

ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 14, No. 1, March 2020
Pages: 107-118

SYNODALITY IN A COMMUNION- CHURCH

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Abstract

The Second Vatican Council mandated a synod of Bishops to “bear testimony to the participation of all Bishops in hierarchical communion in the care of the universal Church.” Synods, gatherings of Bishops to discuss specific questions arising in the Church, have been frequent since the Council. One of the major theological contributions of the Council was the renewal of the notion of the Church as a communion of believers, laity and clerics together. Basing ourselves on this notion of Church as a communion of believers, in this essay we propose synods of all the People of God to discuss questions important to the Church and to bear testimony to the participation of all believers in the mission and care of the communion-Church. We base our proposal on not only a communion model of Church, but also Catholic teaching on the authority and inviolability of conscience and the concept of synodality that so characterizes the papacy of Pope Francis.

Keywords: Communion; Conscience; Discernment; Hierarchy; Reciprocity of Consciences; Synod; Synodality

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Hierarchical and Communion Models of Church

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, one approach to Church held unchallenged sway. That approach was a hierarchical approach that claimed to offer timeless theological norms for a timeless Church, systematically stating theological positions, logically explicating them, and tenaciously defending them against all adversaries. The problem with this timeless approach in the twentieth century turned out to be that it was not historically, and therefore not theologically, timeless enough. It could not stand as the official theology of a Church that, far from being timeless, came to be recognized as thoroughly time conditioned. The worldwide clerical sex abuse scandal and its episcopal coverups was only one proof of its human and time-conditioned reality.

The hierarchical approach could not stand in the light of the fundamental Christian norm that is sacred scripture, interpreted according to “what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances as he used contemporary literary forms *in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture.*”¹ It could not stand in the light of the riches of the Fathers of the Church, East and West, also interpreted in accordance with the situation of their own times and cultures. It could not stand in the light of a vital ecumenical movement that valued open dialogue between Christians East and West and between Christians and non-Christians. Pope Francis recently described that dialogue as “Keep an open mind.” “Don’t get bogged down in your own limited ideas and opinions but be prepared to change or expand them. The combination of two different ways of thinking can lead to a synthesis that enriches both. The unity that Christians seek is not uniformity but a ‘unity in diversity’” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 139). Good advice for a communion Church that is home to a polarity of theological positions.

In preparation for a discussion on the nature of the Church at the Second Vatican Council in 1962, a theological commission prepared a draft document on Church which was hierarchical in tone and content. It was arranged in four chapters: Nature of the Church, Hierarchy in the Church, Laity in the Church, and States of Perfection in the Church, and there could be no doubt about its teaching. The Church is a hierarchical, an almost monarchical, institution ruled by

¹Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, no. 11, in Walter M. Abbott, ed. *The Documents of Vatican II*, El Monte, CA: New Win Publishing, 1966, 120, emphasis added.

consecrated Bishops, with the Bishop of Rome as its head. Authority in the Church belongs to the Pope worldwide and to Bishops in their dioceses. Laity have no authority, they come after hierarchy in the Church, and their commission is to obey their Bishops and the Pope, to pray, pay, and obey as once was said. When this preparatory document came to the Council for discussion, it was roundly rejected by the Council's Bishops as a way to speak of Church in the twentieth century and returned to the preparatory commission to be reworked to bring it into line with Pope John XXIII's call for the *aggiornamento* of doctrinal language. It was suggestively rearranged in eight chapters, only three of which in their conciliar sequence need detain us here: Mystery of the Church, the People of God, the Hierarchical Nature of the Church.

The approved document reverses the ordering of clerics and laity; People of God, embracing laity and clerics together, takes precedence over hierarchy.

The Body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One (John 2:20), cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith [*sensus fidei*] which characterizes the People as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when, from the Bishops down to the last member of the laity, it shares universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.²

Laity live in the world and engage in temporal affairs. "They are called there by God so that by exercising their proper function and being led by the Spirit of the gospel they can work for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of leaven" (LG, 31). Clerics are servants of the People in this task; they are ordained "for the nurturing and constant growth of the People of God" (LG, 18). The revised document was overwhelmingly approved at the Council's third session in November 1964 as *Lumen Gentium*, the *Magna Carta* of every subsequent reflection on, teaching about, and behaviour of the post-conciliar Catholic Church.

Theologian Yves Congar describes the transition from the council's preparatory document to *Lumen Gentium* as a transition from the priority of "organizational structures and hierarchical positions" to "the priority and even the primacy of grace."³ We wholeheartedly endorse the truth in that description, but still prefer a different one. The transition is from a juridical model that sees Church as

²Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (LG), 12, in Abbott, ed. *The Documents of Vatican II*, 29.

³Yves M. J. Congar, "The People of God," in *Vatican II: An Interfaith Appraisal*, ed. John H. Miller, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966, 199.

hierarchical structure and institution to a theological model that sees it as graced communion and mystery to be plumbed in the People's never-ending journeying together in search of a fuller Catholic truth. It is a transition from an exclusive focus on hierarchical office and authority to a focus on co-responsibility for belief and service of all the People of God. The rearrangement of the four neo-scholastic chapters of the preparatory document into the final eight, and especially the emphasis intended by placing chapters on mystery and People of God before one on hierarchy, provide ample evidence of the Council's conviction that the Church is primarily a mysterious communion of believers with one another, and all of them with God in Christ, before it is a hierarchical institution. Theologically, hierarchical institution gave way to shared communion.

The fundamental Catholic meaning of communion designates the communion of all the People of God with God in Christ and his Spirit, and hence their common participation in Christian grace, beliefs, and actions. The Church is, first, communion with God, the Creator who created women and men for participation in divine communion (LG, 2), with the Son who was sent "to establish peace or communion between sinful human beings [and God], as well as to fashion them into a fraternal communion,"⁴ and the Holy Spirit who unites the Church in "a communion of fellowship and service" (LG, 4). It is, second, as the fruit of communion with God, a communion in history of Christian women and men with one another. An official note from the Council explains that the model of Church as communion is not a new idea, but that it is "an idea which was held in high honor in the ancient Church."⁵ In his Exhortation *On the Lay Faithful*, Pope John Paul II characterizes the communion that is the Church as "the incorporation of Christians into the life of Christ and the communication of that life of love and service to the entire body of the faithful" (n. 19).

Conscience

In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas established the authority and inviolability of individual conscience. "Anyone upon whom the ecclesiastical authorities, in ignorance of the true facts, impose a demand that offends his clear conscience, should perish in excommunication rather than violate his conscience."⁶ No clearer Catholic statement on the authority of conscience could be found.

⁴Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, 3, in Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, 586.

⁵Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, 99.

⁶Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sent.*, dist.38,q. 2,a. 4.

Seven hundred years later, the Second Vatican Council endorsed that vision of conscience. "Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of man. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depth. In a wonderful manner, conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbour."⁷ The Council also taught the inviolability of individual conscience.

In all his activity a man [and a woman] is bound to follow his [her] conscience faithfully, in order that he [she] may come to God for whom he [she] was created. It follows that he is not to be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious.⁸

The *Catechism* places the Church's teaching beyond doubt: Catholics have "the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions" (n. 1782).

Pope Francis embraces this Catholic teaching on conscience more than any of his predecessors. At the beginning of his Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, he notes that "We find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them" (AL, 37). He returns to conscience again at the end of his Exhortation, teaching that

conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexities of one's limits, while not yet fully the objective ideal (AL, 303).

The word "conscience" denotes an act of practical judgment that commands to do this or prohibits from doing that. It comes at the end of a process of discernment which is a process of experience, understanding, judgment, decision. To make a practical judgment of conscience involves gathering as much evidence as possible, discerning and understanding the evidence and its implications, and finally making as honest a judgment as possible that this action must be done or that action must be avoided. Since this process ends with a judgment about what is right or wrong, it is a *moral* process.

⁷Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 16, in Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, 213.

⁸Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, 3, in Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, 681.

Conscience, we insist, is not a law unto itself, it must be as fully informed as possible to be right. That formation is precisely the process from gathering the necessary evidence to making the practical judgment that this is what I must do in this situation.

A right conscience necessarily involves the virtue of prudence, by which “right reason is applied to action.”⁹ Prudence is a *cardinal* virtue around which all other virtues pivot. No moral virtue, Aquinas argues, can be possessed without prudence.¹⁰ Unfortunately, as human experience amply demonstrates, even the most prudential practical judgment can be in error. That raises the question of the erroneous conscience and so, at this point, we need to introduce some important distinctions. Moral theologians note that there are two poles in every moral judgment. One is a subjective pole, for it is always a rational human *subject* who makes a judgment; the other is an objective pole, since every judgment is made about some *objective* reality, giving alms to the poor, for instance, or choosing to forego some expensive medical treatment that *might* prolong my life. Subjects arrive at their judgments either by following the correct rational process or by somehow short-changing that process. In the first case, the subject arrives at a right moral understanding and conscience-judgment about the object; in the second case, the subject arrives at a wrong or erroneous understanding and conscience-judgment about the object. If a decision to forego some medical treatment follows a right understanding and judgment about the treatment and its effects on the patient, then conscience is also said to be right; if it follows an erroneous understanding and judgment of the treatment and its effects on the patient, then conscience is also said to be erroneous.

If the error of understanding and judgment can be ascribed to some fault, not taking the trouble to find out what is the truth in the situation, for instance, or negligent failure to gather the necessary evidence, to engage in the necessary discernment, to take the necessary advice, then the wrong understanding and judgment of conscience flowing from it are both deemed to be culpable and cannot be morally followed. If the error cannot be ascribed to some moral fault, then both the understanding and judgment of conscience flowing from it are deemed to be non-culpable and not only can but also must be followed, even contrary to Church authority. There is one final distinction to be added. The morality of an action is largely

⁹Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II, q. 47, a. 5.

¹⁰Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 65, a. 1.

controlled by the subject's motive. A good motive, foregoing a medical treatment *because* of the debilitating expense to one's family is a moral thing to do. A bad motive, foregoing the medical treatment *because* the surgeon is a coloured immigrant, is a bad, racist motive and is an immoral thing to do.¹¹

A decision of right conscience is a complex process. It is an *individual* process, but far from an *individualistic* process. Individual conscience is not everything. The Latin compound word *con-scientia* literally means knowledge together. It suggests what human experience clearly demonstrates to be true, namely, that being freed from one's isolated self into a community is a surer way to come to right moral judgment and truth. This community basis of moral truth, judgment, and action builds a safeguard against isolating egoism and subjective relativism that denies all universal truth. It has been part of the Christian tradition since Paul, who clearly believed in the inviolability of conscience (Rom 14:23; 1 Cor 19:25-27; 2 Cor 1:12; 4:2). Noted moral theologian Bernard Häring calls it "the reciprocity of consciences."¹²

Given the variety of individuals, situations, and concerns in a body of believers as large as the Catholic Church, there will inevitably be a variety of practical judgments of conscience. The poor are not the rich, clerics are not laity, Asia is neither America nor Europe nor Africa. Some of these judgments will be right, some will be wrong, but in time there will emerge, and will be shown to emerge, a shared truth from a kind of communal conscience, what the Second Vatican Council called *sensus fidei*. This *sensus fidei* the communion-Church is called to embrace for the love of God, of neighbour, of unity, and of the common good. This essay is a proposal for a communion model of Church authority that promotes the following of a demonstrated *sensus fidei* or communal conscience and prohibits any uninformed restraint of it. The model of Church we recommend to embrace this communal conscience is a communion model, and the way to communion in truth and morality in that Church we recommend is the way of discernment through synodality and dialogue. It is within this communion of consciences that Church authority should function, not guaranteeing the truth of conscience (past errors preclude that claim) but informing it to a right practical judgment.

¹¹See Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, "Conscience and Discernment," in *Introduction to Catholic Theological Ethics: Foundations and Applications*, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Press, 2019, 133-150.

¹²Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Clergy and Laity*, New York: Seabury, 1980, Vol. 2, 25.

The Catholic faithful, the International Theological Commission teaches, “have an instinct for the truth of the Gospel, which enables them to recognize and endorse authentic Christian doctrine and practice, and to reject what is false.”¹³ It continues: “Banishing the Catholic caricature of an active hierarchy and a passive laity,” so prevalent in the past and present Catholic Church, “and in particular the notion of a strict separation between the teaching Church and the learning Church, the Council taught that all the baptized participate in their own proper way in the three offices of Christ as prophet, priest, and king. In particular it taught that Christ fulfils his prophetic office not only by means of the hierarchy but also via the laity.”¹⁴ The attainment of moral truth in the Catholic tradition, therefore, involves a dialogical process in the communion Church between the “Bishops down to the last member of the laity.” When that process has been conscientiously completed, even the last member of the laity is finally “alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths” (GS 16), and has to make a judgment of conscience that this is what I must believe or not believe, do or not do. Cardinal Newman’s famous words to the Duke of Norfolk come to mind here: “I shall drink to the Pope if you please, still to conscience first and to the Pope afterwards.”¹⁵

Discernment

Conscience is a practical judgment that this action rather than that one is the moral action to be done in this situation. There remains, however, a question: how is that practical judgment to be arrived at? Pope Francis hints at a Catholic answer when he teaches that the faithful “are capable of carrying out their own *discernment* in complex situations” (AL 37). Discernment, the power of the rational mind to distinguish one reality from another, is the way to reach a practical judgment of conscience. The discernment of a conscience judgment is a thoroughly *theo-logical* activity, a gift of God and a skill to uncover the presence and action of God in every experience and judgment. When Catholics discern, they are seeking two things. They are seeking, first, the presence of God in their lives, especially what God is calling them to do in a particular situation. They are seeking, second, the action they must do in this situation to be aligned with God’s will and to be, therefore, moral. It is a gift because it is given to

¹³International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014), 2, accessed at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html.

¹⁴International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, 4.

¹⁵Cardinal Newman, “Letter to the Duke of Norfolk,” accessed at: <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/anglicans/volume2/gladstone/section5.html>.

us by our Father God; it is a skill because we can and must develop the gift by practice. Discernment is like riding a bicycle. First, my parents give me a gift of a bicycle for my birthday and then, by practice, I develop the skill to ride the bicycle with ease.

Spiritual writer Mark McIntosh distinguishes four moments in the process of discernment.¹⁶ The first moment is the discernment of the presence and action of God in our lives. The theological virtue of trust in that God provides the foundation for Catholic discernment and for the conscience judgment and action that is its outcome. The second moment in the process of discernment is the discerning of good and evil human desires that distort our perceptions and make our discernment of the presence and action of God and of our ultimate conscience judgment more difficult. St Paul instructs us here: “The works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, quarrels, dissensions, carousing” (Gal 5:19-26). We can easily add our own lists of evils: greed, idolatry of money, refusing to share our goods with the poor, racial hatred, and today fear of immigrants.

The third moment of discernment is a moment of practical wisdom that demands maturity, both human and Christian. It demands the experience-based maturity to reach intuitively the moral action in a situation. It demands the Christian maturity to recognize not only the presence and action of God in our experiences but also the moral action toward which God is impelling us in a particular situation. The fourth and final moment of discernment is the moment we judge that this action rather than that one is God’s will for me in this situation and we freely decide to do it. This final moment is the moment of the judgment of conscience. Following that practical judgment into action is the moment we act morally.

Synodality

The contemporary Catholic Church is divided by acrimonious polarization. The International Theological Commission (ITC) proposes synodality as the way to move the Church beyond this polarization. It suggests that honest dialogue in which unity prevails over conflict is of the greatest value “in managing different opinions and experiences and learning a style of constructing history, a vital field where conflicts, tensions and opposites can reach a pluriform unity which generates new life, making it possible to build

¹⁶ Mark A. McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge*, New York: Herder and Herder, 2004, 8.

communion amid disagreement.”¹⁷ To build this communion amid disagreement in a polarized Church, all the People of God, laity and clerics, women and men, approved and unapproved theologians, even the Catholic disaffected, should be invited to the table of dialogue. Without such communal dialogue, the communion-destroying polarization dividing the Church will continue. In a communion-Church, the servant-leaders should consult the People of God *before* making authoritative pronouncements that concern them.

This process of consultation is what we mean by synodality, exemplified by Pope Francis in his consultations *before* and *during* the 2014 and 2015 Synods. The word *synod* is instructive. It is a conjunction of two Greek words, *syn* which means together and *hodos* which means journey. A synod, therefore, is a journeying together, and a synod of the communion-Church is a journeying together of all the People of God, laity and clerics together, towards fuller, but never fully achieved, doctrinal and moral truth. Pope Francis has himself modelled commitment to a synodal way of dialogue. Dialogue, he teaches,

is born from an attitude of respect for the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It assumes that there is room in the heart for the other person’s point of view and proposal. To dialogue entails a cordial reception of the other, not a prior condemnation. In order to dialogue, it is necessary to know how to lower the defenses, open the doors of the house, and offer human warmth.¹⁸

Church dialogue should embrace not only Bishops and their court theologians or approved authors but all the competent members of the communion-Church, laity, clerics, and theologians, both those who agree and disagree with Church teaching on specific ethical issues. The German Bishops’ Conference has announced that it will inaugurate “the synodal way” on the first day of Advent 2020 with a meeting comprising the Bishops’ Conference and Germany’s largest lay organization, Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken.¹⁹ It is a very good start in a Church that is essentially a communion of believers.

¹⁷International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” (2 March 2018), n. 111, accessed at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

¹⁸USCCB, “A Compilation of Quotes and Texts of Pope Francis on Dialogue, Encounter, and Interreligious and Ecumenical Relations,” accessed at: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/resources/upload/Quotes-of-Pope-Francis-on-dialogue-encounter-ecumenical-and-interreligious-affairs-12042013.pdf>.

¹⁹See *National Catholic Reporter* online, October 4, 2019.

Church leaders must learn to appreciate theological diversity and to consider its contributions as a manifestation of the Spirit at work in the communion-Church, not as a threat to be silenced or excluded from the table of dialogue and discernment. Although the introduction of ideas that challenge official teaching may cause tension, that is no more than a way for a pilgrim People of God to move towards a fuller possession of the truth about the infinite God it believes in and what the Spirit of God may be asking of it in a pluralistic world. Pope Francis offers an example of this journey together towards truth, through dialogue, in his statement on Catholic and Orthodox relations. "I am comforted to know that Catholics and Orthodox share the same concept of dialogue...based on deeper reflection on the one truth that Christ has given His Church and that we do not cease to understand ever better, moved by the Holy Spirit." We must not be afraid, he continues, "of meeting and of true dialogue. It does not distance us from the truth, rather, through an exchange of gifts, it leads us, under the guidance of the Spirit of Truth, to the whole Truth (cf. John 16:13)."²⁰

It is time, indeed in this time of the scandal of worldwide clerical sexual abuse it is past time, for the Church to abandon its bunker mentality of only the authority of Bishops and their approved authors and to replace it by Pope Francis' synodality and dialogue on all Catholic issues. Synodality embraces the communion ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council that focuses on journeying together and listening to input from all people of good will in the Church. It advocates honest and charitable dialogue to discern God's will and the path the Church must follow to live according to that will. This requires what both John Paul II and Francis frequently refer to as "dialogue in charity." The dialogue in charity, John Paul explains, is a mutual seeking after truth "in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person." In such a dialogue, participants explain "to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the search for truth" (*Ut Unun Sint*, 18). We have already seen Francis' advice with respect to such dialogue. "The combination of two different ways of thinking can lead to a synthesis that enriches both. The unity that Christians seek is not uniformity but a 'unity in diversity'" (AL, 139). We propose that dialogue in charity implemented as the Catholic way in parish, diocesan, national, and international synods to achieve Francis' "unity in diversity." Delegates to such synods, lay women,

²⁰National Catholic Reporter online, October 4, 2019.

lay men, clerics, and theologians would be elected by a normal voting process.

Conclusion

The Body known as the Synod of Bishops was mandated by the Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church. It was to be "representative of the whole Catholic episcopate" in order to "bear testimony to the participation of all the Bishops in *hierarchical communion* in the care of the universal Church."²¹ We are proposing synods representative not of the whole episcopate but of the whole Church to bear testimony to the participation of all the People of God in the *communion-Church*. Synodality is a central dimension of Pope Francis' papacy and, we suggest, is a critical need in our day when polarized clerical and lay cabals are accusing the Pope of heresy when all he is asking for is dialogue in charity as the communion-Church journeys forward together in search of doctrinal and moral truth. Neither dialogue nor synodality is, of course, the endpoint. Both are but ways to the endpoint, which is the fullness of truth into which the Spirit of God is guiding the communion-Church.

²¹Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, n. 5 (emphasis added), in Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, 400.