

## ETHICAL PROCESS IN DECISION- MAKING FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH

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### **Abstract**

Decision-making is the most essential nature of a person as a rational being. Being a member of a family or a society or an institution, his or her decision-making power influences others also in a myriad of ways. Generally, the decision of a powerful and authoritarian person becomes the decision of the group or that of an institution. The Church, too, at certain times, has become institutionalised in its decision-making process. The age-old hierarchical nature of the Church underlines the importance of the synods in its decision-making processes. But at the same time, the synodal model tries to establish a new ethical model of decision-making, which insists on the walking together of the entire people of God without any discrimination in arriving at proper and meaningful decisions. It uplifts the lay faithful as essential elements of decision-making and Pope Francis urges the bishops to consult their priests and the lay faithful in order to arrive at good decisions. Open, free, and honest discussions, patiently listening to one another, and consensus-building are the different stages of this new synodal model of decision-making. It also affirms that decision-making should be characterised by discernment, participatory-consultation, and co-responsibility.

**Keywords:** Communion; Consensus-building; Co-responsibility; Decision-making; Discernment; Parrhesia; Participation; Patient-listening

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## Introduction

Decision-making is an essential element in any person's life. When a person is a leader of a community/institution/group/family, his or her decision has widespread consequences for both the decision-taking person and the whole group. The decision-making process explains the nature and quality of the person and also the unitive power of the group. Though the Church believes that it is led by the Holy Spirit in the decision-making process, the involvement and reasoning of human authorities cannot be ignored. All the faithful desire that there should be an ethical process in this reasoning and participation of the human authorities in decision-making. It is the prayer of the whole Church. The prayer *Ad sumus Sancte Spiritus*, which is used for the synodal meetings, affirms it: "do not let us promote disorder, do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path nor partiality influence our actions [decisions]." The entire Church prays that the decision-making persons should neither be guided by ignorance and partiality nor be led through the wrong path because such wrong decisions may cause disorder and hatred. In this context, this article tries to present the ethical process in decision-making for a synodal Church.

## 1. Synod and Synodality

The original meaning of 'synod' indicates "the path along which the people of God walk together."<sup>1</sup> Christ presents Himself as "the way" (Jn 14:6). The early Christians identified themselves as people who walk through the way of the Lord.<sup>2</sup> The theological discussions in the early centuries until Tertullian were focused on the way of life and death, or that of the way of good and evil. Hence, the way/path is a term very much visible from the very beginning of the Church. The synod thus refers to the faithful who walk together through the way of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the walking together of the faithful in Jesus.

A synodal Church is not merely a Church of synods but a Church guided by the very meaning of synodality because it is an integral part of the very nature of the Church.<sup>3</sup> "Synodality means ending the

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<sup>1</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (02 March 2018), no. 3. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_synodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html) (accessed on 16 November 2022).

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Christians are also called *Margavasis* as those who live in the *marga*/way of Jesus.

<sup>3</sup> *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality (07 September 2021), 1.3. <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html> (accessed on 16 November 2022).

Church's age-old tradition of top-down leadership but holding open discussions at all levels to decide the future. It puts ordinary people at the core of the hierarchical Church."<sup>4</sup> The very logo of the synod designed by the French artist Isabelle de Senilhes affirms it: the bishops, priests, and nuns are portrayed in the midst, moving with the people of God. No one is presented superior or inferior to the other, all are equal in their faith in Christ. Moving with the people of God affirms that it is the walking together of the entire faithful without any differentiation or hierarchical order. "Synodality is the *modus vivendi et operandi* with which the Church prepares all its members to share responsibility and thereby to participate in the mission of the Church."<sup>5</sup> It is not to be considered as a mere working procedure, but it is "the particular form in which the Church lives and operates."<sup>6</sup> That is, "a synodal Church is a Church of participation and co-responsibility."<sup>7</sup> Synodality tries to see every faithful without any hierarchical order, who actively participates in it and who is co-responsible for its decisions, as a vital member of the Church.

## 2. Decision-Making: Meaning and Implications

A decision is a choice or a judgement that one makes after much deliberation and discussion about the best possible action.<sup>8</sup> It "is an act of choosing which can be thought of as issuing from and involving the total being of a man. This includes man's past and future as well as what he is in the present."<sup>9</sup> Decision-making is a process whereby an individual or a community reaches conclusions to pursue some future actions for the good of that individual/community. It is also a process in which the past influences the present decision, that in spirit, is oriented towards the future. Since the past is an influencing factor, the decision may become biased. P. C. Singh proposes four salient features of decision-making: *firstly*, there is the need to engage in open dialogue and

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<sup>4</sup> Inigo Joachim, "Synodality and Synodal Process in India: A Religious Perspective," *Word & Worship* 55, 1 (2022) 29-38, 31.

<sup>5</sup> Varghese Kochuparambil, "Ecclesial Synodality in Continuity with the Theology of Vatican II," *Christian Orient* 45, 1 (2022) 52-69, 67. See also, International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 6.

<sup>6</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 42.

<sup>7</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 67.

<sup>8</sup> *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 392.

<sup>9</sup> William W. Paul, "Decision," in *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981, 167.

debate, respecting and listening to the views of others even if they are in the opposition; *secondly*, relevant and objective information with regard to the subject-matter is to be gathered so that our views are well informed; *thirdly*, no one's life, position, and dignity should be threatened while making free expression of views, including dissent; *finally*, make a free decision without fearing harm to the decision-makers.<sup>10</sup> In the proper functioning of any institution, there should be discussion, dissent, and decision-making. Besides, "the dignity of all people, space for all people, freedom of expression for all people and conscious participation of all" should be taken into consideration in making the decisions.<sup>11</sup> Decision-making, above all, should be the outcome of mutual respect, open discussion, and fraternal concern.

According to Bernard Lonergan, decision-making is much more than just coming to a conclusion; instead, it should pass through four different levels. *Firstly*, "the empirical level on which we sense, perceive, imagine, feel, speak, move;" *secondly*, "the intellectual level on which we inquire, come to understand, express what we have understood, work out the presuppositions and implications of our perception;" *thirdly*, "the rational level on which we reflect, marshal the evidence, pass judgement about the truth or falsity, certainty or probability, of a statement;" and *fourthly*, "the responsible level on which we are concerned with ourselves, our own operations, our goals, and so deliberate about possible courses of actions, evaluate them, decide and carry out our decisions."<sup>12</sup> All these four levels are closely interconnected. Paul Achandy notes that "in arriving at a decision, we use our intelligence, examine our objectives and options, evaluate the choices, and decide the best possible alternative to meet our goal."<sup>13</sup> Decision-making is thus the prudent use of one's intelligence, taking into account of all the available objectives, choices, and options, and depending upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

### 3. Decision-Making: Synodal Model

The preparatory documents of the Synod on Synodality 2023 present a synodal model for decision-making. Synodal assemblies are

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<sup>10</sup>P.C. Singh, "Democracy: Debate, Dissent, Discussion and Decision," *NCC Review* 137, 8 (2018) 430-34, 430.

<sup>11</sup>Singh, "Democracy: Debate, Dissent, Discussion and Decision," 434.

<sup>12</sup>Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, 9.

<sup>13</sup>Paul Achandy, "St. Joseph: The Silent Teacher of Discernment," *Vinayasadhana* 12, 2 (2021) 8-24, 10-11.

not parliamentary meetings<sup>14</sup> but the walking together of the people of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The entire synodal Church tries to listen to the voice of the Spirit through the synodal meetings to arrive at a meaningful decision.

### 3.1. Worldwide Survey of the Faithful

In order to discuss the important topic of marriage and family, Pope Francis convened two Episcopal Synods: the extraordinary synod of 2014 and the ordinary synod of 2015. Such a style of convoking two consecutive synods to discuss the same topic was an uncommon practice. This kind of uncommon preparatory procedure is again practiced by another uncommon preparatory process: for the first time before a synod, there is a worldwide survey of the faithful.<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis says that he is convinced that the people of God should be consulted in the preparation of the Synod.<sup>16</sup> The pastors should not be afraid to listen to the flock entrusted to their care. Behind this survey of the faithful “there lies the conviction that the magisterium of bishops and the pope must first be a ‘listening office’ before it is a teaching office.”<sup>17</sup> The hierarchy must be ready to listen to every faithful as “every faithful has a share in the sense of faith (*sensus fidelium*) as a result of his or her baptism,”<sup>18</sup> and they all “share in the prophetic office of Christ.”<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis says that “all the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Annemarie C. Mayer, “A Church which Listens: Synodality and Evangelization,” *Encounter* (2021) 27-35, 32

<sup>15</sup>Walter Kasper, *The Message of Amoris Laetitia: Finding Common Ground*, New York: Paulist Press, 2018, 1.

<sup>16</sup>Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015). [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/document\\_s/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/document_s/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html) (accessed on 16 November 2022). Cf. Francis, *Episcopalis Communio* (15 September 2018), art. 6, §1. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco\\_costituzione-ap\\_20180915\\_episcopalis-communio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html) (accessed on 16 November 2022).

<sup>17</sup>Kasper, *The Message of Amoris Laetitia*, 1-2.

<sup>18</sup>Kasper, *The Message of Amoris Laetitia*, 2. See also, Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964), AAS 57 (1965) 7-75, no. 12; Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), AAS 105 (2013) 1019-1037, no. 139.

<sup>19</sup>Vincent Kundukulam, “Synodality from the Indian Ecclesial Scenario,” *Word & Worship* 55, 1 (2022) 516, 11.

<sup>20</sup>Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 120.

The Church needs to listen not only to the so-called professionals but also to the lay faithful in order to grow into a meaningful decision-making life. Though the survey is not the testimony of the entire body of the faithful, it is an indication of the sense of faith of the faithful.<sup>21</sup> Pope Francis further reminds that “enabling everyone to participate is an essential ecclesial duty.”<sup>22</sup> The participation of maximum members will enable the Church to really understand the true pulse of the people of God.

Though the results of the survey are not binding on the magisterium, it merits special attention because of the following reasons. *Firstly*, it presents before the magisterium the desire of Christians. *Secondly*, it provides the occasion for critical reflection: it helps to realise the existing chasm between the Church’s teaching and the lived faith conviction of a large number of Christians.<sup>23</sup> The survey is a means of consultation with the lay faithful. Consulting them is indispensable to initiate processes of discernment as they are competent in various sectors of cultural, social, and ecclesial life.<sup>24</sup> *Thirdly*, it is a means of consultation with the entire faithful.

### 3.2. Open, Free, and Honest Discussion

At the very beginning of the Synod on Family, Pope Francis encouraged the bishop-participants to speak freely, openly, and honestly. Openness stems out of freedom. Freedom affirms that one is not under coercion or threat. The Pope says that no one should think that “I cannot say this, they will think this or this of me.”<sup>25</sup> It is the new spirit visible in the Church that one is free to speak respecting the freedom of thought of others. Jesus asks his disciples, who do you say that I am? (Mt 16:15). Jesus gives them the freedom to think freely and openly. It can be either right or wrong. But yet, you are given the freedom to speak it out. Such a freedom leads to openness and honesty. Speaking with *parrhesia* (honestly) must be the

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<sup>21</sup>Kasper, *The Message of Amoris Laetitia*, 2.

<sup>22</sup>Francis, Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synod, 09 October 2021. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/10/09/211009a.html#:~:text=Come%20among%20us%2C%20so%20that,the%20holy%20People%20of%20God!> (accessed on 16 November 2022).

<sup>23</sup>Kasper, *The Message of Amoris Laetitia*, 3.

<sup>24</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 73.

<sup>25</sup>Francis, Greeting to the Synod Fathers During the First General Congregation of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 06 October 2014. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141006\\_padri-sinodali.html#:~:text=Your%20Eminences%2C%20Your%20Beatitudes%2C%20Your,and%20qualified%20presence%20and%20assistance](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141006_padri-sinodali.html#:~:text=Your%20Eminences%2C%20Your%20Beatitudes%2C%20Your,and%20qualified%20presence%20and%20assistance) (accessed on 16 November 2022).

style of synodality. Walter Kasper says that “the invitation to *parrhesia* led during the synod to an open and sometimes also contentious debate such as I had not experienced at earlier synods in which I could participate. This new, fresh tone did good because without frank debates, one cannot solve problems.”<sup>26</sup> Frank debates enhance the decision-making process. The Pope wants the faithful to sit together and discuss, to arrive at a prudent decision for the good of the Church rather than giving some instructions and designing some policies.

Synodality’s open, free, and honest discussion affirms that “every Christian is invited to take part in this candid and simultaneously humble communication, corresponding to his or her knowledge, experience, and responsibility in the Church.”<sup>27</sup> But at the same time, “it is not about engaging in a debate where one speaker tries to get the better of the others or counters their positions with brusque arguments, but about expressing whatever seems to have been suggested by the Holy Spirit as useful for communal discernment, at the same time being open to accepting whatever has been suggested by the same Spirit in other people’s positions, ‘for the general good.’”<sup>28</sup> Besides, it “offers the opportunity to acquire new perspectives and points of view in order to shed light on the solution of the matter in question.”<sup>29</sup> Synodality’s *parrhesia* creates a platform to arrive at a better decision in view of the matter in question. Love, respect, trust, and prudence should guide these open and free discussions rather than one’s own ego-clashes and self-interests.<sup>30</sup> Since it is the Logos that enhances sincere and prudent dialogue, its partakers have the responsibility to orient themselves towards proper communication and communion.<sup>31</sup> Open, free, and honest discussions should help the participants for a proper communication of ideas and it should witness and propagate their intimate communion or walking together in view of the common good.

### 3.3. Patient Listening

Pope Francis says that the Church should become a listening Church. According to him, it is high time for the entire Church “to

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<sup>26</sup>Kasper, *The Message of Amoris Laetitia*, 4.

<sup>27</sup>Kasper, *The Message of Amoris Laetitia*, 6.

<sup>28</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 111.

<sup>29</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 111.

<sup>30</sup>Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 06 August 1964, AAS 56 (1964) 609-659, 644.

<sup>31</sup>Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (29 June 2009), AAS 101 (2009) 642-709, no. 4.

break out of our routine and pause from our pastoral concerns in order to stop and listen.”<sup>32</sup> He equates the synodal Church with the listening Church. “The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit.”<sup>33</sup> That is, by listening to one another, all listen to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit functions not only through the hierarchy but also through the entire faithful. All the faithful can function as the voice of the Holy Spirit. Celebrating mutual listening, each and every member of the faithful celebrates the active involvement of the Holy Spirit.

Pope Francis further says that the participants of the synod should be inspired by evangelical humility, that is, they should overcome their own “conventions and prejudices in order to listen to Brother Bishops and be filled with God. Humility that leads neither to pointing a finger at, nor to judging others, but to hands overstretched helping people to rise again without ever feeling superior.”<sup>34</sup> Both the superiority-syndrome and the inferiority-syndrome harm the beauty and goodness of walking together. Synodality “provides us with the opportunity to open ourselves to listen in an authentic way, without resorting to ready-made answers or pre-formulated judgements.”<sup>35</sup> Besides, patient listening to the opinions of others will help us to free “our minds and hearts from prejudices and stereotypes that lead us on the wrong path, towards ignorance and division.”<sup>36</sup> Pope Francis insists that the synod members “must listen with humility and welcome, with an open heart, what your brothers say.”<sup>37</sup> Humility and openness of heart towards the opinions of others deepens the synodal nature. Humility “inclines each one to be obedient to God’s will and obedient to each other in Christ.”<sup>38</sup> Kasper notes that “the Pope himself was the most attentive listener.”<sup>39</sup> The presence of the humble and attentive listeners helps the speakers to speak freely and dynamically. The historian Plutarch beautifully states, “we have two ears but only one mouth, so that we can listen more and talk less.” Synodality insists

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<sup>32</sup>Francis, Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synod.

<sup>33</sup>Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.

<sup>34</sup>Francis, Introductory Remarks by His Holiness Pope Francis, 05 October 2015. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151005\\_padri-sinodali.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151005_padri-sinodali.html) (accessed on 16 November 2022).

<sup>35</sup>*Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality, 2.3.

<sup>36</sup>*Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality, 2.3.

<sup>37</sup>Francis, *Greeting to the Synod Fathers*.

<sup>38</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 112.

<sup>39</sup>Kasper, *The Message of Amoris Laetitia*, 4.



more on a listening Church than a talking Church. Synodality affirms that all the faithful of God are called “to pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and offer advice on taking pastoral decisions which correspond as closely as possible to God’s will. So, in coming to formulate their own decisions, pastors must listen carefully to the wishes (*vota*) of the faithful.”<sup>40</sup> Normally, the faithful were taught that they have to listen carefully to the pastors but the new synodality model suggests that the pastors must listen carefully to the faithful in taking up the decisions. In the listening process all the participants should be treated equally, so that every voice can be duly heard.

Pliny the Younger (the first century Roman lawyer and magistrate) said that the emperor of all the people should be chosen by all the people (*imperator omnibus eligi debet ex omnibus*). Pope Leo I in the fifth century affirmed that he who governs all should be elected by all. In 1140 Gratian modified it and stated that what touches all must be approved by all (*quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet*). Referring to these ideas Pope Francis speaks of the importance of listening. He says that the synodal process begins by listening to the people of God, then continues by listening to the pastors, and culminates in listening to the Bishop of Rome, who speaks not on the basis of his personal convictions but as the supreme witness to the *fides totius ecclesiae*.<sup>41</sup> Hence, the decision-making should witness a continuous process of listening with humility and fraternal love from bottom to the top.

### 3.4. Consensus-Building

Kasper says that “communal ways of building consensus were already the way of the apostles’ council in Jerusalem as well as the way of the great general councils of the ancient Church, which formulated the basis of the common confession of all Eastern as well as Western Churches to this very day.”<sup>42</sup> Pope Francis invites the Chaldean Synod members:

I encourage you to be a father to your priests and all consecrated men and women, who are your primary collaborators, and, in respect for tradition and canonical norms, to be accepting of them, benevolent and understanding of their needs, discerning ways to help them be ever more aware of the demands of their ministry and service to the faithful. In doing so, you will bridge distances and discern the response to be given

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<sup>40</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 68

<sup>41</sup>Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.

<sup>42</sup>Kasper, *The Message of Amoris Laetitia*, 5–6.

to the pressing needs of the Chaldean Church today, in your native lands and in the diaspora.<sup>43</sup>

According to the Pope, bridging/consensus-building is an important task of the hierarchy. The hierarchy has the prime responsibility to form consensus among the faithful.

Referring to St. Cyprian of Carthage the International Theological Commission (ITC) notes that though it is true that in the local Church nothing should be done without the bishop (*nihil sine episcopo*), it is equally true that nothing should be done without his council (*nihil sine consilio vostro*) or without the consensus of the people (*et sine consensu plebis*).<sup>44</sup> The Church includes the bishops, the clergy, the consecrated people and the lay faithful. When there is a meaningful consensus among all these sections of the faithful as a result of humble and open discussion, the decision becomes a spirit-filled reality. Consensus-building should happen through common obedience to the Spirit. The spirit of synodality demands unity and communion in the Church, and hence, it is against all the antagonising tendencies and divisive conflicts.<sup>45</sup> Threatening and punishment are outdated practices. They are against the Spirit of Christ and the spirit of the Church. Synodality always demands respect towards the other, even when he or she does not agree with my opinion. "It offers a way of understanding and experiencing the Church where legitimate differences find room in the logic of a reciprocal exchange of gifts in the light of truth."<sup>46</sup> The Church needs to grow in communion and unity through consensus-building among the faithful because "all are called to work in accordance with the law of mutual solidarity in respect of their specific ministries and charisms, in as much as everyone finds his or her energy in the one Lord."<sup>47</sup> Consensus-building is an outcome of the conversion of hearts.<sup>48</sup> It also demands doing justice to others, especially, to the weaker section of the community.<sup>49</sup> Though the bishops are having a

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<sup>43</sup>Francis, Address to the Members of the Synod of Chaldean Church, 26 October 2015, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151026\\_chiesa-caldea.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151026_chiesa-caldea.html) (accessed on 16 November 2022).

<sup>44</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 25.

<sup>45</sup>*Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality, 2.4.8.

<sup>46</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 9.

<sup>47</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 22.

<sup>48</sup>Cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 14.

<sup>49</sup>Cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 14.

special authority compared to the faithful, all their decisions and consensus-building should be guided by the highest gift – love.<sup>50</sup>

Pope Francis “has been an active proponent of ‘sound decentralisation’ modelled after the ‘inverted pyramid,’ suggesting that authority and decision-making processes can be re-envisioned in newer ways.”<sup>51</sup> The Church is neither authoritarian nor democratic, but it is synodal in the sense that it tries to listen to the free, open, and honest voice of the entire faithful for consensus-building and decision-making, believing that the Holy Spirit also functions through the voice of the faithful.

### 3.5. Decision-Making

The synodal model of decision-making should be qualified with “a lived experience of discernment, participation, and co-responsibility.”<sup>52</sup> All these three are the essentials of decision-making: discernment, participation/cooperation/consultation, and co-responsibility.

#### 3.5.1 Discernment

The ITC describes discernment in the following words:

Discernment must be carried out in a space of prayer, meditation, reflection and study, which we need to hear the voice of the Spirit; by means of sincere, serene and objective dialogue with our brothers and sisters; by paying attention to the real experiences and challenges of every community and every situation; in the exchange of gifts and in the convergence of all energies in view of building up the Body of Christ and proclaiming the Gospel; in the melting-pot of feelings and thoughts that enable us to understand the Lord’s will; by searching to be set free by the Gospel from any obstacle that might weaken our openness to the Spirit.<sup>53</sup>

This meaningful definition portrays the following points. *Firstly*, the synodal Church must discern the will of God to arrive at a decision. It is to be done in silence and prayer. Most importantly, it should correspond as closely as possible to God’s will.<sup>54</sup> After the whole discussion and debate the participants should be willing to discern the voice of God. Discernment “allows us to discover God’s

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<sup>50</sup>Cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 18.

<sup>51</sup>Stanislaus Alla, “Worldwide Reception of *Amoris Laetitia*,” in *Vocation and Mission of the Family: Reflections on Chavarul and Amoris Laetitia*, ed. Shaji George Kochuthara, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2020, 263.

<sup>52</sup>*Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality, 1.3. See also, International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 69.

<sup>53</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 114.

<sup>54</sup>*Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality, 1.4.

call in a particular historical situation.”<sup>55</sup> It “implies carefully and courageously listening to ‘the groans of the Spirit’ which emerge through the explicit or sometimes silent cry that goes up from the People of God.”<sup>56</sup> God is the Lord of love and communion, and hence, where there is hatred and division in arriving at a decision, it may not be corresponding to God’s will. *Secondly*, the decision-making process should reflect the minds of the faithful: paying attention to the real experiences and their confronting challenges is inevitable.<sup>57</sup> The people representing the grass-root realities should be given an active role in the decision-making process. Sometimes their views are not taken seriously by the authorities, but on the other hand, the voice of the so-called ‘VIPs’ get better reception.<sup>58</sup> Such kind of discrimination does not suit the spirit of synodality. *Thirdly*, the role of theologians is also very important in decision-making because they “are better placed to discern the emerging ideologies and cultural patterns that influence society and the faithful and to articulate needful Christian responses.”<sup>59</sup>

In sum, discernment “is the art of interpreting in what direction the desires of the heart lead us, without letting ourselves be seduced by what leads us to where we never wanted to go. Discernment involves reflection and engages both the heart and head in making decisions in our concrete lives to seek and find the will of God.”<sup>60</sup> The discerning process should engage both the heart and head, finding the divine design to arrive at a proper decision.

### 3.5.2 Participation/Cooperation/Consultation

The decision-making process should involve the participation and the consultation of the entire people of God. Though it is an uphill task, it is meaningful and enriching. Participation is an affirmation of all the faithful that they are willing to give consultation. Pope Francis desires “to continue the reorientation of the clergy and the lay faithful toward a greater sense of participation in the mission of the Church.”<sup>61</sup> Consultation helps to receive the opinions of pastors and

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<sup>55</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 112.

<sup>56</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 114.

<sup>57</sup>Kundukulam, “Synodality from the Indian Ecclesial Scenario,” 11.

<sup>58</sup>Kundukulam, “Synodality from the Indian Ecclesial Scenario,” 13.

<sup>59</sup>Kundukulam, “Synodality from the Indian Ecclesial Scenario,” 11.

<sup>60</sup>*Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality, 2.2.

<sup>61</sup>Shelton J. Fabre, “Truly Synodal Church is one that listens, collaborates with all people.” <https://angelusnews.com/faith/truly-synodal-church-is-one-that-listens-collaborates-with-all-people/> (accessed on 16 November 2022).

the faithful for which the Synod of Bishops must listen more broadly and more attentively to the *sensus fidei* of the people of God. This process of consultation helps to implement and promote synodality at every level of the Church.<sup>62</sup> It also echoes the complementary role of both the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood affirmed by Vatican II. "The bishop is, in fact, called to listen to the priests, to consult them and to dialogue with them 'about the pastoral needs and the good of the diocese.'" <sup>63</sup> Besides, the bishops have to consult the faithful in taking up important decisions of the diocese. The diocesan pastoral council "is the most appropriate permanent structure for implementing synodality in the local Church."<sup>64</sup> The parish council functions as the local body, where the faithful participate and are consulted in the functioning of the parish. "A truly synodal Church is one that listens and collaborates with all people, listening for what the Spirit is saying through them."<sup>65</sup> From the parish level to the universal level, the lay faithful, the clergy, the consecrated, and the bishops should consult each other in forming meaningful decisions in the Church. Such participation and consultation will make the Church truly Catholic. It also creates an atmosphere of openness that fosters unity, not just on a functional level but on a deeper spiritual level.<sup>66</sup> For that "we are called to abandon attitudes of complacency and comfort that lead us to make decisions purely on the basis of how things have been done in the past."<sup>67</sup> The past should inspire us but it should not limit our growth. Taking inspiration from the past the Church needs to reflect on the present realities in order to prudently decide its future in view of the divine design.

### 3.5.3 Co-responsibility

The participatory cooperation and consultation of the bishops, clergy, and the laity insist that the synodal model also should focus on co-responsibility. Cardinal Shelton J. Fabre demands a shift in mindset, "moving from viewing the laity as mere collaborators with

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<sup>62</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 100.

<sup>63</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 81.

<sup>64</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 81.

<sup>65</sup>Shelton J. Fabre, "Truly Synodal Church is one that listens, collaborates with all people."

<sup>66</sup>Shelton J. Fabre, "Truly Synodal Church is one that listens, collaborates with all people."

<sup>67</sup>*Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality, 2.3.

the clergy to recognising that the clergy and the laity are ‘co-responsible’ for the Church’s well-being and action.”<sup>68</sup> The participation and consultation of the entire people of God in the decision-making process is the *sine qua non* element of their co-responsibility. I am responsible for the decision taken because I participated in the process, I cooperated with others and I am consulted by others in taking up the decision. Such an approach transforms every faithful to a positive awareness that he or she is the very part of the decision-making body. Being part of the decision-making body, everyone becomes co-responsible for the decisions taken. Decision-taking is within the competence of the bishop and it is a ministerial responsibility,<sup>69</sup> but at the same time, the clergy and the lay faithful should be properly consulted in order to make them co-responsible and to sincerely work for the good of the Church.

## Conclusion

Decision-making process in a synodal Church celebrates the ethic of walking together of the entire people of God without any gradation. The new paradigm shift—synodality—in the administration of the Church suggests that the decision-making should be a process of active participation, consultation, and co-responsibility. It demands an open and honest discussion, patient listening, and consensus-building among the entire faithful of the Church without any segmentation. It is said that there are three indispensable keys at the heart of a synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission. In that line, it can be said that there are three keys at the heart of prudent decision-making: participatory-consultation, decision, and communion. The decision should be taken by the participatory consultation of all and it should also be oriented towards communion rather than any personal motives. Discerning the will of God as well as the desire of the group is very important in the decision-making process.

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<sup>68</sup>Shelton J. Fabre, “Truly Synodal Church is one that listens, collaborates with all people.”

<sup>69</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 69.