

ECUMENICAL TRENDS

Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute ♦ A Ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement



The Experience of an Orthodox Fraternal Delegate at the Synod on Synodality

METROPOLITAN JOB OF PISIDIA

At the kind invitation of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (the Mother Church of most modern Orthodox Churches, whose patriarch holds the primacy of honor in the world's Eastern Orthodoxy, being considered the spiritual leader of all Eastern Orthodox Christians) sent me as "a Fraternal Delegate" to the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality, which took place at the Vatican in October 2023 and 2024. I was humbled by this mission, which turned out to be a great experience. I have to confess that serving as co-president of the Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church helped me to feel very much at home in that particular and exceptional gathering of about 360 people.

Coming from the Orthodox tradition, it looked to me like an international clergy-laity meeting – composed of bishops, of course, but also of priests, deacons, monks and nuns, lay people, men and women, young and old, seated pell-mell around round tables. These varied church members were going to discuss many highly politicized current issues, such as the question of the ordination of women or of the place in the Church of sexual and gender minorities; during the first meeting in 2023, these questions drew us beyond the classic subject of synodality.

I whispered to an expert that this assembly reflected more closely the concept of *sobornost*, forged by the Russian

Slavophiles of the late nineteenth century, who had campaigned for the integration of the various ecclesiastical "castes" (namely representatives from the episcopate, the clergy, monasticism and the laity) into the government of the Church – a model of administration which the Bolshevik revolution did not permit to be implemented in the Church of Russia – than it reflected our traditional Orthodox understanding of synodality.

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His Eminence, Metropolitan Job (Getcha) of Pisidia, is the co-president (since 2016) of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. He was a permanent representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch to the World Council of Churches from 2015-2022. In 2022, he was elected by the Holy and Sacred Synod as Metropolitan of Pisidia, with his see in Antalya (Turkey). He was a member of the delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in Crete (2016), at which he served as the spokesman of the Council to the press. From 2019-2022, he served as Dean of the Institute of Graduate Studies of Orthodox Theology in Chambéry, France, where he has been Professor of Liturgical and Dogmatic Theology since 2009. He has also taught Liturgy at the University of Paris since 2003. His Eminence has published a plethora of books and articles related to Liturgical Theology, Ecumenism and Orthodox Spirituality. He speaks French, English, Ukrainian, Russian, Greek and Italian.

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When asked by Cardinal Mario Grech to give a testimony at the plenary on the Orthodox understanding of synodality, I said:

For the Orthodox, synodality corresponds to the practice established by the first ecumenical council (Nicaea, 325) of gathering the bishops of a region at least twice a year under the presidency of their *protos* (cf. canon 5). This synodality is best described by Apostolic Canon 34. Thus, in light of this text, it appears that:

- 1) A synod is a deliberative meeting of bishops, not a consultative clergy-laity assembly.
- 2) There cannot be a synod without a primate/*protos*, and there cannot be a primate/*protos* without a synod.
- 3) The primate/*protos* is part of the synod; he does not have authority over the synod, nor is he excluded from it.
- 4) The concord/*homonoia* which is expressed through the synodal consensus reflects the Trinitarian mystery of the divine life.

Having said this, I noted that the common understanding of synodality in the Orthodox Church differs greatly from the definition of synodality given by Synod of Bishops on Synodality, which had not so much in mind the participation of the bishops in the administration of the Church, but the participation of all the people of God – clergy and laity – in the mission of the Church.

My experience in the course of the Synod, however, was particularly enlightening on two points. First, it allowed me to understand that the synodal journey desired by Pope Francis is not an innovation, but the application of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council which overturned the classical pyramid, seeing the Pope at the head of the universal Church, in order to begin with the people of God as constituting the ecclesial body, within which a certain number of particular ministries are distinguished. Second, it allowed me to appreciate the importance of baptismal ecclesiology as the foundation of synodality. Indeed, until now, in the light of the dominant eucharistic ecclesiology, we have tended to consider the Eucharist (where a bishop presides over the as-

sembly) as the model of synodality. But in the light of baptismal ecclesiology, we understand that all the baptized form the ecclesial body within which various particular ministries appear. In this sense, all the baptized are co-responsible for the building up of the ecclesial body.

Although synodality is generally understood differently in the Orthodox Church, it is true that clergy-laity meetings do happen in some dioceses of the Orthodox Church, having a rather consultative or didactic character. Nevertheless, history attests that in the Ottoman Empire, the election of some bishops and primates would have been carried out by clergy-laity assemblies. During that period, in the seventeenth century, the Ecumenical Patriarchate prescribed that the Metropolitan of Kiev should be elected by a clergy-laity assembly in Kiev. Still today, in the Church of Cyprus, the archbishop and the bishop are elected not exclusively by the episcopate, but also by the clergy and the laity. At the first stage, the population votes from the list of all the candidates, then, in a second step, the synod of bishops chooses one from the three candidates having obtained the majority of votes. Nevertheless, the case of the Church of Cyprus constitutes an exceptional case in contemporary Orthodoxy, where, otherwise, the practice of synodality implies exclusively an assembly of bishops. Unfortunately, the Orthodox Church does not know any clergy-laity meeting at the universal level. The latest Holy and Great Council (Synod) of the Orthodox Church which gathered in Crete in 2016 was composed of 162 delegated bishops, while the 62 advisors (clergy, monastics and laity) that were present did not have the right neither to speak, nor to vote. So, my experience at the Vatican at the Synod on synodality was quite unique and inspiring.

I was particularly touched by the importance given to the policy of transparency, accountability, and evaluation. Of course, one can see in this a response to the many sexual and financial scandals that have emerged recently in the Roman Catholic Church and which are also challenges for all the

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Churches. There is no Church exempt from the risk of such scandals. The Synod pointed out that it is not enough to be accountable only to superiors, but that church leaders should be also accountable to the entire people of God. For this reason, the Synod encouraged the practice of having parish and diocesan councils made up of clergy and laity alike, a practice that does exist in many Orthodox dioceses but is not generalized. I also appreciated the distinction made by the Synod between decision-making that involves consultation with all members of the people of God – clergy and laity – in the process of taking a decision, and decision-making that is the responsibility of the superior (priest, abbot, or bishop). I find this distinction enlightening and personally inspiring. Perhaps, here are useful insights that can be brought to my own Church.

I was also amazed by the attention given to listening. Everyone could speak freely to express their point of view, and each point of view was taken into account seriously and respectfully. I told myself that Pope Francis had thus made it possible to make a real survey of the situation of his Church at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I was also impressed by the method of “conversations in the Spirit,” through which everyone around each table was able to express himself; subsequently, each table tried in a spirit of prayer to reach a consensus in the formulation of their report.

This whole process was supported by a spiritual life marked by times of prayer and eucharistic celebrations. In 2023, the pilgrimage to the Roman catacombs was a strong

spiritual moment, as were the ecumenical vigils of 2023 and 2024 at the Vatican. The moments of silence that interrupted the discussions were also privileged moments for prayer, even if the time of silence was perhaps sometimes excessive in 2023, leading some to qualify the synod as a “synod of silence.” Besides this, in 2023, the reports in plenary coming from each table were the occasion for many repetitions and were very heavy in the dynamics of the meeting. Some improvements were made in 2024. The time of silence was reduced, and reports in plenary were not presented from each table, but rather from the language groups.

Among the improvements of the session of 2024, the theological forums were much appreciated, bringing some theological substance to the main questions that were being discussed. It should also be noted that marginal issues were evacuated, to be discussed in study groups outside the session of the Synod; this enabled the session to focus only on the main question of synodality.

I have to confess that the coffee breaks were my favorite form of synodality! It was an opportunity to meet the members of the Synod with whom we were not sitting at the same table, to discuss what we had experienced and to exchange impressions and ideas. Here, perhaps, the best discussions took place.

Thus, by living for two months together at the Synod during these two years, new friendships were formed, heralding new collaborations. On the first day of the Synod in 2024, we felt as if we were witnessing a family reunion. Indeed, spending two months of one's life together in the

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Vatican brings people closer together, and I can testify that I have made many new friends during the Synod.

This is especially true of the friendship that developed between the fraternal delegates. At both sessions in 2023 and 2024, official dinners were hosted for us by Cardinal Kurt Koch of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity. However, the fraternal delegates met frequently for coffee or drinks and to eat together. This was an opportunity not only to exchange our impressions of the Synod sessions, but also to discuss the life of our Churches and our progress on the path of Christian unity. Thus, fraternal delegates were able to forge solid fraternal bonds among ourselves. It could be observed that the exchanges between the fraternal delegates, among ourselves and with the Roman Catholic members of the Synod, during a charismatic ecclesial event such as the Synod, were more fruitful for the rapprochement of the Churches than their interactions at (for instance) a World Council of Churches Assembly, which is a rather bureaucratic setting. The fraternal delegates seem to have experienced a euphoria of Christian unity similar to that of the observers of the Second Vatican Council.

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In this sense, the synodal assembly had a great significance for Christian unity. Its final document welcomes with joy and gratitude the progress in ecumenical relations over the last sixty years and mentions the participation of the fraternal representatives which have enriched the outcome of the Council and given hope for the next steps on the path towards full communion. It proposes the convening of an “ecumenical” council (i.e. with representatives of all Christian churches) on evangelization and recalls the preparation of a joint celebration of the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council as “an opportunity to deepen and confess the Christological faith together and to put into practice forms of synodality among Christians of all traditions” and an “opportunity to launch bold initiatives for a common date for Easter, so that the resurrection of the Lord can be celebrated on the same day.”

Indeed, as I pointed out in an intervention at the 2024 synodal assembly, the theme of conciliarity and authority (or in other terms synodality and primacy) has been the object of study for the last twenty years by the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, which I have the honor and the joy to co-chair with Cardinal Kurt Koch. Three major agreed documents have been produced: (1) “Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority” (Ravenna, 2007); (2) “Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium: Towards a Common Understanding in Service to the Unity of the Church” (Chieti, 2016); and (3) “Synodality and Primacy in the Second Millennium and Today” (Alexandria, 2023). The major contribution of these documents is, certainly, to have underlined that primacy and synodality are mutually interdependent at the different levels of the life of the Church: local, regional and universal. These documents can enlighten the Roman Catholic Church, as well as any other Church, how to harmonize authority with synodality.


I am also personally particularly pleased by the recent publication of the Dicastery for the Promotion of Christian Unity, entitled “The Bishop of Rome: Primacy and Synodality in the Ecumenical Dialogues and in the Responses to the Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*,” which was mentioned in the final document of the Synod. This revolutionary document shows an amazing convergence of all the bilateral dialogues on the theme of the ministry of the bishop of Rome and manifests a true *kairos* in our ecumenical journey, which will not only serve the quest for Christian Unity but also enrich our mutual comprehension of primacy and synodality. I strongly believe that all these documents can contribute greatly not only to the rapproche-

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Our Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew was convinced from the very beginning that the Synod on Synodality would mark an important step in the rapprochement of the Roman Catholic Church with the Orthodox Church, involving a salutary decentralization of the exaggerated papal primacy by resituating it in the normal context of synodality.

ment between the Churches but also to a *synodal conversion* of all our Churches. For this reason, all Christians should be invited to study these documents carefully and try to implement them in their ecclesial life.

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My participation in both sessions of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality will remain unforgettable, and I had many opportunities to share my own experience within my Church. I hope that there will be many other similar occasions when our Churches can share together such an important ecclesial moment, and I am convinced that it is such ecclesial encounters which bring us closer together on the path towards Christian unity. 

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On Not Having to Win: A Baptist Fraternal Delegate at the Synod

ELIZABETH NEWMAN

Being a fraternal delegate at the Synod on Synodality has been transformative for me, but this transformation was sometimes difficult. There was frustration and discouragement, accompanied at times by a nagging thought that I did not belong. It was helpful to talk with my husband at night as I walked around beautiful St. Peter's Square. After one particularly challenging occasion, which I related in too much detail, he said, "It sounds like you've been away from home too long." But where is home when it comes to living in a divided church? I was surprised when I left Rome, after the second session of the Synod, that I felt a strange sadness. After the first round, I was simply eager to leave. The difference between the two sessions had to do with friendship as well as the hard-won realization that one's own views (mine in particular) do not have to prevail. While a lot of ink has been spilled on exactly what synodality is, I think synodality – faithfully practiced – is a way of being in communion with others. So understood, synodality is grounded in the realization that God works through such communion for the good of the whole in ways we cannot always see.

A Neologism

"Synodality" is a neologism. As with any new word, its meaning is not immediately obvious, and dictionary definitions do not always clarify. A "Synod on Synodality" is what, a meeting on meetings? Is this not the ultimate inward-looking ecclesial exercise: navel-gazing when the church should be attending to the needs of the world?

I have shared this perplexity. At the beginning of the second Synod session, after an opening table conversation about synodality, I re-read our working document and counted at least sixteen key words associated with synodality: participation, mission, co-responsibility, dialogue, style, holiness, process, and so forth. If words take meaning from the company they keep, as Nicholas Lash has said, then "synodality" has a lot of friends. Too many? As one delegate joked during a coffee break, "If it's good, it's synodal."

"Synod" has a more definite meaning than "synodality," or at least one I could easily explain to the folks at my church. A synod is a council, a conference, or a gathering. The first ecclesial synod was the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). Here the early church met over a particular question: do Gentiles have to be circumcised? "The apostles and elders were gathered to consider the matter" (15:6, RSV). They debated; they listened; they kept silent. This was not a neutral strategy but a way of listening to the Holy Spirit which, Peter pointed out, had also been given to the Gentiles. Eventually,

"it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church" (15:22, RSV) to send messengers to Antioch to communicate their judgment. In Acts, this synod was a meeting, but a particular kind of meeting. No Robert's Rules of Order, thank God, but a kind of deliberation in the Spirit.

Yet, as we know, appeals to the Holy Spirit can be challenging. How do we know that someone is not simply promoting their own agenda in the name of the Spirit?

What Synodality Is Not: A Census

Descriptions of synodality have emphasized the importance of listening. If synodality includes the whole People of God, then it stands to reason that the people be given an opportunity to be heard. How does one gather input from lay people? Sociologist Mark Regnerus, in "Census *Fidei*? Methodological Missteps Are Undermining the Catholic Church's Synod on Synodality," criticizes synodality for its lack of a scientific methodology on exactly this point.¹ Writing in 2023, he argues, first, that the synodal process has

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Dr. Elizabeth Newman is Chair of the Baptist World Alliance Commission on Baptist Doctrine and Christian Unity and Co-Chair of the Baptist-Catholic international bilateral dialogue, Phase III. She is an adjunct professor of theology at the Baptist Houses of Studies at Duke Divinity School and Union Presbyterian Seminary. She is the author of several books, including *Divine Abundance: Leisure, the Basis of Academic Culture* (2018) and *Living the Liturgy, Enlarging the Baptist Vision* (2024).

been self-selective rather than truly representative. Secondly, the subsequent analysis of the data collected from parishes and dioceses by a group of select interpreters adds another erroneous layer. Rather than summarizing the data, Regnerus points out, these interpreters have synthesized it, making their conclusions seem more like a *sensus marginis* rather than a *sensus fidei*. Thus, the synodal process has “been about far more than fact-finding.”² If the synodal Document for the Continental Stage really is a “census of the church in the world” (as one of the authors of this document maintained), then Regnerus argues that it should follow the rules of census taking: summarizing rather than synthesizing data, avoiding self-selection bias and so forth.

Does synodality need a scientific methodology? If synodality is about gathering different thoughts and opinions, then Regnerus’ analysis makes sense. One needs to measure and quantify the opinions of representative groups to arrive at a sound conclusion. Why not give a questionnaire, or even better hire a professional firm (which Regnerus suggests as a possibility)?³ Then one could arrive at a more accurate consultation with the *sensus fidei*, the purpose of which, Regnerus argues, is to contribute to *understanding* but not to provide *direction*.⁴

Others have expressed similar concerns but have focused not on bias but on ignorance. What if “the faithful” lack substantive training in the *fides quae* (the content of the faith)? Does this mean the church is listening to those who know the least? While there are legitimate concerns about better theological training for the faithful, this worry also rests on the assumption that the primary goal of synodality is listening in order to gather information and sound opinion. From this perspective, it makes sense that we want the best and most educated to give their point of view.

These mistaken views rightly understand that synodality involves listening, but they fail fully to register the true *telos* of listening, a *telos* that cannot be separated from the ontological conviction that communion is intrinsic to being. One sees and receives the other, first of all, not based on his or her opinion, position, or knowledge; one receives the other – in discussion, in debate, in conflict, in ignorance even – as gift. I will return to this point.

What Synodality Is Not: A Contest Between Liberals and Conservatives

To state that synodality is not a contest between liberals and conservatives might sound as if I have had my head in the sand. Talk about any of the “hot” topic issues – sexuality, women’s ordination, and so forth – and there is division. Is synodality a stalking horse for a progressive agenda? Wherever one stands on the political divide, it is difficult not to see synodality as a political football between left and right.

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This framework dominated my own imagination, as well as my anxieties, when I arrived in Rome for the 2023 Synod. It was not only the Catholic essays, podcasts, and opinion pieces that I read or listened to that relied on this political model. This framework has long dominated the Protestant landscape in the United States as well. Progressive Baptists gravitate to progressive Methodists or Catholics, just as conservatives do the same, their ecclesial differences receding into the background.

Within this political Lockean/Hobbesian framework, “synodality” will inevitably be interpreted as a competition.⁵ That is, it is an opportunity for various individuals to get a vote in a competitive marketplace of ideas: ordination, understandings of primacy, sexuality, and so forth. Both “sides” hope to win. And why shouldn’t they? Both agree on at least one thing: there is a lot at stake in terms of the future direction of the church.

This politicized interpretation rightly understands that it is a mistake to seek compromise or an anemic consensus when matters of truth are at stake. As Michael Dominic Taylor describes, consensus building can rest on a corrupt ontology because it asks persons to see their “values” as optional beliefs that they must in the end relinquish in order to find common ground.⁶ Painting over disagreement in order to find an anemic compromise is not the purpose of

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synodality. As theologian Larry Chapp emphasizes, conflict is not to be avoided but welcomed.⁷

Is conflict, however, about winners and losers? Aquinas describes receiving and discerning truth as follows: “When taking up or rejecting opinions, a person should not be led by love or hate concerning who said them but rather by the certainty of truth. He [Aristotle] says we should love both kinds of people: those whose opinions we follow, and those whose opinions we reject. For both study to find the truth and, in this way, both give us assistance.”⁸ The true politics of synodality is not a Lockean/Hobbesian contest of wills, reliant as it is on assumptions of scarcity. Within a faithful synodality, *we win or lose together*. This claim will no doubt sound counter intuitive. How can everyone win? Or conversely, what does it mean to say we lose together? Certainly, there are competing understandings if not theologies and practices, sometimes like waves clashing into each other. Yet Aquinas can only talk about love and truth as he does because of his conviction that love and truth cannot be separated.⁹

Synodality: On Not Having to Win

Or, stated differently, being is communion. Seen in this light, a faithful synodality rests on the realization (and practice) that one’s own view does not have to prevail. From the perspective of winning and losing, this sounds like defeat. But what it means to lose or to win takes on a radically different understanding when placed within the deep Christological mystery that God works in ways that cannot always be predicted or even imagined. Was “Jesus forsaken” a loss or a win?

During set times at the synod, all delegates had the opportunity if they wished to enter a queue and give an in-

tervention: a three-minute talk on the relevant topic under discussion.

When the topic of ecumenism was to be on the schedule, I carefully wrote out an intervention, had a good friend edit it, mustered my courage, and signed up. I waited anxiously for two and a half hours, but my turn never came. I was frustrated. Shouldn’t fraternal delegates have been given some priority? Are Catholics just talking to themselves on this topic? After I traveled some distance down this negative thought path, it occurred to me that I needed to let go. Maybe others needed to be heard at this particular session (which also focused on key issues between Eastern and Western Catholics). The next day, extra time for interventions was available. Encouraged by others at my table, I signed up again for the queue – less anxious, more relaxed, less invested in having to speak. The queue opened and I received kind and generous words of appreciation for my input. But the outcome is not the point. The point is the shift in seeing – however dimly – that there could be any number of reasons for one’s own words not prevailing: the time might not be right, one’s thoughts need to marinate, others might not be able to hear or might need to be heard, and so forth.

Such detachment rests on trusting that God is at work, often mysteriously, for the good of the whole. As Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement, writes: “If you love Jesus forsaken, you must detach yourself from your way of thinking.” This involves “learning how to put aside even what seems our own inspiration.” What could be more non-competitive than learning how to lose? “Gospel love,” Lubich writes, “knows how to lose because it knows how to give.”¹⁰ How is losing related to giving? Losing is a way of giving, or better stated, a way of loving. Lubich emphasizes that loving Jesus forsaken involves the willingness to remain

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lovingly present with others even, or perhaps especially, in the midst of doubt, division, and suffering. For Lubich, Jesus forsaken and unity are two sides of the same coin.

Truth?

If one's own view does not have to prevail, are we not ultimately compromising truth? In the great debate between Athanasius and Arius, for example, Athanasius clearly wants his view to prevail, not simply for himself but because so much is at stake. If Arius had won, the church would have ceased to understand and worship God as Trinity. Is not the point of debate to engage a range of significant, even essential, points so that one view will prevail? Detachment might be all well and good, but in the end, the church and all the faithful are to be attached to the true, the good, and the beautiful. Or, stated in Gospel terms, we are to be attached to Jesus, to pick up the cross and follow him.

The paradox is that in following Jesus – more fully, in participating through grace in the triune life of God – all are called to lives of detachment *for the sake of truth*. Athanasius was willing to suffer and be exiled, trusting that the outcome was not his to secure. Ultimately, in Christ, death and defeat are impotent.

Conclusion

St. Catherine of Siena once wrote: “All the way to heaven is heaven because Jesus said, ‘I am the way.’” Was she being naïvely optimistic? She had trials, struggles, and periods of darkness; she lived in a time of political turmoil. But she also saw that the way and the end cannot be separated. The mustard seed and the full-grown tree are both the Kingdom of God, for those who have eyes to see. Following St. Catherine, I would say that all the way to unity is unity because Jesus said, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...” (John 17:21, NRSV). Synodality is a path to unity. As with any path, there are obstacles and rough ground, difficult terrain to navigate and times when the way forward is not clear. “All the way to unity is unity” is not mere sentimentality; it rests on the ontological truth that communion is intrinsic to being. To receive the other as gift is to receive one's true self as gift in the self-same moment, a reality that redounds to the glory of God “so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23, NRSV). 

Notes

1. Mark Regnerus, “Census *Fidei*? Methodological Missteps Are Undermining the Catholic Church's Synod on Synodality,” *Public Discourse*, January 8, 2023: <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2023/01/86704/>.
2. Ibid.
3. Mark Regnerus, “Questioning the Authenticity of the Synod

on Synodality, with Mark Regnerus,” *Church Life Today*, February 20, 2023: <https://churchlifetoday.osvpodcasts.com/2061699/episodes/12267102-questioning-the-authenticity-of-the-synod-on-synodality-with-mark-regnerus>.

4. Regnerus attributes this distinction between understanding and direction to John Henry Newman's classic essay, “On Consulting the Laity in the Matter of Doctrine.” Newman, he writes, “was mistakenly accused of having suggested that the bishops should be asking the laity for their advice, and endured years of suspicion over his motives. Consulting the faithful, Newman assured, was about listening, gathering facts, and gauging the health of the laity. It wasn't about seeking direction” (Regnerus, “Census *Fidei*?”). Engagement with Newman is beyond the scope of this essay. I will note, however, that Regnerus seems to assume that the *sensus fidei* refers to the laity rather than “the entire body of the faithful,” lay and ordained (see *Lumen Gentium*, §12). Moreover, classically understood, the “faith” of the faithful includes both the faith *with* which one believes (*fides qua*) and the faith *that* is believed (*fides quae*). The *sensus fidei* is at once self-involving and dogmatic, both pneumatically sustained. So understood, the Holy Spirit working through the faithful (the whole church across time) provides both understanding and direction. For a biblical basis for *sensus fidei*, see, for example, Ephesians 1:15-19 or John 14:25-27. For a helpful article on *sensus fidei* and ecumenism, see Ormond Rush, “Receptive Ecumenism and Discerning the *Sensus Fidelium*: Expanding the Categories for a Catholic Reception of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 78.3 (2017): 559–572.

5. Broadly stated, Locke and Hobbes see the state of human nature as individuals fighting for survival in a world of scarcity. Their society is “constructed on the liberal premise of a fundamental conflict of ‘all against all,’ mediated by contract and coercion, and forever oriented toward amassing power and material success” (Maria Brandell, “A Sign of Uselessness,” *New Polity: A Journal of Postliberal Thought* 3.3 [2022], 98).

6. See Michael Dominic Taylor, “The Person, The Leviathan, and the Demise of the Hippocratic Oath,” *New Polity: A Journal of Postliberal Thought* 5.3 (2024): 44-62.

7. See Larry Chapp, “In Defense of the Synodal Critics,” *Catholic World Report*, October 20, 2024: <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2024/10/20/in-defense-of-the-synodal-critics/>: “That said, I have little problem with the fact that the debates are often conflictual... There are good ways and bad ways of doing this, but the mere fact of conflict is not a sign of dysfunction, but its opposite. The passions stirred up indicate an ongoing reservoir of faith where all participants in the conversation have skin in the game since they are vested in the health of the Church as they see it.”

8. Cited in Timothy Radcliffe, *Listening Together, Meditations on Synodality* (Liturgical Press, 2024), 159.

9. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.8.1: “God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence, nor as an accident, but as an agent is present to that upon which it works...” God is able to be “in all things, and innermost.” In loving another, even an enemy, we are loving God, a fact reliant upon the ontological truth that God is love.

10. Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings* (New City Press, 2007), 315 and 301.

Synodality as Spiritual Formation: An Ongoing History

JULIA MCSTRAVOG

Introduction

During his September 2015 visit to the United States, Pope Francis had a meeting with the U.S. Bishops at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington, DC. He addressed them, saying:

Dialogue is our method, not as a shrewd strategy but out of fidelity to the One who never wearies of visiting the marketplace, even at the eleventh hour, to propose his offer of love (*Mt 20:1-16*). The path ahead, then, is dialogue among yourselves, dialogue in your presbyterates, dialogue with lay persons, dialogue with families, dialogue with society. I cannot ever tire of encouraging you to dialogue fearlessly. The richer the heritage which you are called to share with *parrhesia*, the more eloquent should be the humility with which you should offer it. Do not be afraid to set out on that "exodus" which is necessary for all authentic dialogue. Otherwise, we fail to understand the thinking of others, or to realize deep down that the brother or sister we wish to reach and redeem, with the power and the closeness of love, counts more than their positions, distant as they may be from what we hold as true and certain.¹

Pope Francis' speech expressed an aspirational vision of a synodal Church, one that views dialogue as the default method for engagement, modeling love of and for Christ through deep relationships among the People of God. His desire to accompany, encourage, and support the bishops in a renewal of their own relationships – with one another and with their flocks – was evident. Six years later, the Holy Father would announce the 2021-2024 Synod: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.² Using the ancient Christian tradition of the synod of bishops – renewed by Pope Saint Paul VI after the Second Vatican Council and given new life by Pope Francis in the 2018 apostolic constitution *Episcopalis Communio*³ – the 2021-2024 Synod centered on the question of how to be a "synodal Church," in which relationships of dialogue and discernment weave and form the ecclesial tapestry.

The Synod is also an extension of the Second Vatican Council itself, an implementation and continuation of the Council's vision of dialogue and relationship.⁴ Indeed, both dialogue and relationship – themselves fruits of the Council's teaching and learning – were central to the development of the Council's final documents. This is especially true, as I have argued elsewhere,⁵ of the Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, and the Decree on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*. After the Council, Catholics embarked on a journey marked by deep relationship with practitioners of other faiths and Christian traditions.

It was in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue – born of a Catholic anthropology rooted in the dignity of the human person – that the Church refined its dialogue skills: deep, long-term relationships marked by profound listening. The lessons the Church has learned from its external relationships (with, for example, non-Catholic Christians and with the Jewish people) still remain to be applied internally, as well as with societies and cultures more broadly. The synodal process is nothing if not a Church-wide opportunity to reap these dialogical fruits: to form Catholics spiritually in the practices of dialogue that the Church has been honing for over half a century in its ecumenical and interreligious relations.

In light of this recent history, it is clear that from the Synod's inception, the Pope's intention has been to form

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spiritually a billion Catholics across the world to become dialogical and discerning as they exercise their ministries and engage in relationships, both with one another and with the wider world. For example, the Synod's Vademecum and its Preparatory Document aimed to ensure that prayer, silence, and reflection were integral aspects of listening, sharing, and developing synodal relationships.⁶ Synodality requires – and is itself – a spiritual practice that nourishes the People of God, enabling and enhancing ecclesial conversations. Fundamentally, the synodal process is a path aimed at conversion, fostering greater attentiveness to the Holy Spirit and to the Lord's will.

At the start of the Synod, there was – it must be admitted – a lot of criticism: it was to be a meeting about meetings, a self-referential exercise in navel-gazing. These critiques, however, miss a crucial point that Pope Francis outlined in his synodal aspirations: in order to listen and dialogue, it is essential to have a deep knowledge of self. It is essential to pay attention to what one might call pressure points: what triggers discomfort, what wounds emerge, and what elicits joy. This required self-knowledge is, one could say, the most difficult part about being in dialogue, and spiritual formation is a key factor in honing a self-understanding that leads to humility.

What did this spiritual formation process look like over the past years in the dioceses of the United States? I discern three stages of the synodal process between 2021 and 2024: (a) local listening, (b) the writing of the syntheses, and (c) post-Synod next steps. I will treat each in turn.

First Steps: Local Listening

In October 2021, the Vatican's Secretariat for the Synod requested that a consultation be held throughout the country, collecting stories, wisdom, and information in preparation for the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod, which was to focus on the themes of "Communion, Participation, and Mission."⁷ The findings of this Diocesan Stage were to be synthesized in a ten-page report, handled by the U.S. Synod Team composed of Bishop Daniel E. Flores and USCCB staff: Richard Coll, Alexandra Carroll, Fr. Michael Fuller, and myself.

The scope of consultation would be huge. The United States comprises 178 Latin Rite dioceses, including the Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of Saint Peter and the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA, as well as 18 Eastern Rite eparchies representing approximately 75% of the Eastern churches in communion with Rome. In addition, the Catholic Church in the United States oversees many ministries that reach beyond the Church's parochial structure, such as Catholic Charities and Catholic Relief Services.⁸ Further, Catholic schools, colleges, and universities educate all people, not only Catholics.⁹

The U.S. Synod team was to foster, facilitate, and watch over layered and complex listening that was happening throughout the country. The Synod Secretariat did not promulgate a one-size-fits all checklist for each bishops' conference to complete; rather, they provided a flexible framework for listening, consulting, and synthesizing at each stage of the Synod that each local Church could adapt. The U.S. Synod team was itself to model the synodality called for by the documents. It was crucial that the team work well together, pray together, and reflect together, speaking respectfully yet boldly and with humility. Centered in the Spirit, the team sought to discern where the Spirit was moving in the U.S. Church. This was, of course, exercised within the limitations and boundaries of the existing structures and resources of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.¹⁰

The consultation – and subsequent synthesizing – required not only theological competency but also project planning and management skills. It necessitated accompanying those who were to handle consultations within each diocese and eparchy. Thus, one of the most consequential activities of the U.S. Synod Team was the convening of ministers and leaders accompanying the work of synodality at the local level. These regular meetings began in December 2021. They served not only to strengthen the USCCB's relationship with dioceses with respect to synodality, but also an opportunity for inter-diocesan relationship building. These meetings were opportunities to offer support in the midst

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of deeper listening to the needs, challenges, and joys of the work of synodal consultations and to the ongoing processes of implementing synodality.

Because of the strong relationships that were formed, diocesan leaders contributed immensely to the Synod process in the United States. They provided honest feedback, constructive criticism, and affirmation of what worked well. Some diocesan leaders participated in reading and reviewing the documents submitted to the Synod Secretariat. I am very proud of the documents we produced, and they simply would not have existed without the tireless work of our diocesan leaders. Simply put, diocesan leaders and the members of the U.S. Synod Team were mutual companions on the synodal journey. We were present to them, and they accompanied us. Working together, we continually attempted to be attentive to the Holy Spirit.

Often narratives surrounding the Synod have been focused on outcomes – about what happened in Rome and what was included (or excluded) from the resulting documents. True synodality, however, is enacted on the local level. It is principally about listening to all voices, as the *Vademecum* says, and training people in dialogue. No voices are excluded. In accord with the vision of Pope Francis, synodality offers a way for members of the Church not only to engage with one another internally – that is, within the

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boundaries of Church life – but also to bring the skills involved to their everyday lives. Synodality invites Catholics to engage others with curiosity, dignity, and love wherever they may find themselves.

Writing Syntheses

Preparation was a central aspect both of participating in listening sessions and of the process of synthesizing reports from local churches at the national level. The process required mutual listening that began at the parish level, local listening that resulted in diocesan syntheses shared with the USCCB. This preparation for and engagement in listening and synthesizing was part of the synodal spiritual formation process.

Consultations at the local level asked the People of God to be vulnerable, to share their wounds – many of which concerned the Church itself. The process of drafting a synthesis thus sought to honor these sacred stories entrusted to the Church through consultations.

Concretely, the drafting process took the form of writing retreats. The U.S. Synod Team participated in three writing retreats, one for each document submitted to the Synod Secretariat: the National Synthesis of the People of God in the United States of America for the 2021-2023 Synod (August 2022), the North American Final Document for the Continental Stage of the 2021-2024 Synod (March 2023), and the National Synthesis of the People of God in the United States of America for the Interim Stage of the 2021-2024 Synod (May 2024).¹¹ Each of these documents was collected by the Synod Secretariat and used in the discernment for and drafting of the Document for the Continental Stage (October 2022), the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (June 2023), and the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (July 2024), respectively.¹²

As mentioned above, the United States is one of the largest and most complex national churches in the world. It was, needless to say, a challenging task to synthesize the fruit of many consultations into documents that reflected the parameters and expectations set forth by the Synod Secretariat. For the Diocesan and Interim Stages of the Synod, the U.S. Synod Team relied on the geographic regions – geographical groupings of dioceses – to synthesize the diocesan reports from their respective regions. This gave the U.S. Synod team a manageable amount of material to discern and develop national syntheses.

Concurrent to local consultations, the U.S. Synod Team also held listening sessions on the national level around

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particular themes that emerged from the documents from the Synod Secretariat. These occurred particularly during the Continental Stage, when notes from twelve different online Continental Assemblies hosted with the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops provided source material for later synthesis.¹³ Sessions were held in English, French, and Spanish. At least one of the eleven U.S. members of the continental writing retreat team was present at each session, and the eleven collectively participated in over fifty assemblies. Being present in real time for the sharing of the fruits of Conversations in the Spirit was essential for participating in the development and drafting of syntheses.

Drafting syntheses required more than reading and summarizing consultation documents. Members of writing retreat teams prayed with these fruits of consultations. They noted consonances and dissonances between different voices. They were mindful both of multiply attested themes and of those that did not appear frequently. They sought scriptural connections and resonances. This attentive and prayerful reading was necessary preparation for the communal discernment required to create a centering statement for a synthesis document, to outline themes to be included, and to identify quotations from the People of God that support and reinforce the text of the synthesis.

Each document was written collaboratively, rooted both in individual preparation and communal discernment. Discernment requires thinking through various questions. For the writing of the syntheses, some of these questions included: What are we hearing? What are the People saying? What are the underlying sentiments? Are all regions represented?

A key aspect of the synthesis process was the communal reading – out loud! – of document drafts. Reading and hearing a text aloud triggers different parts of the brain than would be stimulated by mere private reading. Reading aloud provided the drafters with an opportunity to note if parts of the text sounded strange or did not fully capture the nuance of a particular theme or idea that emerged in the diocesan syntheses. Reading aloud offered an opportunity for the drafters once again to listen to the voices of the People of God, because the documents are rife with direct quotations. There were instances when a particular word was discussed at length. Immense care and consideration were given to the final text of the syntheses.

An important note: synthesis documents are not teaching documents. They are listening documents. Thus it was crucial that these documents reflected the word and witness of the People of God. The process was always firmly rooted in local consultation, and bore fruit through listening and discernment on diocesan, national, and continental levels.

While the meetings for the 2021-2024 Synod have concluded in Rome, and Pope Francis has endorsed the Final Document as magisterial, the work of implementing a culture of synodality – of personal prayer, communal discernment, and spiritual dialogue – is just beginning.

What Next?

The apostolic constitution *Episcopalis Communio* established an “implementation phase” at the conclusion of synods. The Church is currently in this stage. While the meetings for the 2021-2024 Synod have concluded in Rome, and Pope Francis has endorsed the Final Document as magisterial,¹⁴ the work of implementing a culture of synodality – of personal prayer, communal discernment, and spiritual dialogue – is just beginning. Synodality has been referred to as a “generational project”: there are some recommendations that can be implemented immediately, and there are some issues that are in need of further study and review.


Some of these issues have been tasked to ten Study Groups working in collaboration with consultants, dicasteries, and the Synod Secretariat.¹⁵ These groups provided updates to the members of the Synod Assembly in October 2024 and are due to submit their final reports to the Synod Secretariat in June 2025. One of these groups, Study Group Ten, is responsible for “The Reception of the Fruits of the Ecumenical Journey in Ecclesial Practices.”¹⁶ Pope Francis has insisted upon synodality’s ecumenical dimension, inviting ecumenical partners to observe the Synod Assemblies in Rome as well as incorporating ecumenical prayer services into both sessions. There is much potential for the synodal journey in the United States to become more ecumenically expansive.

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During the 2024 USCCB November Plenary Meeting in Baltimore, the body of bishops took a voice vote in favor of the Committee on Priorities and Plans taking up the creation of a Synod Task Force for the Conference. This Task Force would ascertain the needs and priorities of the bishops in the United States with respect to implementing the fruits of the Synod – both locally (the fruits of consultations in parishes and dioceses) and nationally/universally (in the wake of the Final Document). Hopefully the Synod Task Force and its mandate will be announced in the coming months.

The synodal path requires that the People of God in the United States be attentive to the workings of the Holy Spirit in all aspects of the Church. It requires an openness, a nimbleness, and an obedience to God's will discerned through careful and faithful listening. An authentic, synodal desire wells up: that the Church, the People of God together with their pastors, grow in holy curiosity, hospitality, and the capacity for dialogue. While the synod process in the U.S. has certainly experienced limitations and challenges, there has

also been much joy and celebration. As the North American Final Document for the Continental Stage says, "the synodal process has not been perfect, but it has been good."¹⁷ 

Notes

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16. https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly2024/workinggroups/group10/2024_10-02_CONGREGAZIONE-I GRUPPO-10-ENG.pdf.
17. North American Final Document for the Continental Stage, paragraph 57.

Synodality and the Abuse Crisis: The Beginning of a Beginning

BLANDINE LAGRUT, CCN

We would be missing a fundamental significance of the Synod on Synodality if we forgot that, in the context of the ongoing abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, the transformation of our ways of living in the Church is still a vital emergency. This article examines the case of France, and in particular at the concomitance between the work of the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse (CIASE) mandated by the Catholic bishops and the Synod launch, showing how a culture of synodality could renew the framework of the fight against abuse by opening up a path towards more open and participative governance.

Through the Wounds, See the Light

The final document of the Synod opens with a striking vision. In its second paragraph, the document invites its reader to contemplate the wounds of the Risen Christ. The text reminds us that his wounds, even transfigured, continue to touch his humanity. The sufferings of survivors and victims are, and always will be, Christ's own. Not only are these sufferings forever engraved in him, but they are still being poured out today, "partly through our own faults."¹ Reading these lines, it is impossible not to make the connection with the revelations concerning the psychological and physical abuses committed across generations within the Catholic Church.

The document invites us to adopt a radical existential and ecclesiological stance. In order to realize who we are as the Church, and to live out the synodal transformation to which we are being called, we need to see what we have long wished to ignore and to find there the face of God that we have rejected. It is a question of turning our eyes towards those who have been victims of violence, particularly within the Church. It is only through these wounds, by considering them in truth, with justice and compassion, that we will be able to perceive ourselves as an ecclesial body.

Rereading the Signs of the Times: The CIASE and the Synod

By inviting us to see through the wounds in the Church, the Synod mothers and fathers remind us that the reform made possible in synodality addresses a context of crisis. Many Catholics became aware of the gravity of the current situation thanks to Pope Francis' letter *To the People of God* on August 20, 2018. In this letter, the link between sexual abuse, abuse of power, and abuse of conscience was forcefully affirmed. This was not just a scandal linked to a few deviant individuals. The malaise was deeper, rooted in "a deviant way of conceiving authority in the Church" called "clericalism."² Pope Francis' appeal was clear. He asked the baptized to care for the Church as an institution and to en-

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gage "in the ecclesial and social transformation that we so desperately need."³ This renewed way of living and thinking about responsibilities to better proclaim the Gospel would soon find a name: synodality.

In France, the submission of the report by the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse (CIASE)⁴ coincided with the launch of the synodal process in the global Catholic Church. This interdisciplinary commission, chaired by Jean-Marc Sauvé, was tasked with establishing the facts of paedocriminality within the Church in France since 1950, examining how these cases have or have not been dealt with, evaluating the measures taken to deal with this scourge and, finally, making any useful recommendations. There is no doubt that we are

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still a long way from what we are entitled to expect from the Church in the name of the Gospel. Nevertheless, by commissioning and following up this independent report, the Church of France has set to work and initiated an in-depth examination of the truth. On October 5, 2021, the CIASE published the results of its investigation. A few days later, Pope Francis opened the first of three stages in the synodal process.

Although the two events are not *a priori* related, they are nevertheless linked by a common concern: to remedy the systemic dysfunctions that have contributed, directly and indirectly, to abuses of all kinds (sexual, spiritual, of power, of conscience, etc.). Of course, the aim of the synodal conversion is broader than the CIASE report, its ultimate goal being the proclamation of the Gospel. But freeing ourselves from clericalism in all its forms and combating abuses are necessary conditions for the mission. Even if the vocabulary and aims differ, the diagnosis is common: where Pope Francis invokes synodality to overcome “the culture of abuse,”⁵ the CIASE invites us to “recognize the systemic responsibility”⁶ of the ecclesial institution. The term “systemic” has been widely questioned and has sometimes caused controversy. After clarification, however, the French bishops finally adopted it in their penitential declaration.⁷ Indeed, the term “systemic” allows us to move away from the personal legal imputation of a perpetrator of sexual violence to “question the collective traits and operating modes that have hindered and sometimes prevented the revelation, prevention and appropriate treatment of sexual assaults by the institution.”⁸ In accepting this term, the bishops have expressed their determination to take seriously what has long been an unthought-of aspect of the ecclesial institution, namely its social responsibility. Indeed, the Church has never been in the habit of considering that its actions or internal functioning could have a negative impact on its social environment. This could be seen as another symptom of clericalism: the Church teaches, enlightens, it can do no wrong, so its action creates no victims.⁹ The reception of the CIASE’s report and the Synod’s *Final Document*’s insistence on transparency are signs that a cultural change has begun.¹⁰

With regard to governance, the CIASE invited the Catholic Church in France to examine in depth the palpable tensions between its hierarchical constitution and the desire for synodality. Without claiming to provide the answers, which must come from the Church itself, the CIASE recommended ensuring the separation of powers and the institution of evaluation and internal control procedures. According to the Commission, it was possible to “advance the governance of the Church without undermining any of its foundations.”¹¹ Indeed, in the Church “No one is a mere extra,”¹² but all are called to participate by virtue of their equal baptismal dignity. Even if this is only the beginning, the Synod’s *Final Document* goes in the same direction. It offers clear guidelines for better articulating the vertical and

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horizontal dimensions of authority, insisting on the need for open governance,¹³ integrating more lay and feminine otherness into decision-making spheres.

From Victims to Witnesses

Without realizing it, CIASE’s work set an example of synodal functioning within its own perimeter. In a way, it provided a proto-model of synodality. The members of the Commission had to walk a fine line: recognizing that people have suffered criminal acts, without confining them to the status of victims. The Commission has achieved this by giving a central place to the words of victims and survivors, and more radically by engaging in a process of co-construction of knowledge.¹⁴ This joint effort led to the publication, alongside the report itself, of a document aptly entitled *From Victims to Witnesses*. This document gathers testimonies from people interviewed during the course of the investigation. At the end of its work, the CIASE presented two documents: (1) the report with its ordered chapters, analyses, presentations, and recommendations, and (2) a “literary memorial” featuring the voices, cries, accusations, poems, and silences of the victims.

Receiving these texts together and reading them triggered a kind of mental enlargement in many of us. A psychic reconfiguration. Positions were reversed. We realized that the experts were not primarily the appointed members of the Commission, but rather the victims and survivors who had acquired – *and, it must be stressed, in spite of themselves* – unrivaled knowledge and experience of these painful

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issues. Not only did the victims act as whistle-blowers, they also produced indispensable experiential knowledge. As the document recognizes:

The work of establishing the facts, analyzing the mechanisms of abuse and their consequences of all kinds had to be based first and foremost on what they had to say and pass on. [...] For in order to give an account of this tragic reality in all its density and complexity, it is the victims who clearly hold the knowledge, and it is through them alone that it is possible to access it, to put it into words and convey it.¹⁵

From Victims to Witnesses. It turns out that this reversal of positions, of which the title of the document of the CIASE is emblematic, is also at the heart of synodality. This point of contact between the method of a secular institution and the synodal dynamic of the Catholic Church deserves to be emphasized – precisely because no one had anticipated it. One of the characteristics of the synodal path is the search for a *conversion* of relationships. The reflection on the necessary institutional reform must unfold from a relational and spiritual conversion. From it, and never without it.

In a literal sense, conversion implies a reversal, a change of position. And what attitude is better suited than listening to initiate such a change and to sustain it over time? The Synod has deliberately initiated a new way of listening to one another, one that disturbs positions of authority. By upsetting established positions, listening creates a participatory dynamic that can nourish the missionary impulse.

The synodal church is a church of listening: not just polite listening, but empowering listening. It is about committing ourselves to hearing more than we want to hear,¹⁶ more than is easy or comfortable. Above all, it requires listening to the

minority voices, the precarious voices that have long been rendered inaudible by our well-oiled ways of doing things.¹⁷ In this respect, the steps taken by the Conférence des Evêques and the Conférence des Religieux de France in response to the CIASE report are worth mentioning. Two independent bodies, the INIRR¹⁸ and the CRR,¹⁹ have been set up so that the voices of those who have been injured by members of the Church, whether clergy or religious, can be heard and acted upon. This is the case even when civil or criminal justice is no longer able to act (due to the death of the perpetrator, statute of limitations, lack of evidence). These bodies base their interventions on a presumption of truthfulness: “taking what is said as true.” By opting for restorative justice, their mission is to stand firmly by the side of victims, in order to carry out a process of recognition and reparation with each person who requests it. The only truly respectful way to welcome a word is to make it count and give it weight. Listening for action. Such pioneering approaches could inspire not only the Catholic Church as a whole, but also civil society (the world of sport, cinema, education, etc.).

Breaking Out of the “*Entre-Soi*”

Listening radically to people deeply affected by life generates synodality. Why is this? Because it forces us to reconsider all our relationships within the Church. The parallel between the Synod and all anti-violence initiatives highlights two trends that threaten our relationships within the Church: self-referentiality and *entre-soi* (“among oneself” or social closure).²⁰ In sociology, *entre-soi* refers to a closed grouping of people with common characteristics or interests, involving the more or less conscious and active exclusion of others. It is often characterized by secrecy, which allows rules to be circumvented and insiders to be protected. It fosters a sense of belonging that encourages a sense of impunity.

As Pope Francis has often reminded us, the Church can only “go forth.” Going forth, going out, that is, allying with all those on the margins, those whom the preparatory document for the Synod refers to as “our journeying companions.” It is indeed the Church’s mission “to take on the burden of these wounded relationships, so that the Lord, the Living One, may heal them.”²¹ The change of era expressed in synodality is in fact a change of form: the Church’s understanding of itself must be understood from the point of view of its primary mission, which is to place the excluded, the victims, the little ones at the center.


“Who is the greatest?” asked the disciples.²² “Jesus called a little child to him and placed the child among them.” Children are emblematic of those whom the collective finds hard to consider, to take seriously. They are emblematic of the victims we have long refused even to see. Yet this is the heart of the evangelical adventure. A community nourished

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by the Gospel learns how to re-form itself around the little ones. It is about letting Christ place the child, the wounded person, the survivor at the center. To place him at the heart, in the middle. Not only because of the responsibilities of justice we have towards them, but also because they hold a critical knowledge of our inner selves, our hierarchies, our missionary successes and failures. Knowledge we need if we are to be a Church which *goes forth*. To realize who we are as a Church, we need to find modes of governance that place at the center the voices we tend to exclude. The place of the little one becomes the article *stantis et cadentis*, on which the Church falls or stands its ground. Does our way of living in the Church allow them to remain at the center? Does it allow them to participate?

A few days after the close of the Second Vatican Council, the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner made a remark that could well be relevant today: “The Council laid the foundations for *aggiornamento*, for renewal [...] That’s a lot. But it is only the beginning of a beginning.”²³ 

Notes

1. Synod of Bishops, *Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Second Session (2-27 October 2024), For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission Final Document*, §2. See also §46.
2. Pope Francis, *Letter to the People of God*, August 20, 2018.
3. Idem. To follow up on this interpellation, the *Promesses d’Eglise* collective has decided to engage in synodal transformation by

beginning to reflect on the governance of the 40 movements and communities that make it up: <https://www.promessesdegglise.fr/>.

4. The Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church (CIASE) was commissioned by the Conférence des Evêques de France and the Conférence des Religieuses et Religieux de France in 2018. The final report, which together with the appendices represents almost 3,000 pages of meticulous analysis, is subdivided into three parts: (1) “Shedding light” draws up a quantitative and qualitative assessment of the data collected. (2) “Revealing the dark side” attempts to establish a diagnosis. (3) Finally, “Dispelling the darkness” sets out ways of dealing with the phenomenon of sexual violence in the Catholic Church. CIASE has also published another document alongside the report, a collection entitled “From Victim to Witness.” The various documents are available at www.ciaise.fr.

5. Pope Francis, *Letter to the People of God*, August 20, 2018.

6. CIASE, *General Report*, Recommendation #24, p. 35.

7. French Bishops’ Conference, *Plenary Assembly of the Bishops of France: recognition of the Church’s institutional responsibility for violence*, November 2021.

8. Marie-Jo Thiel, “Une culture synodale et fraternelle peut-elle réfréner la culture des abus?,” *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* 28.2 (2022), 243.

9. Monique Baujard, “Ce que la crise des abus sexuels dit de l’Eglise,” in *J’écouterai leur cri: cinq regards de femmes sur la crise des abus*, ed. Monique Baujard et al. (Editions Emmanuel / Editions de la Xavière, 2022), 142-145.

10. Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, §95.

11. CIASE, *General Report*, §0090, p. 47.

12. In his address *To the faithful of the Diocese of Rome* on September 18, 2021, Pope Francis shared in depth his vision of the synodal Church.

13. Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, §74.

14. Baujard, “Ce que la crise des abus sexuels dit de l’Eglise,” 152.

15. CIASE, *Collection of Testimonies: From Victims to Witnesses*, 5.

16. Pope Francis, *Address on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops*, October 17, 2015.

17. Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, §55. To get an idea of the extraordinary finesse that a testimony can bring to our knowledge of human reality, we can refer to the account of Father Patrick Goujon, SJ, who found his voice again decades after suffering sexual abuse as a child, and succeeded in making it heard for us. Cf. Patrick Goujon, *Precarious: A Survivor of Clerical Abuse Remembers* (Georgetown University Press, 2023).

18. <https://www.inirr.fr/>.

19. <https://www.reconnaissancereparation.org/>.

20. Agata Zielinski, “Une fragilité qui rend libre,” in Baujard et al., *J’écouterai leur cri*, 118.

21. Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, §56.

22. Matthew 18:1.

23. Karl Rahner “Le concile – un nouveau commencement,” in *Le deuxième concile du Vatican. Contributions au Concile et à son interprétation* (Les Éditions du Cerf, 2015), XXI.766.

To Confirm in Unity: Synodality, Primacy, and the Ecumenical Kairos

THEODORE GREY DEDON

Synodality's Theological Foundations

“**T**o confirm in unity” is the stated importance of synodality: so began Pope Francis’ homily both to and on Metropolitan Archbishops, spoken just three months after ascending to the papacy in 2013. To confirm in unity, this sign of the Church’s communion reflected in the presence of the bishops, “does not mean uniformity.” To confirm in unity, he says, means this: “the Synod of Bishops, in harmony with the Primate.” In the Church, variety is itself a great treasure, grounded always in the harmony of unity – a great mosaic, Pope Francis suggests, “in which every small piece joins with others as part of God’s one great plan.” The Catholic spirit, the essence of catholicity, is to be united *in difference*. “United in our differences,” he says, “there is no other Catholic way to be united.” Thus, in his first-ever homily directly calling the Church in such a way, Pope Francis says, “let us go forward on the path of synodality, and grow in harmony with the service of the primacy.”¹

That synodality has been such a call – a call wherein Pope Francis says it is the very path God expects of the Church in the Third Millennium – has become increasingly well-known and controversial. What synodality is, however, or why such a call may be an alternative style to what exists presently, is often vague, requiring a depth of clarification few have been able to muster. Peering into the technical documents from the Joint International Theological Commission, alongside statements from various officials or theologians and the 2023 Synthesis Report from the Synod of Bishops, renders synodality significantly clearer. Synodality is principally about primacy and its ecumenical dimensions are explicit. Synodality as an ecumenical path, at a moment described in synodal documents discussed below as an ecumenical *kairos*, renders this path of paramount concern for Church life. It is the proper *order* of Church life.

Critics of synodality, wide ranging as they are, often reduce its aims to political dimensions or accuse it of being novel and vague. Though there can be truth to its vagueness, described in detail below, there are elements which can be clarified. But synodality being political – or, rather, *merely* political – misunderstands what synodality is entirely. Raymond Cardinal Burke, in his foreword to a text critical of synodality, describes his problem with the path at length. He said,

We are told that the Church which we profess, in communion with our ancestors in the faith from the time of the Apostles, to be One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic, is now to be defined by synodality, a term which has no history in the doctrine of the Church and for which there is no reasonable definition [...] Synodality and its adjective, syn-

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odal, have become slogans behind which a revolution is at work to change radically the Church’s self-understanding, in accord with a contemporary ideology which denies much of what the Church has always taught and practiced.²

This statement, sharp and critical as it is, makes a fair point. The term *synodality* is indeed vague. It has, despite its deep history in political thought, been largely subdued in ecclesiastical forums over the past five centuries at least. Worried about terms such as “listening,” “inclusion,” “participation,” and of course the most contentious of all, “dialogue,” Cardinal Burke sees a replacement of a historically understood catholicity in favor of something altogether modern. Yet precisely by situating synodality as interrelated with primacy and the two together in their ecumenical context, one can understand why synodality is indeed the path and indeed *implicit* in the four marks of the Church. Synodality is the path to drawing the bishops towards univocal catholicity in service of and with, as Pope Francis said, primacy. Synodality confirms in unity.

The foundations of synodality are theological, not political. For the Orthodox Church, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has stated, “[synodality] derives from the very essence of God.” The doctrine of the Trinity, not taking God

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as a “monolithic deity,” underlies the theological premise that God’s *esse* is relational. It is in this understanding and teaching of the Trinity – not of some political concept of authority or power arrangement – that “the entire [synodal] and hierarchical structure of the Orthodox Church rests.”³ Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, synthesizing the importance of synodality as a mode of community in the church, agrees: “it emerges with compelling clarity that synodality,” alongside a proper understanding of primacy, “are indeed an essential part of church life.”⁴ While the particular modalities of its application will change from time to time, God’s *esse* is reflected in “the *fact* of synodality and primacy [being] a permanent and continuing reality.”⁵

The theological foundations of synodality and its essential dimension of primacy derive from two *kairotic* events – wherein the spiritual breaks into the temporal. They are first, Metropolitan Ware says, the Mystical Supper; and second, the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.⁶ Neither of these, apparently, were *councils* in the sense we think of them today. Rather, they were assemblies – calling the People of God out into public in personal and relational ways. Metropolitan Ware makes the point that synodality, pertaining to its *synodal* dimension, further draws out this relational quality reflecting God’s Trinitarian *esse*. It was at the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem, a prototype for all ecumenical councils, wherein two things were confirmed in *one voice*: “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28).⁷ It is univocal catholicity. This is not merely a communal affirmation but a univocal declaration, determining that *with* God the synodal dimensions of the *ekklēsia* were good not to you or to me, but to *us*. It is not individual, it is social; it is relational, communal, and Trinitarian. Thus, the plural pronoun is an essential aspect of what constitutes the synodal path moving forward. It must be, or at least invite for inclusion, the *assembled* whole. Synodality is, in other words, ecumenical by its very nature.

The Synod Is Not a Parliament: Synodality and Conciliarity

One fundamental problem with the discourse around synodality is a lack of distinction from its frequent synonym: conciliarity. The two, in most technical documents and theological treatments, have been rendered thoroughly interchangeable. In the 2007 Ravenna Document from the Joint International Theological Commission (hereafter JITC), the term “synodality” is subsumed under the discourse around “conciliarity” and its relationship to authority. In a 2010 Address by Patriarch Bartholomew on the subject, he uses the term “conciliarity” exclusively. This conflation is not due to error or misunderstanding. It is due to the fact that, to put it bluntly, the discourse around synodality is relatively new. Synodality as the preferred term to describe the phenomenon and process has only just begun. Describing synodality *as* conciliarity leads us to potential problems, however. Describing this path as “collegiality,” as even Pope Francis himself has done,

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is more imprecise still.⁸ Primary amongst those problems, it may be argued, is that conciliarity is something *less* than the stated aims of synodality as both a path and style for the Church in the third millennium. This is where, it seems, critics of synodality then tie the aims and theological propositions of this path to contemporary politics and historical novelties. Conciliarity touches on and perhaps even frames political and social arrangements which are fundamentally not ecclesiastical and pertain little to sacramental concerns except in some subordinate sense. Rendering them as synonyms opens up the very concept and aims of synodality to critical challenges, situating it as modern or from-nowhere historically and ultimately political. Thus, differentiating between the two, plausibly, clarifies the meaning of synodality in the life of the Church.

There is a classic reminder, made by Pope Gelasius against Emperor Anastasius in 494, regarding the two powers. There *are* two powers, spiritual and temporal. The boundary of this distinction was a fundamental issue during the late medieval controversy of the golden age conciliarists, discerning ecclesiastical and political liberties.⁹ Following the distinction between the spiritual and temporal powers, affirming that the spiritual power has primacy over the temporal, synodality should be understood to reflect the spiritual power and conciliarity the temporal.¹⁰ There can be no denial that the conciliar theory, often confused *as* conciliarity itself, has had a tremendous life outside of ecclesiastical governance and theology properly understood. Simply, the conciliar theory can be reduced to the assertion of Council over Pope, but it extends far beyond that – into the realm of loyalty, national representation, and geopolitical order itself.¹¹ The 2023 Alexandria Document coming from the JITC touches on their understanding of the conciliar theory, discussed below in

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relation to papal centralization. Certainly, originally pertaining to the superordinate monarchism of the pope, the conciliar theory was not only – or even in its later life not often – about the pope at all.¹² The conciliar theory, as often as it criticized popes, was used to attack monarchs of all kinds and, if one was to generalize it further, affirm paradigms of power-sharing against those wherein power was centralized. Synodality relates to this, but it is much more still. Synodality, reflecting the spiritual power, can only be understood by its theological principles and ends as well as its ecclesiological arrangements.

At the first General Congregation of the Synod on Synodality in October 2023, Pope Francis implicitly affirmed this distinction between synodality and conciliarity reflecting the two powers, spiritual and temporal. “We are not a parliament,” he said. “We are not the United Nations; no, we are something else.”¹³ This is something he has echoed in other statements, tracing back as early as 2013 but stated in different terms. *Functionalism*, a pattern of temporal political arrangement aimed at efficiency, “reduces the reality of the Church to the structure of an NGO.”¹⁴ The reality, however, is that conciliarity can be achieved precisely in a Parliament, in the UN, NGOs, and indeed through functional ties manifested in supranational state patterns such as the European Union.¹⁵ Synodality, then, must be understood as more than this. It must be explicitly stated *as* more, lest critiques such as those coming from Cardinal Burke take hold as more accurate and compelling than one might like to admit. Synodality, rather than conciliarity alone, has the theological end of convoking the People of God towards the eschatological assembly. The *ekklēsia*, being that community called out into public for deliberation, certainly has conciliar dimensions – being time-bound and political – but it is synodal in where it ultimately goes. Affirming that difference maintains the basic point Pope Francis made: the synod, and indeed a synodal Church, is not *merely* a parliament. It is not *merely* a forum for dialogue. It is not *merely* about listening deeply to interests from particular representatives of particular groups. But it does, of course, hold those things in their highest and best senses, as the spiritual power has primacy over the temporal.

To Confirm in Unity: The Ecumenical Promise of the Synodal Path

It seems apparent that a fundamental aspect of the Synod on Synodality is precisely its ecumenical dimension, confirming the assembled whole in unity. The October 2023 Synod of Bishops began with two major ecumenical gestures. Immediately prior to the opening of the synod, Pope Francis, Patriarch Bartholomew, Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation Reverend Ann Burghardt, amongst others joined together in an ecumenical prayer that they called the “Together Vigil.” At this event, Pope Francis prayed that this be

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a *kairos* moment for “fraternity” – predicting the language of it being an *ecumenical kairos* in the official document coming out of the synod itself. Then, at the start of the synod, the liturgy was celebrated by Patriarch Youssef Absi of the Greek Melkite rite. Though in full communion with Rome, it can reasonably be inferred that this was an intentional signal of openness towards the logic that synodality must be *diversity-in-unity* rather than uniformity. The particular churches constitute the universal – that is, as Pope Francis said, the only way to be united as Catholic. The start of the synod in this way was called in the 2023 Synthesis Report a “highly significant event,” which allows us to further recognize precisely this ecumenical *kairos*. It lets us “reaffirm that what unites us is greater than that what divides us.”¹⁶ It confirms *us* in unity.

The 2023 Synthesis Report undeniably expresses the plural pronoun, ultimately affirming the belief that it is good to the Holy Spirit, but there are still deep tensions across denominational divides. These divides are precisely what needs to be attended to as the synodal process continues over the next decade. Archbishop Justin Welby described a potential stumbling block within Anglicanism in an interview from 2021. Before the start of the Synod on Synodality within the Catholic Church, he was asked about how synodality exists within Anglicanism and if the Anglican Communion has something specific to add to the synodal process. His

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reply gets to the heart of the problem – many of the issues, at their base, are definitional. He stated that the ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic Church and Anglican Communion (ARCIC) concluded that “although we both talk about synodality we mean something slightly different.” Within Anglicanism, Welby says, “synodality, most synods – to say anything happens everywhere in Anglicanism is always asking for trouble.” He continues further,

Within the Church of England for instance, we have three Houses: Bishops, clergy, and laity. And they—the synod for us—enables at three levels: the Deanery which is the very local, just above the parish; at the Diocesan; and at the National in the Church of England, to hear the voice of lay, ordained, and episcopal. That really matters. We think that has a very fundamental ecclesiological understanding of the *laos*, the people of God expressing their sense of how the Spirit is leading the church.¹⁷

The difference Welby speaks of is the role of the laity, or the role of local synodality beyond its expression in bishops regionally or universally. A similar distinction, though, has been developed in the technical documents coming from the JITC. In the 2007 Ravenna Document, it states that the synodal life of the Church takes place at local, regional, and universal levels. The local is indeed a building block for the regional and universal, even if it does not have primacy in an ultimate sense. “The Church of God,” it states, “exists where there is a community gathered together in the Eucharist, presided over, directly or through his presbyters, by a bishop legitimately ordained into the apostolic succession, teaching the faith received from the Apostles, in communion with the other bishops.”¹⁸ The locality of this synodal form is found precisely in the Eucharist, by which it “is the criterion for its exercise.” Each local church has its mission to be a place where God is served and the Gospel is announced, governed by canonical norms aimed at ensuring such a mission at all. *Through* communion, wherein all members are at the service of each other, the local church “appears already ‘synodal’ or ‘conciliar’ in its structure,” again continuing with the interchangeability of these terms.¹⁹ Archbishop Welby had a point, however. The 2007 Ravenna Document, and indeed the subsequent 2016 Chieti and 2023 Alexandria Documents focus even at the local level on their relationship almost exclusively to bishops. The 2023 Synthesis Report coming from the Synod of Bishops, however, takes much more seriously the role of the laity.

One of the proposals from the Synthesis Report states that “each local Church is encouraged to equip itself with suitable people trained to facilitate and accompany processes of ecclesial discernment.”²⁰ Under the theological logic of being relational, gathered by the Trinity, it is that the “distinctiveness of local cultures” can be reflected, as they “are elements of great importance in fostering involvement of the faithful.”²¹ For a Church made “out of every tribe, tongue,

people and nation,” the Synthesis Report makes it clear that cultural context will result in different needs both material and spiritual, shaping the culture “of the local churches, their missionary priorities, the concerns and gifts that each of them brings to the synodal dialogue, and the languages with which they express themselves.”²² Effectively, while it is plausible that Archbishop Welby’s definitional concern regarding synodality is valid, it does seem apparent some considerations are being taken seriously. The role of the *laos* and how the laity in general culturally define their local churches precisely through their particularities is an important element of the synodal dialogue being undertaken so far.

The technical documents coming from the JITC, however, are undeniably focused on bishops either regionally or universally. While older documents focused on Catholic-Orthodox questions regarding matters such as uniatism and communion, since the 2007 Ravenna Document the focus has shifted explicitly towards synodality and primacy. The issue of synodality was first raised by the JITC in the 1988 Valamo Document wherein the problem of the historic pentarchy – the *taxis* of bishops – was discussed.²³ Though in later documents, such as the 2007 Ravenna Document, “conciliarity” is the preferred term, in the 1988 Valamo Document they explicitly use “synodal” to represent the *character* of the historic church. The problem as it is represented in all of the JITC documents is not on a shared understanding of synodality. The essential role of synodality in the historic church – especially the first millennium – is unquestionably accepted. What is demonstrated as deeply problematic, instead, is the question of primacy.

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Where it seems clear from the documents that the historic church recognized primacy, even accepting Rome as *primus inter pares*, it is not at all agreed that Rome's claim to universal jurisdiction is historically accepted. That, according to the narrative history of these documents, is an innovation of the second millennium and perhaps the largest stumbling block to shared communion in the third.

The tension here is raised explicitly, and in great detail, in the latest two documents from the JITC. The 2016 Chieti and 2023 Alexandria Documents discuss the role of synodality and primacy in the first and second millenniums respectively. Shifting from conciliarity to synodality in the latter document, it is made abundantly clear that while the church had continuity and agreement *largely* in the first millennium, the second millennium developments are considerably troubling for the ecumenical aims of Catholic and Orthodox Christians. In other words, it is not the same issue named by Archbishop Welby, wherein there may be a range of meanings for synodality; rather, it is that there is a difference with the application of primacy – and primacy is *essential* to synodality itself. The 2016 Chieti Document is worth citing at length:

Throughout the first millennium, the Church in the East and the West was united in preserving the apostolic faith, maintaining the apostolic succession of bishops, developing structures of synodality inseparably linked with primacy, and in an understanding of authority as a service (*diakonia*) of love. Though the unity of the East and West was troubled at times, the bishops of East and West were conscious of belonging to the one Church. This common heritage of theological principles, canonical provisions and liturgical practices from the first millennium constitutes a necessary reference point and a powerful source of inspiration for both Catholics and Orthodox as they seek to heal the wound of their division at the beginning of the third millennium. On the basis of this common heritage, both must consider how primacy, synodality, and the interrelatedness between them can be conceived and exercised today and in the future.²⁴

The tension between synodality and primacy is basic to what synodality is. Though there are efforts today to heal the divide between Catholic and Orthodox Christians, *this* may well be the fundamental stumbling block. This problem, between the interrelatedness of synodality and primacy, is at the heart of this ecumenical *kairos* described in the 2023 Synthesis Report.

If it is the case that synodality and primacy are essential to the life of the church and it is the case that they were binding to a large degree in the first millennium, what caused the change in the second? It seems apparent that the premise of much messaging around synodality from the Catholic Church today rests on the premise that synodality *was* the way of the church and must become *again* the way of the third millennium. The historical episodes of the second mil-

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lennium, then, hold the key to understanding the stumbling blocks for such an aim. The 2023 Alexandria Document, building on the 2016 Chieti Document, takes to task the second millennium on synodality and primacy.

The 2023 Alexandria Document starts with a restatement of what was agreed upon in the 2016 Chieti Document. “From the earliest times,” it says, “the Church existed as many local churches,” and they were held together through the communion (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit.²⁵ The recent document, however, builds out the “troubled history of the second millennium” over that period, giving “Orthodox and Roman Catholics a welcome opportunity to explain themselves to one another at various points along the way, so as to further the mutual understanding and trust that are essential prerequisites for reconciliation at the start of the third millennium.”²⁶ Of course, while the Great Schism of 1054 is attended to, it is actually the conciliarist controversy alongside the Councils of Constance and Ferrara-Florence that receive more attention. In *Haec sancta* (1415), it says, emerged “the thesis that the highest authority in the Church belongs to a general council, understood as an assembly of the bishops and the secular powers,” held in contradistinction “to the authority of the pope.”²⁷ Conciliarism, it suggests, “stressed the new idea that a council should ‘represent’ all the categories of Christian society, and that such a council, meeting every ten years, with the pope executing its decisions, would govern the Church.”²⁸ This “subverted the canonical role of the primate in the synod and jeopardised the freedom of the Church,” and itself was a challenge to the “ecclesial practice of synodality [...] by the secular notion of corporate representation, a concept drawn from secular Roman law bestowing legal personality on collective bodies.”²⁹ Again, this very tension rests along the spiritual-temporal distinction

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wherein language around synodality instead of conciliarity could be clarifying. This challenge to papal primacy in the conciliarist's thesis, then, is situated as a justification for the strengthening and centralization of the pope against the conciliarist's outgrowth in Gallicanism and other national ecclesial models of that type. Thus, according to the document, the conciliarist controversy represented *not* primacy and synodality, but something strictly lower than it, operating on a temporal pattern of power.

Granting this critique of the conciliarist's aims, even if it is a historically questionable reading, one can see immediately the value of a distinction between synodality and conciliarity. Precisely for the reasons stated above, it might be *useful* to suggest that while conciliarity can be achieved *in* such a representative pattern sharing power, synodality – as understood properly with primacy – is more than this. The document, through all the historical episodes it charts, implicitly recognizes this distinction without stating it explicitly. The distinction is useful as it helps frame the logic that conciliarity has been and certainly will continue to be a model for national representation, power-sharing, affirming diversity-in-unity in political arrangements, as well as opposing superordinate authorities – from popes, kings, dictators, and super-ordered social values such as wealth, fame, and power itself. As conciliarity, and even more specifically the conciliar theory – that very thesis described in the document – has indeed done that, it is not wise to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Rather, it is better to insist on the same conclusions reached at the end of the document which pertain to the excesses for the sake of building towards some sense of univocal catholicity.

To speak with one voice, as was done in the Joint Declarations between various popes, patriarchs, and bishops since 1965, ought to be an avenue for sharing the journey on the synodal path. The 2023 Alexandria Document concludes with the points that while major historical and theological issues complicate an authentic understanding of synodality and primacy, there are still pathways forward. “The Church,” as it describes, “is not properly understood as a pyramid, with a primate governing from the top, but neither is it properly understood as a federation of self-sufficient Churches.”³⁰ Critiquing in one statement both the errors of hyperpapalism and of a national church model, perhaps seen amongst Catholic and Orthodox Christians respectively, it closes precisely with calls made in these joint declarations. For synodality and primacy to be renewed East and West, it is the case (as both Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios and Pope John Paul II stated univocally in 1979) that there must be a “dialogue of charity,” which has “opened up the way to better understanding of our respective theological positions and thereby to new approaches to theological work, and to a new attitude with regard to the common path of our

Churches.”³¹ Harkening back to the 2016 Chieti Document, the 2023 Alexandria Document states clearly that “Roman Catholics and Orthodox need to continue along that path so as to embrace an authentic understanding of synodality and primacy in light of the ‘theological principles, canonical provisions and liturgical practices’ of the undivided Church of the first millennium.”³²

Purely historical conversations are not enough. This is the conclusion of the 2023 Alexandria Document. To actually embrace the interdependence of synodality and primacy – taken as intrinsically linked – it must be grounded in the notion that theological, not political principles, are held most dearly. Synodality, if one accepts the distinction, is *more* than conciliarity. Synodality, perhaps, is conciliarity's perfected form – drawing the latter towards its proper end. The Church, the text reminds us, “is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Holy Trinity, and a eucharistic ecclesiology of communion is the key to articulating a sound theology of synodality and primacy.”³³ To approach the synodal path *together*, as the ecumenical prayer vigil attended by many at the start of the Synod of Bishops desired, these principles must be upheld. The ecumenical *kairos* to which the 2023 Synthesis Report attests can only operate towards the desired ends should an understanding of synodality and primacy be rooted in a Trinitarian theology placing the eucharist at its center. It seems clear that this is *precisely* what synodality is – or at least ought to be.

Though critics of synodality have made a reasonable point regarding the discourse's newness and vagueness, they have misunderstood what synodality is. Synodality, though indeed about listening, mission, inclusion, and dialogue, is principally about *primacy*. To imagine that a theology of primacy, reflecting the relational character of the Trinity in and through the eucharist, is somehow a new concept not having a historic claim on the church is to miss the point entirely. To their concern, it seems wise to distinguish conciliarity from synodality in an effort to clarify precisely these higher theological propositions in contradistinction to lower political ones. Whereas conciliarity touches on things temporal, things at the United Nations, things at the European Union, in the American Congress, in a Board of Directors, or a Student Council, synodality is more. The Synod, as Pope Francis said, is *not* a Parliament. It is essential not merely to governance, but to the *ekklēsia* – to the People of God speaking and walking together with one voice and on one path towards their eschatological assembly. Precisely when synodality centers these higher theological principles, holding its ecumenical character as essential, fixing primacy as the stumbling block on the path, then we can start to confirm in unity. 

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Notes

1. Pope Francis, "Homily, Imposition of the Sacred Pallium on Metropolitan Archbishops (June 29, 2013)," in *Walking Together: The Way of Synodality* (Orbis Books, 2022), 1.
2. Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke, "Foreword," in José Antonio Ureta and Julio Lored de Izcue, *The Synodal Process is a Pandora's Box: 100 Questions & Answers* (The American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family, and Property, 2023), xi. It must be noted that TFP was founded by Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira who believed that the Second Vatican Council was part of a communist plot for revolution both inside and against the Church. His views on these forces are detailed widely in *Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (The American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property, [1974] 1993).
3. Patriarch Bartholomew, "Address by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on Councils and Conciliarity," at the Kadriga Center for Visual Arts (October 1st, 2010). The words "conciliar" and "conciliarity" have been replaced with "synodal" and "synodality" to more precisely define the meaning of them all based in a distinction drawn out in this text.
4. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, "Foreword," in *Primacy in the Church: The Office of Primate and the Authority of Councils, Vol. 1: Historical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. John Chrysavgis (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2016), 8.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 10.
8. Pope Francis, "Interview with Pope Francis by Fr. Antonio Spadaro (September 2013)," in *Walking Together: The Way of Synodality* (Orbis Books, 2022), 12. Here, Pope Francis says to Fr. Spadaro that the notion that the Church may "grow in harmony with the service of the primacy," is "the path of collegiality." Further, Fr. Spadaro even asks Pope Francis if it is possible to reconcile Petrine Primacy with collegiality, relating it explicitly back to the ecumenical task at hand. Pope Francis' reply is, "we must walk together: the people, the bishops, and the pope. Synodality should be lived at various levels." Thus, it is not that the Pope is changing the meaning of what is being presented as synodality, there is just an imprecision in the language being used to convey such a meaning.
9. See Joseph Canning, *Ideas of Power in the Late Middle Ages 1296-1417* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 11-59; cf. Joseph Canning, *Conciliarism, Humanism and Law: Justifications of Authority and Power, c. 1400-c. 1520* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).
10. Theodore G. Dedon, "Synodality, Barlaam of Calabria on the Papacy, and Conciliar Theory," in *Decolonial Horizons: Reshaping Synodality, Mission, and Social Justice*, eds. Raimundo C. Barreto and Vladimir Latinovic (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 61-80.
11. On this subject, see: Francis Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church 1300-1870* (Oxford University Press, 2003).
12. On this subject, see: Dale K. Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* (Yale University Press, 1996); cf. Michael D. Breidenbach, *Our Dear Bought Liberty: Catholics and Religious Toleration in Early America* (Harvard University Press, 2021).
13. Pope Francis, "Address of the Holy Father at the Opening Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 4th, 2023)." <https://press.vatican.va/content/>
14. Pope Francis, "Address to the Leadership of the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America (July 28th, 2013)," in *Walking Together: The Way of Synodality* (Orbis Books, 2022), 7.
15. On this subject, see: Ernst B. Haas, *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces 1950-1957* (University of Notre Dame Press, [1958] 2004); cf. Marc Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State: Ideologies of Reform in the United States and Britain, 1909-1926* (Oxford University Press, 2002); Ben Rosamond, *Theories of European Integration* (Bloomsbury Press, 2000); Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939-1950* (Princeton University Press, 2017).
16. XVI Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "Synthesis Report," First Session (4-29 October 2023). Hereafter cited as 2023 Synthesis Report.
17. Christopher Wells, "Archbishop Welby: Church is synodal when walks together, serving, not dominating," *Vatican News* (October 6th, 2021). <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2021-10/anglican-archbishop-canterbury-welby-interview-cop26-south-sudan.html>.
18. Joint International Theological Commission, "Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority" (Ravenna, October 13th, 2007), 18. Hereafter cited as 2007 Ravenna Document.
19. 2007 Ravenna Document, 20.
20. 2023 Synthesis Report, 2.K.
21. 2023 Synthesis Report, 3.M.
22. 2023 Synthesis Report, 5.B.
23. Joint International Theological Commission, "The Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the Church with Particular Reference to the Importance of Apostolic Succession for the Sanctification and Unity of the People of God" (Uusi Valamo, June 26th, 1988), 52.
24. Joint International Theological Commission, "Synodality and Primacy During the First Millennium: Towards a Common Understanding in Service to the Unity of the Church" (Chieti, September 21st, 2016), 20-21. Hereafter cited as 2016 Chieti Document.
25. Joint International Theological Commission, "Synodality and Primacy in the Second Millennium and Today" (Alexandria, June 7th, 2023), 0.1. Hereafter cited as 2023 Alexandria Document.
26. 2023 Alexandria Document, 0.3.
27. 2023 Alexandria Document, 1.15.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. 2023 Alexandria Document, 5.1.
31. Ibid.; cf. Pope John Paul II and Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios, "Joint Declaration of Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Dimitrios I" (Rome, November 30th, 1979).
32. Ibid.; 2016 Chieti Document, 21.
33. 2023 Alexandria Document 5.3.

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2025

Do You Believe?

CHERYL F. DUDLEY

Editor's Note: The following text is lightly revised from the homily preached by Rev. Dr. Dudley during the Ecumenical Service of the Word hosted by Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute and the Interchurch Center's Committee on Ecumenical, Interfaith, and Community Concerns, on January 22nd, 2025, in the Interchurch Center Chapel, New York City.

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

John 11:17-27

Do You Believe... This?

As this amazing story in the Gospel of John relates, a certain man, Lazarus, a dear friend of Jesus, who lived with his sisters Martha and Mary in Bethany, was seriously ill. As the seriousness of Lazarus' condition became more acute, his sisters sent Jesus urgent messages pressing him, posthaste, to come to Bethany.

From Jesus' decision to tend to other things, as if he didn't understand the sisters' pleas, he did not go to his friend's bedside but traveled instead to Judah – a place understood to be dangerous territory for him. As if his head were in the clouds, he spoke of Lazarus' condition theologically – as if he didn't understand the gravity of his friend's condition. Jesus' companions' objections and counsel did not persuade him to forego Judah and instead make his way to Bethany. They did not seem to be speaking the same language nor understand *reality* in the same way. Jesus spoke theological truths that eluded his companions. Thomas, later called the doubter, was so grieved by the prospect of Lazarus's death, he wanted to die as well.

Days later, when Jesus *finally* arrived in Bethany, as feared, Lazarus had died, and his body had been in the tomb for four days. Mourners and comforters traveled from around the area gathered in Bethany to "give their last respects." When Jesus was spotted, Martha ran to him, and

respectfully confronted him: "Why didn't you come when we first alerted you? You're late: but God always gives you what you ask, so maybe it's not too late."

Jesus seemed to obfuscate theologically – as if denying the pain of death – the ache of grief, and the prospect of life for them without their brother, the man of the house. Martha showed her theological chops when Jesus spoke to her. When Jesus made his declaration – "I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will *never* die" – Martha's micro-expressions must have signaled disbelief, for Jesus asked Martha, "Do you believe... this?" She may have thought, but did not say aloud: *Is that a real question? Do I believe what? My brother is dead. His body is in the tomb, decaying, unsalvageable.* She did not exactly confirm Jesus' words but affirmed that she believed in him.

"Do you believe?" is a good question. "Do you believe *this*?" is a harder question.

There are a lot of unbelievable things that happen in life and faith. There are things that happen that are a challenge to believe. Starting from the beginning – the Creation – and all the way through to the final Re/creation as captured in John's Revelation: Do we believe certain things happened, happen, or will happen metaphorically? Or do we instead understand "the truth" of these stories or accounts as they apply to our lives, in ways that call us back to service and faithfulness? (Dr. Hollander, did you invite me to this pulpit at this moment to get me in trouble?)

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The Rev. Dr. Cheryl F. Dudley has served as the Regional Executive Minister of the American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York since 2015. She was ordained in the American Baptist Churches USA tradition in Phoenix, Arizona, where she was raised, but through the years she has served in several locations. She is glad to call New York City her home, having lived in the metropolitan area since 2006. Cheryl has earned a BA in Sociology from Pomona College, Claremont, CA; a MDiv. from Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ; and a DMin in Executive Leadership from McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL.

The Council of Nicaea that gathered 1700 years ago was a “friendly gathering” to test not so much *if* they believed, but perhaps *what* those who professed Christ believed: what was acceptable or heretical, and where they were in agreement.

I am an American Baptist, so by nature we tend to be non-creedal. Nevertheless, we quibble in various perspectives and understandings of truths. We have said, if you have four Baptists in a room, you have five perspectives. Yet even in our non-creedal-ness, we have key common understandings: belief in Christ, the divine inspiration of scripture, believers’ baptism, soul competency, religious freedom, respect for other faiths, cooperation and *koinōnia* with other believers, and our call to be witnesses for justice and wholeness in our broken world.

Perhaps the distinctions we *all* have in our communions or ecumenically are really “inside talk” – areas that niches of *our* faith debate among themselves – which may or may not be of interest to those outside of Christian circles.

I have a few dear friends who profess to be nonbelievers. These brave friends have the courage to confess to their minister friend that they don’t believe. This doesn’t make one whose vocation is calling people to faith feel very effective, right? I haven’t badgered or argued with them but have listened as they were willing to share their unbelief and am amazed and grateful that we continue to have meaningful connections and have not abandoned fellowship with one another, as those who share faith sometimes do to each other.

One friend shared that when he thinks about religion and belief, it fails the test of logic. Faith is just not logical, he plaintively explained, saying that even miracles are subject to suspicion. Even religious scholars have a hermeneutic of suspicion, as some argue that Lazarus was not dead but in a coma. This friend described growing up in a culture where religion was absent. He was 18 years old when the communist regime fell in his home country of Romania. Despite the restrictions, churches still tried to adapt; my friend’s experience of religion came once a year at Easter – where his father would go to the Orthodox church to retrieve bread and wine and bring it home to them. Priests would give it to the people who came for it, and those like his father would bring it home for their families. They never were given an explanation about what the bread and wine was – what it meant. He had no context for it, yet they took the elements once a year in wonder.

His father did this because he is a Christian and received his faith through his parents. In his family tree on both sides are non-believers, atheists, priests, agnostics, and the devout. Being the logical person that he is, he explored for two or

three years and concluded that it was not for him. Too many restrictions, assignments, and suffering. The music was not understandable to him – fixed in another time period he couldn’t connect to. Perhaps not understanding all of those things was the fruit of his environment.

He thanked me for asking him about his nonbelief which prompted him to think about things he had never really expressed before. My friend has sometimes come to church with me and has said that he admits that church people seemed to have more peace than those who do not claim faith have. When my friend was asked “Do you believe,” however, he said his logical answer is no. There are many things for him and many of us that are too difficult to believe.


In God’s time – *Kairos* – these things of faith will ultimately be revealed. Faith often defies logic and we somehow see or experience something undeniable in the power of the Spirit. Perhaps we are all a bit like Martha, and Mary – watching on the sidelines along with the others, who when hit in the gut by the blows of life don’t know what to believe.

Jesus himself, in the context of reality in Bethany, grieved the death of his dear friend Lazarus in real time. Jesus’ tears were visible. Perhaps he wailed along with other mourners, the demise of one so dear who was bound up in the tomb, whose life left unfinished dreams, ambitions, and uncompleted responsibilities. The stench of his too-soon-extinguished life wafted inside and outside of the place where his lifeless body lay.

What dreams, prayers, hopes, and petitions do you have for the church – which can sometimes appear as if it is dead? Our disappointments can emit a stench that signifies that life is unlikely to return. Someone may say, “Jesus is on the way.” But is it too late?

Another friend said what many have said: “How can a loving God allow such sorrow, heart break, injustice, disappointment to happen? Is God *lollygagging* behind, unaware of the realities that we face?” God’s timing is perplexing sometimes as God attends to all the troubles of the world, his timing, is impeccable, but often different than our own.

If I were to add to the beatitudes today, I would bless this way:

Blessed are those whose lives and faith have not yet been fulfilled, for in God’s timing their spirits will be unbounded and their unspoken prayers answered. One day they will rise to God as a fragrant offering, where sinners along with martyrs and saints will share together in the love feast the Lamb has prepared. Then and there, the one church – the reunited church – will be fulfilled. Amen. 

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