

THE FINAL DOCUMENT OF THE SYNOD FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH *Inspirations, Reflections, and Evaluations*

Yesu Karunanidhi♦

Bengaluru

Imagine sitting down to a meal that looks and smells delicious, promising to fill you up. But with each bite, you must work hard to get to the food. You spend time carefully breaking open shells, dealing with sharp edges, and trying to reach tiny bits of meat. The taste is wonderful, but the bites are small and not very filling, so you must keep going through the same tricky process over and over. It takes patience and skill, and even though the food is good, you only get a little piece at a time.

What is this paragraph about? It's about 'crab eating.' Eating crab is a fitting metaphor for any endeavour that requires intense effort with only modest or incremental rewards. Here, crab eating symbolizes those tasks where the labour far exceeds the payoff, requiring a sustained commitment to the process, often more for the experience itself than for any immediate or substantial outcome.

The three-year-long global journey of synodality concluded on October 26, 2024, as Pope Francis endorsed the Final Document – a 52-page text comprising 155 paragraphs, each carefully voted on by the 355 participants of the Second Session of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod.

♦ **Yesu Karunanidhi**, a priest of the Archdiocese of Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India, currently serves as the Executive Secretary to the CCBI Commission for Bible, and the National Coordinator for the Synod for a Synodal Church. He has a doctorate in theology from Jnana-Deepa, Pune. He is a visiting faculty at Angelicum, Rome. Email: yesukarunanidhi.in

Two month-long sessions of the Universal Phase across two years, hundreds of pages of reports from continents, episcopal conferences, dioceses, religious institutes, ecclesial movements, groups, and individuals – all distilled into a 52-page document. This text has now been ‘adopted’ by the Supreme Pontiff with magisterial authority, taking the place of his traditional post-synodal apostolic exhortation.

Was Pope Francis saying, “Yes, this is exactly what I envisioned!” or was he simply saying, “Enough—no more time on this”? Synodality – everyone speaks of it, yet no one fully grasps it!

The Final Document might feel like a great success to those who participated in shaping and voting on it. But what does it mean ‘for the rest of us’? This article seeks to unpack inspirations from the Final Document and to make a faith reflection, weighing its strengths and limitations.

I. Inspirations

At the outset, we shall explore the core themes and takeaways from the Synod’s Final Document, revealing its vision for a synodal Church. This summary captures the key aspirations and challenges identified in the journey toward a more engaged and dynamic Church community.

1. *Synodality: Meaning and Dimensions.* For the first time in four years, the word ‘synodality’ has been defined: ‘Synodality is the walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God’s Kingdom, in union with all humanity. Synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary, so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ’ (n. 28). It further adds that synodality designates three aspects of the life of the Church: ‘synodality as a style,’ ‘synodality as a determined point of view,’ and ‘synodality as a program’ (cf. n. 30). Its assertion that ‘synodality is not an end in itself’ is a consolation, because all these four years we were treating it as an end.

2. *Baptismal Identity and Dignity.* The synodal call is based upon a shared baptismal identity (cf. n. 4). ‘There is nothing higher than this baptismal dignity, equally bestowed upon each person, through which we are invited to clothe ourselves with Christ and be grafted onto Him like branches of the one vine’ (n. 21). ‘In the Christian community, all the baptised are enriched with gifts to share, each according to his or her vocation. The various ecclesial vocations are many yet express the

one baptismal call to holiness and mission' (n. 57). The synodal journey calls us to rediscover our shared baptismal identity, rooted in the equal dignity given to all in Christ.

3. *From Spiritual Conversation to Synodal Conversion.* The title of Part I spells out the transition required from spiritual conversation (method) to synodal conversion (practise). The Parts II, III, and IV are respectively named as 'Conversion of relationships,' 'Conversion of processes,' and 'Conversion of bonds.' The transition from spiritual conversation to synodal conversion invites us to deepen our listening and dialogue, fostering authentic relationships within the Church. This journey challenges us to move beyond mere discussion, embracing a transformative process that aligns our hearts with the Spirit's call. In this conversion, we become active participants in the mission of Christ, united in purpose and vision. Conversion of heart, as the Spirit calls, isn't a one-time event. This insight invites each member of the Church to a lifetime of transformation, where humility and grace continually renew our relationships and mission.

4. *Synodal Missionary Discipleship.* Every baptised individual is called to be a missionary disciple (cf. n. 4). Missionary disciples are born with the breath of the Spirit (cf. n. 140). Becoming missionary disciples of the Lord is not, however, something achieved once and for all. It demands continuous conversion, growing in love "to the measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13) (n. 142). The action of missionary disciples can influence the construction of a more just and compassionate world (cf. n. 151). 'Missionary discipleship' (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 120), a Francis vocabulary, now carries a new dimension of synodality. This discipleship is rooted in mutual support and collaboration, fostering a spirit of inclusivity and shared responsibility.

5. *Synodal Spirituality.* The Holy Spirit, which is at the core of synodality, calls everyone to conversion (cf. n. 40). A spirituality of synodality calls for asceticism, humility, patience, and a readiness to forgive, embracing the diverse gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit for the service of the Lord. It fosters an attitude free from ambition and envy, reflecting Christ's self-emptying love. The fruits of this spirituality are seen in the Church's unity and harmony amid diversity. Authentic growth in this journey requires communal support, including formation and spiritual direction, highlighting our need for one another in faith. (cf. n. 43). Spirituality, here, could be understood as a 'disposition' or an 'attitude.'

6. *Prophetic Synodality.* ‘The synodal journey constitutes an authentic further act of reception of the Council, thus, deepening its inspiration and reinvigorating its prophetic force for today’s world’ (n. 5). ‘Practised with humility, the synodal style enables the Church to be a prophetic voice in today’s world. Authentic practices of synodality enable Christians to be a critical and prophetic voice over against the prevailing culture’ (n. 47). The occurrence of the word ‘prophet’ sixteen times in the document validates how ‘synodality’ offers a counter-cultural response to the world today. Prophetic synodality invites us to listen deeply to the Spirit’s voice and courageously speak truth in love, fostering a culture of discernment and accountability within the Church and in the world.

7. *Togetherness for Mission.* The Church walks together with all humanity, strongly committed to justice and peace, human dignity and the common good (cf. n. 20). The expressions ‘walking together’ (n. 21) ‘journeying together’ (n. 30), ‘called together’ (n. 30), ‘discern and decide together’ (n. 35), ‘live together’ (n. 40), ‘strive together’ (n. 41), ‘network together’ (n. 64). The section ‘Together for Mission’ (nn. 75-78) speaks about the ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ ministries open for the lay faithful in the Church; further, it proposes four areas (decision-making processes, ecclesiastical institutions including seminaries, positions of ecclesiastical responsibility, canonical processes) for ‘being and working together’ (n. 77). Togetherness for mission embodies our collective commitment to live out the Gospel, uniting our diverse gifts and voices as we journey together in faith to serve and transform the world. Togetherness is bolstered by ‘circularity of dialogue,’ a model where the Church’s conversations are ongoing, inclusive, and reciprocal (cf. n. 3). It invites all members – clergy and laity alike – into a rhythm of mutual listening, allowing the Holy Spirit’s guidance to emerge collectively. Unlike linear or hierarchical dialogue, it values each voice, building unity through diversity.

8. *Ecclesial Discernment and Unity.* The expression ‘ecclesial discernment’ is used thirteen times in the document, while ‘unity’ appears sixty-two times. Ecclesial discernment is identified as a practice intimately connected to decision-making processes and a culture of transparency, accountability, and evaluation (n. 11). ‘Ecclesial discernment is not an organisational technique but rather a spiritual practice grounded in a living faith. It calls for interior freedom, humility, prayer, mutual trust, an openness to the new and a surrender to the will of God. As this discernment entails the

contribution of everyone, ecclesial discernment is both the condition and a privileged expression of synodality, in which communion, mission and participation are lived' (cf. n. 82). The document proposes six steps involved in ecclesial discernment (cf. n. 83), whose aim is mission. As far as 'unity' is concerned, the document begins with an assertion that the Church as the people of God is a sacrament of unity. 'Unity among human persons' (nn. 31, 56), 'Trinitarian unity' (n. 34), 'unity in diversity' (n. 38), 'unity of the Church' (n. 39), 'unity of Christians' (n. 40), 'bishop as a visible principle of unity' (n. 69), 'unity in the faith' (n. 122), 'unity as the catholicity of the Church' (n. 125), 'Bishop of Rome as the guarantor of unity' (n. 131) - through these expressions the document underlines the imperative of unity.

9. *Inclusive Lay Participation, and Decentralization.* The document's acknowledgment of laypeople as equal co-partners in mission is profound. It recognizes the baptismal dignity shared by all and urges the Church to better integrate lay vocations into decision-making processes, enriching the Church's witness. The document acknowledges that there are 'inequalities such as between men and women, racial prejudices, caste divisions, discrimination against people with disabilities, violation of the rights of minorities of all kinds and the reluctance to accept migrants' (n. 54). The word 'inclusive' does not appear in the document; however, participation in terms of 'inclusion' is affirmed: 'There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church' (n. 60); 'increased participation of laymen and laywomen in Church discernment processes and all phases of decision-making processes' (n. 77); 'participatory bodies in the Church to be made mandatory' (n. 104); 'A missionary synodal Church would encourage more forms of lay ministries, that is, ministries that do not require the sacrament of Holy Orders' (n. 66); 'listening and accompaniment ministry' (n. 78). The text acknowledges the Petrine primacy - a 'particular role' (n. 109). It considers subsidiarity as well: 'one could initiate a theological and canonical study whose task would be to identify those matters that should be addressed to the Pope (*reservatio papalis*) and those that could be addressed to the bishops in their Churches or groupings of Churches' (n. 134). The 'particular councils' are seen as a tool for 'sound decentralization' (nn. 129, 134). Inclusive participation and decentralization empower the Church to reflect Christ's body more fully, valuing each person's voice and fostering shared responsibility in discerning and living out the mission of God's people.

10. *Transparency, Accountability, and Evaluation.* The section titled ‘Transparency, accountability, and evaluation’ treats with a foundation that in the Early Church Apostle Peter himself was called for accountability (n. 95). ‘Transparency and accountability should not only be invoked when it comes to sexual, financial and other forms of abuse. These practices also concern the lifestyle of pastors, pastoral planning, methods of evangelisation, and the way in which the Church respects human dignity, for example, regarding the working conditions within its institutions’ (n. 98). It is suggested that ‘progress made in terms of synodality and the participation of all the baptized in the life of the Church’ (n. 11), and the document suggests the procedures for ‘periodic evaluations of all the ministries and roles within the Church’ (n. 102). Transparency, accountability, and evaluation are essential to nurturing trust within the Church, ensuring that our actions align with Gospel values and fostering a community of integrity and mutual responsibility.

II. Reflections

This section provides a thoughtful look at the Synod’s Final Document, exploring its vision of a synodal Church from a personal and faith-filled perspective. These reflections consider the challenges and opportunities of synodality, encouraging a deeper understanding of the Church’s journey. They offer a simple yet meaningful way to connect with the document’s message.

1. *Every Going is a Returning.* The document’s opening statement, “Every new step in the life of the Church is a return to the source” (n. 1), emphasizes the need for continual renewal by revisiting three Catholic anchors: (a) the apostles’ Easter experience (cf. nn. 1, 12, 14, 49); (b) the early Christian community (nn. 81, 95, 152); and (c) the Second Vatican Council, which accounts for over sixty percent of the citations in the document. Synodality, it suggests, lies in continually drawing from these roots.

2. *A Call to Unity in Diversity.* The document envisions a synodal Church where each voice matters. This inclusivity reflects the Trinity’s unity, calling us to embrace one another despite our differences, in pursuit of a common mission. Differences, it emphasizes, are opportunities for growth: ‘Differences in every Christian community – age, vocation, gender, profession, and social belonging – provide opportunities for encountering otherness, indispensable for personal growth and maturity’ (n. 34).

3. *Ecumenical Spirit as Essential to Synodality.* Synodality intrinsically calls for ecumenism, evident in terms like ‘ecumenical journey’ (n. 8, Study Question 10; n. 40), ‘ecumenical path to synodality’ (n. 23), ‘ecumenical relations’ (n. 40), ‘ecumenical momentum’ (n. 56), ‘ecumenical dialogue’ (n. 122), and ‘ecumenical zeal’ (n. 137). This unity among Christian traditions is not just beneficial but essential, affirming that walking together toward unity is central to our faith and witness.

4. *Synodality Begins at Home.* Unlike past synods, this one begins and returns home, starting with each of us through ‘Christian initiation.’ This gradual, Spirit-led formation builds mature disciples (nn. 24-25), reinforcing that faith deepens through intentional, communal engagement and calls for ongoing catechesis.

5. *Synodality as Subalternity.* Listening to the marginalized is pivotal to the Church’s conversion, as authentic faith calls us to include and uplift those often overlooked. The document calls the Church to a ministry of healing and reconciliation for those on the periphery – the poor, migrants, women, children, and youth—and to recognize the apostolic capacity of persons with disabilities, suggesting the creation of a Church-based research centre on disability (n. 63).

6. *Integral Ecology and Synodality.* Synodality is linked to caring for creation, viewing both as relational and interdependent (nn. 48, 151). This connection urges us to integrate care for our common home as a vital expression of the Gospel.

7. *Synodality as a Spiritual Disposition.* Described as a deep, prayerful disposition rather than merely organizational, synodality invites the Church to a contemplative life rooted in the Spirit, especially through Baptism and Eucharist. The Eucharist, as the ultimate expression of unity in diversity, calls us to celebrate and cultivate diversity as a testament to our shared faith.

8. *Synodal Relationships with Other Religions.* Engaging with other religions through synodality exemplifies a commitment to peaceful coexistence, broadening our approach to evangelization as relational and respectful, fostering shared values and mutual support.

9. *Formation For and By Synodality.* Synodality requires not just technical but theological, biblical, and spiritual formation for all the baptized, emphasizing co-responsibility (n. 80). The Assembly calls on theological institutions to research and deepen understanding of synodality and provide formation within local Churches. It also

suggests that bishops be offered ongoing formation, contextualized within local communities (n. 71).

10. *Every Act as Ministry*. Recognizing both instituted and non-instituted ministries—lector, acolyte, catechist, as well as community leaders, prayer coordinators, and charitable organizers—the document celebrates their variety based on community needs. Rather than “ministries,” perhaps these roles could better be described as “skills” essential to the Church’s shared mission.

III. Evaluations

Having explored the document’s inspirations and offered a faith-centred reflection, let us now focus on its key proposals. We will examine any generalizations, simplifications, and contradictions present, and address the lingering ambiguities and underlying concerns.

1. Key Proposals from the Final Document

The Final Document presents a roadmap of actionable proposals, aiming to strengthen synodal engagement across all levels of the Church. Emphasizing transparency, inclusivity, and collaborative leadership, these proposals invite local churches, bishops, episcopal conferences, the Holy Father, and all the lay faithful to adopt practices that embody the Church’s mission. From increased lay participation to safeguarding vulnerable communities, each recommendation builds on the Church’s call to be a vibrant, listening community. Together, these proposals serve as practical steps toward realizing a more responsive, mission-focused Church.

i. *Finance Councils*. Local churches should ensure the establishment of effective finance councils to enhance financial transparency and accountability (cf. n. 102).

ii. *Inter-Religious Dialogue*. The synodal Church is called to actively foster dialogue with other religions, promoting respect, collaboration, and solidarity (cf. nn. 146, 151).

iii. *Formation for Lay Ministries*. Local churches are encouraged to offer formation pathways for lay ministries, especially for unique pastoral needs (n. 66).

iv. *Participation in Deliberative Decision-Making*. The document recommends expanding lay involvement, allowing men and women a voice in Church leadership and decisions (cf. nn. 92-93).

v. *Annual Financial Reports*. Churches are urged to publish audited annual financial reports to model transparency and responsible management practices (cf. n. 102).

vi. *Promoting Synodal Ecumenism*. Synodality should foster unity among Christian traditions, encouraging ecumenism as a vital expression of shared faith (cf. n. 40).

vii. *Ongoing Formation for Bishops*. Continuous formation programs for bishops are suggested to strengthen leadership and deepen synodal understanding within local contexts (cf. n. 71).

viii. *Theological Research on Synodality*. Theological institutions are encouraged to expand research on synodality, enriching its theological role in Church mission (cf. n. 67).

ix. *Strengthening Episcopal Conferences*. Episcopal Conferences are urged to increase their regional influence, especially in areas of cultural adaptation and shared pastoral concerns (cf. n. 125).

x. *Ministry of Listening and Accompaniment*. A dedicated ministry focused on listening and accompaniment is recommended to address today's pastoral needs with compassion. (cf. n. 78)

xi. *Support for Continental Assemblies*. Churches should support continental assemblies as forums for adapting the faith to regional cultural contexts. (cf. n. 119)

xii. *Expanded Lay Pastoral Roles*. The document proposes developing lay ministries in areas like catechesis, finance, and pastoral planning, without requiring ordination (cf. n. 77).

xiii. *Council for Eastern Catholic Leaders*. Establishing a Council of Patriarchs and Archbishops can foster collaboration between Eastern and Latin Catholic Churches (cf. n. 133).

xiv. *Ecological Responsibility*. Churches are encouraged to make ecological care a core mission, reflecting a commitment to integral ecology (cf. n. 151).

xv. *Evaluating Synodal Bodies*. Regular evaluations of parish councils and synods are recommended to ensure they embody and enact synodality (cf. nn. 108, 129, 135).

xvi. *Decentralizing Episcopal Authority*. The document suggests clarifying issues that can be handled locally by bishops, leaving key matters to the Pope, supporting subsidiarity. (cf. n. 171). Besides, the people of God will have a greater voice in choosing bishops (cf. n. 70).

xxvii. *Digital Mission.* Local Churches should encourage, sustain and accompany those who are engaged in mission in the digital environment (cf. n. 113).

xxviii. *Canonical and Theological Study.* Ongoing canonical and theological studies are encouraged to refine Episcopal Conference roles for localized adaptations within unity (cf. n. 134). Canonical norms are proposed for review with a synodal perspective to better address pastoral and cultural realities (cf. nn. 110, 125).

xix. *Canonical Processes for Lay Judges.* Including qualified laypeople as judges in canonical tribunals is proposed to broaden justice access and shared responsibility (cf. n. 77).

xx. *Guidelines for Implementing Synodality.* Local churches are advised to adopt synodal practices into daily pastoral actions and community formation (cf. n. 103).

xxi. *Evaluating Synodal Ministries.* Regular evaluations of synodal ministries and roles are suggested to strengthen accountability and cultivate a culture of service (cf. n. 102).

xxii. *Strengthening Family and Marital Support.* Create networks that support families in pastoral roles, allowing them to actively participate in evangelization and service within their communities (cf. nn. 64, 142).

xxiii. *Formation for Synodal Leadership.* Bishops and clergy are encouraged to pursue ongoing synodal formation, promoting shared leadership and responsibility in diocesan life (cf. nn. 67, 80, 83, 86).

xxiv. *Creating Safeguarding Standards.* Establish safeguarding protocols in every diocese to protect the vulnerable and uphold the Church's credibility (cf. n. 150).

xxv. *Study Group for Liturgical Celebrations.* It is proposed to have a specific Study Group to which would be entrusted reflection on how to make liturgical celebrations more an expression of synodality (cf. n. 27).

These proposals reflect the document's commitment to building a more participatory, transparent, and mission-oriented Church through the practical implementation of synodal values.

2. Generalizations, Simplifications, and Contradictions in the Document

The document's ambitious vision for a synodal Church is marked by several generalizations, simplifications, and contradictions. While it promotes inclusivity, transparency, and unity, certain assumptions and inconsistencies reveal challenges in fully aligning ideals with practical realities. These insights call for deeper nuance to ensure the vision of synodality is both achievable and adaptive across diverse contexts.

i. *Generalization on Synodality and Consensus.* The document presents synodality as a path to consensus, implying that greater participation always leads to unity. This generalization overlooks contexts where diverse views may not align, even with extensive dialogue.

ii. *Simplification of Ecumenical Relationships.* The document promotes a unified approach to ecumenism, suggesting seamless collaboration across traditions. However, it simplifies the complexity of theological and cultural differences that may challenge this unity.

iii. *Contradiction in Lay Participation.* There is a push for increased lay participation in decision-making, but the document simultaneously reinforces the traditional hierarchy, limiting the full impact of lay contributions.

iv. *Generalization about the Digital Mission.* The document assumes digital platforms will naturally lead to more vibrant, engaged communities, which overlooks digital challenges like polarization and misinformation that can complicate online ministry.

v. *Simplification of Transparency and Accountability.* The document endorses transparency as a remedy for trust issues, yet it simplifies the difficulty of implementing transparency consistently, especially in sensitive matters requiring confidentiality.

vi. *Contradiction in Authority and Consultation.* While promoting a synodal decision-making process, the document asserts the final authority of bishops, creating a contradiction between consultation and hierarchical authority.

vii. *Generalization of the Church's Openness to Cultural Diversity.* There is an assumption that all local churches readily adapt to cultural diversity, overlooking areas where integration may encounter resistance due to entrenched practices or beliefs.

viii. *Simplification in Addressing Marginalized Communities.* The document generalizes that the Church's outreach to marginalized communities will readily bridge trust gaps, without addressing the deeper systemic challenges these communities may face.

ix. *Contradiction in Formation of Synodal Culture.* The document encourages the formation of a synodal culture yet presents synodality primarily in terms of structure, potentially limiting its internalization as a genuinely lived experience.

x. *Generalization on Synodality as the Ideal Church Model.* It assumes that synodality is universally ideal for all Church structures, neglecting contexts where alternative or hybrid models might better suit local needs.

xi. *Simplification of Ownership of Synodality.* The document presumes that everyone owns synodality; and in its presumption it romanticizes 'synodality' as an ideal to be followed. If one sits and asks, no one really owns synodality. Everyone thinks 'synodality' is for the other.

xii. *Contradiction in Emphasizing Parish as a Synodal Hub.* While the document promotes the parish as a central place for synodal community, it simultaneously acknowledges that many parishes face structural and attendance challenges, which can undermine their capacity to function as vibrant synodal centres.

3. Deterred Ambiguities and Disturbing Anxieties

i. *Magisterial yet non-normative!* For the first time, Pope Francis has chosen to designate the final document from the Synod on Synodality as authoritative Church teaching. Under the reforms he introduced in 2018, this document is now part of his ordinary magisterium. However, he has described the document as non-normative. This raises important questions: Who is ultimately responsible for the content? Is the document 'a guiding principle'? Is it to be 'implemented' or 'interpreted locally'? Who should be cited when referencing it—Pope Francis himself, the Drafting Committee, the Synod participants, or those who voted in favour?

ii. *Women's Diaconal ministry – an open possibility, yet a closed discussion!* The Final Document notes that women 'continue to encounter obstacles' (n. 60) in realizing their 'charisms, vocations, and ministries' (n. 21) within the Church. On the issue of women's access to diaconal ministry, it states that the question 'remains open' and 'discernment needs to continue' (cf. n. 60). Does this imply that access

is open, but discussion closed? The Church's reluctance to provide a clear 'yes' or 'no' on certain issues raises questions, especially when it swiftly affirms canonical actions against those who express views differing from the Holy Father's. It is essential to recall that *sentire cum ecclesia* ("to feel with the Church") is not synonymous with *sentire cum papa* ("to feel with the Pope").

iii. *Communion–Participation–Mission or Primacy–Collegiality–Synodality?* Initially, the synod's tagline was set as 'Communion–Participation–Mission,' but this was reordered to 'Communion–Mission–Participation' for the First Session of the XVI General Assembly in October 2023. Now, however, the original sequence is restored now, and a new phrase - 'Primacy–Collegiality–Synodality' - has been introduced indirectly in three places (cf. nn. 130, 136, 142). This new framework suggests what is reserved to 'one,' extended to 'some,' and opened to 'all.' It remains unclear how each aspect is intended to function: what exactly pertains to primacy, where collegiality applies, and when openness to all (synodality) should be practiced. The boundaries between these roles are left undefined.

iv. *Not political correctness, but Pontifical correctness.* The Final Document avoids the term 'LGBTQAIK+,' opting instead for the phrasing 'marital situation, identity or sexuality' (n. 50) when addressing the call to avoid exclusion. Was this choice made to ensure 'Pontifical correctness'—that is, to avoid offending the Holy Father? The document frequently references the Supreme Pontiff, using terms like 'Pope' (15 times), 'Francis' (18 times), 'Bishop of Rome' (14 times), 'Petrine' (4 times), 'Successor of Peter,' and 'See of Peter.' In contrast, Pope Benedict XVI is referenced only once, and indirectly, while Pope Francis' writings are cited liberally, even when not directly relevant, as in citing *Dilexit Nos* 17 n. 51 ('heart' does not fit in here!) and *Desiderio Desideravi* 41 in n. 142 (where the focus is on 'synodal formation,' though *Desiderio Desideravi* primarily concerns 'liturgical formation'). It appears the synod participants are subtly expressing gratitude for their selection by ensuring the document reflects what would 'please' Pope Francis (cf. nn. 49, 131, 134).

v. *Comprehensive yet compartmentalized.* While the Final Document provides a thorough exploration of synodality, its structure feels compartmentalized. The chapters are unevenly developed, with varying lengths and proportions (Introduction [nn. 1–12]; Part I [nn. 13–78]; Part II [nn. 79–108]; Part III [nn. 109–139]; Part IV [nn. 140–151]; Conclusion [nn. 152–155]). Citations are also incomplete and

inconsistent; for example, n. 137 uses the abbreviation 'UUS' before fully introducing 'Ut Unum Sint.' Additionally, references to Mary appear twice, as a way of closing the document – once in n. 29 and again in the concluding n. 155. In n. 29, Mary is described as embodying 'the features of a synodal, missionary, and merciful Church shining in full light'. However, references to Mary's 'mercy' are not biblically substantiated. Actions such as her visit to Elizabeth or her words at Cana cannot strictly be interpreted as 'acts of mercy.' Furthermore, in n. 155, the Greek title for Mary should correctly read 'Hodegetria' ("the wayshower") rather than 'Odigitria,' which refers to an ancient Minoan religious site. These inconsistencies suggest that different groups may have worked on separate sections, and the time constraints limited a cohesive final review.

vi. *Corrective, but not sufficiently creative.* The Final Document sheds a lot of light on the areas that need our attention, such as 'inclusion,' 'participation,' 'co-responsibility,' and 'decentralization.' Earlier documents carried different images: cf. 'tent' in *Document for Continental Stage*; 'banquet' in *Instrumentum Laboris – II*. The images that are used in the present document – 'heart,' 'boat,' 'net,' 'catch,' 'send' – are taken from *Dilexit Nos*, and from the Third and the Fourth Meditations of the Fr. Timothy Radcliffe OP, Cardinal-Designate (during the Synod) Dominican priest at the Synod, and they don't build on the previous images. Though the 'banquet' image is brought again in n. 152, 'mountain' and 'seashore,' 'banquet' and 'breakfast' don't match!

vii. *Conclusive, but not all-encompassing.* Previous synods were typically 'local' in scope – focusing on specific groups or issues such as the family or young people – and consultations were often limited. However, the present synod on synodality adopts a more 'global' perspective, extending reflection across both geographical and thematic boundaries. The theme of synodality now touches every facet and member of the Church. Yet, while no document can address every issue, this document one seems to lack continuity with previous synodal documents. Critical concerns specific to India and other regions – such as religious fundamentalism, far-right politics, religious conflict, interfaith dialogue, economic inequality, human rights abuses, mental health crises, caste discrimination, and moral and ethical challenges – remain unaddressed. Although the synod's focus is 'missionary' in spirit, the approach leans more toward 'navel-gazing' or even 'solipsism.' The document appears preoccupied with

‘internal’ matters (our Catholic Church) rather than ‘external’ concerns (the broader world, the mission’s real context). Statements like ‘the name Christian gives us honour’ (cf. n. 21) risk sounding exclusionary, sectarian, triumphalist, or even militant. Further, while promoting ‘episcopal decentralization,’ the document also reflects concerns about procedural authority, such as who should consecrate bishops (cf. n. 70).

viii. *Ecclesial disconnect.* The Final Document references the upcoming Ordinary Jubilee of 2025 in the context of ecumenical relationships (cf. n. 139). The Jubilee theme, “Pilgrims of Hope,” could have been more closely integrated with the synodal theme of “journeying together,” enhancing the ecclesial connection. Jubilee 2025 preparations and celebrations are being coordinated by the Dicastery for Evangelization, with the Holy Father himself as Prefect. When Pope Francis introduced these preparations, he designated 2023 as a *Year of the Council*, encouraging study of the four Constitutions of the Second Vatican Council. The Final Document reflects this focus by quoting eight conciliar documents, underscoring a thematic harmony between the Synod and Jubilee through this Year of Learning. In India, the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI) envisions Jubilee 2025 as a continuation of the Synod for a Synodal Church, integrating it into our Pastoral Plan 2033 under the theme, “Journeying Together as Pilgrims of Hope towards Mission 2033.” By connecting these major events, we reduce the sense of programmatic overload, fostering a unified journey of faith.

ix. *Latin Church vs. Eastern Churches.* In the Eastern Churches, ‘synod’ functions as an institution, while in the Latin Church, ‘synodality’ has evolved as a concept. Ironically, the ‘synod’ of the Eastern Churches is not always practiced in a fully synodal manner. Since the Diocesan Phase, the documents have tended to glamorize the ‘synod’ of the Eastern Churches as an ideal model for synodality. However, in India, the relationship between the Latin Church and the Eastern Churches remains sensitive and complex. Alongside perceived ‘ritual’ dominance, there exists a ‘linguistic-cultural’ hegemony. Furthermore, the Eastern Churches at times present themselves almost as ‘reformed’ or ‘Protestant’ in relation to the Latin Church. The Final Document suggests that ‘instruments and norms need to be developed to strengthen collaboration between the Latin Church and the Eastern Catholic Churches to address this situation’ (n. 133). Yet the question remains: who will take on this task of development? The Latin Church, the Eastern Churches, or both together—or will it fall to an external authority?

x. *Circularity that begs the question!* The principle of circularity between the Universal Church and the Local Churches brings forth a dynamic yet potentially infinite loop, where each feeds into the other without clear resolution. In our synodal journey, this circularity can appear as a productive exchange, but it also raises the question: will this iterative process ever reach a definitive endpoint? Each local insight informs the universal perspective, and in turn, universal principles are meant to guide local action. Yet, if we perpetually mirror back on one another, does this not create a self-referential system where the objective becomes the exercise itself? The synod calls for communion, participation, and mission, but are we at risk of circling indefinitely without concrete conclusions? The very process of ‘journeying together’ is open-ended, and while this is a strength, it also begs the question of where, if anywhere, it truly leads. Does the exercise conclude when we achieve consensus, or is consensus merely the next cycle’s starting point? In this circular framework, our journey may seem boundless, but we must wonder if we are also bound – caught in a never-ending loop of reflection without destination.

Final Thoughts

When Pope Francis initiated the groundbreaking exercise of ‘synodality,’ he emphasized three points: (a) this synod is not a mere event but an experience; (b) it prioritizes the process over the product; and (c) it begins at home and will ultimately return there. His goals were equally clear: (a) to foster the Church’s growth and the faithful’s happiness; (b) to make the Church more relevant and dynamic, especially in a post-pandemic world where local churches need to rediscover their vitality; and (c) to honour the Church’s tradition while embracing changes. Pope Francis has made significant strides toward these goals.

The Final Document has been widely appreciated for one key reason: it openly records the vote count for each section, exemplifying true transparency.

Yet, in the end, is ‘synodality’ still elusive? As soon as we begin to grasp it, it slips away. When we honestly ask, ‘Who are we as Christians?’ we realize we’re far from the unity Christ envisioned. We are baptized – yes! – yet divided by nations, races, societies, rites, languages, dioceses, congregations, castes, communities, and countless affiliations. Many factors divide us, while baptism alone unites us. We must admit blood often feels thicker than water.

Let me return to my initial metaphor of ‘crab eating’: a great deal of effort for limited results. After four years of labour, we are left with a 52-page document. The effort was immense, the outcome small. Yet, as with the rarity of crabs, this rare exercise in synodality makes us cherish it even more.

Frances Burnett, in *The Secret Garden*, reflects on change: “At first, people refuse to believe that a strange new thing can be done. Then they hope it can be done, then they see it can be done – then it is done, and all the world wonders why it was not done centuries ago.” When the synod began in October 2021, people doubted that ‘synodality’ could even happen; by the end of the first phase, they began to hope it could; at the continental phase, they saw it could; and now, at the universal phase, it has been achieved. And so, the world wonders why it was not done centuries ago! Let this ‘strange new thing’ begin with me.

The Synod’s Final Document is both an end and a beginning. In arriving, we are also departing, ‘journeying together as pilgrims of hope.’