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A SYNODAL CHURCH IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL PLURALISM

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to illustrate how a synodal Church can walk alongside people from various religions and cultures in India. It explores the theological grounds of religious pluralism, the present-day conditions in India, and how this synodality manifests itself in the religious and cultural pluralistic reality of India. In the multi-religious context of India, synodality is an experience of walking together with people of other faiths and seeking the truth together. The unity within the diversity of the Indian context serves as the foundation for communion and synodality. It helps foster a certain level of religious tolerance. Being a synodal Church entails an ecumenical, participatory, and dialogical interaction with people of different faiths. The paper also focuses on how the synodal principles of communion and participation are used by the Church in the multi-cultural context of India. Finally, it ends with a few suggestions for the future of a synodal Church in India.

Keywords: Dialogue; Ecumenism; Indian Church; Inter-Religious; Multi-Culture; *Palliyogam*; Religious Pluralism; Synodal Church; Synodality; Unity in Diversity

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Introduction

Wherever a human being encounters God, that is a Sacrament, according to Edward Schillebeeckx.¹ A synodal Church becomes the Sacrament of Christ because the people in other religions and people in different cultures also can encounter God through the Church. The Church presents Christ to the people through the synodal way of living by carrying on the charism of Christ. The focus of the paper is the synodality of the Church from the unique perspective of the religious and cultural pluralism in India. Works of charity, being with the poor, and dialogue with other religions and cultures by the Church are extraordinary ways of having an encounter with God. This paper attempts to illustrate how a synodal Church can walk alongside people from various religions and cultures in India.

1. A Synodal Style of Being the Church

The concept of synodality refers to the participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church. For Pope Francis, "Synodality is not simply a working procedure, but the particular form in which the Church lives and operates."² It is not simply the Church having synods but the entire Church becoming a synod. Pope Francis clarified in the Permanent Synod of the Church of Ukraine on 5th July 2019 that being Church is a community that walks together, and reflects on the journey made.³ The Second Vatican Council also makes it clear that the Church is missionary by its very nature.⁴ Being a synodal Church involves carrying out the mission through the chords of love and communion, participation and co-responsibility with the entire people of God, regardless of any sort of discrimination.

2. Characteristics of a Synodal Church

The concept of a synodal Church revolves around several key characteristics that are essential for the fulfilment of the mission of the Church. One of the primary features of a synodal Church is that it

¹Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963, 41.

²International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, § 42, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html#

³Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission: Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*, 2-3. <https://www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/EN-Vademecum-with-Appendices-A-B-CD.pdf>

⁴Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes*, §2 in *The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, ed. Mumbai: St Pauls, 2010.

is a listening Church. Pope Francis has repeatedly emphasized the importance of listening to one another and responding with humility. By proposing a synodal Church, the Pope invites bishops, priests, monks, and lay people to a mutual listening session in which everyone has something to learn.⁵

Another vital aspect of a synodal Church is that it is a missionary Church, which involves the entire people of God journeying together to evangelise and bring about the Kingdom of God. Pope Francis calls out for the involvement of all the baptised in the mission of the Church, which takes the Church back to the Gospel and leads her out to the peripheries of the world.⁶

A synodal Church is also a participatory and co-responsible Church, where all the faithful are qualified and called to serve each other through the gifts they have received from the Holy Spirit. The concept of synodality goes beyond that of collegiality because it involves the participation of all in the Church and all the Churches.

In a synodal Church, communion is essential, and synodality summarizes the ecclesiology of communion. This involves co-responsibility, collaboration, and genuine consultation between Church leaders and the lay faithful. All members of the Church actively participate in consultation, discernment, and cooperation at every level of decision-making and mission.⁷

Finally, a synodal Church is a discerning Church. Pastors are called to form consciences, not to replace them,⁸ and the faithful can carry out their discernment in complex situations. Community conscience, as *Con-Scientia* the Latin term “knowing together,” is both a model for communion and a process of discernment through synodality and discussion in the Church. Careful discernment of particular cases⁹ is essential to find what God is asking of a person in their situation, as applying a set of rules without discernment is insufficient.

⁵Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission: Vademecum...*, 5.3.

⁶Joseph Palakeel, “Journeying together to Evangelize: A Look at the Synodal Church of Pope Francis,” March, 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348002280_JOURNEYING_TOGETHER_TO_EVANGELIZE_A_Look_at_the_Synodal_Church_of_Pope_Francis/

⁷Mathew Kuttikottayil, “Synodality in the Day-Today Administration of the Parish,” *Encounter*, 12, 1 (June 2021) 94.

⁸Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, §37, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html

⁹Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, §79, §304.

3. *Locus Theologicus* of Religious Pluralism

Nowadays, pluralism is a reality of life. Pluralism refers to a scenario in which several points of view, justifications, or perspectives are put out as explaining the same reality. Religious, cultural, intellectual, social, ethnic, linguistic, and other areas are all included in pluralism.¹⁰ With regard to communion with the plurality of religions, the synodal document states that the Church is Catholic also because she is sent to all, in order to gather the entire human family in the richness of the plurality of cultural forms, under the Lordship of Christ and in the unity of His Spirit. The synodal path expresses and promotes Catholicity in two ways: it shows the dynamic way in which the fullness of faith is shared by all members of the People of God and it assists in handing it on to all people and all peoples.¹¹ The synodal documents reflect *Evangelii Gaudium* as it states that evangelization also entails engaging in discourse with people of other religions, worldviews, and cultures.¹² In the context of India's cultural diversity, synodality is also an opportunity to enhance our awareness of various religious traditions and our ecumenical journey with other Christian denominations.¹³ Walking together with Catholics and with believers of other religions and cultures is indeed necessary as we listen to each other.

4. Images of Indian Realities

Pope Francis observes that each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and be sensitive to its traditions and local needs. Cultures are diverse, and every general principle needs to be inculturated in order to be respected and applied.¹⁴ India has one of the world's most extensive and rich cultural traditions. According to the census of 2011, 79.80% of people in India are identified as Hindu, 14.23% are Muslims, 2.3% are Christians, 1.72 % Sikhs, 0.37 % are Jains and 0.70% are Buddhists.¹⁵ Everybody is free to practise whichever religion they prefer. Accepting social, cultural, and religious plurality is the beauty of India. However, it is exploited by people and groups whose motives are power, social control, and economic greed.

¹⁰Shaji George Kochuthara, "Challenge of Doing Catholic Ethics in a Pluralistic Context," *Religions*, (December 29, 2019): 1-15, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11010017>.

¹¹International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 58.

¹²Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §238.

¹³Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*, 2.

¹⁴Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, § 3.

¹⁵"Population of India by Religion 2023," <https://www.findeasy.in/indian-states-by-religion/>

Religious fundamentalism and the Hindutva movement that have an impact on the 'anti conversion laws' passed in various states of India¹⁶ endanger the multi-religious nature of tolerance and diversity. Christians in India suffer from religious persecution too. Dalits, Adivasis, and women in India do not get their due justice.¹⁷ Given the rising tendency of such religious extremism, which is in opposition to India's sovereign socialist, secular democratic republic, the synodal Church in India is still significant in the modern world. A certain level of religious tolerance in the Indian setting is fostered in us by the synodal ethos.

5. Synodal Functioning in the Context of Indian Realities

This section examines how the synodal life of the Indian Church is shaped by the country's diverse cultural heritage. It looks at various levels of synodality and highlights unique expressions from the Hindu-Indian context. The Indian Church's practices are influenced by the country's rich cultural heritage, which includes Hinduism, the dominant religion in India.

5.1. Synodal Church in India: A Pluralistic-Religious Context

Synodality is a living expression of the Catholicity of the Church as communion. It is essential to accept and acknowledge synodality in the Indian context of plurality of Churches. The synodal document concerning ecumenical dialogue states two essential aspects namely, stress on the participation of all the baptised in the mission of the Church and for the legitimate interpretation of the term *κοινωνία* (*koinonia*),¹⁸ which has the theological basis of Trinitarian Communion. It can be made possible by interpreting how all the baptised can be involved in this process that emphasises the creative fidelity to the deposit of faith and consistency with the hierarchy of truth.¹⁹

A single entity has never offered Christian representation in India. There are countless Christian organisations, including three different Catholic Churches, Protestant, Orthodox, Jacobite, Marthomite, and

¹⁶Sentimental Digital Desk, "What Is Anti-Conversion Law in India?" *National News*, November 13, 2021, <https://www.sentinelassam.com/national-news/explainer-what-is-anti-conversion-law-in-india562981>

¹⁷S.M. Michael, *Faith Culture and Mission: Anthropological Insights*, Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2020, 254-255.

¹⁸Joseph Kallarangatt, "Koinonia / Communion as the Ecclesiological Perestroika in Vat II," *Christian Orient*, 12, 1 (March 1993) 3-15.

¹⁹International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, §115-119.

Chaldean Churches.²⁰ Pope Francis notes in the document *Amoris Laetitia*, “The unity that Christians seek is not uniformity but a unity in diversity.”²¹ Even though they differ geographically or culturally, all Churches share a synodal spirit of unity from the same apostolic heritage that dates back to the first events of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. This is what we call synodality of walking together and communion.²²

In the multi-religious context of India, synodality is an experience of walking together with the people of other faiths and seeking the truth together.²³ Truth expressed by the Greek phrase ἀλήθεια (*althea*) is “revealing,” “unhiding,” or “uncovering.”²⁴ However, there is the existence of the hidden truth that has to be discovered by revelation. This revelation can be interpreted as being done by the truth itself or by the seeker of knowledge. The journey (*yatra*) is a basic metaphor in Indian culture, providing energy and movement in the quest for truth and its deeper experience and understanding. In the ancient Upanishads, the phrase “Lead me from ignorance to truth” (*asato ma satgamaya*) serves as a beautiful expression of earnest longing to move from ignorance to truth.²⁵ The synodal way of living invites us to acknowledge and value any genuine truth in other religious traditions. The path of this seeking together is acknowledging and accepting the goodness, truth, and beauty of those who practice other faiths.²⁶

The plurality of religions is unique to India, where each one seeks to know, engage and build relationships with one’s own neighbours of other faiths. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and other religions, although they differ from Christianity on essential points, they are not totally rejected. They are reflecting the elements of truth and holiness. Vatican II exhorts us saying, “Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve

²⁰John P.S., “Ecumenism and the Re-Union Movement,” *The Harp*, 36 (2020) 507–9.

²¹Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 139.

²²Syro-Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Commission for Ecumenism, *Called to Be United: Ecumenical Directory of the Syro-Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Church*, Changannachery: St Joseph Orphanage Press, 2017, 17.

²³Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, § 2 *The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, ed. Mumbai: St Pauls, 2010.

²⁴Moisés Silva, ed., “Ἀλήθεια,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Grand Rapids, Michigan USA: Zondervan, 2014, 222–241.

²⁵Shyam, “Meaning Behind the Prayer—‘Asato Ma Satgamaya,’” *India Study Channel*, August 9, 2011, <https://www.indiastudychannel.com/resources/143844-Meaning-Behind-The-Prayer-Asato-Ma-Sadgamaya.aspx>

²⁶Paulachan Kochappilly, “Religious Pluralism: Right to Identity as the Right Path to Unity and Solidarity,” *Journal of Dharma* 35, 1 (March 2010) 43.

and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.”²⁷ Being a synodal Church in India implies an ecumenical, participatory, and dialogical interaction with the people of different faiths.

A close look at the Church in India in the light of ethics reveals the common elements of synodal communion present in various religions of India. The ethos of a community serves as the foundation for morality. In India, most religions have their own identity, as well as a great degree of conceptual and philosophical synodal communion between them. An inner yearning to be united with God in prayer is evident in several religions. The existence of ‘*Sanathana Dharma*’ and its perception by the different religions is a visible sign of unity and uniqueness at the same time. Added to it, a large number of scholars from different religions acknowledge that there is God, who is also the creator, sustainer, rock, and refuge. Even though people visualise God very subjectively and each person’s level of comprehension varies, there is an ultimate unity.²⁸ That is a form of synodality evident in the midst of complexity and diversity.

In India, the majority of religions actively promote and practice ethical principles, virtues, and values, with the exception of certain religious sects that follow unethical practices. Governed by an Indian ethos, people of different faiths coexist harmoniously, emphasizing cultural norms such as honesty, non-violence, dedication, hospitality, kindness, respect for elders, and love for children, as well as concepts like *paap-punya* (sin and virtue) and *swarg-narak* (heaven and hell).²⁹ The influence of this Indian ethos is also evident in the Indian Church, which has been significantly impacted by it.

Another ethically united synodal idea is the sacredness of life. Every person has the inherent right to be recognised and cherished for their own sake, which is human dignity. The ability to treat a person as a moral subject of ethical concern results from human dignity. Although there are cultural differences among religions in India, most of them believe that life is a precious gift from a divine

²⁷Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, § 2: 3b.

²⁸Jetti A. Oliver, “Journey of Truth for the People of God towards Interfaith Harmony and Peace,” in *Re-Visioning Methods and Approaches In the Study of Religion: Essays in Honour of Swami Raju Tadvaka*, Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2019, 33–36.

²⁹Francis Kanichikattil, “Inculturation Perspective of Second Vatican Council Restoration, Reform and Adaptation Revisited,” *Thomas Christian Heritage* 13, 25 (November 21, 2020) 45–46.

entity.³⁰ Excluding certain religious beliefs that do not value life, this belief is widely held among the majority of religions in India. Indian culture is the culture of humanity (*manav*) based on the principle of righteousness (*dharma*).³¹ Here, the synodal Church serves as a powerful force for morality acknowledging the positive qualities already present.

Listening, and accompanying the community, are inevitable for synodal living. The art of listening is the most essential element of openness to other religions. It has to take place in a dialogue forum, which places an emphasis on the constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths.³² In this process there is a mutual respect for freedom.

Positively, looking at the Indian context, it has to be acknowledged that Indian theologians have contributed enormously to promote a fruitful dialogue with the people of other faiths. Raimon Panikkar rightly observes, "One of the most urgent tasks of the world today is the establishment of bridges between different religions."³³ Dialogue with other religions establishes harmony and peace in the world that leads to work together for the common cause.

Inter-religious harmony encourages religions to learn from one another while being strengthened in the values of their own religions. Without compromising their religious convictions, everyone can learn about the common features of other religions. India is the perfect setting for such a movement. For instance, many religious movements, and inter-religious and ecumenical dialogues have emerged and flourished in India.³⁴ Another piece of evidence is the "Triple Dialogue" approach in Asia, which was promoted by the Asian Bishops from 1972 onwards. The "Triple Dialogue" with the poor, cultures, and religions is intended to be a journey towards the kingdom of justice, peace, and ecological

³⁰Pradip Thomas, "Communication and the Search for Common Values," in *We the People of Asia and Our Unity in Diversity: Asian Diversity and Common Human Values for Human Dignity*, ed. Cyril S. Cornelius and J.H. Anand, Delhi: ISPCK/AR-WACC, 1999, 14-15.

³¹Sebastian Eluvathingal, *Inculturation and Christian Art: An Indian Perspective*, Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 1990, 159.

³²Pontifical Commission for Interreligious Dialogue Highlights the Four Forum of Dialogue, Dialogue and Proclamation, 9, 19 May 1991.

³³Raimon Panikkar, *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery*, Joseph Cunneen, trans., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006, 28.

³⁴Atul Aghamkar, "Hindu-Christian Dialogue in India," *Fuller Studio*, <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/featured-article-hindu-christian-dialogue-in-india/>.

harmony.³⁵ The most recent triple dialogue took place in 2022.³⁶ Such a synodal principle of listening and dialogue leads people often to tolerate each other and absorb certain precepts and practises to enrich each other's spiritual journey.

Living and working with brothers and sisters of other faiths is a synodal praxis of the Indian Church. Regarding communion with the plurality of religions, the synodal document stresses the aspect of *diakonia* (service) as the common ground.³⁷ In the vision of Pope Francis, to be a Christian is to be on the way and to be on a journey with others both religious and secular persons for the transformation of humanity and the flourishing of nature.³⁸

When people were struggling to obtain food and housing during the disastrous flood and COVID-19 lockdown, the intervention of the Church in India was indicative of the ethics of conviviality.³⁹ The Catholic Church and other Christian Churches in the country joined together with all the faithful, priests, and religious for COVID recovery activities and rehabilitation of the people affected by natural calamities. The Vatican recognises the contribution made by different Churches in India during these trouble times.⁴⁰ It reflects the Church's synodal witnessing face in India.⁴¹ They collaborated and served together to care for all Christians and followers of different faiths without discrimination.

³⁵Orlando B. Cardinal Quevedo, "Interreligious Dialogue in Asia: Fifty Years After *Nostra Aetate*," in *FABC Papers No.152*, ed. William LaRousse (Asian Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* Part 1, Redemptorist Centre, Pattaya, Thailand: FABC Office of Ecumenical and interreligious affairs (OEIA), 2015), 47–55.

³⁶Mary Bernadette, "Cardinal Bo: Asian Bishops Pursuing Path of 'Triple Dialogue/Harmony,'" *Vatican News*, October 28, 2022, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2022-10/cardinal-charles-bo-interview-fabc-answer-pope-francis.html>

³⁷International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, § 119.

³⁸Felix Wilfred, "Nostra Aetate of Vatican II: An Asian Re-Reading after Fifty Years and the Way Forward," in *FABC Papers No.152* (Asian Celebration of the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, Redemptorist Centre, Pattaya, Thailand: FABC Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA), 2015), 33.

³⁹The Lutheran World Federation, "The Concept of Conviviality," *Theology, Union and Mission*, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/concept-conviviality>.

⁴⁰Robin Gomes, "Indian Church Extends Hand to Ease Pandemic Crisis," *Vatican News*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2021-05/india-church-gracias-cbci-efforts-covid19-crisis-suffering.html>.

⁴¹"Church Commits All Healthcare Units for Covid-19 Fight," *Times of India*, March 29, 2020, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/74869710.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

5.2. Synodal Church in India: A Pluralistic-Cultural Context

The concept of 'culture' is the way of life of a people. It includes how they worship, how they eat, how they speak, how they dress, and how they express themselves via art. The culture of India is a synthesis of numerous cultures from various castes, regions, and faiths.⁴² The Church has influenced India's secular, pluralistic, and composite culture. It seeks to unite people of various religious, cultural, ethnic, and ideological viewpoints to integrate them into one nation through dialogue and co-operation. It is done not only through a secular and humanistic education but also through the teachings of Jesus Christ, who preached about love, forgiveness, the cross, and freedom.⁴³

The basic value of India, '*Atithi Devo Bhava*' (A guest is akin to God) states that every visitor should be regarded as though they were God.⁴⁴ This heritage of accommodating everyone is visible in our ecclesiastical settings too. We accommodate people of all religions, castes and cultures to serve humanity. Our beneficiaries have no bounds of caste, creed and culture too.

Communal harmony of the Church is an essential part of synodality in India. Fasting is a common cultural custom in India. Most Hindus observe the tradition of fasting on religious occasions like *Mahashivratri*, *Diwali*, *Karvachauth*, etc. During the month of Ramazan, many adherents of the Muslim faith fast for about 30 days.⁴⁵ In order to prepare for Easter and Christmas, many Christians observe fasts and abstinence for 25, 40, and 50 days throughout the Advent and Lenten season.⁴⁶

In India, despite interreligious cultural differences, religious harmony prevails, evidenced by the participation of members of different communities in the celebrations that go along with most festivals. This inclusivity is not limited to specific ethnic groups. While there are a minority of non-assimilating religious sects, the majority of religions merge with the religious spirit of different

⁴²Udyen Jain & Associates, "The Indian Culture: Traditions, Religions, Festivals, Music, Dance, Clothing, Food, Movies," <http://trebeki.info/en/the-indian-culture-traditions-religions-festivals-music-dance-clothing-food-movies/>

⁴³ Kuncheria Pathil, *Unity in Diversity: A Guide to Ecumenism*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2012, 61.

⁴⁴ "Meaning of *Atithi Devo Bhava*," *Eshwer Bhakti*, November 1, 2022, <https://pujayagna.com/blogs/hindu-customs/atithi-devo-bhava>.

⁴⁵Udyen Jain & Associates, "The Indian Culture: Traditions, Religions, Festivals, Music, Dance, Clothing, Food, Movies."

⁴⁶"Lent: Christianity," in *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lent>.

religions when celebrating major festivals such as *Holi*, *Diwali*, *Id*, *Muharram*, *Baisakhi*, and Christmas. For example, *Diwali* is considered to be an interreligious festival that is close to the hearts of all Indians, associating themselves with the light.⁴⁷ These festivals promote religious tolerance, intercultural harmony, and togetherness, serving as a synodal witness to life in India's pluralistic culture.

India's extensive religious experience, our longstanding heritage of religious tolerance, our will to build a new society based on justice and freedom for everyone, our steadfast dedication to eradicating poverty and misery, and our solidarity with the weak and the marginalised⁴⁸ are all taken into consideration as essential elements of the synodal mission in India entrusted by Jesus Christ.

The multi-faceted culture of India is not extrinsic to the Indian Christian. Instead, the Church in India is an insider and an inheritor of synodality in its mission. Christians bring the treasures of their cultures to their faith and become believers rooted in their soil. The universal solidarity of all peoples, as in *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (all living beings on the earth are a family), is a tradition that is being retrieved by people's movements and dialogue initiatives of India.⁴⁹ The Indian Bishops' call for concerted efforts to address the needs of migrants and domestic workers⁵⁰ expresses the Church as a caring and welcoming Church in India with a synodal spirit.

Multi-cultural dialogue has been one of the most important concerns of synodality in India. The happy blending of different cultures often brings salutary effects through giving and taking.⁵¹ In the process of inculturation, the ancient *palliyogam* was practised among Malabar Christians in India by adapting the traditional secular system of *manram* for village civil government.⁵² The structure of such gatherings was similar to that of the assembly of temple administrators called *ooranmakar*,⁵³ which means administration by the people of the place.

⁴⁷S.M. Michael, "Diwali: Inter-Religious Festival of Light," *The Examiner* 66, 43 (October 2022) 14.

⁴⁸Kuncheria Pathil, *Trends in Indian Theology*, Bangalore: ATC Publications, 2005, 42.

⁴⁹"Editorial," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 72, 4 (April 2008) 241-44.

⁵⁰Charles Irudayam, *A Call to Shared Responsibility*, Bandra: St Paul Press, 2022, 94.

⁵¹Paul Pulikkan, "Synodality, Witness and Dialogue," *Eastern Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 14, 2 (December 2021) 4.

⁵²Francis Thonnippara, "Synodal Church from a Historical Perspective," *Jeevadharma* 47, 280 (March 2017) 25-40.

⁵³James Pereppadan, "Palliyogam-Parish Council-In the Syro-Malabar Church," in *Syro-Malabar Church Since the Eastern Code: An Evaluation and Future Prospects*

Journeying together tends to be more horizontal than vertical. The uniqueness of synodality is listening to the *sensus fidei*.⁵⁴ *Palliyogam* is an expression of such ecclesiastical walking together of the people of God in the parish, with priests, religious, and laity advising and assisting the parish priest and collaborating with him in decision-making, pastoral ministry, and financial administration. The practice of synodality is evident from the ecclesiastical administration based on the *Palliyogam* Procedure Rules promulgated on 16th January 1998 by the Synod of Bishops of the Syro-Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Church as directed by the Eastern Code of Canon Law (CCEO c.295). According to the Procedure Rules, today in every parish there should be two forms of *palliyogam*, namely *potuyogam* and *pratinidhiyogam*.⁵⁵

Furthermore, synodality is shining in the arrangements of ‘*agape*’ by *palliyogam*. Christians of St. Thomas continue to hold *agape*, or feast of love. The auspicious bread (or *nercha*) is distributed to everybody, regardless of gender or age. It, moreover, includes people of different faiths. It is an inspiring scene capable of raising the heart. *Palliyogam* cultivated mutual unity and affection among the people of other faiths through this kind of *agape*.⁵⁶

Christian ashrams are now prominent instances of synodal Churches cultivated in India’s diverse culture. Ashrams were generally intended to serve as meeting places for Hinduism and Christianity. The existence of Christian ashrams, modelled after traditional Hindu and Buddhist ashrams, is a rich source of Indian theology and Christian life in India. Pioneers in this field were Protestant Christians. However, Catholics gradually joined the movement and made significant contributions like interreligious dialogue.⁵⁷ Abhishiktananda asserts that the moment has arrived for the Church, indeed for all Churches together, to enter into close contact with the other religions to recognise their neighbour’s awareness of God’s presence.⁵⁸ Synodality emphasises the hidden presence of the Divine in all cultures, religions, and human societies, calling for communion and authentic human development or humanisation.⁵⁹

Particular Laws, Statutes, Decrees, Bibliography, ed. Francis Eluvathingal, Trichur: Marymatha Publications, 2002, 220.

⁵⁴Eamonn Fitzgibbon, “Together on the Way - Pope Francis and Synodality,” *The Furrow* 68, 10 (October 2017) 534.

⁵⁵Kuttikottayil, “Synodality in the Day -Today Administration of the Parish,” 93.

⁵⁶Kurian Vanchipurackal, “Laity in the Syro-Malabar Church Through the Centuries,” *Christian Orient* 5, 2 (June 1984) 34.

⁵⁷Pathil, *Trends in Indian Theology*, 33-34.

⁵⁸Abhishiktananda, *Hindu -Christian Meeting Point within the Cave of the Heart*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1976, 34.

⁵⁹Pathil, *Trends in Indian Theology*, 42.

Synodality is the *modus vivendi et operandi* with which the Church prepares all its members (laity, religious and clergy) to share responsibility, develop their charisms and ministries, and intensify their bonds of fraternal love.⁶⁰ Walking together, however, requires reciprocity, joint action, openness and trust. Participation of women indeed remains one of the most incredible milestones in achieving a synodal Church. The practice of synodality that includes women in the decision-making process is evident from the ecclesiastical administration based on the above-stated *palliyogam*. According to the *Palliyogam* Procedure Rules, 30% of the members thus elected to *prathinithiyogam* in every parish shall preferably be women and may not be less than 10%.⁶¹ The CBCI's *Gender Policy 2010* addresses different areas of women's concerns.⁶²

This prophetic role of the synodal Church is the inclusion of the poor and oppressed as well as by remaining close to the poor, Dalits, and all other oppressed castes. In this regard, the Catholic Bishop's Conference of India has given us a vision for our Indian context: walking with the marginalised. The CBCI and the National Council for Churches in India (NCCI) focus on the equal rights and dignity of their Dalit brothers and sisters. Dalit Liberation Sunday celebrated every year is an example of that.⁶³ The synodal expression of *palliyogam* of the Syro-Malabar Church in India is inclusive and welcoming of the poor. If there are more than ten Dalit families in the parish and they are not elected otherwise, the parish priest shall nominate one Dalit Catholic into *pratinidhiyogam*.⁶⁴ Manifestations of synodality are visible here.

6. Synodal Church for the Future: Prospects and Suggestions

The Church in India, which is dealing with a number of difficulties, is making an effort to practise synodality to some extent, but it still has to develop more. *Extra ecclesia nulla salus*, which states that there is no salvation outside of the Church, served as the basis for the early

⁶⁰Pulikkan, "Synodality, Witness and Dialogue," 5.

⁶¹Mathew Madathikunnel, "*Palliyogam*: Procedure Rules of the Syro- Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Church- a Study," in *A Study on the Particular Laws of the Syro-Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Church*, Bharananganam: Oriental Canon Law society of India, 2007, 159.

⁶²CBCI Commission for Women, *Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India*, New Delhi: CBCI Commission for Women, Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, 2010, <http://cbci.in/DownloadMat/Gender-Policy.pdf>.

⁶³Irudayam, *A Call to Shared Responsibility*, 109.

⁶⁴Madathikunnel, "*Palliyogam*: Procedure Rules of the Syro-Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Church- a Study," 157- 158.

Church attitude towards other religions. The Church later reshaped this line of thinking following Vatican II by promoting a constructive and positive engagement with all religious believers. But occasionally, to some extent, the mindset of *extra ecclesia nulla salus* controls our actions towards a cordial response to those who follow different religions. In this situation, Christians must develop a synodal mindset, especially in India with its diverse religious traditions.

When we encounter people who are ignorant of our faith, it is advisable to have fresh perspectives, free from all kinds of prejudices. The voices outside the walls of our Christian faith, in a way, test, provoke, encourage, and infuse us with a stronger faith than we had before. 800 years ago, St. Francis of Assisi was inspired by the Muslim faith, namely, the humility with which they prayed and the numerous ways in which they referred to God. He accepted these values and used them to strengthen his own Christian life.⁶⁵ Pope Francis invites us to encounter others in the same spirit of ecumenical synodality. This is where ecumenism and interreligious encounters need to be. To realise the call of Pope Francis for a 'walk together,' here are some practical recommendations for forming a synodal Church in a culturally diverse India.

Culture is not a static, but a living reality. It continues to grow, evolve and change, accelerated by the process of modernization. Therefore, synodality in the Indian Church, as elsewhere, demands that the Church grow by listening, perceiving, and responding to the evolution of culture.

The Church needs to develop beyond the 'Triple Dialogue' rather than limiting itself to it. A synodal Church is one that provides an equal space for all of God's people, regardless of caste, culture, religion, language, or gender. For synodal witnessing and walking together in a country like India with a rich culture, the proposed spiritual dimension of interreligious dialogue is most essential, which can, indeed, build bridges connecting people of every faith, so that they may live happily with each other. It is beneficial to organise collaborative ministries which can be done with people of every faith at the parish and diocesan levels. We must reconceptualise the 'majority' and 'minority' concepts, based on religious and socio-economical, remarkably indifferent attitudes, towards the poor and the oppressed.

⁶⁵ Allyson Kenny, "The Sultan and the Saint," *SL Media*, February 4, 2019, <https://www.slmedia.org/blog/sultan-and-the-saint>.

Openness to pluralism does not mean that we have to accept all ideologies uncritically, as being equal. Hence, we need to conscientize the Christian faithful to respect other religions without compromising our Christian Gospel values. We also need to promote the participation of women and Dalit Christians in parish and diocese decision-making by ensuring their participation in various councils. Launching empowerment programme at the parish level for girls, children, parents, and youth is essential to enable them to hold on to our Christian faith in the face of fanaticism, 'love jihad', and other threats. It is essential to have a compassionate approach towards the interfaith couples and their children as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the observation of the multifaceted acts of the Spirit in the synodal witnessing of the Church's life was aided by an integrated perspective of the elements of religious and cultural pluralism. India's religious diversity and diverse cultural background offer fresh insights into the synodality of the Church. The Good News of God's Kingdom is proclaimed through the synodal Church, the Sacrament of Christ. The synodal Church in India emphasizes that its faithful should acknowledge the goodness in all religions and cultures. Such walking together and seeking presupposes an open and reciprocal dialogue and the ecumenical co-existence of the Churches. Genuine inter-faith brotherhood also catalyses the growth of a synodal Church in diverse India. The Indian Church is also consistently confronting concrete challenges. Amidst all these it is trying to live up to the vision of synodality. The Indian Church's synodal practice in a diverse culture is noteworthy, but it needs to be refined to become a reality. To achieve this, everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs, gender, or sexual orientation, must be included and heard. This will help create a more inclusive, ecumenical, participatory and effective synodal Church in the future.