



The Church becoming synodal, part I: *Lumen gentium* and the inverted pyramid

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‘Pope Francis has underlined how “synodality” grounds, shapes and empowers both the life of the Church and the witness and service it is called to render to the human family’, writes Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ – but what does the term really mean? He explores the roots of synodality in Vatican II, and the way in which it necessitates the participation of all the baptised in the life of the Church, in this first part of a rich presentation of a synodal Church.

When the term ‘synodality’ is applied to the Church, it is not meant to designate a mere decision-making process. It is not about collaborative decision-making that reviews alternatives, makes choices, distributes responsibilities and carries out programmes. Rather, synodality expresses a fundamental characteristic of the Church’s identity: its essential communal dimension, its essential evangelising mission, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

As a manifestation of communion that originates in the mystery of the triune God, the Church presents and realises herself by gathering as the ‘People of God’ who walks together. We could say that synodality is the form in which the Church’s original vocation and intrinsic mission are historicised: to call together all people on earth, of every time and age, and make them participants in the salvation and joy of Christ.

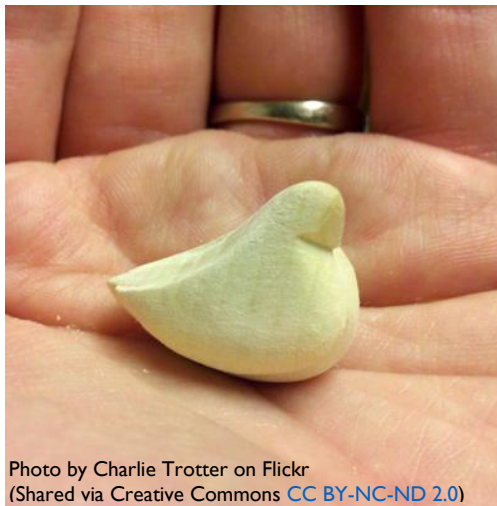


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On several occasions, Pope Francis has underlined how synodality grounds, shapes and empowers both the life of the Church and the witness and service it is called to render to the human family:

To walk together is the *constitutive* way of the Church; the *figure* that enables us to interpret reality with the eyes and heart of God; the *condition*

for following the Lord Jesus and being servants of life in this wounded time. The breath and the pace of the Synod show what we are, and the dynamism of communion that animates our decisions.¹

Synodality – the ‘way’, ‘path’ ‘breath’, ‘condition’, ‘key’ for life in faith – is the *modus vivendi et operandi* with which the Church prepares all its members to share responsibility, develops their charisms and ministries, intensifies their bonds of fraternal love.

For Pope Francis, the reform of the Church starts from within, that is, by virtue of a spiritual process that changes forms and renews structures. Drawing on the legacy of Ignatian spirituality, Francis emphasises the intimate connection between the inner experience, the language of faith and the reform of structures.² Initiating processes of conversion is, therefore, a radical praxis of governance that offers the only real guarantee that the institutionally structured Church can set out on and successfully pursue the communal path of following Jesus, that is, synodality. The insight is this: not only does the Spirit *want* us to make good decisions but, through the process of synodality, the Spirit will *help* us to.

The term 'synodality' is missing from the documents of Vatican II. Why is that? The word is a neologism, the fruit of subsequent theological reflection. Yet it authentically translates and summarises the ecclesiology of communion expressed by the Council. In fact, the Church of the first centuries ordinarily faced the critical issues it had to deal with as a community by listening to the Spirit.

Now the first step to understanding the place of synodality is to recover instances of conciliar teaching on the Church. This will show how synodality represents a *ressourcement*, a return to the sources, that is, to the modality of governance present in the Church since her origins.

The ecclesiology of Lumen gentium: presupposition of synodality

Before the Council, a societal model of ecclesiology was favoured, which held the Church to be the *societas perfecta*. The Council returned to the biblical and patristic categories. In [Lumen gentium](#) (LG), we recognise the theological presuppositions underlying the post-conciliar conceptualisation of synodality. The universal Church is presented as a 'sacrament' (LG §1) and the 'People of God' (LG §4).

In this sense, one of the most innovative aspects of LG is the recovery of the doctrine on the 'common priesthood of the faithful' (LG §10), in which the laity are once again understood to be central in the life of the Church. By virtue of baptism, all her members are awarded the 'dignity of children of God' and their active participation in the mission of the Church is necessary and indispensable. With these affirmations, the Council definitively put an end to the centuries-old custom that had led to a *de facto* distinction between a teaching hierarchy and a learning laity.³ Many lay people now felt encouraged to think about their vocations in an entirely new way.

Graced with the dignity of being sons and daughters, and graced too with the gift and the responsibility of proclaiming the gospel to all, lay people are called to participate in the governance of the Church according to their own duties, roles and ways of acting. The Spirit bestows special charisms and graces on them, making them 'fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which contribute toward the renewal and building up of the Church' (LG §12). In fact, they are 'permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinions on those things which concern the good of the Church.' (LG §37)

The Holy Spirit is the principle of unity that brings all members of the Church, with their different vocations, missions and ministries, together in a single dynamic subject. As the many grains become one bread, the Eucharist is the 'fount and apex' of the believing community (LG §11; [Sacrosanctum concilium](#) [SC] §10). Vatican II thus indicates in the action of the Spirit who vivifies the Church through sacramental grace, especially in the moment of celebration of the Eucharistic assembly, the original source from which the ecclesial 'we' springs and flows.

Two further clarifications allow us to grasp the revolutionary significance of *Lumen gentium* for the subsequent understanding of synodality as the ecclesial 'style', the style appropriate for the Church of Jesus Christ.

The first concerns the *sensus fidei* of the People of God (LG §12), that is, that supernatural instinct⁴ for the truth, which manifests itself in the totality of the faithful and allows them spontaneously to judge the authenticity of a doctrine of faith and converge in adhering to it or to its expression in Christian practice.⁵ Since this convergence (*consensus fidelium*) constitutes an indispensable criterion of discernment for the life of the Church, it represents a valid and important resource for her evangelising mission.

The second clarification concerns the 'sacramentality of the episcopate' (LG §21). The Council teaches that, along with the episcopal consecration, the fullness of the sacrament of Orders is bestowed and the offices of sanctifying, teaching and governing (the unity of the *potestas sacra*) are also conferred. However, by their very nature, they can be exercised only in hierarchical communion with the head and with the members of the college. Due to the collegial character of the episcopal order, the unity of the bishops constitutes a universal reality that precedes the *diakonia* to the individual Churches – the fact that one is the shepherd of a particular diocese.⁶

The supreme collegial power over the whole Church can be exercised by the bishops, together with the pope, either in the solemn form of an ecumenical council or in activities in different contexts scattered throughout the world.

Synodality and collegiality in the Church: the inverted pyramid

The renewed ecclesial awareness of the sacramentality of the episcopate and of collegiality represents a fundamental theological premise for an adequate theological interpretation of

synodality. Indeed, it makes it possible to see how the concept of synodality is broader than that of collegiality: while synodality implies the participation and involvement of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church, collegiality refers to the specific form in which it is defined through the exercise of the ministry of bishops *cum et sub Petro*.

The episcopal ministry combines the particular dimension, in relation to the portion of the people gathered in a local Church, with the universal dimension, that is, the exercise of the ministry in communion with the other bishops and with the pope. Therefore, any effective manifestation of synodality requires the exercise of the collegial ministry of bishops.

Developing the implications of the analogical relationship between the mystery of the immanent Trinity and the *forma ecclesiae*, proposed in the prologue of *Lumen gentium*,⁷ post-conciliar theology highlighted how the agapic-trinitarian syntax regulates the life of the Church. The dynamic relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Divine Trinity – *perichorisis* (Greek) or *circuminessio* (Latin) – is reflected onto and expressed in the structure and vitality of the Church, disposing it to make its essential communion explicit through that 'perichoretic dynamic' which takes the name of 'synodality.'

Francis uses the term 'synod-synodality' in a broad sense, that is, to translate theological orthodoxy into pastoral orthopraxis. 'Synod' does not exclusively refer to the ecclesial structure headed up by the collegial government, but it is the visible form of communion, the path of ecclesial fraternity, which all the baptised personally participate in and contribute to in their own way. A Church that, in its striving towards universality, wants to protect the diversity of cultural identities, considering them an indispensable asset, cannot but assume synodality as that connection or intermediary between the unity of the body and the plurality of members.

Adopting the ecclesiological perspective of Vatican II and following the teaching of *Lumen gentium*, Pope Francis affirms that ‘this path of synodality’ is precisely what ‘God expects of the Church of the third millennium.’⁸ He stresses that synodality ‘offers us the most adequate interpretative framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself’ and traces the image of a Church which – like ‘an inverted pyramid’, where the peak is beneath the base – harmonises all those involved in it: the People of God, the episcopal college, the Successor of Peter.⁹

In *Evangelii gaudium* (EG), Francis gave new impetus to the doctrine of the *sensus fidei fidelium* (EG §119), stating that the path of synodality represents an indispensable prerequisite for infusing the Church with a renewed missionary impulse: all the members of the Church are active subjects of evangelisation and ‘missionary disciples’ (EG §120).

The laity represents the overwhelming majority of the People of God, and there is much to be learned from their participation in the different expressions of the ecclesial community: popular piety, commitment to ordinary pastoral care, competence in the different areas of cultural and social life (EG §126). And if the status and experience of clerical life generate certain unconscious biases, we can hope for a devoted laity to play the attentive, loving observer who helps everyone become conscious of them. When asked about the role of the laity, St John Henry Newman replied: ‘The Church would look foolish without them.’¹⁰

It is therefore necessary to overcome the obstacles that come from a lack of formation and the harmful effects of the clerical mentality that risks relegating the lay faithful to a subordinate role, by opening up spaces in which the laity can express themselves and share the wealth of their experience as disciples of the Lord (EG §102).

The co-responsibility of the entire People of God for the mission of the Church requires beginning consultative processes in which the laity participate and speak more actively. This is not a question of establishing a sort of ‘lay parliamentarism,’ since the authority of the episcopal college does not depend on the faithful delegating it by an electoral process; but it appears rather as a particular charism with which the Spirit has endowed the ecclesial body. This means making full use of the resources and structures that the Church already has.

From this perspective, on 15 September 2018, with the Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis communio* (EC), the Holy Father made all the characteristic steps along the path of a ‘constitutively synodal Church’ normative. Compared with Vatican II, then, the Apostolic Constitution represents Spirit-led progress: while we owe gratitude to the Council for having recovered the ecclesial subjects and their ministerial nature, this document translates the theoretical arguments into ecclesial practice. The keystone is listening: every synodal practice ‘begins by listening to the People of God,’ ‘continues by listening to the Pastors’ and ‘culminates in listening to the Bishop of Rome, who is called to speak as “pastor and teacher of all Christians”’.¹¹

Since collegiality is at the service of synodality, Pope Francis states that ‘the Synod of Bishops must increasingly become a privileged instrument for *listening* to the People of God ... Although structurally it is essentially configured as an episcopal body, this does not mean that the Synod exists separately from the rest of the faithful. On the contrary, it is a suitable instrument to give voice to the entire People of God.’ (EC §6) Therefore, it is ‘very important’ that in the preparation of Synods ‘consultation of all the particular Churches be given special attention.’ (EC §7)

This consultation of the faithful must be followed by ‘discernment on the part of the Bishops’. Attentive to the *sensus fidei* of the People of God, they must be able to perceive the indications of the Spirit and distinguish them ‘from the changing currents of public opinion’ (EC §7).

This way of proceeding is communal discernment, a practice dear to Pope Francis, who frequently mentions it, drawing from his own Ignatian spirituality: it is attending to God’s will in history, in the life, not of an individual person, but of the whole of God’s people. Although it takes place within the heart, the interior, its raw material is always reality echoing and reverberating in the inner realm. It is an interior attitude that pushes us to be open to dialogue, to meeting, to finding God wherever God may be found, and not only within predetermined, well-defined and enclosed parameters (EG §231-33).

Episcopalis communio lays out the synodal practice in three phases: preparation, discussion and implementation; and each Synod during the current pontificate – on the [family](#) (2014, 2015), on [youth](#) (2018), on the [Amazon](#) (2019) – has sought increasingly to carry them out. ‘The synods held every two or three years here in Rome,’ the Holy Father himself observed, ‘are freer and more dynamic, giving more time for honest discussion and listening.’¹²

For the next Synod in October 2022, Pope Francis has chosen as the theme: ‘For a synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission.’

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¹ Pope Francis, [Address to the Italian Episcopal Conference](#), Synod Hall (22 May 2017, emphasis original).

² Cf. A. Spadaro, ‘Il governo di Francesco. È ancora attiva la spinta propulsiva del pontificato?’ *La Civiltà Cattolica* 2020 III 350-64.

³ We can also deduce this intention of the Council Fathers from the very order in which the teaching was presented: the second chapter dedicated to ‘The People of God’ precedes the third one on ‘The Hierarchical Structure of the Church’, in order to make clear how the ecclesiastical hierarchy’s role and purpose is to serve the whole Church. ‘The whole is greater than the part, but it is also greater than the sum of its parts.’ (EG §235)

⁴ The term ‘instinct’ is used for *sensus fidei* because it is not primarily the result of rational deliberation, but rather takes the form of spontaneous and natural knowledge, a kind of perception (*aisthêsis*).

⁵ ‘The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One (cf. 1 Jn 2:20, 27) cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples’ supernatural discernment in matters of faith when “from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful” they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.’ (LG §12)

⁶ The Council specifies that the episcopal college has authority only if it is conceived as united with the Roman Pontiff, as a subject of supreme authority in the Church (LG §22). The affirmation that episcopal ordination primarily involves a reference to the universal Church also remains in the 1983 Code of Canon Law (Can. 330-41). According to some scholars, the Council on this point has not sufficiently clarified how the relationship between the *collegium episcoporum* and the *communio ecclesiarum* is articulated. Cf. H. Legrand, ‘Les Évêques, les Églises locales et l’Église entière’ *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 85 (2001), 210-11.

⁷ Cf. LG §2-4.

⁸ Pope Francis, [Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops](#) (17 October 2015).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ J.H. Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, ed. with intro. by John Coulson (London, 1961), p. 41.

¹¹ *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*.

¹² Pope Francis, *Let us dream: A time to choose* (Simon & Schuster, 2020), p.84.