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TOWARDS A SYNODAL CHURCH – MORAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract¹

From the very beginning, synodality belongs to the genetics of Christianity and it has permeated all the basic dimensions of the Church from its local to its universal existence. At the same time, centralization, clericalism, and hierarchicalism have existed side by side, in practice making the members of the Church unequal, and distorting the synodal nature of the Church and disrupting dialogue and participation of all the faithful. One of the greatest ecclesiological contributions of the Second Vatican Council is the re-discovery of the communion, and collegial character of the Church. According to Pope Francis, synodality is an essential dimension of the Church. A synodal Church assures the participation of each member – women and men, young and old – without discriminating anyone, listens to

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one another, learning from one another, taking responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel. It is about a path taken together, People of God walking together, under the guidance of the Risen Lord, led by the Holy Spirit. It has to be also remembered that the moral implications of synodality refers not only to particular actions, but above all to attitudes, perspectives and perception.

Keywords: Clericalism; *Palliyogam*; Participatory Church; *Sensus Fidei*; Synodality; Vatican II

“It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium”² (Pope Francis). It can be said that from the very beginning, synodality belongs to the genetics of Christianity and it has permeated all the basic dimensions of the Church from its local to its universal existence. Ecumenical councils, regional or provincial synods, and diocesan synods were held throughout the centuries. Synodal and conciliar activities were part and parcel of the Church during the first millennium.

At the same time, centralization, clericalism, and hierarchicalism have existed side by side, in practice making the members of the Church unequal, and distorting the synodal nature of the Church and disrupting dialogue and participation of all the faithful.

One of the greatest ecclesiological contributions of the Second Vatican Council is the re-discovery of the communion, and collegial character of the Church. The Council spent considerable time for reflecting upon collegiality, the major result of which is *Lumen Gentium*. The Council’s preference for collegiality is seen in other documents also. LG, 10-12 speak about the new dignity of the People of God, as all are called to participate in the kingship, priesthood and prophetic office of Christ. All the faithful, whatever be their status in life, are called by God to perfect holiness. “The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvellous light” (LG, 10). LG, 12: The entire People of God shares in Christ’s prophetic office. A supernatural instinct of the faith (*sensus fidei*) empowers them and hence the whole body cannot err in matters of faith: “The entire body

²Francis, Address of His Holiness Pope Francis on the Occasion of the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html

of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief.” About the synod of bishops, the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops, *Christus Dominus*, states: “This sacred ecumenical synod earnestly desires that the venerable institution of synods and councils flourish with fresh vigor” (CD 36, 2). The establishment of the Synod of Bishops in 1965 and its regular meetings to a great extent express the collegial character of the Church. The role and function of the Laity are further elaborated in *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity. This is further elaborated and developed in the Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Christifideles Laici* (1988, following the Synod on Laity in 1987). We can also note that though “Synod of Bishops” is an important step forward, the concept of synodality which we discuss today goes much beyond that. Synodality is the participation of all—all the members of the Church, and it goes even beyond the borders of the Church.

Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have spoken about the importance of synodality. However, Pope Francis has frequently referred to synodality and his vision of synodality has given it new levels of meaning and new vitality for the life and mission of the Church. He speaks of a participatory Church, which is open and ready for dialogue, a Church in which everyone participates as equals. According to Pope Francis, synodality is an essential dimension of the Church: “what the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word synod.”³ In his view, “A synodal Church is a listening Church...It is a reciprocal listening in which each one has something to learn.” The International Theological Commission, in the document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018)⁴ has developed further this concept of synodality.

In developing a theology of synodality and its practical implications, the Eastern traditions can be of particular help, since Eastern Churches had the Synod of Bishops, and participatory bodies at various levels of ecclesial life. The *palliyogam* of St Thomas Christians is a typical example of this. Indian Church with three ecclesial traditions can greatly contribute to the development of a theology and praxis of synodality.

³*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 2.

⁴ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html

The Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, entitled *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission* delineates the three basic foundations of a synodal Church. On the basis of the theology of synodality, we are particularly focussing on its moral implications. In fact, the document presents a number of moral issues against the background of which the theology of a synodal Church is to be developed: clericalism, sexual abuse scandal, transparency and accountability, abuse of power, justice, equal dignity of all, etc. Let me highlight only a few of them, especially referring to the characteristic of participation in a synodal Church.

A synodal Church assures the participation of each member—women and men, young and old—without discriminating anyone, listens to one another, learning from one another, taking responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel. It is about a path taken together, People of God walking together, under the guidance of the Risen Lord, led by the Holy Spirit.

Clericalism refers to the policy of maintaining or increasing the power of the religious hierarchy. The clergy and the hierarchy are seen as the source and centre of power and authority. As Pope Francis says,

Clericalism is a constant temptation on the part of priests who see ‘the ministry ... as a power to be exercised, rather than a free and generous service to be offered...’ Doubtless, such clericalism can make consecrated persons lose respect for the sacred and inalienable worth of each person and of his or her freedom.⁵

Considering priesthood as a source of special power offering special privileges and superior status over others is one of the important signs of clericalism. Katarina Schuth defines clericalism as a “type of exceptionalism, a form of elitism... an attitude embraced by priests and bishops in which they see themselves as special or superior to others... In parish life, priests exhibit clericalism by ignoring, putting down, and excluding laypeople, especially those with whom they minister...”⁶ There are those who hold that clericalism has developed in the Church in the context of the Church’s elitist culture. Elitism distinguishes the ordained from the lay, the bishops from the priests

⁵Francis, *Christus Vivit*: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God, 25 March 2019, no. 98, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html.

⁶Katarina Schuth, “Seminary Formation: Addressing Clericalism and Sexuality,” *Asian Horizons* 14, 2 (2020) 421-430, at 423-424.

and deacons, the cardinals from the bishops, and finally from all others the Pope who himself wields absolute power. "Ecclesiastical elitism involves an entire gamut of privilege from the rest of the people."⁷ In spite of the shift into a communion ecclesiology and the conviction that the Church is the People of God, clericalism continues to divide the Church into superior and inferior members, thus promoting unequal discipleship in the Church. Besides making the ordained a centre of power, clericalism in effect distances people from God, by presenting the ordained as the mediators, only through whom God's grace can be obtained and truth can be understood.

We need a Church which is participatory, where the uniqueness and equality in dignity of all the members are recognised and the unique charisms of all are promoted. We need a Church where differences in functions and roles do not lead to divisions and discriminations, but lead to mutual recognition and appreciation and greater unity. The ordained represents Christ, but he equally represents the community. Clericalism somehow underlines the difference between the ordained and the non-ordained, highlights the authority of the ordained, even to the point of ignoring his basic unity with the community, in which everyone partakes in the priestly function of Christ, by virtue of his/her baptism. It may be worth listening to what Pope Francis told in his homily on December 16, 2013: "Lord, free your people from a spirit of clericalism and aid them with a spirit of prophecy." Pope Francis prayed and said that, in the Gospel, those who met Christ with a spirit of prophecy welcomed him as the Messiah, but without it, "the void that is left is occupied by clericalism; and it is this clericalism that asks Jesus, 'By what authority do you do these things? By what law?'"⁸

Evidently, it has to be still accepted in practice that ministerial priesthood is for service, not for power. It is a privilege—the privilege of serving others following the footsteps of Jesus who served others and emptied himself for them, and not a privilege to dominate over others. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* he points out that excessive clericalism is responsible for keeping the laity away from active involvement and decision-making in the Church.⁹

⁷Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, "Abuse, Elitism and Accountability: Challenges to the Philippine Church," *Asian Horizons* 14, 2 (June 2020) 361-380, at 368-369. Also available at <http://dvkjournals.in/index.php/ah/issue/view/22>

⁸"Pope Francis Prays for Church to Be 'Free of Clericalism,'" *National Catholic Register* (17-12-2013): <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/pope-francis-prays-for-church-to-be-free-of-clericalism/>, accessed on 10-01=2014.

⁹Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 102.

That all the faithful equally participates in the priestly function of Christ and that all are called to the same perfection of holiness also points out the need of a more participatory Church. Everyone is responsible for discerning and understanding the faith and living it to its fullness, sharing the fruits of that faith with others. No one can evade this responsibility, nor can anyone be excluded from this responsibility and privilege.

But, this role of all the faithful cannot be limited merely to professing the same faith, but should be extended to participation in the visible structures of the Church. Often, it is repeatedly said that the Church was instituted by Christ and is guided by the Holy Spirit, and hence it cannot be a democratic structure. But, if we believe that all the baptized share in the priestly function of Christ and all are given the same Spirit, by which all have the instinct of faith, how can the vast majority be excluded from the structures of the Church? Moreover, if we hold that ministerial priesthood is not for power, but for service, why should power and authority in the Church be reserved for the ministerial priests?

By democratic process, I do not mean party politics or craze for power. Democracy is not first of all about party politics, which in the present form in many countries, is a degeneration of democracy. Democracy is first of all about participation of all the members in the decision-making and governance. The Church, in fact, adopts the democratic process in many places and phases. For example, the highest authority in the Church is elected through voting; the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils are taken—in general—through voting; the office bearers of the Bishops' conferences are elected through voting; in most religious congregations, the major superiors and councillors are elected through voting. In the first centuries, in many places, the bishops were selected through people's participation. In India, in the Syro-Malabar Church, for more than sixteen centuries, the priests were ordained only with the consent of the Parish Committee (*palliyogam*); only with the authorization letter from the parish council the bishop was authorised to ordain a priest. Moreover, the temporal administration of the Church was entrusted with the laity. Thus, in the Church, democratic process has a long tradition, which was ignored, side-lined and rejected in the process of clericalism and centralization that crept into the Church later.

One important implication of being a participatory Church is the Church becoming more transparent and ensuring justice within the Church. One of the salient features of today's society is the sense of social justice. There is a thirst for justice and committed action to

establish justice is undertaken. Perhaps this was initiated by different political and social movements from the 18th century and was strengthened in the 20th century. There is a strong sense of equality and freedom of all human beings, the dignity of the human person and the fundamental rights of everyone. The Church has also creatively responded to this thirst for justice, as can be seen in the developments in the social doctrine of the Church in the 20th century. The Church's attempts to ensure justice in society are held in high esteem. However, there is a growing scepticism about the Church's sincerity in ensuring justice. One of the criticisms raised against the Church in the wake of the recent cases of abuse of minors by the clergy centres on administering justice within the Church. It is pointed out that the Church employs different norms distinguishing those who are in authority from others. Such disparity in meting out justice creates a negative image of the Church's commitment to justice and the Catholics who share this view prefer civil procedure in cases of abuse; they believe that the ecclesiastical system will not ensure justice.¹⁰ We cannot ignore the concerted efforts from different corners to tarnish the image and to weaken the moral power of the Church. However, loss of trust in Church's administration of justice is a matter of serious concern for us to examine. This scepticism about the administration of justice within the Church is not a new situation. In the recent decades, moral theologians like Charles E. Curran, Richard A. McCormick and many others have pointed out the need of transparency and justice in dealing with theologians who differ from the magisterial stances.¹¹ Jim Keenan and others have underscored the need to "practice what you preach."¹² One of the tasks of a participatory Church will be to ensure justice and transparency in its own administration.¹³ Similarly, there are a

¹⁰Aaron Milavec, "Reflections on the Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests," *Asian Horizons* 4 (2010) 179-191.

¹¹For example, see Charles Curran and Richard McCormick, ed., *Readings in Moral Theology, No. 3: The Magisterium and Morality*, New York: Paulist Press, 1982.

¹²For example, James F. Keenan, *Practice What You Preach: The Need for Ethics in Church Leadership*, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2000; M. Shawn Copeland, "Collegiality as a Moral and Ethical Practice," in *Practice What You Preach. Virtues, Ethics, and Power in the Lives of Pastoral Ministers and Their Congregations*, ed. James F. Keenan and Joseph Kotva, Lanham: Sheed and Ward, 1999, 315-332.

¹³Please note: "The 21st century could well create a "boom market" for movements seeking to foster greater accountability, collaboration and transparency in the church, if activists and entrepreneurs understand how to make the pitch in a global key." : John L. Allen, Jr., "A Global Case for Good Government in the Church," in *National Catholic Reporter*, 25-06-2010, www.ncronline.org, accessed on 11-07-2010.

number of issues which we are not free to discuss. For example, Papal Primacy, Papal Infallibility, Communion for the divorced and re-married, contraception, homosexuality, ordination of women, etc. The list will be much longer if we include all such issues on which discussion is not allowed or discouraged. Any society may need disciplinary measures and for unity, sometimes even freedom of expression may be limited. But, the greater the freedom of expression, the more people feel involved.

Women and Men—they are equal in dignity. In the Church, they are equally disciples of Christ. A synodal Church, a participatory Church demands the recognition of the equal dignity and unique charisms of women and men. The Church has to ensure that men and women are equals, not only in theory but also in practice, and that they have equal opportunities to work together for the good of the community and glory of God as equal partners.

It has to be also remembered that the moral implications of synodality refers not only to particular actions, but above all to attitudes, perspectives and perception. A participatory Church demands the ability to listen to others, humility to hear the voice of God who speaks through the voices of others, generosity to accept all others as brothers and sisters of the same family of God, willingness to respect others as equals, openness to engage in dialogue with others, including those belonging to other Churches, religions and cultures, readiness to be transparent and accountable in one's life and work, etc. Such attitudes, perspectives and perceptions lead to new actions and behaviour. Thus, synodality calls for a total conversion and acceptance of a new lifestyle, which has implications for personal, interpersonal and social life.