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PRACTISING SYNODALITY: INSPIRATIONS FROM A HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE IN GERMANY

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Abstract

As a response to the Second Vatican Council and to the democratisation movement of 1968 the Joint Synod of the Dioceses in the Federal Republic of Germany took place from 1971 to 1975. It was a unique experience within the history of the synodality of the Catholic Church. The article gives a brief history of the genesis and the history of the Synod with special regard to two questions. How can a synod be representative for the people of God? And secondly, how can a synodal decision-making process be designed so that it respects the real competence of the people of God and the responsibility of the bishops? Correlating the historical experiences with Pope Francis' reflections on a synodal Church the article gives impulses for a synodal practice today.

Keywords: Catholic Church in Germany, Democracy, Ecclesiology, People of God, Representativeness, *Sensus Fidei*, Synodality

During the ceremony commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the synod of bishops on 17 October 2015 Pope

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Francis gave a noteworthy address in which he focused on the synodality of the Church.¹ In this reflection he perceived two essential stakeholders that committed the Church to the way of synodality: “The *world* in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of synodality which *God* expects of the Church of the third millennium.”² The Pope called synodality “a constitutive element of the Church” and he quoted Saint John Chrysostom who said that “Church and Synod are synonymous.” And interpreting synodality on the basis of the literal meaning of “synod” Pope Francis admits: “Journeying together – laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome – is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice.”³ By appreciating and fostering the synodal element of the Church and by accepting its challenges Pope Francis encourages theology to ask how synodality can be put into practice and how the synodal methodology can be improved.

One approach is to look into the history of the worldwide Church hoping to find good examples. In the recent history of the Catholic Church in Germany a unique model of synodality can be discovered. The “Joint Synod of the Dioceses in the Federal Republic of Germany”⁴ (*Gemeinsame Synode der Bistümer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*) took place from 1971 to 1975. Although it was a singular event it still provides inspirations for the way of the contemporary Church, especially when looking at its statute that gives a synodal ecclesiology *in nuce*.⁵ This article gives a brief history of this synod and presents important aspects of its statute, especially with regard to the process of decision-making and to the problem of representativeness. In a concluding section the article will focus on remaining impulses of the historical example and outline some chances and challenges of a synod today. The attempt made here, to

¹Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015 (emphasis added). Retrieved 12 September 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html (hereafter cited as “Address 17 October 2015”). For the vision of synodality that Pope Francis outlines in this speech cf. the instructive article of Ormond Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church,” *Theological Studies* 78, 2 (2017) 299-325.

²Pope Francis, Address 17 October 2015 (emphasis added).

³Pope Francis, Address 17 October 2015.

⁴Hereafter briefly cited as “Joint Synod.”

⁵The historical part of this article is based on my doctoral thesis, Stefan Voges, *Konzil, Dialog and Demokratie. Der Weg zur Würzburger Synode 1965-1971*, Paderborn: Schöningh, 2015 (English summary 447-449).

look at an example of synodality in a particular Church in order to get inspirations for a synodal Church, is also implied in the Pope's reflection. In his address in October 2017, he calls the synod of bishops "only the most evident manifestation of a dynamism of communion" and distinguishes three levels of the exercise of synodality, 1) "the particular Churches," 2) "Ecclesiastical Provinces and Ecclesiastical Regions, Particular Councils and, in a special way, Conferences of Bishops," and 3) "the universal Church."⁶ This historical retrospect focuses on a specific historical example of synodality that is located on the first two levels. In the spirit of exchange within the worldwide Church it wishes to give some inspirations for similar ways of synodality also in Asia.

Dialogue and Democratization: The History of the Joint Synod of the Dioceses in the Federal Republic of Germany

At the end of the 1960s, two developments interfered with each other in the Catholic Church in Europe. Firstly, there was a reform process within the Church. Pope John XXIII (1958-1963) promoted the *aggiornamento* of the Church and convened the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). In the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* the Council reformulated the self-conception of the Church by using the key term "people of God." In the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* Vatican II described the relation between the Church and the modern world, led by the idea of "dialogue" that Pope Paul VI (1963-1978) had promoted in his inaugural encyclical *Ecclesiam suam*.⁷ By these and other realignments of the Church's position the council raised expectations for ecclesiological and pastoral changes in the post-conciliar Church. Furthermore, in the Decree *Christus Dominus* concerning the pastoral office of the bishops, the council fathers "earnestly [desired] that the venerable institution of synods and councils flourish with fresh vigor" (CD 36).

The second development was driven by the global protest movement named with the cipher of "1968".⁸ In Germany, the student movement of 1968 among other motives promoted ideas of participation and democratisation and introduced a new culture of discussing and debating.

⁶Pope Francis, Address 17 October 2015.

⁷Cf. Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 6 August 1964, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html, Retrieved 12 September 2018,

⁸Cf. *1968 in Europe – A History of Protest and Activism, 1956-77*, ed. Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth, Palgrave Macmillan: New York/London, 2008.

The specific German interference of these developments became obvious at the *Katholikentag* (congress of German Catholics) in the Western German town of Essen from 4 to 8 September 1968. Only few weeks after the publication of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* it was on this occasion where mainly young Catholics protested against papal authority and demanded a democratisation of the Church. And in the same context, the laity demanded that the Catholic Church in Germany should be convened for a national synod (*Nationalkonzil*). Besides, the *Katholikentag* was affected by a cultural change: There was more free speech and discussion than in previous events.

The idea of a national synod in Germany was strongly influenced by the example of the Dutch Pastoral Council (*Pastoraal Concilie van de Nederlandse Kerkprovincie*) that was held from 1966 to 1970. In their assembly, the Dutch Catholics had experimented with a new and democratic way of cooperating on a national level. For more conservative Catholics, however, the Dutch experiment signified the dissolution of traditional ecclesiastical structures and partly of the Catholic faith itself.

The *Katholikentag* in Essen was an unsettling experience for many bishops and leading laypersons for it showed a far-reaching questioning of authority structures within the Church. The critical evaluation of the restless days of Essen led to the appointment of a study group that should analyse the state of Catholicism in West Germany and consider the question of convening a national synod. Only a few months later the study group made the recommendation to hold a joint synod of all dioceses in the Federal Republic of Germany. The unique structure of a “joint synod” (*Gemeinsame Synode*) for West Germany was developed because Germany was a divided nation where a truly *national* synod for the entire country was impossible for political reasons. At the same time, the decision to hold a joint synod was a reaction to the fact that pastoral issues were widely the same in all West German dioceses in the late 1960s. In February 1969, just six months after the *Katholikentag*, the German Bishops’ Conference decided to convene a joint synod and asked the study group to formulate a statute and a list of topics that the synod should address. After a public discussion and several revisions the German Bishops’ Conference adopted the statute of the synod – its “constitution” – in an extraordinary meeting on November 11, 1969.

Before taking a closer look at the statute, the history of the Joint Synod shall be told briefly. After nearly two years of preparation, including a large-scale survey and especially the election of the members of the synod, the Synod came together for its constituent

assembly in the cathedral of Würzburg in January 1971. The President of the Joint Synod was Cardinal Julius Döpfner (1913-1976), Archbishop of Munich and Freising, Chairman of the German Bishops' Conference and one of the moderators of Vatican II. Ten commissions were formed that prepared the resolutions of the synod. From 1972 to 1975 the Synod came together for seven plenary assemblies and adopted 16 resolutions, covering a wide range of topics from "The Participation of Laypersons in the Proclamation of the Faith" (*Die Beteiligung der Laien an der Verkündigung*) and "Religious Education in Schools" (*Der Religionsunterricht in der Schule*) to "Church and Working Class" (*Kirche und Arbeiterschaft*) and "The Contribution of the Church to Development and Peace" (*Der Beitrag der katholischen Kirche in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland für Entwicklung und Frieden*) to "The Responsibility of the Entire People of God for the Mission of the Church" (*Die Verantwortung des ganzen Gottesvolkes für die Sendung der Kirche*) and the ecumenical document "Pastoral Cooperation of the Churches in service of the Christian Unity" (*Pastorale Zusammenarbeit der Kirchen im Dienst an der christlichen Einheit*). While some documents are mainly of historical interest today others are more timeless, especially the fundamental document, "Our Hope. A Commitment to Faith in this Time," (*Unsere Hoffnung. Ein Bekenntnis zum Glauben in dieser Zeit*) is still worth reading. And with regard to the theological issue of synodality it is still worth to look at the statute of the Joint Synod.

Empowering the People of God: The Decision-making Process of the Joint Synod

When, in 1968/69, the Catholic Church in West Germany – the Bishops conference and the lay organisation "Central Committee of the German Catholics" (*Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken, ZdK*) – developed the idea and drafted the statute of a national Church assembly, they had to decide first of all which form this gathering should have. Should it be a more or less nonbinding conference or should it be a binding synod, constituted according to the canon law? Mainly for two reasons they agreed to establish a formal synod instead of an informal pastoral conference. Firstly, it was a reaction to the Dutch experiment where the Bishops did not exercise their episcopal authority and where the media had an immense influence on the deliberations of the Pastoral Council. Secondly, it was the intention to give the laity a real say. If the assembly had only an advisory function, in the end, the right of decision would lie with the bishops alone. Consequently, a mere conference did neither go with the self-concept of the bishops nor with the self-confidence of the laity.

When those responsible determined to prepare a proper synod it was obvious at once that they could not stick to the prescriptions of the *Codex Iuris Canonici* of 1917. This codex was still valid but at the same time not fitting with the course of renewal that was set by Vatican II. The most important modification to be made was the participation of laypersons. According to CIC 1917 a diocesan synod would be only a function of the clergy. But in 1967, Rome had already conceded the participation of laypersons at a diocesan synod, namely for the synod in the diocese of Hildesheim, the only single diocesan synod in West Germany after Vatican II. In the preparation of the Joint Synod those responsible could resort to this permission when they envisaged the participation of laypersons.

The Roman approval of the plans for the Joint Synod was attached to two conditions: Firstly, the clergy had to be the majority among the members of the Synod. Secondly, the "*potestas episcopalis*," the episcopal power, should be preserved. It was rather a challenge to draft a decision-making process that preserved the authority of the bishops and conceded to the laypersons a real right to speak.⁹ After the discussion of various proposals the preparatory commission finalised the decision-making process as follows.¹⁰ The synod itself has the right of decision-making with a two-thirds majority (art. 13,1-2). The bishops get a twofold right of veto. Before each reading of a draft resolution the Bishops' Conference gets the opportunity to comment on it. If they have concerns that are founded either in the teaching authority or in the legislative power of the bishops the Bishops' Conference will announce these to the plenary assembly latest during the second reading and with an appropriate explanatory statement (art. 12,5). And as a kind of safeguarding the statute contains another provision. If the Bishops' Conference declares that it cannot approve a proposal for reasons of the binding doctrinal and moral teaching of the Church the plenary assembly of the synod is not able to adopt this proposal.¹¹ But it is able to pass the issue again

⁹Another question that cannot be treated here is which competences the Bishops Conference should have with regard to the competences of the single diocesan bishops.

¹⁰Cf. for the following "Das Statut der Gemeinsamen Synode der Bistümer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland," in *Gemeinsame Synode der Bistümer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, vol. 1: *Beschlüsse der Vollversammlung*, ed. Ludwig Bertsch et al., Freiburg: Herder, 1976, 856-861. (Online https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Synoden/gemeinsame_Synode/band1/synode.pdf)

¹¹The veto right of the Bishops Conference is restricted to truth- or faith-related matters whereas interest-related matters are open to a synodal decision-making. For the distinction of truth- and interest-related items cf. Jürgen Werbick, *Kirche. Ein ekklesiologischer Entwurf für Studium und Praxis*, Freiburg: Herder, 1994, 151.

to the responsible commission so that this commission can work out a new proposal (art. 13,3).

Two aspects of this procedure shall be underlined. It has to be recognised that the bishops are really integrated into the synod. Of course, they have a powerful position from which they can direct the synod.¹² But with regard to the process of deliberation and decision-making the bishops are part of the synod. Thus, the problem is avoided that the bishops decide subsequently about resolutions of the synod. Theologically speaking, the statute managed to combine the “two ecclesiologies”¹³ of Vatican II by setting a hierarchical framework in which fit various elements of a stronger participation of the whole people of God. The second aspect to be highlighted is the manner how this combination is organised. It is mentioned in passing that the Bishops’ Conference is obliged to present its concerns with an appropriate explanatory statement. This signifies a fundamental change in the exercise of episcopal authority because it requires justification. The bishops can no longer take the position of formal authority but are integrated in the quasi-parliamentary process of discussing and debating. At least during the deliberative process the church hierarchy is replaced by the hierarchy of better arguments. These regulations reflect the historical context of the synod, the democratisation movement and the cultural revolution of the late 1960s.

The underlying ideas can also be seen in the seating arrangement. The synod met in the cathedral of Würzburg, which showed the spiritual dimension of the synod. The central nave of the cathedral was changed into the synod hall by setting up a parliamentary seating arrangement.¹⁴ On the one side there was the table of the presiding committee (*Präsidium*) and the lectern. On the opposite side there was the seating area for the bishops in the midst of seating areas for the other synod members. The bishops sat together, they were not dissolved among the other synod members who got their seats in alphabetical order. This arrangement expressed the particular role of the bishops. But at the same time they were physically

¹²The sovereignty of the bishops becomes even more obvious when taking into account that the Bishops’ Conference decides about the beginning and the end of the synod (art. 10) and co-determines the proposition of the topics to be discussed (art. 11,1).

¹³Cf. Antonio Acerbi, *Due ecclesiologie. Ecclesiologia giuridica ed ecclesiologia di comunione nella Lumen Genium*, Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1975.

¹⁴For an interesting interpretation of the parliamentary seating arrangement cf. Philip Manow, *In the King’s Shadow. The Political Anatomy of Democratic Representation*, tr. Patrick Camiller, Cambridge: Polity, 2010.

integrated into the synod. Like all synod members they were sitting opposite to the presiding committee.¹⁵ This demonstrated the institutional character of the synod. And, even more important for the performance of the synodal assembly, all synod members (except the members of the presiding committee) were sitting opposite to the lectern indicating their equality. Thus, a dialogical situation was created, with changing roles of speakers and listeners or, in a sense, of teachers and learners.

Involving the Whole People of God: The Representativeness of the Synod

Besides the competence of the synod another crucial question is that of the representativeness and of the legitimacy of the synod. With regard to the *sensus fidei* as described in *Lumen Gentium* 12 it is the practical and theological question how “the entire body of the faithful” can be represented, how the “whole people [of God],” “from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful,” can show their “universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.” The ideal of a representation of the whole people of God is impossible to realise. Therefore each way to set up a representative assembly can only be an approximation. In a democratic surrounding it makes sense to choose the way of elections, with all the problems involved.

It was clear that the members of the Joint Synod would have to be elected, different from the prescription of the CIC 1917 can. 358 that the bishop appoints all members of a diocesan synod. The first question that had to be answered was whether all Catholics should vote for the synod members or whether the suffrage should be given to the various councils that had been established after Vatican II. The statute of the synod gave the suffrage to the newly created councils in order not to pass over them but to enhance their position. In each diocese, the diocesan councils – the diocesan pastoral council and the presbyteral council – together should elect members of the Joint Synod. The association of the religious congregations should elect further members. Altogether, the elected members would account for the majority of the synod. After the elections, the Central Committee of German Catholics would elect and the German Bishops Conference would appoint respectively 40 more members, “in consideration of the various areas” (“*unter angemessener Berücksichtigung der verschiedenen Bereiche*”). The various areas mean

¹⁵The presiding committee of the Joint Synod consisted of five people, the chairman of the German Bishops’ Conference as the president of the synod, a bishop, a priest, a layman, and a laywoman.

various regions, professions and social strata. The subsequent elections and appointments by central institutions were justified by the need to achieve a more representative composition of the synod. Accordingly, sociographic analyses of the diocesan elections were made before the additional elections by the central lay organisation and the Bishops' Conference. The combination of various steps of election was an attempt to increase the representativeness of the synod in a sociological perspective, as a representation of the people of God.

But in the realm of the Church representation is more than an aspect of a representative democracy. It is also the theological question how and by whom Christ is represented.¹⁶ This issue was also reflected upon in relation to the Joint Synod. In 1970, one of those responsible, Klaus Hemmerle (1929-1994), rector of the *Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken* and later Bishop of Aachen, developed a theology of representation in the Church with regard to the synodal election procedure.¹⁷ In his inspiring approach he recognised the value of representation in the sense of a quantitative mirroring of various opinions as well as of various groups in the Church. But second, he wanted to explain that, theologically speaking, in the Church it is all about the representation of Christ. Hemmerle proposed a three-part interpretation. Christ is represented 1) in the mission that comes from him, 2) in every single person, also in the last and least, 3) in the many gifts, if they are not separated but according to their character given to the whole. The theologian identified these dimensions in three groups in the synod: 1) The bishops represent the apostolic mission of the Church. 2) The elected synod members represent the people living in the dioceses. 3) The appointed synod members represent the diversity of gifts and ministries.¹⁸ Hemmerle correlated the representation of Christ with the structure of the synod and set this Christological interpretation

¹⁶According to Vatican II, Christ is represented by the Pope, the bishops and the clergy (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 18 and 27, *Ad Gentes*, 39). But Christ is also present in the Church, understood as *Corpus Christi mysticum*, the Mystical Body of Christ (*Lumen Gentium* 7). In its historical evolution the issue of representation had brought about the question whether the Pope or the Council represents the Church. For the Joint Synod a similar question arose: Did only the episcopal ministry represent the local Church in West Germany or did also the Joint Synod?

¹⁷Klaus Hemmerle, "Zur Theologie der Repräsentativität in der Kirche," in *Rheinischer Merkur*, No. 16, April 17, 1970, 22.

¹⁸It is worth thinking about the other possible correlations, e.g. the bishops representing the gifts or the elected members representing the mission of the Church, to get new inspirations for the self-concept of the various groups and for the dimensions of representing Christ.

against a numerical mirroring of the strata, groups and opinions within the Church. He developed a model of representation that is founded on ideas of Vatican II like the self-understanding of the Church that is based on its pastoral mission, the understanding of the Church as people of God, and the new appreciation of the variety of charisms within the Church. It is doubtful whether this theological interpretation of representation could prevail in a time that was highly politicised and dominated by a sociological terminology. But Hemmerle's approach adds a valuable theological reflexion to the remaining problem of representativeness.

The composition of the Joint Synod was an attempt to get many voices to be heard in this Church assembly. Another way was the survey among all Catholics (*Umfrage unter allen Katholiken*), the largest survey in the area of sociology of religion to be conducted in Germany.¹⁹ The survey consisted of three parts: a general written questionnaire for all Catholics, a representative written control survey, and an oral representative survey. By conducting these surveys those responsible pursued various aims. Substantially, the general survey should help to set up the list of topics for the synod. Methodologically, it should inspire the discussion about the issues of the synod in the ecclesiastical public. The general survey was expressly addressed to *all* Catholics, also those who did not partake actively in Church life. This aspiration in turn demanded that an easily comprehensible language was used to formulate the questionnaire. In the end, 4.4 million of 21 million distributed questionnaires were sent back until June 30, 1970. This relatively high number indicates that the survey was a suitable means to involve the Catholics in the subsequent synod. Whether this involvement was sustainable depended on an accurate analysis of the survey and on the willingness of the synod members to include the results of the survey in their work. In the preparation of the Joint Synod one purpose of the survey was not achieved: The list of topics for the synod was practically finished when the results of the survey were available.

Listening and Deciding: The Legacy of the Joint Synod

The prehistory of the Joint Synod of the Dioceses in the Federal Republic of Germany shows how certain problems of synodal practice were solved in a specific historical context. Nonetheless the model of the Joint Synod can give some inspirations for synodal

¹⁹For the historical background of this opinion poll cf. also Benjamin Ziemann, *Encounters with Modernity. The Catholic Church in West Germany, 1945-1975*, tr. Andrew Evans, New York: Berghahn, 2014.

experiments today. This becomes obvious when looking at Pope Francis' address of 17 October 2015 and at his Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* on the synod of bishops of 15 September 2018.²⁰

The key concept for Pope Francis' understanding of synodality is the *sensus fidei*.²¹ In his address of October 2015 the Pope goes back to the teachings of Vatican II about the people of God and the *sensus fidei* in LG, 12: "The whole body of the faithful [...] cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people of God, when 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful' it manifests a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals."²² Practically it is simply impossible to manifest a universal consensus of all the faithful. Therefore synodality must deal with the problem of representativeness. The election procedure of the Joint Synod shows a practical way to achieve a good representativeness of the synodal assembly. The elections in the dioceses aimed at connecting the synod with the people in the dioceses and at including views from the (Church) life in various parts of the country. The supplementary elections and appointments by central institutions helped to raise the representativeness of the synod in various dimensions by including 'forgotten' parts of the society.²³ Furthermore, the interpretation of the three groups in the synod – bishops, elected members, appointed members – with regard to the representation of Christ in the Church contains important reminders: One dimension of the representation of Christ is the (apostolic) mission of the Church, in other words: the Church does not exist for her own sake. Another dimension is the inclusion of the variety of charisms which reminds to cultivate a sensitivity for the various charisms.

From the key concept of the *sensus fidei* Pope Francis derives another consequence: "The *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation

²⁰Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* on the synod of bishops, 15 September 2018. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html, Retrieved 20 September 2018.

²¹Pope Francis highlighted this concept already in *Evangelii Gaudium* 119: "As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression." Cf. also O. Rush, "Inverting the Pyramid," 311-312, 320-322.

²²Pope Francis, Address 17 October 2015.

²³In the Asian context representativeness would have to be interpreted against the background of the triple dialogue with culture, religions and the poor.

between an *Ecclesia docens* [teaching Church] and an *Ecclesia discens* [learning Church], since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church."²⁴ From this ecclesiological point of view Pope Francis explains his approach of consulting the people of God in the run-up to the Synod of Bishops on family.

Such was the conviction underlying my desire that the people of God should be consulted in the preparation of the two phases of the Synod on the family, as is ordinarily done with each *Lineamenta*. Certainly, a consultation of this sort would never be sufficient to perceive the *sensus fidei*. But how could we speak about the family without engaging families themselves, listening to their joys and their hopes, their sorrows and their anguish? Through the answers given to the two questionnaires sent to the particular Churches, we had the opportunity at least to hear some of those families speak to issues which closely affect them and about which they have much to say.²⁵

The Pope concedes the insufficiency of the questionnaires but still holds on to that means in order to involve more people in the synodal consultations than can be present in the assembly. A questionnaire was already used in the preparation of the Joint Synod in Germany in 1970, and the challenges of a preliminary survey are the same today as at that time. The questions need to be formulated in simple terms so that the questionnaire may reach out also to the more distanced faithful. The aims of the survey need to be communicated transparently in order to avoid allegations of "manipulation" or "plebiscite." Finally, the questionnaire needs to be evaluated accurately and in time so that the results can really be included in the synodal process. And the synod members must commit themselves to consider the results in their deliberations. Otherwise a questionnaire can also bring about a loss of confidence, namely if it is debunked as a mere ostensible means of participation.

Pope Francis also mentions the necessity to overcome the rigid separation of a teaching and a learning Church. For this purpose the Joint Synod offers a suitable model by adapting the parliamentary set-up. This does not transform the Church in an institution with a democratic constitution but it takes elements of a parliamentary democracy in order to improve the synodal practice. The process of parliamentary deliberation allowed to integrate the episcopal authority into a synodal decision-making. Only a binding decision-making could express in turn the competence of the whole people of

²⁴Pope Francis, Address 17 October 2015 (emphasis as in the original).

²⁵Pope Francis, Address 17 October 2015.

God and the responsibility of laypersons. The veto right of the bishops needs to be interpreted in the sense of service, like the Pope put it: “For the disciples of Jesus, yesterday, today and always, the only authority is the authority of service.”²⁶ The parliamentary seating arrangement enabled the change of speakers and listeners and expressed it spatially by defined positions at the lectern and in the auditorium. Thus, a situation for listening was created, a precondition for a synodal Church as Pope Francis puts it: “A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening ‘is more than simply hearing’ [*Evangelii Gaudium*, 171]. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7).”²⁷

Finally, by following a democratic procedure a synod might serve a further purpose. It could give Catholics and also guests from other denominations and religions the opportunity to learn elements of democracy and of a democratic culture in order to prepare them for an engagement in the political sphere and in civil society. This could be a concrete outcome of what Pope Francis has described as the impact of synodality beyond the borders of the Church:

A synodal Church is like a standard lifted up among the nations (cf. Is 11:12) in a world which – while calling for participation, solidarity and transparency in public administration – often consigns the fate of entire peoples to the grasp of small but powerful groups. As a Church which ‘journeys together’ with men and women, sharing the travails of history, let us cherish the dream that a rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and of the function of authority as service will also be able to help civil society to be built up in justice and fraternity, and thus bring about a more beautiful and humane world for coming generations.²⁸

Here again it becomes clear that synodality is not an end in itself but a concept of the Church to fulfil better its mission “as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1).

²⁶Pope Francis, Address 17 October 2015.

²⁷Pope Francis, Address 17 October 2015.

²⁸Pope Francis, Address 17 October 2015. Cf. also O. Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid,” 303: “‘Synodality’ is [Pope Francis’] catch-all phrase for how he believes the Second Vatican Council is envisioning the church ad intra – in its inner workings – without wanting to separate the church’s inner life with the effectiveness of its outward (ad extra) mission in the world.”