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SYNODALITY: ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This paper, titled *Synodality: Ethical Perspectives*, delves into the ethical dimensions and transformative potential of Synodality in Church governance and communal life. It underscores the pivotal shift from a hierarchical model to a more inclusive, participatory approach, emphasizing Synodality as a virtue of listening to the Holy Spirit, a virtue of inclusivity, and a virtue of discernment. The paper examines Synodality fosters collective spiritual growth, responsibility, and the reform of entrenched power structures, aiming to enhance the Church's credibility, mission, and impact. Additionally, it addresses the ethical implications of engaging in meaningful social dialogue, living out Church teachings authentically, and building unity amidst diversity. By highlighting the renewal of internal relationships and a steadfast commitment to ethical principles, this research reflects the Gospel's call to love, justice, and unity. Ultimately, the paper presents Synodality as a transformative path for deepening communion, mission, and witness within the contemporary Church, aligning its practices with both ethical and spiritual values.

Key Words: Synodality, Inclusivity, Shared Responsibility, Church Reform, Communal Life, Discernment, Social Dialogue

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Introduction

The concept of synodality represents a profound shift in the Church's approach to governance, decision-making, and communal life. Traditionally, the Church has operated within a hierarchical framework, where authority is concentrated at the top, and decisions are often made by a select few. This model, while effective in maintaining order and doctrinal purity, sometimes led to a sense of exclusion among the broader faithful and a disconnect between the leadership and the lived experiences of the laity.

In contrast, Synodality emphasizes a more inclusive and participatory model, where the collective journey of the faithful, guided by the Holy Spirit, takes center stage. This approach is not merely procedural but deeply ethical, calling for a transformation in how the Church listens, discerns, and acts. The ethical dimensions of Synodality touch upon the core values of inclusivity, shared responsibility, and the reform of power structures within the Church. By embracing these values, the Church can respond more effectively to the challenges of our time, fostering a community that is credible in its witness, transparent in its operations, and united in its mission. This article explores these ethical perspectives, offering a comprehensive reflection on how synodality can renew the Church's life and witness in a rapidly changing world.

1. Synodality as a Virtue¹

Synodality, when viewed as a virtue, underlines the Church's character on its road to unity. Rather than being controlled by regulations, it concentrates on the traits exhibited by the believers, asking, "What kind of person am I?", "What kind of person should I be?", "What kind of community are we?" and "What kind of community should we create?" Synodality, therefore, as a virtue, encourages critical and creative reflection on the individual and Church's identity and journey to wider communion, necessitating an honest assessment of its current situation and future orientation.²

¹ Xavier M. Montecel, "Eucharist, Synodality, and Ethics: Making Connections," *Religions* 14, no. 11 (November 1, 2023): 1379, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111379.

² Xavier M. Montecel, "Eucharist, Synodality, and Ethics: Making Connections," 1379

1.1. Synodality is the Virtue of Listening to the Holy Spirit, Our Guiding Witness

A profound, attentive listening that goes beyond simple discourse. This listening is about more than just hearing voices; it is about distinguishing the activity of the Holy Spirit inside the community of believers. As Pope Francis states in Evangelii Gaudium, "We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing" (EG 171). He clarifies that it is an openness of heart that fosters true spiritual encounters. This respectful and compassionate listening allows us to connect deeply, finding the right words and gestures to move beyond being passive bystanders. Such listening leads to genuine spiritual growth and awakens a desire to respond fully to God's love.³ The Holy Spirit, whom Christ the head pours out upon his members, and whom the Father sends in his name, is the principal agent of the Church's mission.4 "The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple. In them He prays on their behalf and bears witness to the fact that they are adopted sons (daughters)" (LG 4). Therefore, it necessitates a humble listening to the Holy Spirit that dwells in us as brothers and sisters, and in and through it acknowledge the importance of every member of the Church, from the laity to the clergy, in the decision-making process. By practising listening, the Church becomes more in tune with the sensus fidelium or the sense of the faithful, ensuring that choices are inspired by the collective wisdom and lived experiences of the entire people of God.⁵ This characteristic of synodality is especially important when tackling delicate and complicated topics like the clergy sexual abuse crisis, where transparency and accountability are critical.6

1.2. Synodality is the Virtue of Inclusivity

The virtue of inclusivity advocates for a Church that values diversity and welcomes all members, regardless of one's status or position. Synodality's inclusivity calls into question conventional

³ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 171, AAS 105 (2013): 1019-1137.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 4, AAS 57 (1965): 44-52.

⁵ Kristin Colberg, "Ecumenical Ecclesiology in Its New Contexts: Considering the Transformed Relationship between Roman Catholic Ecclesiology and Ecumenism," *Religions* 9, no. 10 (September 26, 2018): 291, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9100291.

⁶ Tracey Lamont, "Ministry with Young Adults: Toward a New Ecclesiological Imagination," *Religions* 11, no. 11 (November 2, 2020): 570, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11110570.

hierarchical systems, encouraging a more horizontal and participative leadership approach. This move not only empowers the laity, but also instils a feeling of ownership and duty in all Church members. As a virtue, inclusivity promotes a collaborative rather than authoritarian leadership style, fostering a Church community that represents the Body of Christ's diversity and universality. Over a century before the Second Vatican Council, St. Vincent Pallotti, the founder of the Society of Catholic Apostolate (SAC) had already envisioned such a Church. He highlighted that every Catholic, regardless of whether they are a priest, religious, or layperson, should find joy in dedicating all their talents, knowledge, education, and resources - along with their material goods and prayers - to the advancement of faith and the renewal of charity in the world, thereby gaining the merit of the apostolate.⁷

Later, the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, stated, "Let the spiritual shepherds recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the laity in the Church" (LG 37), indicating that the spiritual leaders have the bounding duty to foresee and promote the lay faithful in taking up tasks in the Church. This clearly shows that everyone is invited to take part in the apostolate of Jesus Christ. Moreover, by participating in Christ's redemptive mission, we are perfected to reflect the Holy Trinity and grow closer to Jesus, the ultimate example of perfection.

1.3. Synodality is the Virtue of Discernment

Synodality exemplifies the virtue of discernment - a shared, prayerful effort to understand God's will.8 Rather than being a single event, discernment in synodality is an ongoing practice that demands patience, openness, and engagement with diverse viewpoints. This virtue allows the Church to address the complexities of contemporary life, such as navigating issues like secularism, moral relativism, and the rapid pace of technological change, while upholding doctrinal unity. Although implementing synodality presents challenges, such as managing extensive participation and maintaining doctrinal consistency, a deep commitment to discernment helps overcome these

⁷ Jacob Nampudakam, "Pastors and Laity Called to Walk Together: A Pallottine Dream," Catholic Apostolate Center, 2023, https://www.catholicapostolatecenter.org/blog/pastors-and-laity-called-to-walk-together-a-pallottine-dream.

⁸ Kristin Colberg, "Ecumenical Ecclesiology in Its New Contexts: Considering the Transformed Relationship between Roman Catholic Ecclesiology and Ecumenism," 291

obstacles. This approach ensures that decisions are made thoughtfully and guided by the Spirit, rather than hastily or unilaterally.

Synodality operates in conjunction with other virtues as well, such as fidelity, humility, and self-care, guiding the Church to embody the reign of God in history and advocate for the universal common good. These enable the Church to journey well through history, responding to the signs of the times with a commitment to justice and the common good. Each aspect of Synodality - whether it is the virtue of listening to the Holy Spirit, inclusivity, or discernment - reveals a deep, intrinsic commitment to authentic and transformative engagement within the Church. These virtues not only guide individual and communal actions but also shape the Church's mission and identity in profound ways. Moving forward, it is essential to consider how these virtues translate into practical, transformative steps for collective growth and renewal. Let us in the following section delve into the process of this synodal maturation.

2. The Path of Synodal Conversion: Maturing Together

The path of synodal conversion is fundamentally about maturing together as a community of faith. This journey involves a collective process of spiritual and moral growth, where both individuals and the Church as a whole embrace a transformative openness to the Holy Spirit's guidance. It requires a conscious effort to evolve beyond entrenched habits and complacent attitudes. As we engage in dialogue, reflection, and collaboration, we are called to deepen our understanding of each other and of our collective mission. This maturing process is not just about refining practices but about cultivating a more profound unity and authenticity in living out the Church's vocation, ultimately enriching the ecclesial community and advancing its witness to the Gospel in the modern world.

Hence, conversion here is understood not merely as recognizing sin but as a profound change of heart and mind that reshapes attitudes towards oneself, others, and God. Pope Francis stresses that this transformation, or *metanoia*, is crucial for the Church to evolve into a more faithful expression of its vocation. The process requires abandoning complacent attitudes and adapting to new realities rather than clinging to outdated methods. The Holy Spirit plays a key role in this journey, guiding and empowering the Church toward deeper

spiritual maturity and a more vibrant ecclesial life.⁹ And through collective dialogue and reflection, the Church moves beyond entrenched practices, opening itself to new ways of living out its vocation.

2.1. Collective Spiritual Growth

One prominent example of collective spiritual growth within the Church is the Charismatic Renewal Movement. ¹⁰ Beginning in the late 1960s, this movement emphasized a personal and communal experience of the Holy Spirit, leading to a renewal of spiritual vitality and enthusiasm in many Catholic communities. Through communal prayer, worship, and the use of charismatic gifts like speaking in tongues and healing, the movement fostered a deeper, shared experience of spirituality. This collective engagement led to a more vibrant and dynamic expression of faith, demonstrating how a group of believers can grow spiritually together by embracing a transformative openness to the Holy Spirit.

2.2. Transformation of Attitudes

A significant example of the transformation of attitudes that is happening within the Church is its evolving approach to LGBTQ+ issues. And the process of maturing together will help us transform attitudes towards many such impending issues. Historically, the Church's stance on LGBTQ+ individuals was often rigid and exclusionary. However, recent statements and actions by various Church leaders, including Pope Francis, have reflected a more compassionate and inclusive attitude. For instance, Pope Francis' message "Who am I to judge?" signifies a shift towards understanding and accepting LGBTQ+ individuals with dignity and respect. This change in attitude represents a profound shift from condemnation to a more welcoming and understanding approach, illustrating a transformation in how the Church relates to and supports its members.

Another example is the Church's evolving response to clerical abuse scandals. The initial responses were often characterized by denial,

⁹ Shaji Kochuthara and Joby Kochumuttom, eds., *Towards a Synodal Church - Moving Forward* (Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2023), 133-136.

¹⁰ Matthew Price, "What Is Catholic Charismatic Renewal?," www.ccr.org.au, n.d., https://www.ccr.org.au/about-ccr/what-is-catholic-charismatic-renewal.

¹¹ Joshua J. McElwee, "Francis Explains 'Who Am I to Judge?," National Catholic Reporter, January 10, 2016, https://www.ncronline.org/francis-explains-who-am-i-judge.

cover-ups, and protection of perpetrators. However, in recent years, there has been a significant shift towards transparency, accountability, and support for survivors. The implementation of stricter safeguarding measures and the establishment of new protocols for handling abuse cases illustrate a transformation in attitudes towards justice and care for victims. This change reflects a broader commitment to addressing past failures and fostering a more ethical and compassionate approach within the Church.

This illustrates how the path of synodal conversion involves both collective spiritual growth and a transformation of attitudes, leading to a more mature and authentic expression of the Church's vocation in the world.

3. Shared Responsibility: Proclaiming the Gospel and Shaping the World

In the journey toward a more Synodal Church, the concept of shared responsibility also emerges as a central theme. Synodality is a deeper call to renew the way the Church lives out its mission. And at the heart of this renewal is the understanding that the Church is the People of God, where every baptized person is invited to participate in proclaiming the Gospel and contributing to the transformation of the world.¹² This shared responsibility calls for a profound shift in perspective - one that recognizes the diverse gifts and vocations of all members of the Church, and the need for collaborative discernment and action. In this context, the faithful are not passive recipients of ministry but active participants in the Church's life and mission. By embracing this shared responsibility, the Church can more effectively witness to the Gospel, address the challenges of our time, and work towards building the Kingdom of God. The following points explore how shared responsibility can be lived out in the Church, focusing on co-responsibility in mission, collaborative decision-making, and witnessing in the public sphere.

3.1. Co-responsibility in Mission, Engaging All the Baptized

The Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops emphasizes co-responsibility. The 2018 document on *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* by the

¹² Joseph W. Tobin, "Co-Responsibility in Mission," Archdiocese of Newark, August 11, 2023, https://rcan.org/how-we-can-better-share-gifts-tasks-in-service-gospel/.

International Theological Commission said, "A synodal Church is a Church of participation and co-responsibility. In exercising Synodality she is called to give expression to the participation of all, according to each one's calling...". Also, the *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality emphasizes mutual listening, teamwork, a spirit of fraternity and co-responsibility. In the Synodal Church, the concept of co-responsibility is rooted in the belief that every baptized person is called to participate in the mission of the Church.

This co-responsibility challenges the traditional view that only the clergy and religious are responsible for evangelization and the life of the Church. Instead, it emphasizes the active engagement of the laity, who bring their unique gifts and experiences to the mission of proclaiming the Gospel. In practical terms, this co-responsibility means that laypeople are not just encouraged to follow actively but also to take on leadership roles within their parishes, dioceses, and broader Church structures.¹⁵ For example, lay ministers can lead catechetical programs, facilitate small faith-sharing groups, and serve as Eucharistic ministers. Additionally, laypeople are increasingly being called upon to contribute to theological reflection and to participate in synodal processes at the diocesan, national, and global levels. By embracing their co-responsibility, the laity help to ensure that the Church's mission is truly a mission of the whole People of God. And Synodality makes it very evident that all bear the responsibility of the growth of the Church and therefore, all should walk together.

3.2. Collaborative Decision-Making and Reforming Power

Shared responsibility within the Synodal Church is also expressed through collaborative decision-making. In a Synodal Church, decisions are not made unilaterally by a single person or group but are discerned collectively through a process of listening, dialogue, and prayerful reflection. This approach is grounded in the belief that the Holy Spirit speaks through all members of the Church, and that the wisdom of the community is greater than that of any individual.

¹³ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 67, AAS 107 (2015): 1286.

¹⁴ "Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality," September 2021,https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html.

¹⁵ John C Cavadini, "Could 'Synodality' Defeat 'Co-Responsibility'?," *The Thomist* 87, no. 2 (April 1, 2023): 289–309, https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.2023.0014.

Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church makes it very clear that there is a difference between decision-making and decision-taking. It states that decision-making is 'a joint exercise of discernment, consultation and co-operation'. And decision-taking is 'within the competence of the Bishop, the guarantor of apostolicity and Catholicity'. Thus, the value of consulting all members of the Church which comes under the purview of decision-making should not be underestimated. Unlike civil law, where consultative votes may have less weight, in the Church, the community is called to listen to the Spirit, discern the signs of the times, and offer advice to guide pastoral decisions. Pastors must carefully consider the wishes of the faithful and, in some cases, are required by Canon Law to seek and obtain opinions before making decisions. ¹⁷

One concrete example of this collaborative decision-making is the establishment of parish and diocesan councils, where clergy and laity work together to discern pastoral priorities, allocate resources, and develop strategies for evangelization and social outreach. In these councils, the voices of all members are valued, and decisions are made through consensus rather than simple majority voting. Another example is the synodal process itself, where the local Church gathers to listen to the experiences, hopes, and concerns of its members, and then discerns how the Church can respond more faithfully to the Gospel in its specific context. Through collaborative decision-making, the Synodal Church becomes a more inclusive and participatory community, where every member has a voice and a role in shaping the Church's future.

3.3. Witnessing in the Public Sphere

The shared responsibility of the faithful extends beyond the internal life of the Church and into the public sphere, where the Church is called to be a witness to the Gospel and a force for social transformation. "All the faithful are called by virtue of their baptism to witness to and proclaim the Word of truth and life, in that they are members of the prophetic, priestly and royal People of God." In a synodal Church, all members are encouraged to engage with the wider

¹⁶ International Theological Commission, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, 69, 1286.

¹⁷ Codex Iuris Canonici (CIC), auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus, AAS 75, pars 2 (1983), can. 212 §2.

¹⁸ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 56, 1286.

society, bringing the values of the Gospel to bear on issues of justice, peace, and the common good.

This responsibility can take many forms. For example, Catholic social movements and organizations, such as Caritas and the Catholic Worker Movement, unite clergy, religious, and laypeople to tackle critical social issues like poverty, environmental degradation, and human rights abuses. These movements embody the Church's commitment to solidarity with the poor and marginalized, demonstrating how the faithful can collaborate to transform society according to Christ's teachings. In India too, we have movements and organizations dedicated to promoting social justice, human rights, education, healthcare, and the empowerment of marginalized communities. Rooted in the Catholic Church's teachings, these organizations focus on poverty alleviation, rural development, advocacy, and environmental sustainability. Notable organizations include Caritas India, the social arm of the Catholic Church, which works on disaster relief, sustainable development, and social justice initiatives. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) Commission for Justice, Peace and Development addresses issues like poverty, inequality, and violence. The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) India provides education, healthcare, and livelihood support to refugees and marginalized groups. The Conference of Religious India (CRI) represents various religious congregations, while the Indian Catholic Youth Movement (ICYM) promotes social justice and peace Catholics. Together, these movements young organizations reflect the Church's mission to serve the poor and marginalized and to advocate for a just and equitable society.

Another example is the involvement of lay Catholics in the political sphere, where they are called to bring their faith to bear on public policy decisions, advocating for laws and policies that promote human dignity, protect the vulnerable, and advance the common good. This can include participation in local, national, or international advocacy efforts, as well as involvement in political parties or civil society organizations.

In all these ways, the shared responsibility of the faithful is not just about internal Church matters but is also about shaping the world according to the values of the Gospel. By working together, the members of the Church can have a profound impact on broader society, helping to bring about the Kingdom of God here and now.

4. The Church in Social Dialogue and Fraternity, Building Credibility

We are in an increasingly polarized world, and the Church's credibility hinges on its ability to engage meaningfully in social dialogue and to foster fraternity among all people. This credibility is not just about maintaining a good reputation but also about embodying the values of the Gospel in a way that resonates with the global society.

4.1. Authentic Engagement

Building credibility begins with authentic engagement in social dialogue.¹⁹ The Church must be willing to listen to the voices of those who are often marginalized or excluded from mainstream conversations. This includes not only the poor and vulnerable but also those who hold different beliefs or values. By listening with an open heart and mind, the Church demonstrates its commitment to the dignity of every person and its willingness to learn from others. However, listening is only one part of the equation. The Church must offer a prophetic voice that challenges injustice and promotes the common good. This requires a careful balance between holding firm to the truths of the faith and engaging respectfully with those who may disagree. This approach not only builds credibility but also helps to bridge divides, whether speaking on climate change, human rights, or economic inequality.

4.2. Living Out the Church's Social Teaching

Credibility is not just about words; it is also about actions. "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men (women) of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ" (GS 1). The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World emphasizes the Church's role in engaging with the contemporary world and its responsibility to address social issues through dialogue and action.²⁰ The Church's commitment to social dialogue and fraternity must be reflected in its actions, particularly in how it lives out its social teaching. This includes advocating for policies that promote justice and peace, as well as engaging in charitable works that

¹⁹ Vatican News, "Indian Church Renews Its Commitment to Dialogue for Social Harmony," Vaticannews.va (Vatican News, February 14, 2020), http://surl.li/bwbvlr.

²⁰ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1, AAS 58 (1966): 1025–1120.

support the most vulnerable members of society. The Church's initiatives like interfaith dialogue, community development projects, or peacebuilding efforts can serve as powerful witnesses to its commitment to the common good. These actions not only address immediate needs but also help to build long-term relationships of trust and cooperation. By standing in solidarity with those who are suffering and working to transform unjust structures, the Church becomes a credible and influential voice in the public arena.

4.3. Building Fraternity and Fostering Unity in Diversity

A key aspect of the Church's credibility is its ability to build fraternity in a world that is often divided along lines of religion, nationality, and ideology. Synodality calls the Church to be a model of unity in diversity, where different voices and perspectives are not just tolerated but celebrated as part of the richness of the human family. This can be seen in the Church's efforts to promote ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, where it seeks to build bridges with other Christian denominations and faith traditions. By engaging in these dialogues with humility and respect, the Church can help to break down barriers and foster a sense of shared humanity. "The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open. One concrete sign of such openness is that our church doors should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door" (EG 47). Pope Francis in Evangelii Gaudium not only discusses the need for the Church to be a community of missionary disciples going out to the peripheries and engaging in social dialogue but also emphasizes the importance of ecumenism and interfaith dialogue in renewing relationships.²¹

5. Renewing Relationships Within and Beyond Christian Communities

Synodality emphasizes the need for the Church to be a community of genuine relationships - both within its own walls and in its interactions with the wider world. Thus, renewal of relationships is crucial for the Church to live out its mission of evangelization, social justice, and peacebuilding.

5.1. Healing Internal Divisions

Renewing relationships within the Christian community begins with healing internal divisions. The Church, being diverse, often faces

²¹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium, 47, 1019-1137.

misunderstandings and conflicts due to differences in culture, background, and experience. Synodality addresses these challenges by fostering communion through reconciliation, dialogue, and mutual understanding. For instance, when tensions arise between groups over liturgical preferences, cultural differences, or political views, Synodality encourages honest and respectful dialogue.²²

5.2. Embracing Those on the Peripheries

Renewing relationships within the Church involves reaching out to marginalized or alienated individuals, including those economically or socially marginalized and those excluded due to past hurts.²³ Synodality calls the Church to be welcoming and inclusive, with concrete actions such as creating ministries for marginalized groups, offering pastoral care to those hurt by the Church, and seeking to reconnect with those who have left. These efforts help the Church fulfil its mission of being a sign of God's love.²⁴

Conclusion

Synodality, therefore, as an ethical framework, offers the Church a path toward renewal that is both faithful to its tradition and responsive to contemporary needs. By prioritizing the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church can foster a deeper communal discernment that transcends individual agendas and embraces the collective wisdom of the faithful. The commitment to inclusivity, shared responsibility, and the reform of power structures within the Church are not merely organizational strategies but profound ethical imperatives that reflect the Gospel's call to love, justice, and unity. As the Church engages in social dialogue and builds credibility in a fractured world, it must also renew its internal relationships, ensuring that all members are valued, heard, and empowered to contribute to the Church's mission. Ultimately, synodality is not just a method but a way of being Church, one that calls for a continuous conversion and commitment to ethical principles that will guide the Church into a future marked by greater communion, mission, and witness.

²² Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 92, 1025–1120.

²³ Vatican News, "Pope Encourages Community of Sant'Egidio to Persist in Pursuing Peace," Vaticannews.va (Vatican News, September 12, 2023), https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-09/pope-encourages-community-of-sant-egidio-berlin-meeting.html.

²⁴ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, Fratelli Tutti, 77, AAS 112 (2020): 1006.