceted Church of different positions*. The entire process was transparent and participatory.¹⁸

During this synod, it became clear how to “practice synodality.” For Pope Francis to practise synodality means “to speak with *parrhesia* [‘to speak candidly’] and to listen with humility,” because for him both freedom of speech and the humility of listening are essential for a “serious process of pastoral discernment.” Himself a model of listening, the Pope stated that ordinary authority of Pope must not be understood as the “bulwark” of speech and thought within the Church, but, on the contrary, as the solid “rock” which makes expression possible, where “guarantor” means not to restrain speech, but to clear way for mature freedom of speech.¹⁹ In other words, what the synodal process promotes is not just slavish fidelity to doctrine but freedom and creativity.

¹³ Pope Francis has chosen “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission” as the theme for the next Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.” <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/synod-of-bishops-to-take-up-theme-of-synodality-in-2022.html>.

¹⁴ Antonio Spadaro, “A Church on a Synodal Journey: Pastoral Challenges of the Family,” *America Magazine* (November 07, 2014), <https://www.americamagazine.org/church-synodal-journey>.

¹⁵ “Si deve camminare insieme: la gente, i Vescovi e il Papa. La sinodalità va vissuta a vari livelli.” See Antonio Spadaro, “Intervista con Papa Francesco,” 466. See also Pope Francis, “My Door is Always Open. A Conversation with Antonio Spadaro,” Milan: Rizzoli, 2013, 65.

¹⁶ Spadaro, “A Church on a Synodal Journey.”

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Spadaro, “A Church on a Synodal Journey.”

¹⁹ Cf. Pope Francis, “Homily for the Opening Mass of the Extraordinary Synod on the Family,” October 5, 2014. See also “Greeting to the Synod Fathers during the First General Congregation of the Third General Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” October 6, 2014. [as quoted in Spadaro, “A Church on a Synodal Journey.”]

Another dimension of the synodal method is to acknowledge that the true Catholic principle is unity in diversity. In his concluding speech, citing the example of the ‘great debate’ (Acts 15:7) and face to face dissent and opposition (Acts 15:2; Gal 2:11) in the ‘Council of Jerusalem,’ Pope said: “United in our differences: there is no other Catholic way for uniting ourselves. This is the Catholic spirit, the Christian spirit: to unite in our differences.”²⁰ This is the way of Jesus!”²¹ He considers “the visible differences, animated debates, divergent views as the movements of Spirit.”²² To him, “If there is deeper unity beyond the conflicts, “disagreements are not rifts; instead they are fissures through which grace passes more easily.”²³ Spadaro writes: “A seeking church, a truly ‘catholic’ church, emerged during the synod” as “there was a conciliar spirit inside the synod hall,” where, “not confusion but ‘genuine dynamic freedom,’ similar to Pentecost, existed despite different models of church, opposing views.”²⁴ This is the Church on a synodal journey.



(Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna of the Magnificat*)

²⁰ Pope Francis, “Concluding Speech of the Third General Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” October 18, 2014.

²¹ Pope Francis, “Concluding Speech of the Third General Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” October 18, 2014.

²² Spadaro, “A Church on a Synodal Journey.”

²³ Pope Francis, “Homily for the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul,” June 29, 2013. (quoted by Spadaro)

²⁴ Spadaro, *ibid.*

Missionary Synodality

For Pope Francis, synodal life of the Church is essentially oriented towards mission. He writes in *Evangelii Gaudium* 27: “I dream of a ‘missionary option,’ that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation” (EG 27). The final document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People²⁵ has an entire section on “Missionary Synodality,” saying the Holy Spirit is calling the Church “to practice synodality as a way of being and acting, promoting the participation of all the baptized and of people of good will, each according to his age, state of life and vocation” in the life and mission of the Church (no.119-124). The whole document speaks a ‘synodal’ language, comprising phrases like “journeying together” or “walking together,” “communion,” “dialogue” and “participation.” Jesus who journeys with the disciples on the way to Emmaus—who walks with, asks questions and listens patiently, stay with them, resume journey—is the leitmotif of the whole synodal discussion. Presenting herself as the “tent of meeting” (cf. Ex 25), the synodal church “adopts a relational manner that places emphasis on listening, welcoming, dialogue and common discernment in a process that transforms the lives of those taking part” (no. 122) through “communal discernment,” which “includes fraternal listening, intergenerational dialogue, discussions” (no. 121). The document speaks of a dynamic Church, a Church in movement, which accompanies while journeying, a “Church that listens” and a “Church that accompanies,” “living in

²⁵ Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on *Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment*.

<http://www.synod.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/final-document-of-the-synod-of-bishops-on-young-people--faith-an.html> (for all quoted texts, paragraph numbers are indicated within text).

communion with them,” growing together in understanding of the Gospel. This is synodality in practice.

Address at the 50th Anniversary of Synod of Bishops: The Synodal Process

Pope Francis’ remarkable speech at the celebration of the 50 years of the Synod of Bishops is the best elucidation of his synodal vision. Quoting St. John Chrysostom, who stated that “Church and Synod are synonymous,” Pope Francis affirms “*Synodality*, as a constitutive element of the Church.”²⁶ He shares his strong conviction that “the path of the synod is exactly what God wants from His Church in the third millennium.” He also defines more or less what is synod: “What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word ‘synod’—Journeying together—laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome.” “Church is nothing other than God’s flock ‘walking together’ on the paths of history to meet Christ the Lord.”²⁷

This vision is grounded on ecclesiology of “the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people of God” (LG 12), “comprised of all the baptized” (LG 1). Pope Francis says that “the *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and an *Ecclesia discens*, since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church.”²⁸ Thus “the whole people of God, ‘from the bishops to the last of the faithful,’ whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization” (EG 119-120) and as such

“manifest a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals” (*infallible “in credendo”*). This is accomplished by listening and discernment: “a synodal Church is a Church which listens,” a listening which is “more than simply hearing” (EG 171), a “mutual listening” “at every level of the Church’s life,” in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7).”²⁹

The Synodal process begins by “listening to the people of God,” which shares in Christ’s prophetic office (LG 12); it then “continues by listening to the pastors”; and the Synod of Bishops is “the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church’s life.” The Synod Fathers, “having listened to the people of God and the pastors and discerning carefully the changing current of public opinion,” “listen to God ... until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us.” The Synod process culminates in listening to the Bishop of Rome, who is called to speak as “pastor and teacher of all Christians,” and “the guarantor of the obedience and the conformity of the Church to the will of God, to the Gospel of Christ, and to the Tradition of the Church.”³⁰

The first level of the exercise of *synodality* happens in the particular Churches, in which priests and laity are called to cooperate with the bishop for the good of the whole ecclesial community, (CIC 460-468). The second level is that of Ecclesiastical Provinces and Ecclesiastical Regions,

²⁶ Saint John Chrysostom, *Explicatio* in Ps. 149: PG 55, 493, as quoted in *Address*.

²⁷ “Address of Pope Francis at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary.”

²⁸ Cf. Pope Francis, “Address to the Leadership of the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America during the General Coordination Meeting,” Rio de Janeiro, 28 July 2013, 5,4; Pope Francis, Address on the occasion of a meeting with Clergy, Consecrated Persons and members of Pastoral Councils, Assisi, 4 October 2013, as quoted in “Address of Pope Francis at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary”.

²⁹ Referring to his consultations in the Synod on Family, he says: “such was the conviction underlying my desire that the people of God should be consulted in the preparation of the two phases of the Synod on the family, as is ordinarily done with each *Lineamenta*. Certainly, a consultation of this sort would never be sufficient to perceive the *sensus fidei*. But ... through the answers given ... we had the opportunity at least to hear some of those families speak to issues which closely affect them and about which they have much to say.”

³⁰ “Address of Pope Francis at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary.”

Particular Councils and, in a special way, Conferences of Bishops (CIC431-459). The last level is that of the universal Church. Here the Synod of Bishops, representing the Catholic episcopate, becomes an expression of *episcopal collegiality* within an entirely synodal Church (CD 5, CIC 342-348), joining the Bishops among themselves and with the Pope in solicitude for the People of God. Pope places “episcopal collegiality” (mutual collegiality of bishops, including the Pope) within a ‘fully synodal church’ (comprising of all baptised). Thus he widens the scope of collegiality.

Synod of Bishops within a Synodal Church

The Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* (2018)³¹—on the Synod of Bishops—turns all the steps on the path of a constitutively synodal Church into norms. Pope expresses the hope that “*the collegial pastoral responsibility can be expressed in the Synod even more fully*”³² [italics mine] (EC 3-4) as the Canon Law provides that “*the Synod might also enjoy deliberative power, should the Roman Pontiff wish to grant this* (CIC 337, §3; CCEO can. 50, §3) [italics mine].”³³ He even goes to the extent of saying “Although structurally it is essentially configured as an episcopal body, this does not mean that the Synod exists separately from the rest of the faithful.”³⁴ “Synod of Bishops must increasingly become a privileged instrument “to listen to God and to

listen to the people” (EC 6). Thus this document has norms to widen the scope of the synod of bishops in order to make it truly synodal, which may be taken up in the forthcoming Synod of Bishops in 2022. It describes the bishop as “both teacher and disciple,” a *teacher* when he acts as “head and shepherd” and a *disciple*, when “he listens to the voice of Christ speaking through the entire People of God.” Supernatural sense of faith (*sensus fidei*) entails that “all Bishops are appointed for the service of the holy People of God” (EC 5).³⁵ His ears must be open to the ‘voice of the sheep’ (EC 5).

The recent document of the ITC with the title *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*³⁶ clarifies the theological meaning and the basic notions of synodality. After exploring the foundations of synodality in Scripture and tradition, the document outlines a theology of synodality within the framework of the synodal vocation of the people of God, basing on the ecclesiology of Vatican II. It also develops the spiritual, pastoral as well as practical dimensions of the synodal process.

Having analysed the synodal vision of Pope Francis in the light of his own speeches and writings, we will now move into a systematic exploration of his vision of a synodal church.



³¹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio*—On the Synod of Bishops, 2018. [quoted texts are indicated by paragraph numbers within text]

³² Pope John Paul II, Homily at the Mass for the Closing of the VI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (29 October 1983). Pope Francis, “Address to Members of the XIII Ordinary Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops” (13 June 2013).

³³ While “the Eastern Churches have an ancient and very rich synodal tradition,” in the West they “would normally exercise a consultative role,” although the Code of Canon Law (1983) made the Synod of Bishops part of universal law, (CIC can. 342-348; CCEO can. 46).

³⁴ EC Article 2#2 indicates that certain others who are not Bishops may be summoned to the Synod Assemble. Article 6#1 makes “consultation of the People of God” by local or particular churches, a part of the preparation for the Synod.

³⁵ So the Bishop is called to lead his flock by “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” (EC 5).

³⁶ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, 2018.

4. Understanding “synodality”

By proposing the synodal path, the Pope’s intention is to reform and renew the Church for the third millennium, while being rooted in Scripture and Tradition. O’Hanlon calls it a ‘silent revolution by Pope Francis’ and speaks of Pope Francis’ “two very significant contributions to our understanding of church reform”: “firstly, he [the Pope] has located the issues of renewal and reform within the more basic truth of our encounter with Jesus Christ and the missionary impulse this generates.” As a result, “reform is not simply self-referential” or even “for better organizational structures for their own sake” but “reform always functions, with respect to mission.” “Secondly, and crucially, ‘the Church for the third millennium must be synodal, collegial, an ‘inverted pyramid,’ in which people of God are primary and the hierarchy in all its forms are there to serve the People in whom the Holy Spirit is present.”³⁷ The Pope’s model of the Church, with its ‘missionary synodality’ and synodal collegiality, is more suitable for our age.

Hierarchy, Collegiality and Synodality

Synodality, in the words of Pope Francis, offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry and collegiality. He argues that since hierarchical ministry is one of service in the spirit and manner of Jesus Christ (Cf. Jn 13:1-15; Mt 20:25-27), it is necessary to understand hierarchy as the authority of service. “It is in serving the people of God that each bishop becomes, ... *vicarius Christi*”; and “the successor of Peter is nothing else if not the *servus servorum Dei*.” The bishops are linked to the bishop of Rome by the bond of “*hierarchica communio*” (*cum Petro*) while, at the same time, hierarchically subject to him as head of the college (*sub Petro*) (LG 22, CD 4).³⁸ In an interview with the Belgian Catholic Newspaper *Tertio* in December 2016, Pope Francis stated that “...

either there is a pyramidal Church, in which what Peter says is done, or there is a synodal Church, in which Peter is Peter but he accompanies the Church, he lets her grow, he listens to her, he learns from this reality and goes about harmonizing it.”³⁹ Thus, “in this Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base.” It is on this foundation that “Jesus founded the Church by setting at her head the Apostolic College, in which the Apostle Peter is the “rock” (cf. Mt 16:18).” For, the Pope is “the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful” (LG 23). “The Synod always acts *cum Petro et sub Petro*” and, thus, synodal church is not doing away with apostolic primacy or hierarchical ministry of the Pope or the Bishops, but reinterprets collegiality in line with the ecclesiology of *sensus fidei* of the whole people of God.⁴⁰

Synodality is, thus, much wider than collegiality spoken of by Vatican II. “The concept of ‘synodality’ refers to the involvement and participation of the whole people of God in the life and mission of the Church,” while ‘collegiality’ refers to the College of bishops acting with and under the Pope.

[Synodality] promotes the baptismal dignity and co-responsibility of all, makes the most of the charisms dispensed by the Holy Spirit, recognizes the specific ministry of pastors in collegial and hierarchical communion with the bishop of Rome, and guarantees that synodal processes and events unfold in conformity with the deposit of faith and

³⁷ O’Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis*.

³⁸ “Address of Pope Francis at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary.”

³⁹ Interview the Holy Father granted to the Belgian Catholic weekly publication *Tertio* on the conclusion of the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. See also Massimo Faggioli, “Pope Francis’ Struggle to Bring forth a Synodal Church,” *La Croix International*, published Nov. 5, 2018.

⁴⁰ For study of *sensus fidei* in the context of social media culture see: Joseph Scaria Palakeel, “Crowdsourcing Divine Truth? ‘Sensus Fidei’ and Theological Authority in the Social Media Culture,” in Miriam Diez Bosch and others, *Authority and Leadership. Values, Religion, Media*, Barcelona: Blanquerna Observatory, 2018 123-140.

*involve listening to the Holy Spirit for the renewal of the church's mission.*⁴¹

But it doesn't take away the difference of function in ministry and roles. The collegiality which unites the bishops '*cum Petro et sub Petro*' (with and under Peter, the pope) in their concern for the people of God is called to articulate and enrich itself through the practice of synodality at all levels.

It is in this context that Pope Francis speaks of "intermediary instances of *collegiality*" through decentralisation. Pope believes that the decentralisation has to be achieved by empowering local, regional and national episcopal bodies into intermediary instances of *collegiality*, so that they can be in a position, "like the ancient patriarchal Churches ... 'to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit' (LG 23)" (Cf. EG 32). He has expressed this emphatically in EG 16:

Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound "decentralization."

According to Pope Francis, "excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach" (EG 32).

Synodality as Presence and Action of the Holy Spirit

In his meeting with the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Bishops on 02 September 2019, Pope Francis cautioned about the danger of believing that

... to undertake a synodal journey or to have an attitude of synodality, means to carry out

*a survey of opinions, what does this one think, that one, that other one... and then hold a meeting, and come to an agreement... No, the Synod isn't a Parliament!... "You must certainly know what your lay people think, but it's not a survey; it's something else. "If the Holy Spirit isn't there, there is no Synod. If the Holy Spirit isn't present, there is no Synodality."*⁴²

Pope Francis has a profound sense that the Church is led by the Holy Spirit and that we must therefore listen to the voice of the Spirit, quite in continuity with his Jesuit formation to discern the voice and the call of God.



In his general audience on October 23, 2019, in the context of Amazon Synod and its discussion on synodality, Pope said that the Assembly of Jerusalem "reminds us that the ecclesial methods for the resolution of conflicts are based on dialogue made of attentive and patient listening, and on discernment made in the light of the Spirit." He continued, "This text helps us to understand synodality. The way they write

⁴¹ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, 2018, 72.

⁴² Pope Francis Stresses Synodality to Bishops of Synod of Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church," cf. <https://zenit.org/articles/pope-francis-stresses-synodality-to-bishops-of-synod-of-ukrainian-greek-catholic-church/>.

the Letter is interesting: the Apostles begin by saying: ‘The Holy Spirit and we think that...’ The presence of the Holy Spirit is proper of synodality, otherwise it’s not synodality, it’s a parlor, parliament, something else...”⁴³ In a hierarchical church Pope and Bishops are privileged listeners to the Holy Spirit and are mandated to teach the people of God, whereas in the Synodal church the magisterium listens to the Holy Spirit speaking to them through the people of God (LG 12) as well.

Synodality as a New Facet of Communion

Understanding synodality as a constitutive element of the Church adds a new dimension to the Church as a communion of believers and as an agent of effective communion among men. Synodal Church is a multi-level communion. This communion starts from and is modelled after the Trinity and is sacramentally enacted in the Church. It involves a circularity of movements. It flows from the Father, the source and ground of unity and is revealed by the Son and effected by the Holy Spirit. Humans enter into this communion through Baptism and are sustained in communion through common faith and sacraments. The hierarchy is at the service of this communion and not to impose it from top to bottom. Church communion is effected by the spontaneous coming together of believers under the guiding action of the Holy Spirit. This is perichoretic communion, in which all exist in relation to each other and nobody is independent of any one or above anyone. Priests and bishops are baptized persons among baptized people with a call to ministering; the Pope is a bishop among bishops called to head the hierarchical communion. The same applies to different individual churches or rites as well as local churches. There is a movement from the centre to the periphery (that is, an outward movement from hierarchy to the faithful) and an inward movement from peripheries to

centre (namely, from the faithful in the periphery to the hierarchical centre, represented by the Pope). This move from periphery toward the centre does not replace centre, but replenishes it as a centrifugal force. Synodality, as a process of consultation, communal discernment and decision making in the service of the mission of Christ, involves a two-way communication and communion.

Synodality as a Communication Style

Synodal church is also a communication strategy⁴⁴ for the meaningful proclamation of the Gospel in today’s social media culture. The traditional hierarchical and top-down communication style of the Church does not match the cultural conditions of today. The administrative and communication style of the Church flows closely from the vision of the Church (ecclesiology). In a hierarchical church, with a monolithic and monologic structure, communication is always institutional and top-down, demanding obedience and submission, whereas in a synodal church, internal organization and communication are participatory and dialogical, while the outward communication is simple, attractive, open and transparent. Synodality, for Francis, is not just a form of Church government but also a way of being Church. A transformation of the hierarchical church into a synodal church is a radical shift from hierarchical, one-way and ‘top-down’ to a ‘bottom-up’ communication with lateral and multi-nodal interchange. Through his teachings and personal communication style, Pope advocates a Church that communicates the joy of the Gospel to the whole world by listening, dialoguing and accompaniment, rather than by one-way proclamation. Synodality is, thus, a communication style that invites to encounter and communion. Pope Francis envisions a synodal church,

⁴³ <https://zenit.org/articles/holy-father-continues-catecheses-on-acts-of-the-apostles/> .

⁴⁴ Cf. Joseph Scaria Palakeel, “Pope Francis: A Master Communicator. Renewing Church and World through Communication,” (unpublished) paper presented at the JDV–CCBI Inter-Faculty Symposium entitled “Towards Renewing Church and World: Revisiting Vatican II through the Eyes of Pope Francis,” JDV, Pune, Nov 29-30, 2019.

which has the broader aspirations of humankind in mind and is attentive to the signs of the time and engages the world in conversation on ecology, migration, global poverty and injustice, proper governance through his communication.

Synodality as Openness to the Wider World

A Synodal Church is a “church with open doors” (EG 46)—open to one another, to others and to the whole world as the universal sacrament of communion and salvation. According to Pope Francis, the Church is “not a fortress but a tent capable of enlarging its space (cf. Is 54:2) giving access to all. The Church is either ‘going forth’ or it’s not Church, it is either a path that is always widening its space so that all can enter, or it’s not Church.”⁴⁵ For Pope Francis, “the commitment to build a synodal - missionary Church ... is fraught with ecumenical implications” and a “careful consideration of how to articulate the principle of collegiality in the Church’s life and the service of the one who presides offer a significant contribution to the advancement of relations between our Churches.”⁴⁶ Further, he envisages a synodality that “extends to humanity as well”:

*As a Church which ‘walks together’ towards mankind, participating in the travails of history, we cultivate the dream that the rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and of authority’s function of service will also be able to help civil society to grow in justice and brotherhood, bringing to birth a more beautiful world that is worthier of mankind for the generations who will follow us.*⁴⁷

Synodal governance is thus a new model of authority inspired by Christian vision,

capable of pointing the way for a new model of governance, which is democracy in its pristine sense.

Synodality as a Call for Spiritual and Cultural Reform

The presuppositions and processes of a synodal path means cultural and spiritual renewal rather than institutional reform.⁴⁸ A synodal way of being Church means for Pope Francis a paradigm shift which goes beyond any adjustments to existing model of Church. Synodal “reform is not simply self-referential” or even “for better organizational structures for their own sake” but a reform with a missionary focus. Pope told a gathering of 2,200 Italian bishops, priests and lay people in Florence’s Cathedral in 2015:

*... the constant need for reform in the Church, the semper reformanda “does not end in the umpteenth plan to change structures... There are ecclesial structures which can hamper efforts at evangelization, yet even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them... Without new life and an authentic evangelical spirit, without the Church’s “fidelity to her own calling,” any new structure will soon prove ineffective.*⁴⁹

Hence Pope Francis has “located the issues of renewal and reform within the more basic truth of our encounter with Jesus Christ and the missionary impulse this generates.” The Church for the third millennium must be Synodal, an ‘inverted pyramid,’ in which people of God are primary and the hierarchy in all its forms are there to serve the people in whom the Holy Spirit is present.

⁴⁵ Pope Francis, General Audience, October 23, 2019. <https://zenit.org/articles/holy-father-continues-catecheses-on-acts-of-the-apostles/>

⁴⁶ “Address of Pope Francis at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary.”

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Gerry O’Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis*. See also, Massimo Faggioli, *Pope Francis: Tradition in Transition* (Translation ed.), Paulist Press, 2015, 32-33.

⁴⁹ “Address by Pope Francis to Italian bishops in Florence,” 10 November 2015, see *The Tablet*, 11 November 2015.

Conclusion

Pope Francis thinks that the synodal path, while being rooted in Scripture and Tradition and open to the new cultural environment, is more suitable for a missionary Church in the third millennium. It is in close continuity with the ancient and rich synodal tradition found in the early first millennium. The Gospels and epistles give indications that a diversity of churches and structure existed in early Christianity. The twenty-one ecumenical councils, starting with the Jerusalem Council, show that synodal and collegial culture flourished at local, regional and universal (ecumenical) levels till the end of the first millennium. Second Vatican Council was a clear attempt to amend the Roman centralisation, which began formally with Gregorian reform (Pope Gregory 1073-85) and climaxed in papal primacy and infallibility in the First Vatican Council in 1870, and to usher in the communion ecclesiology, based on Trinity, Eucharist and community of believers. Synodal Church proposed by Pope Francis is an attempt to complete the unfinished agenda of ecclesial reform initiated by the Second Vatican Council. We can see here a confluence of all conciliar ecclesiologies, crowned with the principle of *sensus fidei* of the whole people of God. Synodality expresses the fact that the Church is a pilgrim people, journeying together and regularly taking counsel together on the way, led by the Pope and the Bishops. It presupposes fundamental equality of the baptized, outreach to the alienated, dialogue and mutuality between Church and world with a renewed commitment to mission of Christ. This is the only way forward for church renewal. It is more in tune with demands of twenty-first century.



The Synodal vision of Pope Francis aims at addressing the challenges faced by the Church in a materialist culture created and dominated by secular ideologies and social media. Faced with the onslaught of secularism and post-modernity – and the resultant denial of transcendence and the loss of language of faith in public sphere – on the one hand, and the diminished moral authority of the Church due to scandals, on the other, Church appears to be ill-prepared to fulfil its role as the sacrament of Christ and his Kingdom in this world. The Synodal path appears to be the much needed radical strategic response to make the Church relevant today. In the new situation – defined by relegation of religion to the private sphere, assertion of individualism indifferent to common good, avowal of relativity in a

market-driven capitalism, economic and social injustices, plurality of religions and cultures – a synodal church, which discerns communally, is more appropriate to dialogue with the world, which is in need of the Gospel more than ever. Only an effective exercise of synodality within the Church can help us read our situation today and engage in discernment with broad involvement of the whole people of God. It

will require imagination and critical engagement from the agents in the Church if the change he envisages is to happen. It is capable of galvanizing the Church from bottom to top and thus serves as the only way forward for the Church. Synodal church is a prophetic and courageous step by Pope Francis to the existing structure, through a return to the original way of being Church, in view of renewal for the changed times, without losing focus on the Gospel centre.

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