

**Some core points to advance towards an *Ecclesial Synodality*
The challenge of an effective synodalization of ecclesial life**

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1. The Normative Character of the Category *People of God*

In 2013, we entered a new phase in the reception of the Second Vatican Council that recovered the Church as *the people of God* as the central hermeneutical criterion of the Council's ecclesiology. This image was proposed by Card. Suenens and incorporated in *Lumen Gentium* by placing the chapter on the People of God [II] before the chapter on the hierarchy [III], making the sequence of the Chapters normative. The document on *Synodality in the life and in the mission of the Church* by the International Theological Commission recovers this today: "the sequence —the Mystery of the Church (chapter 1), the People of God (chapter 2), the Hierarchical Constitution of the Church (chapter 3)— stresses that the ecclesiastical hierarchy is at the service of the People of God in order that the Church may carry out her mission in conformity with God's plan of salvation, in the logic of the priority of the whole over its parts and of the end over the means" (ITC *Syn*, 54).

With this sequence, the Council Fathers recognized the participation of all the members of the messianic People of God (LG 9) in the *tria munera* (LG 10-13.31; AA 2) of Christ —priest, prophet, and king— thus establishing the equality of *all* by means of baptismal dignity as a structuring criterion for the configuration of the identity of all ecclesial subjects. Therefore, this hermeneutics of the Council made "it possible to affirm both the equality of all the faithful in the dignity of Christian existence and the organic or functional inequality of the members." (Congar). In this way, the pre-conciliar ecclesiology of an *unequal society* was overcome. The words of Bishop De Smedt in the Council were clear: "we must be careful when speaking about the Church so as not to fall into a certain hierarchism, clericalism, and bishopolatry or papolatry. What comes first is the People of God. [Consequently,] the hierarchical power is only transitory (...). What is permanent is the people of God" (*AS*, 1/4, 143).

The recovery of the notion of People of God allows for an understanding of the Church as a collective *organic* subject that constitutes an *ecclesial we* (Cf. Serena Noceti; ITC *Syn*, 47.107). After the Council, Cardinal Suenens stated: "if we were to be asked what we consider to be that seed of life deriving from the council which is most fruitful in pastoral consequences, we would answer without any hesitation: it is the rediscovery of *the people of God as a whole*, as a single reality; and then by way of consequence the co-responsibility implied for every member of the church". It is because of this hermeneutical ecclesiological framework that we can talk about *synodality*, but a great deal of the problem we face today when talking about *synodality* has to do with an incomplete or fragmented reception of this Council's hermeneutics.

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Synodality embodies a maturation and deepening in the reception of this understanding of the *Church as People of God walking together* according to which "the Pastors and the other faithful are bound to one another by *mutual necessity*" (LG 32). This produces a *constitutive reciprocity* among all ecclesial subjects by which all are called to *walk together* in order to become *People of God in communion* —a *Synodal Church*. But what does *walking together* mean? The *Preparatory Document* (PD) for the *Synod on Synodality* explains that journeying together ~~can be understood from two perspectives.~~ "The first looks at the internal life of the particular Churches, at the relationships between the subjects that constitute them (in the first place, the relationship between the faithful and their pastors, also through the participatory bodies provided for by canonical discipline, including the diocesan synod) and at the communities in which they are articulated (in particular parishes)" (PD 28). "The second perspective considers how the People of God walks together with the entire human family" (PD 29). Therefore, discerning synodality means discerning the whole the Church, *ad intra* and *ad extra*, because "synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church People of God" (ITC, *Syn* 6).

Building a *Synodal Church* will require processes of *conversion of mentalities* and *reform of structures*, and overall, a change of the current *clericalist ecclesial culture*. More specifically, it implies reviewing "relationships and mentalities" (being) and "communicative dynamics and structures" (operating) at the same time. Hence, it demands "conversion and reforms", both (Cf. *DCS. Working Document for the Continental Stage of the Synod*, 98-103).

2. People of God in a Particular Place. The Ecclesiology of the Local Churches

To recognize the centrality of *Lumen Gentium*'s chapter II further reveals another dimension of the *ecclesial reconfiguration*: the affirmation that "in and from the particular Churches there exists the one Catholic Church" (LG 23). Additionally, the People of God that exists in "the variety of local churches is splendid evidence of the Catholicity of the undivided Church" (ITC, *Syn* 61). Pope Paul VI reminded that "the Church spread throughout the world would become an abstraction if it did not take on body and life precisely through the particular Churches" (EN 62). Though, while the local Church is not the *whole* Church, it is a *complete* church.

The call to recover the ecclesiology of local churches is one of the most important ongoing contributions of the current phase in the reception of the Council. It provides the hermeneutical framework for understanding the ecclesiological *shift* that synodality represents today. In fact, "the first level of synodality" lies precisely in conceiving the church as a *Church of churches*, existing in a variety of ecclesial identities with all their theological, liturgical, spiritual, pastoral, and canonical particularities (LG 23, UR 4, AG 19). Card. Grech reminds us that "there is no other People of God but that which lives in every *portio Populi Dei* (..) The principle that founds and governs this understanding of the People of God was established by the Council: this People exists in and from the particular Churches (..). There is no Church outside of this principle".

The reception and practical implementation of this ecclesiological model by Francis can be described with the use of a *communicative dynamic*, "that of listening". The Pope says that "a synodal Church is a Church that listens." The implications of such an act of listening go beyond

a personal conversion, because listening shapes the relations among ecclesial subjects and reconfigures the Church organization and structures. The act of listening to the people and their cultures enables a process of reconfiguration of the ecclesial organization. Francis explains that the people of God must be listened to, in their particular place and time, “in order to know what the Spirit is saying to the Churches” (Rev 2:7) and find ways of proceeding that respond to the particular reality where ecclesial life and mission evolves. This is what the Synod for the Pan-Amazon Region claimed when it said that “[the Church] reconfigures her own identity through listening and dialoguing with the people, realities and stories of a [sociocultural] territory” (QA 66). Hence, we can say that the exercise of Synodality is the most appropriate way to generate processes of identity and theological-cultural reconfiguration of the Church under the model of the Church as *Church of Churches*, thus fulfilling the catholicity of local churches.

3. The Challenge of Situating Episcopal Collegiality within Ecclesial Synodality

From this perspective, *synodality* offers the framework to address two *juxtapositions* that still remain unresolved in the reception of the aforementioned Council’s ecclesiology. First, between *collegiality and primacy*. Second, between *collegiality and synodality*.

3.1 Collegiality and Primacy

Lumen Gentium 22 and *Christus Dominus* 4 explain collegiality in the context of differences of power between the episcopal college and the primate. Therefore, the emerging post-conciliar ecclesial institutions were defined by the exercise of *potestas*. This is the case of the *Synod of Bishops*, created by Paul VI, which reinforced the idea of a hierarchical episcopal collegiality exercised strictly *with* and *among* some (bishops) and *for* one (Pope). The problem arises when it is not understood that the *Synod of Bishops* is only one particular instance of the exercise of power between the episcopate and the primate, and not its full realization. According to John O’Malley, “the Synod would be subject (...) to the power of the Pope (...). *Apostolica Sollicitudo* was, with all its merits, an expression of papal primacy, and not of collegiality, a word that was not even mentioned in the text” (O’Malley, Vatican II). Even more, it was created with a juxtaposition between these two entities –*collegiality and primacy*– giving the impression of being endowed with autonomy with respect to the rest of the People of God.

Aiming at resolving this impasse, the practice of an *affectus collegialis* within the hierarchical communion with the papacy was privileged, rather than an effective, horizontal, binding collegiality. This vision was finally institutionalized and extended to all ecclesial subjects with the *hermeneutical turn* introduced by the Extraordinary Synod of 1985. There, the notions of participation and co-responsibility were interpreted through the exclusive lens of *hierarchical communio* as a principle of vertical and auxiliary relationships among all ecclesial subjects. This implied a return to a pyramidal way of understanding the *process of configuring ecclesial identities*. In this matter, *synodality* offers a *reciprocal identity-building dynamic* between the *All* [People of God], the *Many* [collegiality] and the *One* [primacy] that can overcome this juxtaposition. But the unresolved juxtaposition will remain if the *hierarchica communio* is exercised without being bind to the normative character of the *communio fidelium et ecclesiarum*.

3.2 Collegiality and Synodality

It is possible to say that we are in *the early moments of an emergent* and more inclusive solution. *Episcopalis Communio* (2018) conceives the *Synod* as a circular and polyhedral process with the purpose of building ecclesial consensus throughout different phases, starting with the local churches and involving the totality of the faithful in a dynamic of reciprocity and necessity. By this means, Francis has enabled a broadening of the exercise of *episcopal collegiality* in the light of synodality, although it continues to have as *the enabling referent* an episcopal structure—the *Synod of Bishops*—and not an ecclesial one. In fact, under Francis, Synodality is understood as a *synodal collegiality* (Letter to Baldisseri, 2014) that "manifests the *collegialitas affectiva*, which can become effective only in some circumstances" (Francis, *50th Ann.*, 2015), but not in a permanent way.

In light of this vision, synodality offers a greater interaction between the hierarchy and the rest of the faithful through the *Synod*, which articulates "the ministry of the personal and collegial exercise of apostolic authority with the synodal exercise of discernment by the community" (ITC, *Syn* 69). Francis explains this by saying that, "although in its composition it is essentially an episcopal body, the *Synod* does not live apart from the rest of the faithful. On the contrary, it is a suitable instrument for giving voice to the whole People of God" (*EC* 6).

Nevertheless, we can find here an initial recovery of *the exercise of episcopal collegiality in light of an ecclesiology of local churches*, moving from the model of *hierarchica communio* to that of *communio fidelium et ecclesiarum* by deepening the reception of *LG* 23. In doing so, the bishop is called to attend a synodal assembly not simply to give his individual opinion, but as voice and witness of the sentiments of the faithful (*sensus fidei*) of his particular church—*portio populi Dei* or diocese—, deepening the reception of *LG* 12. If Bishops do not participate personally in synodal processes with the rest of the faithful, we will continue to experience an "insufficient consideration of the *sensus fidelium*, the concentration of power and the isolated exercise of authority" (Borras). Even more, without the integration of the bishops with the rest of the faithful how can "the unique consensus of all the faithful" be achieved (*DV* 10)?

It is important to recognize that the model of a *synodal collegiality* recovers the theology and the practice of the *sensus fidei* in three aspects: (a) by creating the link between "the entire People of God, ... the exercise of the episcopal ministry and the primatial ministry of the Bishop of Rome"; (b) by promoting the principle of *essential co-responsibility* that "expresses the active subject character of all the Baptized"; (c) and by fostering a collaborative dynamic "at various levels and in various ways, at the level of the particular Churches, at that of their regional groupings and at that of the universal Church" (*CTI Sin* 64). Although a *synodal collegiality* understands the "exercise of the *sensus fidei* of the *universitas fidelium*" (*ITC Syn*, 64), it still leaves open an unresolved bond between the process of consultation and listening (*All*), the discernment and decision-making (*Some*) and the decision-taking (*One*).

4. Towards an effective synodalization of the Church

As seen, Synodality expresses a new way of being and proceeding in the Church that “has its point of departure but also its point of arrival in the People of God” (*Episcopalis Communio* 7). In other words, “synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church, and through synodality the Church reveals and configures herself as the pilgrim People of God.” This scenario places us before a moment of *ecclesiogenesis* that stimulates us to take *a new ecclesiological turn*: to go from the “*collegial we* of the episcopate gathered in unity *cum Petro et sub Petro*” to the “*ecclesial we*, in which each ‘I’, being clothed with Christ (cf. *Gal 2:20*), lives and walks with the brothers and sisters as a responsible and active subject in the one mission of the People of God” (ITC *Syn*, 60). Therefore, the revision of episcopal collegiality —the great novelty of the Council— in the perspective of a *synodal collegiality* —a contribution of the pontificate of Francis— must still advance towards a *synodal ecclesiality*.

An *ecclesial synodality* is grounded in the equal participation of *all* in the common priesthood, which offers the hermeneutical framework for thinking about *communal dynamics* based on an *essential co-responsibility* that springs from Baptism. This is based on the principle of *identity complementarity and completeness* amongst all the *christifideles*. This can generate a process of *effective synodalization* of the Church as *People of God walking together in communion* according to the principle by which “all that has been said about the People of God is addressed equally to laity, religious and clergy” (LG 30). The novelty lies in the fact that all ecclesial subjects are defined by relationships of *completeness* realized through a co-responsible exercise of each one’s own identity and vocation within an *organic totality* of the *universitas fidelium*. Consequently, each ecclesial subject is needed for the realization and *completeness* of the other(s), as affirmed in *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity): “the apostolate of the laity and the pastoral ministry are *mutually completed*” (AA 6: *mutuo se complent*).

We can, then, ask ourselves if instead of solely reforming structures that respond to an episcopal and auxiliary nature, what is needed is to create new ones based on an *ecclesial synodality* in which the exercise of co-responsibility of all the faithful or *christifideles* —including bishops— is essential, binding, and works through common processes of decision-making (elaboration) and consensus-building by *all*. This is emerging in Latin America with two new Institutions, *The Ecclesial Assembly of Latin America and the Caribbean* and *the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazonia*. Both inspired in St. Cyprian’s rule: “no decree can be established that is not ratified by the consent of the plurality”; and in the classic principle: “what affects all must be dealt with and approved by all”.

In view of this exposition, we can affirm that reforming a failed institutional model requires authentic theologico-pastoral conversion, re-creation, and re-education or re-learning. It is necessary to renew the identities and good practices of institutions and the mentalities of the ecclesial subjects for a *Synodal Church*, whose “internal institutions must become more fraternal, more participatory, more open to dialogue, more flexible, and poorer” (R. Muñoz). It is not enough to update what has existed until now; it is necessary to create something new. More specifically, new *relations, communicative dynamics and structures* for a *Synodal Church*.

As Congar reminds us, “we must ask ourselves whether *aggiornamento* is enough or whether something else will not be necessary. The question becomes urgent to the extent that the

Church's institutions are rooted in a cultural world that no longer has a place in the new cultural world. Our epoch requires a revision of traditional forms that goes beyond the plans for adaptation or *aggiornamento*; it requires a new creation. It is not enough simply to maintain and adapt what has existed until now; it is necessary to create something new. Christianity is essential transmission, *traditio*. The only things that can be reinvented are the *forms* of what has been received. To make the transmission—the paradosis—effective and authentic, we must revise and renew the forms that served well for transmission in other times but that now prove to be obstacles to genuine transmission”.

5. The core of the current reception of the ecclesiology of the People of God. The theology and practice of the *Sensus fidei*

We are facing an initial emergence of a *synodal ecclesiality* derived from the ecclesiological turn produced by the intertwined reading of *Lumen Gentium* 12 (*sensus fidei*) and 23 (*local Churches*), making the theology and the practice of the *sensus fidei* the core of today's reception of the ecclesiology of the People of God and, therefore, deepening what synodality is about and how it is exercised.

The *Document for the continental stage* of the *Synod on Synodality* takes up the theology and practice of the *sensus fidei* by rescuing "the exquisitely theological treasure contained in the experience of listening to the voice of the Spirit enacted by the People of God, allowing its *sensus fidei* to emerge" (DCS 8). The novelty lies in the fact that, through "the experience of synodality lived by those who took part [...] emerges a profound re-appropriation of the common dignity of all the baptized" (DCS 9). In this way, the *sensus fidei* becomes "the path of conversion toward a synodal Church. This means a Church that learns from listening how to renew its evangelizing mission in the light of the signs of the times, to continue offering humanity a way of being and living in which all can feel included as protagonists" (DCS 13).

We can affirm that the *sensus fidei* is the most appropriate dynamic to *link* all the ecclesial subjectivities—*christifideles*—to one another through the action of the Spirit and with the aim of making pastoral decisions together about the life and mission of the Church. It links the discernment of the bishops with the prior carrying out of processes of consultation and listening to ensure that the elaboration of pastoral decisions is constructed among all in order to express the *sensus ecclesiae*. Therefore, the practice of the *sensus fidei* provides a channel for a new ecclesial way of proceeding, laying the bases—*attitudes, atmosphere, arguments*—and the way—*consultation, listening, discernment, decisions making and taking*—to put into practice the classic principle that says: "what affects all, must be dealt with and approved by all".

Underneath this vision, lies one of the most novel aspects of the current reception of the *sensus fidei* lies in the deepening of *the pneumatological dimension of ecclesial life*. This is found in the discussions during the drafting of *Lumen Gentium* 12 when the Council Fathers came to the understanding that it is the Spirit itself who *manifests* through the communicative dynamism that is set in motion by the *sensus fidei* of the whole People of God. This makes it theologically clear that the *sensus fidei* is not a mere exercise, function or putting into practice of an operation of the intelligence of faith, but it is a *spiritual community dynamic* that links all the ecclesial subjects together and configures them as an *organic and co-responsible whole* on the basis of what the

Spirit is manifesting through the *whole* People of God, and not just through *some*. As Bishop De Smedt explained, "the teaching body [bishops] does not rest exclusively on the action of the Holy Spirit on the bishops; it [must] also listen to the action of the same Spirit on the people of God. Therefore, the teaching body not only speaks to the People of God, but also listens to this People in whom Christ continues His teaching".

We discover what the Spirit is saying to the Churches (*Episcopalis Communio* 5.8) through the practice of a series of communicative dynamics such as *consultation, dialogue, common discernment, counseling, decision-making and accountability*. The Synod's DCS explains how "listening and dialogue are the way to access the gifts that the Spirit offers us through the multifaceted variety of the one Church: of charisms, of vocations, of talents, of skills, of languages and cultures, of spiritual and theological traditions, of different forms of celebrating and giving thanks" (DCS 102). In fact, Francis uses *communicative dynamics* to define a synodal Church. He tells us: "a synodal Church is a Church of *listening* (...). It is a *reciprocal listening* in which each one has something to learn (...). It is listening to God, to the point of listening with him to the cry of the people; and it is listening to the people, to the point of breathing in them the will to which God calls us" (Francis, *50 Anniv.*). Listening to the others is a powerful communicative dynamic that opens the path to conversion, because "listening requires that we recognize others as subjects of their own journey. When we do this, others feel welcomed, not judged, free to share their own spiritual journey. This has been experienced in many contexts, and for some this has been the most transformative aspect of the whole process. The synodal experience can be read as a path of recognition for those who do not feel sufficiently recognised in the Church" (DCS 32).

But listening is not an end in itself. It has a specific purpose in a synodal Church: to take advice and counsel from what has been heard, and this is a duty proper to those who exercise authority. The Synod's DCS takes up this sentiment by saying that "not listening leads to misunderstanding, exclusion, and marginalization. As a further consequence, it creates closure, simplification, lack of trust and fears that destroys the community" (DCS 33). Therefore, the exercise of *reciprocal listening* and *discernment in common* is indispensable in a synodal ecclesiology because it builds a binding character among all the faithful conceived as an organic *whole* in which each subject contributes something to the others according to *suo modo et pro sua parte* (LG 31).

If we want a synodal Church, we need to ask ourselves if we believe that the Spirit manifests freely through all persons and their life stories, even in points of view that are completely different and diverse from our own positions. The latter is also a mediation of the Spirit that we often forget because it can be uncomfortable to listen, talk and discern in common. Hence, the art of listening requires formation and experience, as well as to provide the necessary means at our disposal, in order to avoid empty discussions based on opinions or cultural wars. A true listening requires "to encourage the fuller dissemination of information, to allow consultation and the serene expression of diverse points of view, to support study leading to the maturing of ideas, to frame the exchange and deliberation leading to decision making, to encourage feedback in order to understand the orientations taken, and so on" (Routhier). If we do not proceed in this way, we can fall into the temptation of substituting ourselves for the Spirit.

This supposes that all ecclesial life is to be built and evaluated by all on the basis of baptismal dignity. This is expressed by many voices in the Synod's DCS: "the experience made [...] has helped to rediscover the co-responsibility that comes from baptismal dignity" (DCS 67). The document on the *Sensus fidei in the life of the Church* of the International Theological Commission expresses it in the following words: "there is true equality in the dignity of all the faithful, because through their baptism all have been reborn in Christ. By virtue of this equality all, according to their own condition and office, cooperate in building up the Body of Christ. Therefore, all the faithful have the right, and sometimes even the duty, by reason of their own knowledge, competence and prestige, to express to the sacred pastors their opinion on what pertains to the good of the Church (ITC, *Sensus fidei* 120).

This practice is being revived today. In the synodal process, People "spoke of how, after decades of church going, they had been asked to speak for first time" (DCS 23). They also said that "many emphasised that this was the first time the Church had asked for their opinion and they wish to continue this journey (...), in which all members of the congregation or community can openly and honestly express their opinion, as well as meetings with various groups outside the Church, should continue" (DCS 17).

The new reception of the theology and practice of the *sensus fidei* is not limited to what has been presented up to here. Another communicative dynamic has appeared in the current synodal path: the all-new *restitutio*² or accountable consensus that should be achieved by the whole People of God (*All*). This defines the very meaning and aim of the *Working Document for the Continental Stage of the Synod on Synodality* by saying that "the DCS gathers and restores to the local Churches what the People of God from around the world said" (DCS 105). [*Restore or to give back*; in Spanish: *restitución*; in Italian: *restituzione*].

Here lies the understanding that the "synodal process has its point of departure and also its point of arrival in the People of God" (*Episcopalis Communio* 1) and, therefore, the process has the scope of building the *consensus omnium fidelium* or con-sensus *totius populi*. In proceeding in this way, consensus is not built at the top of the process, but at the bottom; it is not elaborated by *some* but by *all*; it is not linear, but reciprocal and spiral; and in returning to the local Churches—by means of "giving back" what was said by the People—the faithful are recognized and have the right to verify (*accountability*) what was gathered in order to discern it anew until the *communio omni populo dei* is reached. But this is not a new practice. We find it in the tradition of the Church. St. Cyprian's golden rule reads: *Nihil sine consilio vestro et sine consensu plebis mea privatim sententia gerere*. For this bishop, *taking counsel* from the presbyterate and *building consensus* with the people shaped his episcopal exercise. He had to devise methods that made this way of proceeding possible.

² "What would happen if, instead of ending the assembly by handing the final document to the Holy Father, we took another step, that of *returning* the conclusions of the synodal assembly to the particular Churches from which the whole synodal process began? In this case, the final document would go to the Bishop of Rome, who is always and universally recognized as the one who issues the decrees established by Councils and Synods, already accompanied by the consensus of all the Churches. Moreover, the consensus on the document could not be limited only to the bishop's *placet*, but extended to the people of God whom he summoned again to close the synodal process opened on October 17, 2021. In this case, the Bishop of Rome, the principle of unity of all the baptized and of all the bishops, would receive a document that jointly manifests the consent of the People of God and of the College of Bishops: it would be an act of manifestation of the *sensus omnium fidelium*, which would also be at the same time an act of magisterium of the bishops dispersed throughout the world in communion with the Pope" (Card. Mario Grech, *Opening of the Synod*, 2021).

Conclusion. The path has been opened

In the light of all that has been said, we can sustain that we are living a first emergence of what can be called a *synodal ecclesiality*, but for this to be possible, it is fundamental to recover the text and the spirit of the Second Vatican Council that understood the **Church as People of God in a state of permanent conversion and reform** (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 4.6). This was the feeling of the voices from all over the world that were gathered in the *Document for the continental stage* of the *Synod of Synodality*. There it is pointed out, with parrhesia, that: "to walk together as the People of God requires that we recognize the need for a continuous conversion, both individual and communitarian. On the institutional and pastoral level, this conversion translates into an equally permanent reform of the Church, its structures and its style, following in the footsteps of the impulse to continual *aggiornamento*, a precious legacy left to us by the Second Vatican Council" (DEC 101).

Let us finish by evoking Francis' words to the Diocese of Rome, before the Opening of the Synod: "the theme of synodality is not just a chapter in a treatise on ecclesiology; even less is it a passing fashion, a slogan, or a new term to be used and exploited in our meetings. No! Synodality expresses the nature of the Church, its form, its style, and its mission. Thus, when we speak of a *Synodal Church*, we should not consider that title to be one among others or a way of conceiving the Church with a view to alternatives (...). I am following what we may consider the first and most important manual of ecclesiology, the book of the Acts of the Apostles" (18-10-2021). This is the challenge of synodality today.