

JERUSALEM COUNCIL: A PARADIGM FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH

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Abstract

The essence of Christian religion is communion. Synodal and conciliar activities were very common in the history of the first millennium Church. The Jerusalem Council (49 CE) is a paradigm for regaining the collegial, or synodal or participatory character of the Church where all layers of faithful were consulted before arriving at a solution by the "Apostles and Elders."

The greatest ecclesiological contribution of the Second Vatican Council is the re-discovery of the communion and collegial character of the Church. The establishment of the Synod of Bishops and its regular meetings to a great extent express the collegial character of the Church. Pope Francis is very much for a synodal Church. Through his Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* (2019) expressed his desire for the synodal Church, taking lot of inspiration from the Jerusalem Council. Going back to the Jerusalem Council model of the functioning of the Church will also encourage ecumenism. The Spirit's abiding presence in the Church guiding it to all truth is seen when the Church comes together in council.

Keywords: Antioch; Collegiality; Jerusalem Council; Communion; German Synod, Pope Francis; Pyramidal Church; Second Vatican Council; St Paul; Synodality

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Introduction

The essence of the Christian religion is communion. The communion of the apostolic, post-apostolic and pre-Constantine Church is expressed through mutual visits, praying for one another, exchange of letters, material help to the churches in need of, mutual corrections and interventions in case of wrong teachings. The synodal and conciliar activities in the Church were very common in the first nine centuries. The councils were central to the organisation of the Church during the first Millennium. The central role of the councils in the life of the Church in the first Millennium was beautifully stated in the Second Council of Constantinople in 553:

The holy fathers, who have gathered at intervals in the four holy councils [i.e., Nicaea I, Constantinople I, Ephesus and Chalcedon], have followed the examples of antiquity. They dealt with heresies and current problems by debate in common, since it was established as certain that when the disputed question is set out by each side in communal discussions, the light of truth drives out the shadows of lying.

The truth cannot be made clear in any other way when there are debates about questions of faith, since everyone requires the assistance of his neighbour. As Solomon says in his proverbs: "A brother who helps a brother shall be exalted like a strong city; he shall be as strong as a well established kingdom" [Proverbs 18:19]. Again in Ecclesiastes he says: "Two are better than one, for they have good reward for their toil" [Ecclesiastes 4:9]. And the Lord himself says: "Amen I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" [Matthew 21:8, 19].¹

The synodality of the Church or the synodal nature of the Church is the very inner dynamics of the Church life and has permeated all the basic dimensions of the Church, from its local to its universal existence. Synods or Councils are important means of maintaining and promoting the dialogical character and unity of the Church and deciding questions of faith, morals and discipline. The essential character of the Christian religion is communion and since Church is the communion of the faithful, the responsible members of the Church gather together as a group or community possessing authority, to consult and make decisions after due deliberations guided by the Holy Spirit for the protection of faith and morals and for the growth and unity of the Church. The regional or provincial synods of the early Church were clear manifestations of the conciliar

¹Norman P. Tanner, SJ, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. I, London: Sheed & Ward, 1990, 108.

or synodal character of the Church founded by Christ. The synodal character which was spontaneously exercised through the frequent synods and councils was very much in the functioning of the Church of the first Millennium, which had been lost or ignored during the second Millennium. One of the greatest achievements of the ecclesiological vision of the Second Vatican Council is the re-assertion of the collegial or synodal or participatory character of the Church. A humble attempt is made here to highlight the synodal character of the Church with focus on the Jerusalem Council.

Jerusalem Council (Ca. 49 CE)

The Jerusalem Council should be understood in the context of the attachment of the Jewish Christians to the temple and the old ways. With the conversion of St Paul and with his active engagement in the preaching of the Good News, the Gospel message reached to lands and peoples beyond Judea and the Jews. The Christian community in Antioch was converted from Pagan or Gentile background. However, under the influence of the Jewish Christians coming from Judea or Jerusalem to Antioch (Acts 15:1) the Jewish Christians in Antioch disturbed the Antiochian Gentile Christian community through their teaching that circumcision was obligatory for all to become a Christian. This extreme group of the Jewish Christians were called Judaizers. Paul and Barnabas opposed this view. Thus, the Antiochian community was seriously disturbed by the controversy of integrating Gentile Christians into the Jewish Christian community through the insistence of the Judaizers.

[The Judaizers] were a small, but very active and zealous minority, and full of intrigue. They compassed sea and land to make one proselyte. They were baptized with water, but not with the Holy Spirit. They were Christians in name, but narrow-minded and narrow-hearted Jews in fact. They were superfluous, pedantic, slavish formalists, ritualists and traditionalists, of malignant type. Circumcision of flesh was to them of more importance than circumcision of the heart, or at all events an indispensable condition of salvation.²

The Judaizers could not reconcile with the fact that the prominence of the Infant Church was passing from Jerusalem to Antioch, and from the Jews to the Gentiles. This tension led to the brink of a split which would have seriously impeded its progress and endangered its final success.³ The discussion in Antioch between the two types of

²Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. I, Apostolic Christianity*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: WMB Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988 (Reprint), 338.

³Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. I, Apostolic Christianity*, 340.

Christians was a discussion as to whether the Law had lost its saving power, whether a Christian could be saved through the Church alone.

The free attitude of Hellenists of Antioch denied the permanent authority of the Law. In the same way, the freedom preached and, in principle, founded by Paul, appeared to it as entirely heretical and to call for definite repudiation. Taking into account the seriousness of the situation, the Antiochian Community mandated Paul, Barnabas and Titus along with them a few others to go to Jerusalem to the Apostles and Elders to decide on the question since nobody in Antioch had sufficient authority to decide upon the question (Acts 15:3). At Jerusalem Paul, Barnabas and Titus were received by the Apostles and the Elders.

Jerusalem was symbolically significant as the source from which the Christian religion emerged. Though Antioch served as the base from which the mission of Paul and Barnabas into Cyprus and Asia Minor was launched, they travelled all the way to Jerusalem to decide in council with the other Apostles on the question of the status of Gentile converts to the Christian religion.⁴

The Church at Jerusalem, which is the mother of all churches, stood apart from the development of Christianity into a world religion.

Crucial to this expansion were the difficult decisions to admit to the Christian fold persons who were not Jews and to lift several obligations – at least for non-Jewish converts to Christianity – regarding circumcision and diet: decisions that could be seen as going beyond the explicit teachings and practices of Jesus.⁵

The Jerusalem Council was held around 49 CE to settle tension between the Gentile Christians and the Jewish Christians and it was the first and in some respects the most important Council or Synod held in the history of Christendom, though differing widely from the councils of later times. The two objectives before the Council were to settle the personal relations between the Jewish and Gentile Apostles and to divide their field of labour; to decide the question of circumcision, and to define the relation between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. There were private consultations (Gal 2:2) and there was a clear understanding of the mission fields of Peter and

⁴Dale T. Irvin, Scott W. Sunquist, *World Christian Movement*, Vol. I, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001, 29.

⁵Norman Tanner, *New Short History of the Catholic Church*, London: Burns & Oates, 2011, 7.

Paul.⁶ During the discussions, the Jewish Christians who had Pharisaic background argued for the obligation of the Mosaic Law for Christians who were converted from the Gentile background. In the Council Paul was bitterly attacked and finally Paul could convince the Council members the fulfilment of the Mosaic Law in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and the Council laid down that except for the prohibition of certain foods, the Gentile converts were free of the Law. The address of James, the brother of the Lord, the local head of the Jerusalem Church, representing the extreme right wing of the Jewish Church, conceded the main point at issue, salvation without circumcision.⁷ Peter had the admirable good sense and practical tact, and quickly perceived the true line of progress and duty. He protested against imposing upon the neck of the Gentile disciples the unbearable yoke of the ceremonial law,⁸ and laid down, as clearly as Paul, the fundamental principle that "Jews as well as Gentiles are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 15:11; Rom 10:12-13). The matter was heatedly discussed until Peter stood up and reminded them that Jew and Gentile were equal before God's sight, since by giving the Gentiles the faith God had removed all uncleanness from their hearts. James softened his stand with some concessions to the Judaizers which were adopted by all and drafted into the form of a decree to the Gentile Christian brethren in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. In order to become a Christian, therefore, it was not necessary to become a Jew. They were required only to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood. Two respected members of the Jerusalem church, Judas and Silas, were entrusted with the delivery of the decrees to the Antiochians. "Thus by moderation and mutual concession in the spirit of peace and brotherly love a burning controversy was settled, and a split happily avoided. The decree of the Council is a decree of emancipation of the Gentile disciples from circumcision and the bondage of the ceremonial law."⁹

The Council decision symbolically shows the distancing of the Christian religion from the Jewish religion and cutting off of the former from the latter tradition. Antioch, the third greatest city of the Empire, is important as Antioch is the place where the Christians were called first time Christians (Acts 11:26).

⁶Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. I, Apostolic Christianity*, 340.

⁷Cfr., Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. I, Apostolic Christianity*, 344.

⁸Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. I, Apostolic Christianity*, 343.

⁹Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. I, Apostolic Christianity*, 346.

However, in order to facilitate the fusion of pagans and Jews into *one* Church, the so-called *Apostolic Decree* demanded that the pagan converts abstain from certain things particularly obnoxious to Jews, namely ‘things sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication’ (Acts 15: 28 f).¹⁰

Although it was a victory for Paul, the implementation of the Council Decree was not an easy task. For some time, the Jerusalem Church held some prestige and it was sufficiently powerful to intimidate St Peter when, at Antioch, among the Gentile Christians, he was living with Christian freedom. Peter visited Antioch and mixed freely with the Gentile Christians. But when Jerusalem Jewish Christians presented themselves there, Peter stopped mixing with the Gentile Christians and conformed to the other observances of the Judaizers. Paul openly rebuked Peter for his compromising attitude. Peter admitted that Paul was right, and Christians were free from the observance of the Old Law (Acts 15; Gala 2:11-14; 1 Cor 8:7-13; 10:23-33; Rom 14:2; 21; 1 Tim 4:4).¹¹

As time went on, the relation of the original Church to the Jews became more strained and the Antiochian community recognised only the Gentile Christians’ freedom from the Law. The Judaizers could not influence the development of Christianity any further, because the apostolic age was approaching its end in both the East and the West.¹² The Jerusalem Council paved the way for the eventual separation of the Church from the Synagogue.

In the International Theological Commission Document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* we read:

[in the Jerusalem Council] we can see a synodal event coming into being, in which the apostolic church, in a decisive moment of its development, lives out its vocation in view of its mission, enlightened by the presence of the Risen Lord. Across the centuries, this event has been interpreted as the paradigm for Synods celebrated by the Church.¹³

Again, the same document in the same number beautifully narrates the consultative character of the Church with reference to the Council of Jerusalem. The dispute in Antioch was referred to “the Apostles

¹⁰Karl Bihlmeyer, *Church History*, Volume One, *Christian Antiquity*, Westminster: The Newman Press, 55.

¹¹Cfr., Philip Hughes, *A History of the Church*, Vol. I, London: Sheed and Ward, 1983 (Reprint), 45-46.

¹²Cfr., James Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church*, Vol. I, Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1993, 161.

¹³International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, (March 2, 2018), Vatican, no. 20.

and Elders” and in the Jerusalem Council each member was given the opportunity to express his views, listened particularly to the authoritative witness and profession of faith of Peter (Acts 15:7b-12) and finally they chose some representatives to take the letter that explains the decision taken and prescribes the procedure to be followed (Acts 15:23-39), and the letter was delivered and read to the community in Antioch, who received it gladly (Acts 15:30-31).

Ecumenical Councils, Regional Councils and Synods

According to Norman Tanner there are three special natures of the ecumenical councils: it is the tradition of the Church and there is no other Institution, including the papacy, that carried comparable authority; secondly, the councils had long history in comparison with other representative institutions; and thirdly, the councils distinguish Christianity from other world religions; councils have produced a remarkable forum in which the updating and development of doctrine has been possible.¹⁴

Regional councils and synods were not lower level councils of little authority. They played a key role in the growth and vitality of the Church in the first millennium. These regional councils disappeared in the Middle Ages. “This demise of regional councils, and the culture of dialogue they embodied, had been one of the greatest blows in the history of the Church, a principal reason why the Church has found it so difficult to remain up-to-date.”¹⁵ In the city of Carthage alone in North Africa between 393 and 419 there were eighteen regional councils. The main purpose of these councils was to provide a mechanism for discipline in the Christian community.

One notices a general atmosphere of debate and discussion in the early Church and these councils provided a forum for views to be expressed and heard.¹⁶ One cannot deny the power politics which influenced the council decisions and decided the destiny of the local churches. Still, councils meant that Christians sensed their voices were heard and their concerns met more than most people felt in society at large.¹⁷

Regional councils are rooted in the rich tradition of the Church and the spirit of these councils will promote ecumenism. The churches which are not in communion with the Catholic Church very often

¹⁴ Norman Tanner, *Was the Church too Democratic?* Bangalore, Dharmaram Publications, 2003, 5-7.

¹⁵Tanner, *Was the Church too Democratic?*, 15.

¹⁶Tanner, *Was the Church too Democratic?*, 19.

¹⁷Tanner, *Was the Church too Democratic?*, 20.

blame the Catholic Church by pointing out the fact that Catholic Church has abandoned the age-old practice of regional councils and favoured for more hierarchical institutions.

The councils through the centuries discussed the issues at stake and produced statements that eventually received unprecedented acceptance. These statements are not the result of the easily arrived consensus, but the fruit of the heatedly discussed topics. As Tanner says,

The fundamental unity of the Church was preserved amidst all these tensions and schisms. Far greater disunity would have occurred, it seems certain, without the Councils than because of them. Later history showed that the most serious schisms—that which divided East and West beginning in 1054 and the schisms resulting from the Protestant reformations in the sixteenth century—occurred in the absence of the Council, not because of them.¹⁸

The medieval Church did not give due importance to the regional councils, not forgetting the facts of the great achievements of the medieval Church, in the foundation of religious orders, religious societies, art and architecture, missionary expansion, mystical theology, etc. Again “the councils of the second millennium were largely ‘from above’ whereas those of the first millennium were much more ‘from below.’”¹⁹ The first six medieval councils from Lateran I (1123) to Lyons II (1274) are called papal councils and were councils from above as the legislation was prepared before the council took place by the pope and the Roman curia, so that the work of the council was little more than to approve the already prepared decrees. The only exception of this category was the council of Constance which was predominantly convoked and conducted in the spirit of conciliarism. The Council of Trent was a council from above and from below as the council sessions were presided over by the papal legates and the council decrees were not prepared by the papacy and Roman curia.²⁰ It is worth quoting the words of Norman Tanner after analysing the collegial practice of the Church in the light of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council:

Fear of the conciliar ghost remains with us today in many quarters of the Roman Catholic Church. The restriction to an advisory role, and to a tightly controlled agenda, of the recently established biennial synods of

¹⁸Tanner, *Was the Church too Democratic?*, 4.

¹⁹Tanner, *Was the Church too Democratic?*, 27.

²⁰Tanner, *Was the Church too Democratic?*, 28.

bishops, is one example of this fear; hostility to initiative on the part of Episcopal conferences is another.²¹

Causes of the decline of the culture of councils and the synods and regional councils include the Great Schism of 1054 which divided the Christendom into East and West and the check and balances from Constantinople over Rome was completely gone. The Gregorian Reformation launched by Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) and continued by his successors and culminated in the Concordat of Worms in 1222, was ratified by the Council of Lateran I in 1123. The papacy was exalted and the College of Cardinals assumed their new role as the consultors of the popes and the evolution of the Roman Curia, all happened at the cost of the age-old regional councils and synods. The exaltation of papacy reached its climax during the time of Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) who described himself as the supreme power in the world, less than God and more than human beings. Another reason for the decline of council culture was the threat of the theory of Conciliarism, which asserted that council is superior to the Pope and the influence of which discouraged many popes to convoke the Council. There was the strong fear of the influence of the dominance of Conciliarism when the Council of Trent was convoked. The promoters of Catholic Reformation and Counter-Reformation hardly promoted the culture of council as they are afraid of the influence of Conciliarism.²² And the next Council after the Council of Trent had a gap of more than three hundred years which is the longest gap between two councils in the history of the councils. The monarchical and pyramidal structure of the medieval Church got a definite form and shape with the definition of the Infallibility of the Pope in the First Vatican Council (1869-1870).

Second Vatican Council and Collegiality

The greatest achievement of the Second Vatican Council is the rediscovery of the collegial, conciliar and communion nature of the Catholic Church. Collegiality was one of the heated topics of the Council and much time and discussion was given on this topic, the result of which is *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Many felt that Episcopal collegiality be one of the cornerstones upon which the renewal of the Church, hoped from the council, should be based.²³

²¹Tanner, *Was the Church too Democratic?*, 29.

²²Cf. Karl Bihlmeyer, *Church History*, Vol. II, *The Middle Ages*, Westminster: The Newman Press, 1967, 379-395.

²³Tanner, *Was the Church too Democratic?*, 38.

Although there were discussions on the exercise of the office of the Pope in consultation with the bishops, no clear idea had been emerged. But the formation of regional Episcopal conferences in different countries was another phenomenon and by 1959 there were forty Episcopal conferences around the globe. The spirit of collegiality was very much there in the function of the Second Vatican Council as is evident from the elections to the conciliar commissions. The revised schema of *Lumen Gentium* “allowed collegiality to appear more strongly and explicitly. It sought to connect the episcopate with the institution of the twelve apostles as a college and argued that this college under Peter continues today in the bishops and pope.”²⁴ There were heated discussions on collegiality and by the end of the council the concept of collegiality was put in a better perspective.

The Church put collegiality into practice by the establishment of the synod of bishops which had its first meeting in 1968. In the first phase the synod was held once in three years and more recently once in two years. “[T]he synod of bishops is quite distinct from an ecumenical/general council in as much as the latter has legislative and executive authority and is not merely advisory and consultative. This distinction between advisory ‘synods’ and executive ecumenical ‘councils’ was formally enshrined in canons 342 to 348 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law.”²⁵

Ecclesiology is the articulation of the self-understanding of the Church in the particular context. The ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council is a paradigm shift from the medieval ‘pyramidal ecclesiology’ to a ‘communion model ecclesiology.’ The Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* demands for a radical change and restatement of the self-understanding of the Church in the modern world. “At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4). The Document calls for a new understanding of the Church, away from an absolute and dogmatic Church to a contingent and historically conditioned Church.

The Second Vatican Council has rediscovered the concept of the Church as People of God which transformed and enriched the life of the Church. The basic ecclesiology of Pope Francis is very much

²⁴Tanner, *Was the Church too Democratic?*, 43.

²⁵Tanner, *Was the Church too Democratic?*, 51.

influenced by this understanding of the Church of the Second Vatican Council. For him the Church is not at the centre, but at the periphery, at the margins. He dreams of a Church that “constantly fights against institutionalism, clericalism and triumphalism and calls for continuous renewal and purification.”²⁶ Pope Francis speaks of an open Church, a Church which is open and ready for dialogue, not forgetting the differences of opinion.

Pope Francis and Poor Church

The ecclesiology of Pope Francis is a participatory Church, a Church which takes into consideration the poor, marginalised, voice from periphery. This thrust is clear from his statement: “How I long for a poor Church for the poor.”²⁷ This is a reminder to the Church to continue the mission of Christ which is clearly recorded in Luke 4:18-19: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” The formation of a new humanity characterized by love, freedom, fellowship, equality and justice was the mission of Christ, a mission which he entrusted to the Church. The Church in the post-Constantine era forgot this mission and identified herself with the then existing structures and systems.

Pope Francis wanted the poor to become the centre of the Church in its pilgrim way.

We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voices to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them. Only on the basis of this real and sincere closeness can we properly accompany the poor on their path of liberation. Only this will ensure that in every Christian community the poor feel at home. Would not this approach be the greatest and most effective presentation of the good news of the Kingdom?²⁸

Pope through his life shows to the whole world the message he wants to convey. The very choice of his name, Francis, loudly declares his option for the poor and the determination to rebuild the Church according to the spirit of the manger of Bethlehem. His refusal to

²⁶ Kuncheria Pathil, *Pope Francis and his Vision of the Church*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2018, 30.

²⁷ “Pope Francis Wants ‘Poor Church for the Poor,’” *BBC News*, 16 March 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21812545>

²⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 198-199.

wear the traditional red cape (*mozzetta*), rejecting the traditional golden ring and choosing the modest silver ring, replacing the traditional golden cross with his ordinary iron cross are powerful symbolic actions of distancing himself from the Constantine era and back to the Gospel simplicity. Throughout his public life, Pope Francis has been noted for his humility, emphasis on God's mercy, international visibility as Pope, concern for the poor and commitment to interfaith dialogue. He is credited with a less formal approach to papacy than his predecessors, for instance choosing to reside in the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, Vatican guesthouse, instead of residing in the papal apartments of the Apostolic Palace used by previous popes. This act of the Pope symbolically shows the disconnect with the Constantine donation of the Lateran Palace to Pope Sylvester, a radical move to remove the vestiges of the Edict of Milan and liberate the Church of Christ from the unhealthy marriage between Church and State. Another point to be stressed is his concern for the refugees which is clear from his address to the male and female religious. He exhorts:

Your empty convents are not useful to the Church if they are turned into hostels and earn money. The empty convents do not belong to you, they are for the flesh of Christ which is what refugees are. The Lord calls us to live with greater courage and generosity, and to accept them in communities, houses and empty convents. This is of course not something simple; it requires a criterion and responsibility, but also courage.²⁹

Pope Francis and Synodal Church

Pope Francis is very much for a synodal Church and he has supervised Synods on the Family (2014), on Youth (2018) and on the Church in the Amazon Region (2019). In the Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* (2019), Pope Francis allowed that the final document of a Synod may become magisterial teaching simply with papal approval. The Constitution also gives possibility for laity to give inputs directly to the Synod's Secretary General.

The very motto of the Pope *Miserando Atque Eligendo*, by giving mercy and by choosing, speaks volumes of the new approach of the Pope to papacy. Besides, his Encyclicals, Apostolic Exhortations, etc. bear witness to the new direction Pope Francis gives to the Church. *Lumen Fidei*, encyclical on June 29, 2013, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation on November 24, 2013, *Laudato Si*, Encyclical on June 18, 2015, *Amoris Laetitia*, Apostolic Exhortation on April 8, 2016, *Veritatis*

²⁹Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*, ed., Guiliano Vignini, Bengaluru: ATC, 2014 (Reprinted; first published by Darton Longmann & Todd), 123.

Gaudium, Apostolic Constitution on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, on January 29, 2018 and *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Apostolic Exhortation on March 19, 2018, all reveal the philosophy of life of Pope Francis.

“It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium,” stated Pope Francis on October 17, 2015 at the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops by St Paul VI. It is a call for reform of the Church in the pastoral and missionary fields. Pope Francis stressed that, in fact, synodality is an essential dimension of the Church, in the sense that “what the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word synod.”³⁰ He continued: “A synodal Church is a listening Church, aware that listening is more than hearing. It is a reciprocal listening in which each one has something to learn.” The Pope continued by saying that, “The *sensus fidei* (sense of faith) makes it impossible to rigidly separate the *ecclesia docens* (teaching church) and the *ecclesia discens* (learning church) because even the flock has a ‘nose’ for discerning the new paths that the Lord is opening up to the church.” Synodality becomes impractical when we misunderstand the hierarchy of the Church and see it as a structure in which some people are placed above others. A synodal Church is listening to one another, learning from one another and taking responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel. Synod comes from *syn* (with) *hodos* (path), meaning walk together or journeying together. It is about a path taken together, under the guidance of the Risen Lord, led by the Holy Spirit, by all the People of God. St John Chrysostom says that Church is a term standing for walking together.

Synod of bishops is a special permanent council of sacred pastors and it needs constant updating and renewal. St John Paul II stated that “perhaps this instrument can be further improved. Perhaps the collegial, pastoral responsibility can be expressed in the Synod more fully.”³¹ Again, “Similarly, the Synod of Bishops must increasingly become a privileged instrument for listening to the People God.”³² The same document continues: “Above all, the contribution of the local church’s participatory bodies, especially the Presbyteral Council and the Pastoral Council, can prove fundamental and from here ‘a

³⁰*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 2.

³¹*Episcopalis Communio*, no. 4, homily at the Mass for the closing of the VI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, October 29, 1983.

³²*Episcopalis Communio*, no. 6.

synodal Church can begin to emerge.”³³ In collaboration with the Synod of Bishops, “the papacy will find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation.”³⁴

Synodality encourages and enriches the ecumenical path of the churches and the ecclesial communities to reach full and visible unity in Jesus Christ:

It is important to acknowledge with joy that, in our time, ecumenical dialogue has come to recognise synodality as something that reveals the nature of the Church, something essential to its unity in the variety of its manifestations. There is convergence on the notion of the Church as *koinonia*, which is realised in each local Church and in its relation with the other Churches, by means of specific synodal structures and processes.³⁵

The Catholic Church in Germany has begun its *Synodal Way* from January 30 to February 1, 2020 by the assembly of the bishops and lay and other representatives in Frankfurt. In two years time they will be having three more plenary assemblies to discuss topics like women in church ministry and offices, priestly life and celibacy, etc. The aim of the *Synodal Way* is to connect to people today, and redefine Christian and priestly lives for today. In the context of this discussion on a Synodal Church, Pope Francis has written a letter to the German Church on June 29, 2019, expressing his ideas about a Synodal Church. It is a 28-page long letter originally written in Spanish where he focusses on evangelisation in the face of the erosion and decline of the faith in the country. “Synodality presupposes and requires the action of the Holy Spirit.” “Synodal Path” Pope says, “what it entails in concrete terms and how it unfolds will certainly require further consideration.”³⁶ However, it seems that they (the German Church) have forgotten the dimension of evangelism. Besides, according to some critics, there is no much stress on doctrinal fidelity. The future of German Church depends very much on the measure of evangelisation the Church is going to engage in.³⁷ Lot of discussions are going on regarding the *Synodal Way* of the German Church.

³³*Episcopalis Communio*, no. 7, Address on the Fifteenth Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops; Cfr., *Evangelii Gaudium*, 31.

³⁴*Episcopalis Communio*, no. 10; John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Ut unum Sint*, May 25, 1995, 95.

³⁵*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 116.

³⁶*Letter of the Holy Father Pope Francis to the People of God which is on the Way in Germany*, no. 2, 3 & 7, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019.

³⁷ Cf. Hans Feichtinger, “First Things as the Synodal Way Begins,” 2.10.2020. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/02/as-the-synodal-way-begins>

Oriental Catholic Churches in India

In the process of restoring the Oriental identity, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara churches were raised to the status of Major Archiepiscopal churches in 1992 and in 2005 respectively. These *sui juris* churches enjoy lot of autonomy in church administration, sacramental life, election of the Major Archbishop, bishops, etc. of course, in communion with the Holy See and approved by the Pope. The Holy Synods of the Oriental churches are indeed an example to be followed by the Latin Church in the process of moving towards a synodal church in the universal Church. There should be revision in the Latin Code of Canon Law for the realisation of a synodal Church.

Conclusion

Christianity, if it has to survive, especially in the context of its missionary expansion in Asian, African and Latin American countries, and prevent its decline in the strong Christian belt of Europe, has to go beyond the traditional concepts and to undertake a new step equal to the one employed by the Apostles and the Elders in the Jerusalem Council, a daring and future oriented step. The Church, which is a pilgrim Church, has to overcome the past by accepting and assimilating the positive developments in the world into the present. The traditional categories and theological jargons may not be of much use if we fail in theologizing in context which is a liberative activity of the children of God. By this we overcome the temptations of the members of the Church to consider herself as a sect, a perfect society, an institution, as in the case of the Judaizers, forgetting the fact that Church is a growing organism, a charismatic movement, which transcends the walls and boundaries built by the humans.

Following the model of the Jerusalem Council, the coming together of the bishops and leaders in the early Church was to reach and express a common mind in matters of faith and morals. The Holy Trinity is a council; conciliarity is inherent in the Church, since the Church is also a council, an image and reflection of the council of the Holy Spirit.³⁸ Ecclesial synodality is the most authoritative expression of God's presence and *koinonia* with His Church. The Apostolic Council of Jerusalem (Ca 49 CE) depicted in Acts 15 is a paradigm for all subsequent councils and it defined the essential criteria for reaching common decisions within the different local churches. The entire Church participated in the decision-making process of the

³⁸ Cfr., Maximos Athiorgoussis, "Theological and Historical Aspects of Conciliarity: Some Propositions for Discussion," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 24, 1 (1979) 5.

Church. Before the Apostles and Elders met to consider the matter (Acts 15:6), the entire Church had come together to hear the mission work of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:4). In this way, the importance of bringing together the diversity of charisms of all baptised faithful in order to decide upon an issue was seen as a fundamental prerequisite in the exercise of synodality within the Church. After the plenary assembly, the Apostles and Elders met together (Acts 15:6) to discern the mind of the whole body of the Church so that all could be of one accord (Acts 15:25). Thus, it is clear from the above exposition that the guiding principle by which issues must be dealt with within the church today is through different layers of dialogue, consultations and discussions. The synodal or communal character of the Church is safeguarded and maintained by sending a delegation along with a letter to the Church of Antioch. God's continued presence in the Church is expressed by the words of James: "and with this (decision) the words of the prophets agree" (Acts 15:15). From this it becomes clear that the Spirit's abiding presence in the Church guiding it to all truth is seen when the Church comes together in council and that was the practice in the Church in the first Millennium.