

DISSENT IN A SYNODAL CHURCH: A PROPOSAL

Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler♦

Abstract

Currently the Catholic Church is a state of polarization marked by dissent and disagreement between more conservative and more change-accepting Catholics. There is even dissent and disagreement among Church leaders which, when articulated in public, adds to the confusion among lay believers. In this article, we offer various proposals for dealing with that dissent and confusion. There are two models guiding the theology of Church among Catholics. One is a hierarchical model in which the Church is rigidly structured hierarchically and all decisions about doctrine and practice come from the leadership. This model dominated Catholic ecclesiology from the Council of Trent to the Second Vatican Council, which introduced another model of Church, a communion model, in which all lay believers have their part to play in Church decisions. In the hierarchical model, dissent is perceived as a threat to unity and is to be condemned. In the communion model, presented and lived out as a synodal model by Pope Francis, dissent can be addressed by “synodal dialogue” in which “unity prevails over conflict.” In this essay, we recommend that the term *dissent* be abandoned and replaced with Pope Francis’ preferred *disagreement*, which can be addressed in synodal dialogue leading to what Francis calls “unity in diversity,” to which he believes the Church is called.

♦**Todd A. Salzman** (toddsalzman@creighton.edu) is the Amelia and Emil Graff Professor of Catholic Theology at Creighton University in Omaha, U.S.A. Together they are the authors of the award-winning and best-selling *The Sexual Person* (Georgetown University Press, 2008), of *Sexual Ethics: A Theological Introduction* (Georgetown University Press, 2012), and many articles worldwide in *Theological Studies*, *Louvain Studies*, *Heythrop Journal*, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, etc. They have recently published *Introduction to Catholic Theological Ethics: Foundation and Applications* (Orbis Press, 2019). **Michael G. Lawler** (michaellawler@creighton.edu) is the Amelia and Emil Graff Professor Emeritus of Catholic Theology at Creighton University.

Keywords: *Amoris Laetitia*; Communion Church; Conscience; Dialogue; Disagreement; Dissent; Hierarchical Church; Synod

1. Introduction

Currently, the Catholic Church is in a state of polarization marked by disagreement and dissent, even among ecclesial leaders who have become more publicly vocal about such disagreements. Throughout history dissent in the Church has been viewed as a threat to orthodoxy and orthopraxis, and has frequently been silenced through ecclesial censure and spiritual or physical violence. Developments in Catholic theology and praxis over the past sixty years, Vatican II's communion ecclesiology, and Pope Francis' synodal papacy have all provided an ecclesiological perspective that makes it possible to view dissent as a service to a pilgrim church rather than a threat to its survival. This perspective can move the Church beyond the present polarization by inviting all the faithful, both those who agree and those who disagree with Church teaching, to the table of dialogue. Without such synodality and dialogue, we assert, the polarization infecting the communion Church will not only persist but also increase, continuing to damage it.

2. Hierarchical and Communion Models of Church

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, one model of Church held unchallenged sway, a hierarchical model that purported to offer timeless theological norms for a timeless Church. The problem with this model in the twentieth century turned out to be that it was neither historically nor theologically timeless enough. It could not stand as the official theology of a Church that came to be recognized as thoroughly time conditioned. *Lumen Gentium*, the document on Church overwhelmingly accepted by the Second Vatican, reintroduced an apparently new model but, as explained by the Council, "an idea which was held in high honor in the ancient Church,"¹ namely, a communion model that emphasizes the communion of all Catholic believers in the People of God that embraces laity and clerics together and takes precedence over an isolated hierarchy. "The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One (John 2:20), cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith which characterizes the People as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when, from the Bishops down to the last member of the laity, it shares universal

¹Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 99.

agreement in matters of faith and morals.”² Lay people live in the world and engage in temporal affairs. “They are called there by God so that by exercising their proper function and being led by the Spirit of the gospel they can work for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of leaven.”³ *Lumen Gentium* is now the *Magna Carta* of any reflection on, teaching about, and behaviour of the post-conciliar Church.

The contemporary communion-Church is divided by acrimonious polarization. Pope Francis proposes synodality as the way to move it beyond this polarization. In a landmark speech at the 2015 synod, he quoted an ancient theological maxim: *Quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet* (“what affects everyone should be discussed and approved by all”). In a communion-Church, the servant-leaders are required to consult the People of God *before* making authoritative pronouncements that concern them. It should be a learning Church before it is a teaching Church. Pope Francis has modelled commitment to a synodal and dialogical way to this learning Church. Dialogue, he teaches, “is born from an attitude of respect for the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say...to dialogue, it is necessary to know how to lower the defences, open the doors of the house, and offer human warmth.”⁴ Church dialogue should embrace not only Bishops and their court theologians but also all the competent members of the People of God in communion, laity, clerics, and theologians who agree and disagree with church teaching on specific issues. Francis explains that we must not be afraid “of meeting and of true dialogue. It does not distance us from the truth, rather, through an exchange of gifts, it leads us, under the guidance of the Spirit of Truth, to the whole Truth (cf. John 16:13).”⁵ He adds that “the combination of two different ways of thinking can lead to a synthesis that enriches both. The unity that Christians seek is *not uniformity but a unity in diversity*.”⁶ With the shift in ecclesiological models from a hierarchical model to a communion model comes a corresponding shift in the understanding of dissent. To that we now turn.

²*Lumen Gentium*, n. 12.

³*Lumen Gentium*, n. 31.

⁴United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), “A Compilation of Quotes and Texts of Pope Francis on Dialogue, Encounter, and Interreligious and Ecumenical Relations,” accessed at: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/resources/upload/Quotes-of-Pope-Francis-on-dialogue-encounter-ecumenical-and-interreligious-affairs-12042013.pdf>.

⁵USCCB, “A Compilation of Quotes and Texts of Pope Francis...”

⁶*Amoris Laetitia*, n. 139, emphasis added.

3. Dissent Within the Two Ecclesiological Models

Ladislas Örsy defines dissent as “the refusal to accept some point of doctrine officially taught, but not infallibly defined.”⁷ He notes that it is an imperfect term and, we add, one more appropriate to a hierarchical ecclesiology than a synodal ecclesiology. It is a negative term, “indicating nothing positive,” and it has no recognizable boundaries. It can mean a disagreement with the process and logic of reaching a conclusion and it can mean a radical opposition to the conclusion. In the present polarized context, it can indicate a willingness to break the bond of unity based on entrenched internal antagonisms.⁸ Cardinal Mario Grech, the Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, reflects on dissent and the *communio hierarchica* in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council.

We must not hide the fact that perhaps in the past there has been so much insistence on the *communio hierarchica* that there arose the idea that unity in the Church could only be achieved by strengthening the authority of pastors. In some respects, that path was in some ways necessary when after the Council various forms of dissent had appeared. However, that cannot be the ordinary way of living ecclesial communion, which requires circularity, reciprocity, journeying together with respect to the various functions of the People of God. Therefore, communion becomes the participation of all in the life of the Church, each according to his or her specific condition and function. The synodal process demonstrates this very well.⁹

We make several comments about this statement. First, there has been dissent in the Church from its earliest years: from the moment Paul confronted Peter to his face because Peter was wrong when he stopped eating with Gentiles because they were not circumcised (Gal 2:11-13) to the widespread dissent from bishops, priests, theologians, and faithful following the promulgation of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae vitae* and its absolute prohibition of artificial contraception to regulate fertility in a marital relationship, and a myriad historical times in between. In a recent book, Massimo Faggioli notes that “the whole reception of Francis’s magisterium, especially on social issues, is the story of a more or less subtle rejection on the part of the Catholic establishment, with more subversive tones and methods

⁷Ladislas Örsy, *The Church: Learning and Teaching*, Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1987, 90.

⁸Örsy, *The Church*, 91.

⁹Andrea Torielli, “Cardinal Grech: Transformation of Synod to Create Space for People of God,” *Vatican News* (May 21, 2021). Access at: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-05/cardinal-grech-interview-synod-secretariat-changes.html>.

than the post-conciliar Catholic dissent of the 1960s and 1970s.”¹⁰ Leading these subversive tones and methods have been many bishops, both individually and collectively, along with priests, theologians, and lay faithful who have sided with them.

Second, Pope John Paul attempted to integrate hierarchical and communion models of Church, but his authoritarian and hierarchical approach to dissent inevitably makes his attempts ring hollow. His attempts are in stark contrast to Pope Francis’ synodal process and his pastoral approach focused on mercy, social justice, and synodality. Third, although, perhaps even because, John Paul attempted to reinstate papal authority through absolute obedience and the suppression of dialogue and dissent, polarizing dissent now plagues the current Church. In a speech a week before the November 2019 meeting of the USCCB, Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego presented a dire warning. “It is my reluctant conclusion that the Church in the United States is now adrift on many levels and that a fundamental moment of renewal is needed. A synodal pathway would be an opportunity to set that type of renewal in motion... The great danger is that our ecclesial life is becoming like our political life—polarized, distorted, and tribal. That is why a deep and broad process of synodal dialogue within the Catholic community in the United States [and throughout the world] could empower an alternative pathway forward.”¹¹ What, we ask, are the implications of a communion, synodal ecclesiology for understanding and navigating dissent and disagreements in the Church?

4. From Dissent to Disagreement and Synodal Dialogue: A Proposal

The International Theological Commission (ITC) suggests that the criterion according to which ‘unity prevails over conflict’ is of particular value in conducting a dialogue, managing different opinions and experiences and learning ‘a style of constructing history, a vital field where conflicts, tensions and opposites can reach a pluriform unity which generates new life,’ making it possible to ‘build communion amid disagreement.’

¹⁰Joe Biden and Catholicism in the United States.

¹¹Massimo Faggioli, “Adrift and Alone: The Bishops Meet, and Miss the Point,” *Commonweal*, November 25, 2019. Access at: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/adrift-alone>; Bishop Robert McElroy, “Bishop McElroy: US Church is Adrift, Synodality Can Renew It,” *National Catholic Reporter*, November 7, 2019. Access at: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/bishop-mcelroy-us-church-adrift-synodality-can-renew-it>.

Dialogue, it continues, “offers the opportunity to acquire new perspectives and points of view in order to shed light on the solution of the matter in question.”¹² To build the recommended “communion amid disagreement” in a polarized Church, all the members of the People of God, laity, clerics, bishops, approved and unapproved theologians, even the disaffected, should be invited to the table of dialogue. Without such synodal dialogue, we assert, the polarization infecting the Church can only persist and continue to divide and confuse the People of God. We propose several steps to alleviate and heal polarization in the Church, evident in the synodal process itself that honestly acknowledges dissent in the Church and use synodality to facilitate the “unity in diversity” sought by Pope Francis.

First, given the negative connotations of the term *dissent*, we suggest it be replaced by Pope Francis’ term *disagreement*. Disagreement can be addressed by “synodal dialogue” in which “unity prevails over conflict.” We must be careful, however, not to take the new wine of a revised term or phrase, “disagreement” rather than “dissent,” or “synodal dialogue” vis-à-vis “*communio hierarchica*,” and place it in an old wineskin. In other words, it is not enough to change a concept or a word and retain the same epistemological and theological baggage that plagued the old term. Though he did not abandon the term *dissent*, Pope John Paul II talked about “dialogue in charity” to reflect the dialogue promoted by a communion ecclesiology. His openness to dialogue, however, was more extended *externally* to non-Catholics, who offered no threat to doctrinal teaching, than *internally* to the Catholic *communio*, where there were theologically informed challenges to some doctrinal teachings, especially in the area of human sexuality. *Veritatis splendor* is an example of an old wineskin that contained hierarchical and authoritarian ecclesiology to set the parameters of dialogue in a communion Church. This is very different from Pope Francis’ synodal path.

Second, a synodal path demands authentic dialogue and an ecclesial infrastructure to promote and realize that dialogue. In his ongoing attempt to promote a synodal ecclesiology and provide the infrastructure to make that ecclesiology a reality, in October 2021, Pope Francis opened a three-year synodal journey that includes three phases: diocesan, continental, and universal synods. Cardinal Grech highlights the importance of this first phase: “In reality, without this consultation, there would be no synodal process, because the

¹²International Theological Commission (ITC), “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” March 2, 2018, 111. Access at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

discernment of pastors, which constitutes the second phase, emerges from listening to the people of God.” He continues, “every voice might be heard, the decision-making process in the Church always begins with listening... because only in this way can we understand how and where the Spirit wants to lead the Church.”¹³ The Church, as we already asserted, must first be a listening Church before it can be an authentic teaching Church. A synodal path attempts to make this a reality.

Third, while Pope Francis’ papacy has been defined in terms of synodality, another key feature of his pastoral approach is to revive the concept of the authority and inviolability of a well-formed conscience. He complains that we “find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations.” He goes on to insist that “we have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.”¹⁴ Already in the thirteenth century, theologian Thomas Aquinas established the authority and inviolability of conscience. Anyone, he argues, “upon whom the ecclesiastical authorities, in ignorance of the true facts, imposes a demand that offends against his clear conscience, should perish in excommunication rather than violate his conscience.”¹⁵ For any Catholic in search of the good and the true, no clearer statement on the authority and inviolability of personal conscience could be found. Perhaps, however, the Second Vatican Council did make it clearer by asserting the inviolability of conscience. *Dignitatis Humanae*, its Decree on Religious Freedom, declared that “In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience faithfully, in order that he may come to God for whom he was created. It follows that he is not to be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious” or, we add, ethical.¹⁶ In the 1960s, these were seldom heard words in Catholic magisterial circles, but they are words deeply rooted in the Catholic moral tradition and, indeed, constitutive of it.¹⁷

¹³Andrea Tornielli, “Cardinal Grech: Transformation of Synod to Create Space for People of God,” *Vatican News* (May 21, 2021). Access at: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-05/cardinal-grech-interview-synod-secretariat-changes.html>.

¹⁴*Amoris Laetitia*, n. 37.

¹⁵Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sent.*, dist. 38, q. 2, art. 4.

¹⁶*Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 3.

¹⁷For a fuller exposition of the importance of conscience, see Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *Introduction to Catholic Theological Ethics: Foundations and Applications*, Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 2019, 133-52.

Fourth, we must recognize that the well-formed consciences of all the People of God, laity, theologians, clerics, Pope, often function out of different horizons or perspectives.¹⁸ This is an epistemological consideration and raises concerns on the distinction between relativism and perspectivism. Throughout their pontificates, Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI and, to a lesser extent, Francis, have raised concerns over relativism, which denies the existence of an objective, universal truth and fundamentally threatens the humans search for truth. In his homily at the opening of the 2005 papal conclave, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger spoke of the “dictatorship of relativism” which “does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate standard consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.”¹⁹ Here, we are specifically concerned with moral relativism, which denies the existence of objective, universal, valid-for-all-circumstances moral truth. Such truth is necessary, the magisterium argues, as the foundation for absolute norms which assert that certain acts (contraceptive and homosexual acts, for example), are intrinsically evil and can never be morally justified regardless of motive, context, or circumstance. Concern about relativism is undoubtedly warranted in the twenty-first century, but the magisterium fails to discern the difference between *relativism*, which rejects all objective moral truth, and *perspectivism*, which acknowledges that there is objective moral truth, albeit it is only partially attained. It also fails to discern legitimate theological pluralism, which the International Theological Commission advances as an essential criterion of Catholic theology.²⁰

Bernard Lonergan’s perspectivism is an epistemological theory that explains the difference between dissent as a form of relativism and dissent arising from different perspectives leading to theological and moral pluralism. He addresses magisterial charges of relativism aimed at those who disagree with some of its absolute norms. Writing on the nature of historical knowledge, Lonergan notes the following: “Where relativism has lost hope about the attainment of truth, perspectivism stresses the complexity of what the historian is

¹⁸See Örsy, *The Church*, 103-104, n. 22.

¹⁹Joseph Ratzinger, “Cappella Papale Mass Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice: Homily of His Eminence Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger of the College of Cardinals,” Monday 18 April 2005. Access at: http://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html.

²⁰ITC, “Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria,” November 29, 2011. Access at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_teologia-oggi_en.html.

writing about and, as well, the specific difference of historical from mathematical, scientific and philosophic knowledge.”²¹ Relativism concludes to the falsity of a judgment; perspectivism concludes to its *partial* truth.

Lonergan offers three factors that give rise to perspectivism in human knowledge, including moral knowledge. First, human knowers are finite, the information available to them at any given time is as yet incomplete, and they cannot attend to or master all the data available to them. Second, the knowers are selective, given their different enculturations, personal experiences, and ranges of data offered to them. Third, knowers are individually different, and we can expect them to have different interpretations of the data available to them. The theologian-knower trained in the philosophy of Plato and Augustine for instance, will attend to different data, achieve different understanding, and make different judgments from the theologian-knower trained in the philosophy of Aristotle and Aquinas, for instance. Augustine and Aquinas produce different theologies, both of which are necessarily partial and incomplete explanations of a very complex theological reality. They are like two viewers at fourth-story and thirteenth-story windows of a multi-story building; each gets a different, partial, but correct view of what they see outside their particular window. If they were to ascend to a higher story, we would expect each to get a different, but still partial, view again.

We must always keep in mind that no single perspective comprehensively captures the full theological truth of the unfathomable mystery of God. Perspectivism, however, accounts for the plurality of partial truths. It is focus on different particular perspectives that leads to different and partially true definitions of that mystery. Örsy points out correctly, however, that different perspectives “can never be bridged by dialogue alone.... The passage from one [perspective] into another cannot be achieved by a new conceptual understanding; it is the surrender of the whole person to a new environment.”²² This surrender of the person to the Holy Spirit to be guided in the discernment of theological truth is what Pope Francis is proposing in the synodal path.

Fifth, discernment is an essential charism of the synodal process, which is essentially a “spiritual process.” “Authentic discernment is made possible where there is time for deep reflection and a spirit of

²¹Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, New York: Herder, 1972, 217.

²²Örsy, *The Church*, 104, n. 22.

mutual trust, common faith, and a shared purpose.”²³ Conscience, we have argued, is a practical judgment that this action rather than any other is the moral action to be done in this situation. That definition leaves a critical question: how is that practical judgment to be arrived at? Pope Francis provides a Catholic answer: the faithful “are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations.” Discernment “involves reflection and engages both the heart and head in making [conscience] decisions in our concrete lives to seek and find the will of God.”²⁴ It is the Christian way to reach a decision of conscience and is essential to the synodal process.

Christian discernment, we insist, is a thoroughly *theo-logical* activity. It “is based on the conviction that God is at work in the world and we are called to listen to what the Spirit suggests to us.”²⁵ When we say that discernment is a *theo-logical* activity, we are saying that it is both a gift and a skill to recognize the presence and activity of God in every situation and decision in our lives. When Catholics discern, they are seeking two things. They are seeking, first, the presence and action of God in their lives, especially what God is calling them to do in this particular situation. They are knights, in poet Rainer Maria Rilke’s contemplative words, riding forth to discover “God himself set thousandfold on every street.”²⁶ They are seeking, second, the action they must do in this situation to be aligned with God’s will and, therefore, to be moral. We say it is a gift because it is given to us by our creator God; we say it is a skill because the gift can be honed and developed by practice. The synodal process promotes discernment individually and collectively as a journeying together, guided by the Holy Spirit, to see how God calls us to walk forward together.

Sixth, prudential judgments should guide synodal dialogue. This involves a process of considering the teaching, discerning the correct hierarchy of values at stake on any specific issue, and prayerfully discerning the ones that will facilitate human dignity adequately considered. People may disagree on the conclusions of prudential judgments and such disagreements may require further dialogue.

²³Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality: Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches* (Rome: Vatican, September 7, 2021), 2.2 and 1.1. Access at: <file:///C:/Users/tas30732/Documents/Desktop%20Sept%202008/LEST%202021/Vademecum%20Synod%20Vatican.pdf>.

²⁴Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*, 2.2.

²⁵Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*, 2.3.

²⁶Rainer Maria Rilke, “Knight,” in *The Book of Images*, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1991, 9.

The possibility and reality of disagreements highlights the importance of pluriform responses in particular historical, cultural contexts. It recognizes that there may not be a one-size-fits-all resolution to disagreements in the Church. For instance, whereas blessing same-sex civil unions may reflect the *sensus fidelium* and be culturally and contextually desirable in Germany, doing so in Nigeria or other more conservative Catholic countries may not reflect the *sensus fidelium* and may not be culturally desirable.

Seventh, Pope Francis emphasizes the *sensus fidelium* as an essential dimension of synodality: “The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression.”²⁷ Drawing from Francis, the International Theological Commission emphasizes the need for synodality in the Church: “The emergence of a new climate in ... a more careful discernment of the advanced demands of modern consciousness concerning the participation of every citizen in running society call for a new and deeper experience and presentation of the mystery of the Church as intrinsically synodal.”²⁸ The *Vademecum* affirms this traditional stance. “All the baptised are the subject of the *sensus fidelium*.” Synodality, however, goes beyond listening to the faithful and must listen to, and discern, “the voices of other people in their local context, including people who have left the practice of faith, people of other faith traditions, people of no religious beliefs, etc.”²⁹ The notion of a communion Church, the *sensus fidelium*, and Catholic social teaching’s principle of subsidiarity all emphasize the inclusion of all the faithful and even extends to “all people of good will” in the process of dialogue in the Church.

Eighth, the principle of subsidiarity prescribes that “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its [proper] functions, but rather it should support it in case of need and help it to co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society [and the Church], always with a view to the common good.”³⁰ Although Catholic social teaching emphasizes subsidiarity as an essential principle to empower and include the voices of the voiceless in the process of discernment and seeking the common good, the Church

²⁷Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 119.

²⁸International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018, 38.

²⁹Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum*, 9.

³⁰*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1883.

has frequently violated or ignored this principle, especially within a hierarchical model of church. Such violations, at least in part, led to and enabled both the sexual abuse by priests and the episcopal cover-up of that abuse. Pope Francis' synodality integrates subsidiarity into the very ecclesial structures to empower and include all the faithful, those who agree and disagree with specific Church teachings, in the synodal path. The *Vademecum* fully embraces subsidiarity. "A synodal Church walks forward in communion to pursue a common mission through the participation of each and every one of her members."³¹

Finally, synodality requires an ecclesial structure for its promotion and realization. On the first day of Advent, 2019, the German Bishops' Conference inaugurated a two-year project, which they called the "Synodal Way,"³² with a meeting between members from the Bishops' Conference and Germany's largest lay organization, *Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken*. This project, both the inclusion and active involvement of lay voices in it and the infrastructure to support it, represents finally a move toward both the validation of the Second Vatican Council's communion model of Church and Pope Francis' synodal path. The synodal path facilitates greater dialogue between theologians, laity, and clerical members of the communion Church to promote active synodality. In his ministry, Pope Francis has himself modelled such a synodal path. Dialogue, he teaches, "assumes that there is room in the heart for the other person's point of view and proposal. To dialogue entails a cordial reception of the other, not a prior condemnation. In order to dialogue, it is necessary to know how to lower the defenses, open the doors of the house, and offer human warmth."³³ In a courageous move to embrace and make possible a synodal path, the German bishops are creating an ecclesiological infrastructure to explore lay and clerical perspectives that challenge Catholic teachings in general and sexual teaching on homosexuality in specific. "The unity we seek," Francis explains, "is not uniformity, but a 'unity in diversity' or 'reconciled diversity.'"³⁴ The failure of other episcopal conferences to follow the German lead of establishing a synodal path in their dioceses will not only ignore a fruitful way of healing the present polarization in the

³¹Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum*.

³²Zita Ballinger Fletcher, "Despite Disagreements, German Bishops Commit to 'Synodal Way,'" *National Catholic Reporter* (October 4, 2019). Access at: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/despite-disagreements-german-bishops-commit-synodal-way>.

³³USCCB, "A Compilation of Quotes."

³⁴*Amoris Laetitia*, 139.

communion Church but will also lead to the widening of that polarization as lay believers, theologians, and clerics become increasingly disillusioned and alienated.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, we have investigated two models of Church and the understanding of dissent or disagreement within those models. We have defined Pope Francis' synodal path and how the very concept of dissent must be revised within a new ecclesiological paradigm and, drawing from Catholic teaching, proposed principles to realize a synodal path that can deal with disagreements through discernment and dialogue to move the Church forward in its ongoing journey to know, understand, and live out the Gospel. Ultimately, the goals of dissent, disagreement, and synodality should be the same: to discover "God himself set thousandfold on every street" and what God is asking of us specifically on our cultural street. The discovery of that God, in many cases the rediscovery, can, and on occasion must, be open to an organic development of doctrine in a journeying, synodal Church.