

## WHITHER SYNODALITY IN INDIA? ACCEPTANCE AND RESISTANCE TOWARDS BEING A SYNODAL CHURCH IN INDIA

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### Abstract

This article explores the concept of synodality within the context of the Catholic Church in India, focusing on both its acceptance and resistance. Synodality, emphasizing communal discernment and collaborative decision-making, reflects the Church's mission to journey together. The article examines the theological and cultural factors contributing to the embrace of synodality among Indian Catholics, highlighting successful instances of synodal practices. Conversely, it addresses the challenges and resistance faced, including hierarchical structures, cultural diversity, and socio-political dynamics. Through a balanced analysis, this study aims to provide insights into the future trajectory of synodality in India, offering recommendations for fostering a more inclusive and participatory Church.

**Key Words:** synodality, stages, possibility, acceptance, indifference, resistance

What is synodality? Everyone knows it, but no one knows it. Some treat it as a Catholic term, while others treat it as a secular word. Some trace its origin to the Fathers of the Early Church, while a few say it is

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the fruit of the Second Vatican Council, and still others see it as theological-pastoral vision of the Holy Father Pope Francis that it has snowballed from his first greeting, through his first homily, through his first image as the protector as made explicit when he took charge of the Petrine office, through his coat of arms (*miserendo atque eligendo* – by showing mercy and by choosing), through his first apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* where he did a house-cleaning, through *Querida Amazonia*, the post-special-synodal exhortation, where he spelt out his social-cultural-ecological-ecclesial dreams, to the present synod for a synodal church. The word synodal has been more common in our mouth for more than a year, and it has affected not only the way we understand the Church, but also how we sit at the table in a dining hall, how we interact with our maid, and how we conduct ourselves with each other in the civil society.

The present paper reviews the ‘synodal’ journey that we have made so far in the Church in India in the light of the synodal documents, and presents the resistance, indifference, and acceptance that synodality has encountered. The article is divided into four sections: (1) The Whence; (2) Acceptance of Synodality; (3) Resistance to Synodality; and (4) Moving Forward.

## 1. The Whence

### *a. Synod, Synodal Discussions, Synodal Church*

The XVI Ordinary Synod: Synod for a Synodal Church 2021-2024 began in October 2021 with two questions: “How does this ‘journeying together,’ which takes place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her? And, what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?”<sup>1</sup> The topic of synodality came to be taken for discussion and implementation primarily because of the document of the International Theological Commission titled “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” published in 2018.<sup>2</sup> The uniqueness of this Synod as our Holy Father mentioned on various occasions are as follows: (i) The present synod, unlike other synods, begins from home, goes to Rome, and comes back home; (ii) The synod focuses not on the product – the outcome of the discussions in the form of a document,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Preparatory Document*. n. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Online resource accessed on 31 July 2024, from [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)

but focuses on the process of living synodality in the life of the Church.<sup>3</sup> And (iii) This synod is not an event that happens in space and time, but an experience that happens in the life of every individual and community.<sup>4</sup>

Though Pope Francis did not spell out the reasons for his calling out the synod of bishops, we could deduce the context such as: (i) Abuses in the Church: financial, sexual, and administrative;<sup>5</sup> (ii) Evil of clericalism; (iii) The pandemic: the Covid-19 pandemic has given a deadly blow on the institutions. (iv) Shift from the centre to the peripheries; (v) Inclusion and diversity; (vi) The Amazon Synod and the German Synodal Path.

The move towards a more synodal Church has generated a spectrum of responses within the Catholic community, marked by both excitement and apprehension. Many faithful and clergy members are enthusiastic about synodality, seeing it as a revitalization of the Church's mission and a return to early Christian practices of communal discernment.<sup>6</sup> They appreciate the emphasis on dialogue, inclusion, and shared responsibility, which they believe can lead to more dynamic and responsive pastoral care.<sup>7</sup> However, alongside this excitement, there is notable apprehension. Some fear that synodality might dilute ecclesial authority, leading to potential conflicts and a loss of clear leadership. The uncertainty of change and the challenge of adapting longstanding structures to new forms of participation contribute to this cautious attitude.

Similarly, the call for greater involvement in the Church's decision-making processes has been met with both active engagement and indifference. Those who are eager to contribute see synodality as an

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Homily during the Opening Mass of the Synod of Bishops, 4 October 2021. Accessed online on 29 June. Cf. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html)

<sup>4</sup> The g-local exercise in fact began with a reflection on the following ten thematic nuclei: (i) The journeying companions, (ii) Listening, (iii) Speaking out, (iv) Celebrating, (v) Co-responsible in mission; (vi) Dialogue in Church and society, (vii) With the other Christian denominations, (viii) Authority and participation, (ix) Discerning and deciding, and (x) Forming ourselves in synodality.

<sup>5</sup> The Worksheet B3.3 of the *Instrumentum Laboris - 1* spells out different types of abuse: sexual, economic, spiritual, psychological, institutional, conscience, power, jurisdiction.

<sup>6</sup> 'Missionary' and 'synodal' become two sides of a coin (cf. *Document for the Continental Stage*), nn. 29-30.

<sup>7</sup> Commission for Spirituality, *Towards a Spirituality of Synodality*, 9.

opportunity to have their voices heard, fostering a deeper connection to their faith community and encouraging a more vibrant, participatory Church. Conversely, others remain indifferent, either due to a lack of awareness or a sense of disillusionment with institutional structures. This divide is also evident in the sense of responsibility versus reluctance. While many feel a renewed sense of co-responsibility, eager to take on new roles and support the Church's mission, others are reluctant, wary of the additional demands and the potential for increased conflict. This complex landscape of responses highlights the challenges and opportunities inherent in the journey towards a more synodal Church.

Doubts and fears surrounding synodality often centre on concerns that it might lead to the secularization of the Church, compromising its spiritual mission in favour of contemporary societal norms. Critics worry that synodality could be seen as a survival mechanism, a way for the Church to remain relevant in an increasingly secular world rather than a genuine theological development. There are also apprehensions that the emphasis on synodality might become overly sentimental and sensational, prioritizing popular opinion over doctrinal truth. Additionally, some fear that it may globalize local problems, imposing uniform solutions on diverse communities and cultures. The push towards synodality is sometimes viewed as an attempt at the modernization of the Church, which might dilute its traditional teachings and practices. These doubts reflect a deeper unease about balancing the need for reform with the preservation of the Church's core identity and mission.

However, in general, people agree upon the three paradigm shifts that the synodal Church will make: The synodal Church embodies significant paradigm shifts that transform traditional ecclesial structures and theological understandings. Firstly, it marks a movement from a strictly hierarchical model to a more reciprocal one, emphasizing mutual listening and shared decision-making among clergy and laity. This shift seeks to balance authority with co-responsibility, fostering a more inclusive and participatory community. Secondly, the paradigm transitions from an absolute, Newtonian worldview to a multi-relative, quantum perspective. In this new framework, diverse viewpoints and experiences are valued, recognizing the complex and dynamic nature of ecclesial life rather than adhering to a one-size-fits-all approach. The Universal Church will appreciate, acknowledge, and encourage the interplay of the Local

Churches. Lastly, the synodal Church embraces a shift from a focus on the supernatural, symbolized by the 'chrism oil,' to a more natural emphasis, represented by 'baptismal water.' This highlights the fundamental dignity and role of all the baptized in the Church's mission, underscoring the call to holiness and active participation inherent in baptism. Together, these shifts represent a profound reimagining of the Church's identity and mission, oriented towards greater communion, participation, and mission.

### ***b. Conflicts and Concern***

*Differentiation vs. Communion.* Conflicts over synodality often arise from the tension between differentiation and communion within the Church. While synodality seeks to foster unity and collective discernment, deeply rooted differences in theological perspectives, liturgical practices, and cultural traditions can challenge this goal. Differentiation, when not managed constructively, can lead to fragmentation and a sense of division rather than a harmonious communion. Synodality demands a delicate balance, where diversity is embraced and valued within the broader context of the Church's unity. This involves creating spaces for open dialogue and mutual respect, where varied voices and perspectives can contribute to a richer, more inclusive understanding of the Church's mission. By focusing on communion, the Church can transform differentiation from a source of conflict into an opportunity for deeper engagement and collective growth.

*Demonization vs. Participation.* Another significant conflict to synodality is the tendency towards demonization, which undermines genuine participation. In situations where differing opinions and practices exist, there can be a propensity to view others' perspectives with suspicion or hostility, leading to exclusion and polarization. This demonization stifles the collaborative spirit essential to synodality, preventing meaningful participation from all members of the Church. To counteract this, it is crucial to cultivate an environment of trust and openness, where disagreements are approached with a spirit of charity and understanding. Encouraging active participation and valuing each person's contribution can help to mitigate the negative effects of demonization. By fostering a culture of inclusivity and respect, the Church can ensure that all voices are heard and considered, enhancing the synodal process and reinforcing the communal bonds within the faith community.

*Distortion vs. Mission.* The conflict between distortion and mission presents a profound challenge to synodality. When the principles of synodality are misunderstood or misapplied, they can distort the Church's mission, leading to confusion and misalignment with its core values. This distortion can manifest in various ways, such as prioritizing procedural formalities over genuine discernment or allowing synodal structures to become bureaucratic rather than spiritually enriching. To prevent this, it is essential to maintain a clear focus on the Church's mission of evangelization, service, and witness. Synodality should be seen as a way to deepen the Church's commitment to its mission, fostering a spirit of collaboration and shared purpose. By aligning synodal practices with the Church's evangelizing mission, the faithful can ensure that synodality serves as a dynamic and effective framework for living out the Gospel in today's world.

### *c. Three Journeys of Synodality*

In the journey of synodality, the transition from emotional contagion to empathic concern and then to communicative responsiveness represents a profound evolution in communal interaction. Initially, emotional contagion involves a basic, almost automatic sharing of emotions, where feelings are simply absorbed from others. Moving beyond this, empathic concern requires a deeper engagement, where individuals not only feel the emotions of others but also actively seek to understand and address their needs. Ultimately, communicative responsiveness involves a more deliberate and constructive interaction, where participants engage in meaningful dialogue, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration.

The journey from action to attitude underscores a fundamental change in how individuals approach their roles within a synodal process. Actions alone, though important, may not fully capture the spirit of synodality. An attitude that embraces openness, respect, and a genuine willingness to listen and learn transforms these actions into a more integrated and reflective practice. This change calls for a commitment to internalizing the values of synodality, ensuring that the attitudes and intentions behind actions align with the broader goals of unity and shared mission.

Finally, the transition from being followers to being partners marks a significant reorientation in the dynamics of engagement.<sup>8</sup> While following implies a degree of passivity and adherence to directives, being partners involves active and equal participation in decision-making processes. This shift fosters a collaborative environment where all members contribute their insights and perspectives, thereby enriching the collective journey. Embracing this partnership approach ensures that every voice is valued and that the journey of synodality is marked by genuine cooperation and shared responsibility.

## **2. Acceptance of Synodality**

### ***a. Cultural Resonance***

The acceptance of synodality within the Catholic Church in India finds a deep resonance with the country's rich cultural traditions of collective decision-making and shared responsibility. Indian society has long valued the wisdom of communal discernment, exemplified by the practices of village councils and the involvement of community elders in decision-making processes. This cultural backdrop aligns naturally with the principles of synodality, which emphasize inclusion, listening, and dialogue. Symbols such as taking off one's shoes, sitting in a circle of elders, and using the image of a tree for community gatherings illustrate this cultural synergy. Similarly, traditional practices like tribal dances and the creation of rangoli, which celebrate community and diversity, mirror the diverse expressions of faith and unity envisioned in a synodal Church. These cultural elements enrich the Church's journey towards a more synodal and participatory future, fostering a deeper connection between faith and local traditions.

### ***b. Ecclesial Commitment***

Ecclesial commitment to synodality is evident in numerous reports from the Dioceses showcasing active participation and the implementation of synodal practices within the Church. Various dioceses have embraced synodal principles by creating platforms for dialogue and decision-making that include both clergy and lay faithful. For instance, diocesan synods and parish councils have been revitalized to ensure broader participation in Church governance.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Statement of the Indian Theological Association reflection on synodality, 19 Apr 2023. Accessed online from <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/47829>. The earlier document is: *The Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014).

Formation programs and educational initiatives have been developed to promote synodality, equipping clergy and laity with the necessary skills and theological understanding to engage in this new model of Church life. These programs emphasize listening, discernment, and collaborative leadership, leading to increased involvement of lay members in various ministries and decision-making processes. The impact of these initiatives is profound, fostering a more engaged and active Church community where both clergy and laity work together to fulfil the Church's mission.

### ***c. Social Justice Orientation***

Synodality's acceptance is also closely tied to the Church's mission for social justice and its outreach to the marginalized. The synodal approach, with its emphasis on inclusivity and listening to all voices, particularly resonates with the Church's commitment to social justice. By adopting synodal practices, the Church strengthens its support and outreach efforts, ensuring that the needs and perspectives of the marginalized are heard and addressed. This orientation towards social justice is reflected in various initiatives aimed at empowering the poor, advocating for human rights, and providing education and healthcare to underserved communities. The synodal process helps the Church to identify and respond more effectively to social issues, fostering a sense of solidarity and shared responsibility among all members. This commitment to social justice not only aligns with the Church's mission but also enhances its credibility and relevance in contemporary society, demonstrating the transformative potential of synodality.

## **3. Resistance to Synodality**

### ***a. Hierarchical Structures***

Resistance to synodality within the Catholic Church is often rooted in the deep-seated tradition of clericalism and the hierarchical structures that have long defined ecclesial governance. Clericalism, with its emphasis on the authority and privilege of the clergy, creates a significant barrier to the adoption of synodal practices that promote shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making. Many within the Church are hesitant to alter these traditional structures, fearing that doing so might undermine the established order and authority.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup> Cardinal Mario Grech and Archbishop Lazzaro You Heung, *Letter to the Priests on the Synodal Journey*, 19 March 2022. Accessed online on 3 Aug 24: <https://www.synod.va/en/news/letter-to-priests-on-the-synodal-journey.html>.



balance between primacy, collegiality, and synodality presents a complex challenge, as efforts to enhance synodal governance must navigate the delicate boundaries of these concepts. Structural changes required to implement synodality can be daunting, particularly when it comes to issues like the appointment of bishops, where the principle of subsidiarity must be carefully applied to maintain both local and universal Church unity.

### ***b. Cultural Challenges***

Cultural challenges further complicate the acceptance of synodality, especially in a diverse and complex society like India. Caste dynamics, for instance, can create significant obstacles, as the rigid social hierarchies inherent in the caste system often translate into the Church's internal structures, perpetuating inequality and resistance to inclusive practices. Gender issues also pose a challenge, with traditional roles and perceptions about women's place in the Church often limiting their participation in synodal processes. The inherently argumentative nature of Indian society, while a potential strength in fostering dialogue, can also lead to divisive consciousness, where differences become points of contention rather than opportunities for growth. These cultural factors necessitate a nuanced approach to implementing synodality, one that is sensitive to local realities while striving for greater inclusivity and collaboration.

### ***c. Practical Limitations***

In addition to structural and cultural challenges, practical limitations significantly impede the adoption of synodality. A widespread lack of understanding about what synodality entails and how it can be effectively practiced hinders its acceptance. This issue is worsened by resource constraints, particularly in rural and remote areas where access to education and formation programs is limited. Many communities lack the necessary training and resources to engage fully in synodal processes, resulting in a gap between the ideals of synodality and their practical implementation. Moreover, the logistical challenges of reaching and involving diverse and geographically dispersed communities add another layer of complexity. Addressing these practical limitations requires targeted efforts to provide education, training, and resources, ensuring that all members of the Church can participate meaningfully in the synodal journey.

## **4. Moving Forward**

### ***a. Formation and Education***

Developing comprehensive formation programs for both clergy and laity is essential to foster a deeper understanding and commitment to synodality within the Catholic Church. These programs should provide theological and practical education on the principles and practices of synodality, equipping participants with the knowledge and skills needed to engage effectively in synodal processes. By emphasizing the importance of listening, dialogue, and discernment, formation programs can help cultivate a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility. Additionally, ongoing education initiatives can ensure that all members of the Church, regardless of their role, are well-prepared to contribute to the synodal journey.<sup>10</sup> This investment in formation and education is crucial for building a foundation of informed and active participation, enabling the Church to navigate the complexities of synodal governance.

### ***b. Owning it Up***

To make synodality more accessible and meaningful, it is vital to contextualize it within India's diverse cultural realities. This involves recognizing and integrating local traditions, practices, and symbols into the synodal framework, thereby making it more relatable and impactful for the faithful. Engaging in spiritual conversations that resonate with the cultural context can facilitate a synodal conversion, encouraging individuals and communities to embrace the values of synodality more fully. By aligning synodal practices with the lived experiences and cultural expressions of Indian Catholics, the Church can foster a sense of ownership and commitment to the synodal process. This contextualization helps bridge the gap between universal Church principles and local realities, ensuring that synodality is not perceived as an abstract concept but as a tangible and transformative way of being Church together.

### ***c. Collaborative Leadership***

Encouraging collaborative leadership models is key to overcoming hierarchical resistance and fostering a synodal Church. By promoting shared responsibility and inclusive practices, the Church can move away from rigid hierarchical structures towards a more participatory and egalitarian model of leadership. Efforts to include marginalized

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<sup>10</sup> cf. *Synodal Church in Mission. Synthesis Report*. 28 Oct 2023, Para. 11.

groups, women, and youth in leadership roles are essential for ensuring that all voices are heard and valued in the decision-making process. Collaborative leadership not only enhances the Church's ability to respond to diverse needs and perspectives but also strengthens its mission and witness in the world. By modelling inclusive and shared leadership, the Church can demonstrate the transformative potential of synodality, inspiring greater engagement and commitment from all its members. This shift towards collaborative leadership is critical for building a vibrant, dynamic, and truly synodal Church.

### **The Whither?**

The Loci of Synodality are Universal Church, Local Church, and Parochial Church (parish, institution, religious institute, lay ecclesial movement, BEC, family, individual).

The 'synod' ('meeting' or 'gathering') of the Eastern Churches is equated to the understanding of 'synodality'. This type of understanding not only monopolises, but also distracts us from the real meaning of the word.<sup>11</sup> So far, we have heard about the 'description' about synodality, 'not' the definition: 'synodality' as descriptive of inclusion, diversity, welcome, synergy, discernment, collectivity, solidarity, symphony, sharing, decentralisation, empowerment, happiness, listening, dialogue, and collaboration. We need let synodality define our identity and mission.

The question now raises in our minds is, 'Whether synodality in India?' or 'Weather of synodality pervades the entire nation?' or 'Does synodality wither away as a premature fruit?'

The General Secretariat of the Synod on 9 July 2024 released the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Session of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. The *Instrumentum Laboris* beautifully begins with a quote from Isaiah's prophecy of 'the feast on the mountain of the Lord' (cf. Isa 25:6-8) and ends with a 'festive note.'<sup>12</sup> Now, it is in the hands of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, and the synodal fathers and mothers, to serve the meal of 'synodality' to

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<sup>11</sup> cf. *Synodal Church in Mission. Synthesis Report*. 28 Oct 2023, Para. 6.

<sup>12</sup> The *Document for Continental Stage* had yet another image from Isaiah: Stating that the synodal journey is a return from an exile (n. 24), the document presents the image of tent promised by the prophet Isaiah (54:2). The cloths, the ropes and the pegs of the tent are used metaphorically to refer to enlarging, accommodating and being rooted in faith.

the last and the lost members of the Church and the world. Or else it would be an exercise of a waiter reading out the menu to the guests and sending them out, 'Go! You have eaten well.' Reading the menu does not satisfy our hunger! Documents alone don't bring about synodality! My fear is that the Francis effect (of the synodal Church) may turn out to be a Francis syndrome!