

RAMIRO PELLITERO

## SYNODALITY, A SIGN AND INSTRUMENT OF COMMUNION AND EVANGELISATION

**Abstract.** The ongoing synodal process (16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly: *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission*), which began in October 2021 and will culminate in the same month in 2023/2024, is encouraging broad participation of the faithful in the synods, starting with local Churches. In terms of its concrete objective, it is a reflection on synodality and its exercise around synodal assemblies. This article explores synodality as a constitutive dimension of the Church and its meaning in practice. It delves into the organic cooperation between pastors and the faithful as the basis for the baptised participating in synods. It looks at some specific aspects of synods: their service in favour of communion and mission, an instrument discerning the “dynamic fidelity” which characterises the Church’s journey; the appropriateness of a journey from the peripheries to the centre; the attitudes proper to those who participate in a synod; and the theological-pastoral dimensions of the synod. These take into account the experience of the Church and the current reflection.

**Keywords:** synodality; synod; communion, participation and mission; organic cooperation between pastors and faithful; dynamic fidelity; synodal spirituality.

Synodality can be seen from the perspective of the Church’s sacramentality as a manifestation of communion and an instrument of evangelization and, therefore, as a constitutive dimension of the Church.. It means walking, living and acting together while exercising organic cooperation between pastors and faithful in order to discern the concrete ways that the dynamic fidelity of the People of God must take in each historical moment. It is worth outlining some stages in the synodal processes and also underlining the attitudes and dimensions proper to synodal discernment.

---

RAMIRO PELLITERO IGLESIAS, Ph.D., is Professor of Pastoral Theology in the School of Theology at the University of Navarra. Address for correspondence: Edificio Facultades Eclesiásticas, Campus universitario, Universidad de Navarra, 31011 Pamplona (Spain). e-mail: [rpellitero@unav.es](mailto:rpellitero@unav.es); ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7098-0783>.

## 1. A CONSTITUTIVE DIMENSION OF THE CHURCH

Synodality is one of the manifestations of *communio* and an expression of the co-responsibility of all the baptized, the People of God, in the Church's evangelizing mission.<sup>1</sup> It is to be considered a *constitutive dimension of the Church* (hence the expression "synodal Church").<sup>2</sup> Synods serve as instruments for the Church's ever-necessary renewal,<sup>3</sup> as well as for implementing or following up on the orientations of the Second Vatican Council, while prolonging the image, spirit and method of the Council itself.<sup>4</sup>

The term *synod* comes from the Greek σύννοδος, the way that is traveled together or, according to another etymology, crossing a threshold. In Latin, *synodus* (related to *concilium*, assembly), means a path that is traveled in communion (*koinonia*; hence synodality has Trinitarian roots), for the Church's edification and mission as the universal sacrament of salvation, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of pastors. "Synod" historically designates the disciples of Jesus (cf. John 14:6; cf. Acts 9:2; 19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14,22), and on some occasions, it simply designates the ecclesial community. Thus, for St. John Chrysostom, synod and Church are equivalent: *Ekklésia synodon estin onoma* (the Church is a word that expresses walking together).<sup>5</sup>

This "walking together" has its principle and fundamental law in the Eucharist: "According to its purpose, the Church has only a dynamic existence, it is on the way; but, theologically considered, this mission is not, first of all, a fact that can be understood from an intramundane and sociological perspective (only in the

<sup>1</sup> For an overview, cf. Eloy Bueno de la Fuente, "Sinodalidad," en *Diccionario de Ecclesiología*, edited by Gianfranco Calabrese, Philip Goyret, Orazio Francesco Piazza, coordinated in the Spanish edition by José Ramón Villar (Madrid: BAC, 2016), 1393–1401.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Francis, *Discourse at the Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015. Already in his apostolic and programmatic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013), he laid the foundations for rethinking and promoting the synodality of the People of God (cf. especially no. 112; more on this topic, see Dario Vitali, *Un popolo in cammino verso Dio. La sinodalità in "Evangelii gaudium"* (Milano: San Paolo, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> "Ecclesia [...], sancta simul et semper purificanda, poenitentiam et renovationem continuo prosequitur" (LG 8).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Apostolica sollicitudo*, 15 September 1965, instituting the Synod of Bishops, and *Discourse at the beginning of the work in the Synodal Aula*, 30 September 1967). "Pablo VI percibió que el Sínodo era una forma de continuar la dinámica del concilio y de responder a los desafíos pastorales en el mundo con una creciente interdependencia global" – Carlos María Galli, *La alegría del Evangelio en América Latina. De la conferencia de Medellín a la canonización de Pablo VI (1968-2018)* (Buenos Aires: Agape, 2018), 140.

<sup>5</sup> San Juan Crisóstomo, Expl. in *Psalm* 149, 1, PG 55, 493.

second term can have something to do with these), but a Eucharistic event that develops according to the law of Christ's life and self-giving."<sup>6</sup>

## 2. WALKING, LIVING AND WORKING TOGETHER

Therefore, a synod means to walk, live and work together, from the profound unity the *koinonia*, that is the mystery of communion of communion, man's communion with God and each other, and mission that is the Church. At the same time, in the Church, the universal sacrament of salvation, "synodality is an antidote to isolation – the individualism typical of our Western culture – which helps us to appreciate the beauty of the human community."<sup>7</sup>

In the history of the Church and Christianity up to the present day, we can highlight two meanings of synodality that in a complementary way contribute to expressing and realizing the Church's mission, since synodality is at the same time an ecclesial property and an institution.

1. There are two *main meanings of synodality*. In a broad sense, it refers – with roots in salvation history developed from the Covenant between God and Israel to his chosen people – back to the Church and her mission, as "walking together" throughout history (*modus vivendi et operandi*).<sup>8</sup> In a stricter sense, it refers to the *synodal assemblies* (and the process that serves as their framework) as a manifestation and concrete realization of this journey. They are assemblies in which Church cohesion and unity are strengthened at all levels. In them, the faithful can collaborate with their pastors in decision-making, exercising the co-responsibility that every baptized person has in the mission.<sup>9</sup> Thus, *communion, participation and mission* are three fundamental keys to synodality.

Synodality is lived from the beginning in the Church. "In the first millennium, 'journeying together,' that is, practicing synodality, was the ordinary way in which the Church (...) acted" (note 10).<sup>10</sup> Until a few decades ago, the term has

<sup>6</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *La verdad es sinfónica* (Madrid: Encuentro, 1979), 84.

<sup>7</sup> Mario Grech, "Uno stile sinodale como antidoto allá chiusura," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 30 May 1994.

<sup>8</sup> "La sinodalidad, siendo una dimensión esencial de la Iglesia, suscita en ella también la exigencia de vivir siempre en estado sinodal: esto significa «en condición discipular y de misión»" (Michele Giulio Masciarelli, "Synodalità e Chiesa," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 10 August 2019).

<sup>9</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018, 6.

<sup>10</sup> *The Preparatory Document for the Synod of 2023*, 11.

now been reserved for meetings of bishops. Today, it is used in a broader sense (it includes conciliarity in some way), to designate the participation of all, hierarchy and faithful, as a reflection of the unity that takes place within the intra-Trinitarian communion, in the edification and mission of the Church, a *participation* that manifests the fraternity around the Eucharist.<sup>11</sup> This participation, not being the only kind, is one of the forms of *organic cooperation*, as we will see in the following section, between faithful and pastors, each according to their condition and gifts. Synodality also offers an interpretative framework for understanding the *meaning of hierarchical ministry* as a ministry of service.

Francis has expressed this meaning using the image of the inverted pyramid. The top is below the base. The sacred or ordained ministers (constituted by the authority) are the servants of all in the People of God, and the one who serves the most is the successor of Peter, “servant of the servants of God.”<sup>12</sup> He also used the image of the polyhedron, contrasting it with the sphere, where all the points are equidistant from the centre and the peculiarity of the peripheries has disappeared; instead, in the polyhedron, the partialities converge towards the centre, but retain their originality and make possible the dynamics of the whole.<sup>13</sup>

2. In the same way, synodality constitutes a channel for the complementarity between *institution and charism* in the Church to be manifested and realized. Indeed, both dimensions cannot live separately. The institution, represented by the ministries, is to serve the Christian life. The charisms that the faithful possess are for the Church’s mission. The faithful are subjects of evangelization, both individually and corporately, not only in a spiritual, but also in a visible way. Although they do not officially represent the Church as a visible institution, they confess their faith (*sensus fidei*)<sup>14</sup> and their belonging to it, participate in its celebrations and develop their ordinary life outside the Church; they live in “communion” and fraternity in different ways, always united in prayer; they are responsible for many tasks as Christians; they collaborate in the ministries of pastors, including the discernment and decision-making in pastoral ministry in local Churches; in this way they influence the Church’s “institutional credibility,” in addition to carrying out the tasks proper to their state (laity, ordained ministers, members of consecrated life) in the Church and in the world. In this way, synods are instruments both

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *La fraternidad de los cristianos* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2004), 69.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Galli, *La alegría del Evangelio en América Latina*, 141–142.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, 236.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. International Theological Commission, *Sensus fidei* in the Life of the Church, 23 September 2014; Pierangelo Sequeri, “Sensus fidei,” en *Diccionario de Ecclesiología*, 1376–1393.

to promote the collaboration of the faithful – most of whom are lay faithful – with the hierarchy – although the proper mission of the laity is to imbue the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel, to bear witness to Christ amid secular tasks, etc. – and to reverse *clericalism*: the mentality that reserves responsibility for the Church to the clergy, with its unfortunate consequences, scandals and abuses of all kinds that derive therefrom.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. ORGANIC COOPERATION BETWEEN PASTORS AND THE FAITHFUL

As we have pointed out, synodality, understood in the strict sense of synodal assemblies, is an expression, put into action, of the organic interaction between the faithful and pastors, as befits an entirely synodal Church. It is worthwhile to pause at this point to assess the role of the lay faithful in this cooperation, as well as its modalities.

1. Before the Second Vatican Council, and as an inheritance received from previous centuries that caused a strong reaction against Protestant anti-hierarchical doctrines, the distinction between pastors and the faithful was accentuated to the point of near separation. The problem was not the affirmation of the hierarchical ministry, but the scant valuation of the baptismal priesthood. Lay Christians were seen as mere auxiliaries of the clergy, those who were to bear the Church's mission.<sup>16</sup>

It is well known how the Council changed this situation, establishing the People of God as the subject of the only one evangelizing mission (cf. LG, ch. 2), in which there is a diversity of services and functions (cf. AA 2). There is *unity* in the Church (unity of the mission vocation), *distinction* (of sacramental or charismatic origin: hence the principal "positions" in the Church: ministers, laity and religious) and *communion* ("she is an organically structured priestly community," states LG 11); that is, the diversity and complementarity of gifts and vocations, ministries and charisms.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, the Church is an *organic communion* in which all, pastors and faithful, according to their respective modality, participate in the *triplex*

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Francis, *Letter to the People of God*, 20 August 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. José Ramón Villar, "Pastores y fieles en comunión operativa," *Scripta Theologica* 48 (2016): 667.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Exhort. *Christifideles laici* (1988), 20. Cf. Pedro Rodríguez, "La cuestión de las leyes imperfectas. La función de Pastores y laicos según la Doctrina social de la Iglesia," *Scripta Theologica* 28 (1996): 405.

*munus* of Christ: priest, prophet and king.<sup>18</sup> According to this, the mission is carried out in “organic cooperation.” The Council expresses the task of pastors in this way:

pastors [...] know that they were not ordained by Christ to take upon themselves alone the entire salvific mission of the Church toward the world. On the contrary, they understand that it is their noble duty to shepherd the faithful and to recognize their ministries and charisms, so that all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one mind (LG 30).<sup>19</sup>

Pastors help the faithful, and the faithful cannot do without the service of the sacred ministers. Thus the whole Church-sacrament serves the salvific action of Christ.

On the part of the lay faithful, they cooperate with the pastors in two ways: a) as baptized faithful (to whom corresponds, among others, a consultative service) and b) as lay faithful, with an ecclesial service of their own.

All the *baptized faithful* participate in the “Christian secularity” (relationship with the world shaped by belonging to Christ) or “secular dimension” of the Church. The lay faithful also participate in this general secularity; moreover, in them, the secular dimension is transformed into a “secular nature” as a characteristic and specifying feature of their vocation. For sacred ministers, the secular dimension is configured and dependent on the sacrament of Orders, and, in fact, they cease to be lay faithful. Among members of the religious life, the general secularity of the Church takes on different configurations according to a charismatic modality that implies a certain “formal” distance from certain values of the world, a distance that is usually expressed by the term “consecration.”<sup>20</sup>

The lay secularity or secular nature of the laity can be explained as the fruit of the Holy Spirit’s charismatic action that, on the one hand, leaves the baptismal ontology untouched. At the same time, it configures the majority of the faithful – the lay faithful – in the “ordinary way” of relating to the world, that is, “from within” the earthly structures (cf. LG 31). It should be

---

<sup>18</sup> Cf. LG 11, 34 y 35; AA 2.

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html), accessed January 24, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> These statements have not been received unanimously in the theological literature. For a synthesis of the discussion, cf. Villar, “Pastores y fieles en comunión operativa,” 673-677. Vid. también nuestro texto “La identidad de los cristianos laicos a la luz del Concilio Vaticano II,” *Scripta Theologica* 47 (2015): 483–506.

emphasized that “this mode of action of the laity in the world is their indispensable ecclesial form of cooperating in the mission”<sup>21</sup> and, therefore, the characteristic form of the lay apostolate.

2. From what has been said, two forms of cooperation of the laity with pastoral ministry emerge, when *Lumen Gentium* states that they “may cooperate in this common undertaking” (no. 30).

a) First of all, the proper way for the faithful to participate through *general cooperation* in the Church’s mission, according to his or her condition and vocation.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the lay faithful, this general cooperation is carried out according to their secular nature, as we have pointed out.

b) Also, based on the Council texts, there is a *more immediate cooperation of the laity with the pastoral ministry*, by the title of baptised that the lay faithful are. This can be done in three possible ways:

(1) First and foremost, *individual collaboration* in functions of pastoral ministry related to doctrine, liturgy and pastoral guidance (cf. LG 22, 24 and 33).

(2) Collaboration in *associations* such as Catholic Action, understood as “collaboration with the hierarchical apostolate” and other apostolic works (cf. LG 20 and 22). In this cooperation, some characteristics of the relationship between the lay apostolate and the hierarchy are noted: on the one hand, respect on the part of pastors for the judgement and prudence of the laity in the works that they freely carry out, the hierarchy limiting itself to general supervision; on the other hand, the notion of “mandate,” applicable in cases where the hierarchy associates a certain work in a narrower and more specific way.

(3) Reference should be made to the *community services* that can be provided by lay people. These services have been called “lay ministries” (a term which is not entirely appropriate and should be replaced by ecclesial or baptismal ministries, since they can also be exercised by religious). Today, they can be undertaken by both men and women,<sup>23</sup> sometimes as a substitute for sacred ministers.

<sup>21</sup> Villar, “Pastores y fieles en comunión operativa,” 677.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. LG, 20, 30, 37 y AA 2; this terminology of “complementarity” and “organic cooperation” was taken up in the exhortation *Christifideles laici* to explain the relations between pastors and laity (cf. nn. 15 and 55).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. The Apostolic Letter *Ministeria quaedam* 15 August 1972 and the Apostolic Letter *Spiritus Domini* (10 January 2021). Concerning synodality, see Carmen Peña, “Sinodalidad y laicado. Corresponsabilidad y participación de los laicos en la vocación sinodal de la Iglesia,” *Ius Canonicum* 59 (2019): 731–765; María del Pilar Río García, “Ministerialidad de la Iglesia y ministerialidad de la mujer en el marco eclesiológico de *Spiritus Domini*,” *Phase* 62 (2022): 29–48.

It is important to insist on the distinction between this more immediate cooperation and the more general cooperation of the laity in the Church's mission, always according to *their secular character*. In any case, these community services are carried out by the laity as Christian or baptised faithful, through their common priesthood, and in relation to the Word, the sacraments and charity.

Finally, among these community services, *two types* should be distinguished:

(a) Those "recognised," such as *de facto* ministries as a lector, acolyte, catechist, or participant in parish or diocesan councils, etc.

b) Those formally "instituted": in this case, it is a matter of collaboration, sometimes – but not always – as a delegate or substitute, on a temporary or permanent basis (in which case they require legitimisation); they require sound doctrine, upright conduct and appropriate formation. Such are (in addition to those already mentioned as recognised) the cases of the extraordinary Eucharistic minister, presiding at non-sacramental celebrations, baptismal celebrations or assistance at marriages in special circumstances, judges, economic or cultural managers, communicators, etc.<sup>24</sup>

The participation of the lay faithful in synods is also in line with community services. In this participation, *dialogue* comes into play as a requirement of structural reciprocity among the faithful and pastors.<sup>25</sup> The *consultative function* of the baptised faithful is also involved here: it is not merely a matter of the faithful helping their pastors, but an exercise of the common priesthood of the faithful and of the prophetic *munus* through the *sensus fidei* or *sensus fidelium* (together with the *munus docendi* of the pastors). In this sense, this consultative function does not coincide with "public opinion" (with merely sociological value), but is a synchronic and diachronic exercise of *communio* in revealed truth and, therefore, in the search for the good that includes the evangelising mission. Hence, the "consultative vote" does not mean a devaluation of the lay faithful; moreover, because of its theological truth, this function can have greater force than the merely juridical.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Cf. CIC 129, 228, 231 y Exhort. ap. *Christifideles Laici*, 23.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Alphonse Borras, "Déliberer en l'Église: communion ecclésiale et fidélité évangélique," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 132 (2010): 177–196.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. José Ramón Villar, "La sinodalidad en la reflexión teológica actual," *Ius Canonicum* 58 (2018): 8–11.



#### 4. DISCERNING DYNAMIC FIDELITY

1. *Synodal processes and ecclesial assemblies* – at their various levels: parish and diocesan, local and regional, continental and universal – express and promote, as has been said, the missionary communion of the People of God. They aim to promote, in every time and place, dynamic fidelity to the Christian message<sup>27</sup> – far from relativism, fundamentalism, progressivism and traditionalism – and, therefore, *discern the signs of the times*<sup>28</sup> and enculturate the Gospel and missionary conversion. All this is done in order to creatively improve evangelising activities.

“In the synodal Church the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called together to pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and offer advice on taking pastoral decisions which correspond as closely as possible to God's will.”<sup>29</sup> This is a condition for what St. Augustine called “concordissima fidei conspiratio,”<sup>30</sup> the agreement in faith among all the baptised.<sup>31</sup>

The Synodal Process is first and foremost a spiritual process. It is not a mechanical data-gathering exercise of a series of meetings and debates. Synodal listening is oriented towards discernment. It requires us to learn and exercise the art of personal and communal discernment. [...] Communal discernment helps to build flourishing and resilient communities for the mission of the Church today. Discernment is a grace from God, but it requires our human involvement in simple ways: praying, reflecting, paying attention to one's inner disposition, listening, and talking to one another in an authentic, meaningful and welcoming way.<sup>32</sup>

The initial paradigm of synodality is what has been called the “Council of Jerusalem” (cf. Acts 15:4-29), in which “the apostles and the elders, together with the whole Church” (v. 22) participated. The fruit of that first assembly was a decision whose expression is, in fact, paradigmatic for synodality: “The Holy Spirit and we have agreed [...]” (v. 28).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Vademecum for the Synod of Synodality* (2021), 2.1.

<sup>28</sup> Vid. Ramiro Pellitero, “Sobre el discernimiento eclesial,” *Roczniki Teologiczne* 68 (2021), 11: 87–104.

<sup>29</sup> International Theological Commission, *The Synodality...*, 68. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html), accessed 24 January, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> San Agustín, *Epistola* 194, 31: PL 33, 805.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *The Preparatory Document 2023*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> *Vademecum*, 2.2.

– From the Council of Jerusalem onwards, synodal terminology especially spread with Eusebius of Caesarea and St John Chrysostom. As a manifestation of synodality, the synods of bishops were born as an expression at the same time of *episcopal collegiality*, which implies a ministry of accompaniment and discernment *cum Petro et sub Petro*. Yet, the term synodality – as we have pointed out – expresses the wider participation of Christian communities, and not only of bishops, in building the Church.

– “The concept of collegiality defines the theological significance and the form of a) the exercise of the ministry of Bishops in the service of the local Church entrusted to the care of each of them, and b) of the communion between local Churches at the heart of the one universal Church of Christ, brought about by means of the hierarchical communion of the College of Bishops with the Bishop of Rome.”<sup>33</sup>

## 5. STAGES IN THE EXERCISE OF SYNODALITY

The first exercise of synodality is that which takes place in the *local Church*<sup>34</sup> and involves both the participation of priests in the local presbyterate and the participation of the laity within the organisational structures of the local Church (such as parish and diocesan councils). All the faithful, based on baptism and its unfolding in *Christian initiation*, and according to their state and gifts, charisms and ministries, can participate in diocesan synods, as well as in other local and provincial councils. This participation should in some way include the poor, the alienated and the forgotten, the elderly and the sick, because God often manifests himself through them.<sup>35</sup>

It should also include baptised non-Catholics; they participate to some degree in the *sensus fidei*, can share their gifts, and so Catholics can strengthen their credibility by listening to them, since the synodal process as a whole is an opportunity to promote ecumenical relations at all levels.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality...*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> This manifests the responsibility of the centre of the Church to listen to the periphery. Cf. Gilles Routhier, “La sinodalité dans l’Église locale,” *Scripta Theologica* 48 (2016): 695-969; Roberto Calvo Pérez “Sínodos diocesanos”, en *Diccionario de Ecclesiología*, 1411–1417; Antonio Ciudad Albertos, “Actuales expresiones canónicas de sinodalidad,” *Scripta Theologica* 48 (2016): 707–730.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, 197.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Pontifical Council for promoting Christian Unity, *The Bishop and Christian Unity: an ecumenical Vademecum* 2020; *Letter to the Bishops responsible for Eumenism in the Episcopal Conferences and Synods*, 28 October 2021.

It is *Christian initiation* (formed around the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and first communion) that makes possible the unfolding of the potential of baptism, the integration of various charisms and, where appropriate, the possibility of ministries, whether ordained or not.

The local level foresees the basic “ingredients” of the synodal experience: a liturgical celebration to begin, gathering in a large assembly, small group meetings, moments of silence and prayer, informal conversations, shared experiences (such as pilgrimages, artistic expressions, and experiences with those who are vulnerable, handicapped persons, and the elderly), and a liturgical celebration to conclude.<sup>37</sup>

The second level of synodality takes place at the *national and continental* levels (provinces and ecclesiastical regions, local councils and episcopal conferences).

The last level is that of the universal Church: the synod of bishops,<sup>38</sup> representing the episcopate, as an expression of collegiality in a synodal Church.

The aim of the Synod of Bishops is not to overshadow the diocesan, episcopal conference/synod of Oriental Churches, and continental phases, but rather to discern at a universal level the voice of the Holy Spirit who has been speaking throughout the entire Church.<sup>39</sup>

## 6. ATTITUDES AND DIMENSIONS OF SYNODAL DISCERNMENT

1. Synodality can be seen today as a “systematic rediscovery” (in the sense of organic and global) for the life of the Church and theology, in relation to the “*sensus fidei*”<sup>40</sup> and as an exercise of the *prophetic “munus”* of the faithful, in complementarity with the *munus docendi* of the Church’s hierarchy and the magisterium.<sup>41</sup> Thus, all the faithful are taught and learn that

<sup>37</sup> *Vademecum* (2023), 2021, 4.5. [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/vademecum/en\\_vade.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/vademecum/en_vade.pdf), accessed 24 January, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Mariano Crociata, “Sínodo de los obispos,” en *Diccionario de Ecclesiología*, 1401–1411.

<sup>39</sup> *Vademecum*, 3.4. See also Fernando Rodríguez Garrapucho, “Sínodos orientales,” en *Diccionario de Ecclesiología*, 1417–1427.

<sup>40</sup> “Ecclesial synodality therefore needs theologians to do theology in a synodal way, developing their capacity to listen to each other, to dialogue, to discern and to harmonise their many and varied approaches and contributions” (International Theological Commission, *Synodality...*, 75).

<sup>41</sup> Hence the principle, highly esteemed in the first millennium: “Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet” (cf. *ibid.*, 122; Yves Congar, *Falsas y verdaderas reformas en la Iglesia* (Madrid:

“there can be no rigid separation between teachers and learners” according to their state in life.

In today’s perspective, the *synodal Church* implies renewing the institutions and channels that promote the attitudes proper to ecclesial discernment: encounter, listening and dialogue, initiative and reception, discernment, cooperation and participation.<sup>42</sup> Synodality facilitates the integration of the voices of the people of God, the episcopal college and the successor of Peter.

A synod presupposes encounter, listening and pastoral and ecclesial discernment: it is an *encounter*, so that all the faithful, based on their *common priesthood*,<sup>43</sup> may participate, according to everyone’s condition and vocation, in order to guide the service rendered to them by the ministerial priesthood; it is *listening*, first of all to the Holy Spirit (in prayer and also to others) and listening to one another; specifically, listening to the faithful on the part of pastors and bishops on the part of the Pope; this pedagogy and practice of listening<sup>44</sup> is a condition of *discernment*, based on knowledge and transmission of the experience of the Church, its needs and those of the world, to implement processes of co-responsibility in mission.

As an expression and instrument of the Church’s evangelising mission, synodality has not only an *ad intra* dimension, but also an *ad extra* dimension: it is *not simply one* evangelising dimension in general, since everything that is done in the Church is evangelisation, but also a missionary dimension, in the strict sense *ad gentes*, which is open to sharing the message of the Gospel in dialogue with all cultures and religions, thus promoting universal brotherhood.

Thus, a synod is, at the same time, a consultative body, a process and a moment, an event and a structure, a path of spiritual discernment and even a style and way of being<sup>45</sup> which is realised in worship and prayer, in contact with the Word of God.

Given the plurality of meanings of both the term synodality and the more specific term “synod,” it is necessary to be aware of the analogical use of these words and pay attention to the context in which they appear.

---

Instituto de Estudios Políticos, 1953), 203; Idem, “Quid omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet,” *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* 36 (1958): 210–259, especially 224–228.

<sup>42</sup> On the attitudes necessary for discernment, cf. *Vademecum*, 2.3 y 2.4. See what we have written in “Sobre el discernimiento eclesial,” 99–101.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Ramiro Pellitero, “El sacerdocio común de los fieles en la reflexión posterior al Concilio Vaticano II,” *Annales Theologici* 33 (2019): 319–353.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Franz Jalics, *Escuchar para ser. Dimensión contemplativa de las relaciones interpersonales* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2021).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Vademecum*, 3.1.

Today, the process of improving the concrete dynamics of synods, their channels of expression and communication, and the ways of doing things, so that their diagnoses and proposals are relevant for the life of Christian people and families, is underway.<sup>46</sup> Thus, it is well understood that the purpose of the synods is not simply the visibility of participation or the elaboration of working documents, but, as has been said, listening to personal experiences. While opinions may be more or less true, experiences, while they may be considered more or less positive or negative, are all true insofar as they are real. Listening facilitates the promotion of holiness in the faithful<sup>47</sup> and of the evangelising mission at all levels and in its various aspects. It provides knowledge of the cause and manifests the closeness of Christ's disciples to the real issues and problems of the Church and the world without remaining under a mere maintenance pastoral.

In connection with synods, the need for prayer and formation for all (laity, sacred ministers, religious) in the various aspects of evangelisation (Christian identity and belonging to the Church, interior and missionary conversion, inculturation, integral development, the ecological dimension, education and communication of the faith, etc.) is rediscovered. "The path of synodality is the path that God expects of the Church in the third millennium."<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, it is clear that the current phase of renewal and the impulse of synodality has important connections with ecumenism.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> All this raises the desirability of some juridical-canonical reforms, which may affect the synod of bishops, but also other ecclesial structures, such as episcopal conferences and diocesan synods. See this purpose in Antonio Viana, "Sinodalidad y derecho canónico," *Estudios eclesiológicos*, 92 (2017): 689–690.

<sup>47</sup> See our text "Santidad y edificación de la Iglesia" in Josep Ignasi Saranyana et al. (dirs.), *El caminar histórico de la santidad cristiana* (Pamplona: Universidad de Navarra, 2004), 517–533.

<sup>48</sup> Francis, *Discourse at de 50° anniversary of the institution of the Synods of Bishops*, 17 October 2015. Cf. Santiago Madrigal, "El camino sinodal del Papa Francisco," *CONFER* 60 (2021), 230: 173–196. In an unpublished lecture delivered at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick (Ireland) on December 8, 2021, Austen Ivereigh, the Pope's biographer, pointed to seven sources of Francis' impetus to synodality: the Acts of the Apostles (cf. Acts 15:4-29); the Church of the first millennium; St Ignatius and his Spiritual Exercises; the Second Vatican Council; the reception of the Council in Latin America under the guidance of CELAM, including the Aparecida conference; sexual abuse in connection with clericalism; and the Covid-19 pandemic (which has prompted us to assume our responsibility as the People of God for the life of the world: recall the Pope's meditation alone in St Peter's Square on March 27, 2020, broadcast live around the world).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality...*, 9; Jutta Burggraf, *Conocerse y comprenderse*, 2ª ed. (Madrid: Rialp, 2003); Piero Coda, "La sinodalidad como oportunidad ecuménica," en *La sinodalidad en la vida y en la misión de la Iglesia. Texto y comentario del documento de la Comisión Teológica Internacional*, editado por Santiago Madrigal (Madrid: BAC, 2019), 175–205; Fernando Rodríguez Garrapucho, "Hacia una sinodalidad ecuménica," en *En camino hacia una Iglesia sinodal. De Pablo VI a Francisco*, coords. Rafael Luciani, María Teresa Compte

Ecclesial and pastoral experience indicates that, in any synod, *four dimensions*, among others, should be considered: the *pastoral* or evangelising dimension (the most essential, because we look at reality through the eyes of “missionary disciples”), the *cultural* dimension, the *social* dimension and the *ecological* dimension. This means seeing the reality of peoples, valuing their style of a “good life” in the sense of their identity and wisdom, their way of seeing the world and their history. This must be done without reducing their idiosyncrasies, but by respecting the authenticity of their cultures, without qualifying them by setting boundaries, without proposing merely pragmatic measures, but starting with contemplation and admiration for the many true and good things they possess, things we share in common and can learn from them.<sup>50</sup> As it is proper to discernment, these dimensions require dialogue with the sciences, particularly the humanities and social sciences.

2. In short, a synod is: 1) an opportunity to discern God’s will and thus foster holiness, the dynamic fidelity of the whole people of God, including missionary conversion; 2) an operative (though not only) translation of the *communio* that is the Church, with its particular structure, ordered towards mission and in the “active hope” of the Kingdom of God; 3) a channel for collaboration among the faithful, from the “sense of faith” to the service rendered by pastors (the episcopal college presided over by its head, the Pope); 4) a way of manifesting and developing the relationship between the institution and the charisms in the Church and thus of reversing clericalism; 5) an instrument for Gospel inculturation within local Churches; 6) an opportunity also to rediscover the “here and now” in the social dimension of evangelisation; 7) and first of all, an event of grace and a healing process guided by the Holy Spirit, which calls for prayer and formation, but above all faith and humility.<sup>51</sup>

Participation is indeed a *matter of faith*. Not only in the theological sense, meaning that it presupposes the essence of the Church and the sense of faith among the faithful; but also in the existential, spiritual and pastoral dimensions

---

(Madrid: PPC, 2020), 215–235; Benito Méndez Fernández, “La sinodalidad en perspectiva ecuménica”, *Salmanticensis* 68 (2021): 265–300.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Francis, *Greeting at the opening of the works of the Assembly for the Pan-Amazon region*, 7 October 2019.

<sup>51</sup> “It can be seen that the synodal process not only has its point of departure but also its point of arrival in the People of God, upon whom the gifts of grace bestowed by the Holy Spirit through the gathering of Bishops in Assembly must be poured out” (Francis, Ap. Const. “*Episcopalis communio*” on the *Synod of Bishops*, 15 April 2018, 15)..

that, without the faith that the Holy Spirit is really at work in us and in others,<sup>52</sup> and therefore needs to be heard, there would be no participation; and without participation, ecclesial communion and mission seem to be abstract. *Humility* is an antidote to individualism and worldliness. Faith and humility translate into readiness for *prayer and worship*: “Worship is synodal prayer par excellence, because it is where we awaken to our action. When we are present before Jesus, in communion with him in the Eucharist, we are known, recognised and loved. We participate.”<sup>53</sup>

As the Second Vatican Council was drawing to a close, Romano Guardini wrote: “The Church has perceived ‘the world’ as something that is not only profane and dangerous, but also – or rather, above all – the work of God, loved by him and entrusted to man. Yet, to be consistent, this means that the Church esteems and listens to the judgement of the laity, who are the ones to whom the world is given under her responsibility, and that she passes on to them what is their business.”<sup>54</sup>

God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity, and we can already see its first signs. [...] Christian hope sustains us in committing ourselves fully to the new evangelization and to the worldwide mission, and leads us to pray as Jesus taught us: “Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10). The number of those awaiting Christ is still immense: the human and cultural groups not yet reached by the Gospel, or for whom the Church is scarcely present, are so widespread as to require the uniting of all the Church’s resources. [...] We must increase our apostolic zeal to pass on to others the light and joy of the faith, and to this high ideal the whole People of God must be educated.<sup>55</sup>

Let us not soundproof our hearts; let us not remain barricaded in our certainties. [...] Jesus calls us, as he did the rich man in the Gospel, to empty ourselves, to free ourselves from all that is worldly, including our inward-looking

---

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Roberto Calvo Pérez, *La pastoral, acción del Espíritu: ungidos y urgidos en esperanza* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 2002), 52–63.

<sup>53</sup> Austen Ivereigh, “Speak Boldly, Listen Carefully: Inside the Synod,” *Commonwealth Magazine*, October 23, 2021. Francis’ biographer refers above all to the Pope’s speech at the beginning of the synodal process: participation is “not a requirement of style but of faith”; it is an opportunity to “move *not occasionally but structurally* towards a *synodal Church*” (9 October 2021).

<sup>54</sup> Romano Guardini, *La Iglesia del Señor: meditaciones sobre la esencia y la misión de la Iglesia* (texto de 1965), published in Spanish as second part of the volume entitled *El sentido de la Iglesia* (Buenos Aires–Madrid–San Pablo: Edibesa, 2010), 109.

<sup>55</sup> Juan Pablo II, Enc. *Redemptoris missio* (1990), 86. [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html), accessed 24 January, 2023.

and outworn pastoral models; and to ask ourselves what it is that God wants to say to us in this time and the direction in which he wants to lead us.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, synodality – to the extent that it is authentically realised – can help us to overcome inertia, routines and fears; for “Jesus did not come to bring an evening breeze, but fire to the earth.” It is a matter of “rekindling the gift” (2 Tim 1:6, literally “giving life to the fire,” *anazopurein*). This implies *discernment* in order to serve with wisdom, sensitivity and faithfulness to the newness of the Spirit.<sup>57</sup>

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *La verdad es sinfónica*. Madrid: Encuentro, 1979.
- Borras, Alphonse. “Délibérer en l’Église: communion ecclésiale et fidélité évangélique”. *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 132 (2010): 177–196.
- Bueno de la Fuente, Eloy. “Sinodalidad”. En *Diccionario de Ecclesiología*, editado por Gianfranco Calabrese, Philip Goyret, Orazio Francesco Piazza, coordinado en la edición española por José Ramón Villar, 1393–1401. Madrid: BAC, 2016.
- Burggraf, Jutta. *Conocerse y comprenderse*, 2ª ed. Madrid: Rialp, 2003.
- Calvo Pérez, Roberto. “Sinodos diocesanos”. En *Diccionario de Ecclesiología*, editado por Gianfranco Calabrese, Philip Goyret, Orazio Francesco Piazza, coordinado en la edición española por José Ramón Villar, 1411–1417. Madrid: BAC, 2016.
- Calvo Pérez, Roberto. *La pastoral, acción del Espíritu: ungidos y urgidos en esperanza*. Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 2002.
- Ciudad Albertos, Antonio. “Actuales expresiones canónicas de sinodalidad”. *Scripta Theologica* 48 (2016): 707–730.
- Coda, Piero. “La sinodalidad como oportunidad ecuménica”. En *La sinodalidad en la vida y en la misión de la Iglesia. Texto y comentario del documento de la Comisión Teológica Internacional*, editado por Santiago Madrigal, 175–206. Madrid: BAC, 2019.
- Congar, Yves. *Falsas y verdaderas reformas en la Iglesia*. Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Políticos, 1953.
- Crociata, Mariano. “Sinodo de los obispos”. En *Diccionario de Ecclesiología*, editado por Gianfranco Calabrese, Philip Goyret, Orazio Francesco Piazza, coordinado en la edición española por José Ramón Villar, 1401–1411. Madrid: BAC, 2016.
- Francis, *Discourse at the Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015.
- Francis. Ap. Const. “*Episcopalis communio*” on the Synod of Bishops 15 April 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Francis, *Homily at the opening of the Synodal path*, 10 October 2021. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html>, accessed 24 January, 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Idem, *Homily at the opening of the Synod for the Pan-Amazon region*, 6 October 2019.



- Francis. *Homily at the opening of the Synodal path*, 10 October 2021.
- Galli, Carlos María. “La renovación sinodal y misionera del Pueblo de Dios”. En Carlos María Galli. *La alegría del Evangelio en América Latina: De la conferencia de Medellín a la canonización de Pablo VI (1968-2018)*, 125-144. Agape: Buenos Aires, 2018.
- Guardini, Romano. *El sentido de la Iglesia. La Iglesia del Señor*. Buenos Aires–Madrid–San Pablo: Edibesa, 2010.
- Homily at the opening of the Synod for the Pan-Amazon region, 6 October 2019.
- International Theological Commission, “*Sensus fidei*” in the Life of the Church, 23 September 2014.
- International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018.
- Ivereigh, Austen. “Speak Boldly, Listen Carefully: Inside the Synod”. *Commonwealth Magazine*, 23 de octubre de 2021.
- Jalics, Franz. *Escuchar para ser. Dimensión contemplativa de las relaciones interpersonales*. Salamanca: Sígueme, 2021.
- Luciani, Rafael-Silveira y Maria del Pilar, ed. *La sinodalidad en la vida de la Iglesia*. Madrid: San Pablo, 2020.
- Madrigal, Santiago, ed. *La sinodalidad en la vida y en la misión de la Iglesia. Texto y comentario del documento de la Comisión Teológica Internacional*. Madrid: BAC, 2019.
- Madrigal, Santiago. “El camino sinodal del Papa Francisco”. *CONFER* 60 (2021), 230: 173–196.
- Méndez Fernández, Benito. “La sinodalidad en perspectiva ecuménica”. *Salmanticensis* 68 (2021): 265–300.
- Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Apostolica sollicitudo*, 15 September 1965, instituting the Synod of Bishops.
- Pellitero, Ramiro. “El sacerdocio común de los fieles en la reflexión posterior al Concilio Vaticano II”. *Annales Theologici* 33 (2019): 319–353.
- Pellitero, Ramiro. “La identidad de los cristianos laicos a la luz del Concilio Vaticano II”. *Scripta Theologica* 47 (2015): 483–506.
- Pellitero, Ramiro. “Santidad y edificación de la Iglesia”. En *El caminar histórico de la santidad cristiana*, coordinado por Josep Ignasi Saranyana, Juan Antonio Gil Tamayo, Maria Rosario Bustillo, Eduardo Flandes, Santiago Casas Rabasa, 517–533. Pamplona: Universidad de Navarra, 2004.
- Pellitero, Ramiro. “Sobre el discernimiento eclesial”. *Roczniki Teologiczne* 68 (2021), 11: 87–104.
- Peña, Carmen, “Sinodalidad y laicado. Corresponsabilidad y participación de los laicos en la vocación sinodal de la Iglesia”. *Ius Canonicum* 59 (2019): 731–765.
- Pontifical Council for promoting Christian Unity, *Letter to the Bishops responsible for Eumenism in the Episcopal Conferences and Synods*, 28 October 2021.
- Pontifical Council for promoting Christian Unity. *The Bishop and Christian Unity: an ecumenical Vademecum*, 4 December 2020.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. *La fraternidad de los cristianos*. Salamanca: Sígueme, 2004.
- Rodríguez Garrapucho, Fernando, “Sínodos orientales”. En *Diccionario de Ecclesiología*, editado por Gianfranco Calabrese, Philip Goyret, Orazio Francesco Piazza, coordinado en la edición española por José Ramón Villar, 1417–1427. Madrid: BAC, 2016.

- Rodríguez Garrapucho, Fernando. “Hacia una sinodalidad ecuménica”. En *En camino hacia una Iglesia sinodal. De Pablo VI a Francisco*, coordinado por Rafael Luciani, María Teresa Compte, 215–235. Madrid: PPC, 2020.
- Rodríguez, Pedro, “La cuestión de las leyes imperfectas. La función de Pastores y laicos según la Doctrina social de la Iglesia”. *Scripta Theologica* 28 (1996): 399–438.
- Routhier, Gilles. “La sinodalité dans l’Église locale”. *Scripta Theologica* 48 (2016): 695–969.
- Sequeri, Pierangelo. “Sensus fidei”. En *Diccionario de Eclesiología*, editado por Gianfranco Calabrese, Philip Goyret, Orazio Francesco Piazza, coordinado en la edición española por José Ramón Villar, 1376–1393. Madrid: BAC, 2016.
- Synod of Bishops. *The Preparatory Document for the Synod of 2023*, Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021
- Synod of Bishops. *Vademecum for the Synod of Synodality*, Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021.
- Viana, Antonio. “Sinodalidad y derecho canónico”. *Estudios eclesiológicos: Revista de investigación e información teológica y canónica* 92 (2017): 683–701.
- Villar, José Ramón. “La sinodalidad en la reflexión teológica actual”. *Ius Canonicum* 58 (2018): 69–82.
- Villar, José Ramón. “Sinodalidad: pastores y fieles en comunión operativa”. *Scripta Theologica* 48 (2016): 667–685.
- Vitali, Dario, *Un popolo in cammino verso Dio. La sinodalità in “Evangelii gaudium”*. Milano: San Paolo, 2018.
- Vitali, Dario. “Sinodalidad: de *Apostolica sollicitudo* a *Episcopalis Communio*”. En *En camino hacia una Iglesia sinodal. De Pablo VI a Francisco*, coordinado por Rafael Luciani, María Teresa Compte, 25–48. Madrid: PPC, 2020.