

DEVELOPING SYNODALITY AT THE DIOCESAN AND PARISH LEVELS

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Abstract

Synodality characterizes the way of being and proceeding as Church. However, the lived experiences of many local churches around the world are sometimes far from this ideal. It is thus crucial that intentional efforts are made to develop synodality especially at the diocesan and parish levels where the majority of the baptized live out their faith. This article offers a framework for cultivating synodality in a comprehensive, holistic, and sustained way in local churches. It highlights key areas for implementation including reshaping formation for clergy, religious, and laity, facilitating associations among the faithful, promoting co-responsibility in ministry and leadership, building bridges to marginalized groups and to the wider society, ensuring consultation and communal discernment, and renewing liturgies. The article points out crucial shifts that are required in attitudes and ecclesial cultures, and offers practical suggestions for taking concrete steps forward.

Keywords: Community Building; Consultation; Formation in Synodality; Leadership Development; Liturgical Renewal; Marginalized Groups, Synodal Diocese; Synodal Parish; Synodal Pedagogy

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Theology of the Local Church and Synodality

Dioceses and parishes are the loci where the majority of the People of God manifest and experience the presence or absence of synodality in concrete ways. Indeed, whenever the topic of synodality is presented at seminars and other fora, a question invariably arises about how synodality translates into actual practice at the grassroots level. Some pastors also express reservations about the applicability, relevance, and fruitfulness of a synodal approach in their local church, mindful of the peculiarities of their local cultures and contexts, or the potential risks of compromising the integrity of religious doctrine.

As a preamble, it is worth recalling the Second Vatican Council's teaching that "(the) Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament. For in their locality these are the new People called by God, in the Holy Spirit and in much fullness" (*Lumen Gentium* 26). Thus each local church bears fully the essential nature of the Church as the People of God, a community of the baptized and bearer of the *sensus fidei fidelium*. The Council speaks of "particular churches" for which bishops are the "visible principle and foundation of unity" (LG 23), as well as "individual local congregations" (LG 28) entrusted by the authority of the bishop to priests who consequently "make the universal Church visible in their own locality" (LG 28). Consequently, the synodal character of the Church applies fully to dioceses and parishes without exception. The International Theological Commission (ITC) even states that "the first level on which synodality is exercised is the local Church," adding that "the historical, linguistic and cultural links that mould interpersonal communication in the local Church and describe its particular features facilitate the adoption of a synodal style in its daily life and are the basis for effective missionary conversion."¹ It is precisely within the unique reality of each local context that synodality is to be expressed, and every local church is called to on-going transformation so as to become a more shining sign of synodality. This is true no matter how wide the perceived gap is between the current local realities and the ideals of synodality, and how challenging it would be to bridge this gap.

This paper offers a basic framework for dioceses and parishes, along with some practical suggestions. It will also point out theological,

¹International Theological Commission (ITC), *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (Vatican City, Vatican Press: 2018), para. 77.

canonical, and pastoral issues that need further development in order for synodality to become a lived reality.

A Framework for Developing Synodality in Dioceses and Parishes

Re-forming Formation

Formation for laity and clergy at all stages of their faith life and vocation is integral to the manifestation of synodality. A major feedback arising from the consultation phase of the Synod 2021–2024 on the theme of synodality is that many Catholics lack not only adequate catechesis about their baptismal calling and co-responsibility but also concrete experiences in their local churches which are resonant with the ecclesiology and missiology of Vatican II.² Hence, at the diocesan level, those responsible for basic catechetical and on-going formation could examine the existing curricula for children, youth, and adults. A major overhaul might be needed especially if the existing curriculum tends to reinforce a notion of religion that over-emphasizes individual piety, dogmatism, clericalism, and disengagement from the world. In contrast, formation in synodality should foster authentic relationship with God, openness to others, orientation towards community, intercultural relationality, a heart for inclusion especially of those on the peripheries, an audacious missionary spirit, and the capacity for discernment and dialogue.

Besides learning the teachings of the church, it is also important to learn *how* to learn. This includes learning how to approach and regard the various sources and genres of religious teaching, how to interpret them, how to reflect on experiences and the signs of the times, how to listen and dialogue amidst diversity, how to exercise the *sensus fidei* and to make a discerned evaluation of issues at hand. Providing such formation implies a paradigm shift from merely imparting catechetical content to cultivating the attitudes and skills for a “pilgrim hermeneutic.”³ This is a way of proceeding that involves epistemic humility, sensitivity to context and history, mindfulness of development, and patient discernment. Thus the capacity of the People of God would be strengthened for the *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* needed to carry on the journey of “traditioning” – in the continuous tense of the word – which lies at the heart of synodality. In this way,

²See Secretaria Generalis Synodi, *Working Document for the Continental Stage*, Vatican City, October 24, 2022 (hereafter DCS), especially para. 82–84.

³Pope Francis, *To the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome*, September 18, 2021.

the Church can avoid the two extremes of “capitulation to the *zeitgeist*”⁴ or becoming a community that is “stagnant and putrefies.”⁵

Theologians could assist this endeavour by exploring the implications of a pilgrim hermeneutic and how this might re-shape faith formation and theological methodology. Those in the ministry of formation and catechesis could consider how formation processes and experiences might be re-designed. In particular, the pedagogy itself has to be synodal because quite often, the best way of learning synodality is by “doing” synodality. In the consultation for the Synod 2021–2024, a common feedback was that people’s direct participation in the process had enabled them to learn what synodality was all about.⁶ A synodal pedagogy would involve, among other things, mutual inquiry and learning between teachers and students in accord with Pope Francis’s remark that “a synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn.”⁷

Learning also has to be life-long and progressive. This might require dioceses and parishes to coordinate their efforts more closely. For the majority of the lay faithful, formation in synodality might be best done at the grassroots level of the parish. There can be formal catechetical programs as well as flexible modalities suited for people with varied levels of literacy skills or limited ability to attend regular programs due to remoteness and livelihoods. Training can also be done for teams of facilitators in base ecclesial communities, lay associations, youth groups, and family ministries so that they can in turn facilitate formation at these informal settings. Concretely, this calls for a greater sharing of responsibility between clergy, religious, and laity, and especially for more lay people to step up as formators. In this regard, some dioceses have taken steps to pool resources in jointly training their lay formators, thus ensuring a constant pipeline of qualified personnel.

On the formation of clergy, there has been increasing spotlight on the areas for improvement especially with regard to synodality. Although dioceses and parishes have limited direct influence on

⁴Michael Warsaw, “Resisting the *Zeitgeist*,” *National Catholic Register*, March 19, 2022, accessed February 12, 2023, <https://www.ncregister.com/commentaries/resisting-the-zeitgeist>.

⁵Pope Francis, *To the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome*, September 18, 2021.

⁶See DCS, especially para. 16-17, 23-24.

⁷Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness on the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution Of The Synod Of Bishops*, October 15, 2015.

seminary programs, they could ensure that pastoral internships would immerse seminarians in diverse contexts especially among peripheral groups, and be accompanied or mentored by a variety of persons including lay women. Just as important, dioceses could put in place systems to ensure on-going formation for priests and other ecclesial leaders. A key topic is the synodal exercise of leadership, power, and authority. In this regard, some creative and effective initiatives have emerged in recent years, such as reflective workshops and retreat-based learning. At the universal level, there needs to be more synodal ways of formulating guidelines for seminary formation such that the voices of local churches and especially the laity are heard.

Building Platforms for Association

Another major area for action is to create and sustain more platforms for sharing ecclesial life and mission. Individually, every baptized person participates in the mission of Christ through his or her roles in society whether as parent, neighbour, worker, employer, student, or citizen. Collectively, synodality implies that the community of the baptized come together regularly to share their faith and vocational journey, to support and encourage one another, and to be accountable to each other. This is so that the intrinsic communal character of mission as well as the spiritual bond that binds the Christian community would not remain as abstract concepts. Rather, they are incarnated empirically and meaningfully through various ways of gathering and interacting.

Many Christians exercise their missionary vocation in isolated and challenging conditions, such as in the case of a Christian at a workplace of largely non-believers, or a single parent struggling alone to provide for the family. Among the various ways of journeying together, the Eucharist is the most august sacrament of communion. Since Vatican II, a complementary plethora of grassroots associations have taken shape in many local churches especially at the parish level. These include base ecclesial communities (BECs), village associations, family life groups, children and youth associations, prayer societies, and bible study groups. At the same time, a wide variety of associations also operate at the diocesan level, such as agricultural and occupational guilds, special interest groups, associations for the differently-abled, migrant networks, single-parent groups, and societies formed around specific spiritual traditions. Diocesan and parish leaders can promote the flourishing of these associations by encouraging, guiding, and resourcing, rather than stifling them through excessive control. Youth

movements, in particular, need support and accompaniment so that young people can navigate the complexities of these challenging times.

Besides cultivating associations and formal groups, more can be done to facilitate the spontaneous sharing of daily life among people. Contemporary society reinforces individualism, insularity, socio-cultural silos and their attendant polarizations. To counter this, dioceses and parishes could create spaces of encounter between diverse persons and groups. These might include integrating more social, recreational, and community-building opportunities into ecclesial life and reaching out to the surrounding neighbourhood. For instance, a communal refectory, a children's playgroup, or a gardening network could be established that is open to all. Such spaces of spontaneous fellowship are often where the untold stories of individual lives are shared and the fabric of inter-personal relationships are weaved. In fact, it has become a common saying that "synodality starts with coffee."⁸ In this vein, *Christifideles Laici* highlights that

there always remains in the human heart the desire to experience and cultivate caring and personal relationships. The response to such a desire can come from the parish, when ... it adheres to its fundamental vocation and mission ... to be a house of welcome to all and a place of service to all, ... the 'village fountain' to which all would have recourse in their thirst (*Christifideles Laici* 27).

For some parishes, a paradigm shift might be needed to become less like a tightly-secured fortress and more like a porous, welcoming, and life-giving "village fountain."

Facilitating Co-responsibility in Ecclesial Institutions and Leadership

The Church's task of evangelization is carried out through ecclesial institutions as much as it is realized through the personal vocations of Christians in the world. Catholic education, healthcare, socio-ecological ministries, peace and justice work, religious communication, and other means of proclaiming the Gospel are often carried out through organized corporate effort. This is not only because institutions are efficacious means for sustained service provision but more importantly, they are concrete signs of the communal character of Christian mission. Through institutions, the

⁸Barb Arland-Fye, "Coffee, Conversation, Catholic Communion," *Catholic News Service*, February 9, 2022, quoting Sr Nathalie Becquart, Under-Secretary, General Secretariat of the Synod.

faithful collaborate with each other as well as with non-Christians to further God's reign of love and to promote the common good. Dioceses could cultivate more vibrant institutions for mission and ensure the relevance and dynamism of their programs. Moreover, to enlist the contributions of people beyond those already engaged and over-stretched, there needs to be some creativity and flexibility in adapting to people's availability, interests, and talents. Identifying and calling forth the charisms of new contributors entail a willingness on the part of pastoral leaders for the creation of ministries that might be unconventional but refreshing.

Just as important, ecclesial institutions must be role models of synodality by giving witness through their own spirit of co-operation, mutual understanding, fraternal love, and missionary fervour. This is especially significant because their members face the same challenges as those working in secular organizations, such as internal divisions, jealousies, prejudices, favouritism, complacency, and over-attachment to past practices. In some dioceses and parishes, there is also a need for the clergy, religious, and laity to work together better. Likewise, the relationship between bishops and priests requires on-going synodal conversion on the part of both parties.

A key issue that warrants closer attention is that of leadership development. All too often, bishops and parish priests take upon themselves much of the burden of leading. Although official church regulations hold them responsible for the care of a diocese or parish, the same regulations frequently encourage that this responsibility be exercised in a synodal and collegial way. At the diocesan level, for instance, there are provisions for a variety of people to assist bishops in their leadership role whether at the diocesan curia or consult, in the pastoral council, at diocesan commissions, regional vicariates, and key institutions.⁹ Similarly, parish priests are encouraged to work with parish councils and teams, as well as foster the leadership contributions of heads of ministries, neighbourhood associations, and various parish groups. Widening the tent of leadership not only enables pastors to avoid burn-out but more importantly fosters the maturation of the community and honours the co-responsibility of all the faithful. In particular, it creates more room for women, young people, and minority groups to take on leadership roles.

⁹ See The Code of Canon Law, c. 460-573, accessed February 16, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/cic_index_en.html; and ITC, *Synodality*, 78-82.

At the level of intermediate bodies such as grassroots associations and ministries, leadership development and the principle of subsidiarity can be promoted by providing formation and accompaniment while progressively allowing more autonomy. It is helpful to bear in mind that no one is ever fully equipped to lead. Leadership is something learnt gradually on-the-job whenever a person is encouraged to step up to the role and given guidance amidst concrete experiences of successes and failures. At the same time, there is a need to strike a balance between bottom-up, contextualized initiatives and centralized, universal norms. Platforms for regular dialogue between the centre and peripheries could help local churches negotiate this balance.

Bridge-building

Synodality calls for dioceses and parishes to take pro-active steps in reaching out to people on the margins in a consistent manner rather than sporadically, and to be inclusive and welcoming. Peripheral groups might include homeless persons, the destitute poor, undocumented migrants, those who live in remote areas, or those who are often excluded or have withdrawn from the church community for various reasons. A paradigm shift from being self-referential to becoming more outward-looking could foster greater sensitivity about new groups of the excluded and the most effective means of outreach. In some dioceses, the so-called peripheries actually comprise the vast majority of former church-goers who have left the faith community and are either antagonistic towards the Church or simply disinterested in religion altogether. Bridge-building could mean starting from the outside with them, listening to and understanding their experiences, finding out what engages them or what they seek, and discovering new pathways for connecting on mutually relevant concerns. Young people, for instance, are increasingly passionate about climate issues and could be re-engaged on some local ecological project. A more challenging endeavour, however, is to re-engage those who have been hurt by the Church, including those affected by the clergy sex-abuse crisis. In this regard, some dioceses have made positive strides towards reconciliation and healing.

To accompany specific groups such as migrants, youth-at-risk, families facing socio-economic hardships, the divorced and re-married, LGBTQI+ communities, and those who are differently-abled, specialized ministries could be formed at the diocesan or parish levels. Adjustments often have to be made in the parish setting so that they can feel more at home. As highlighted by the Congregation for the Clergy,

“a sanctuary open to all, the Parish, called to reach out to everyone, without exception, should remember that the poor and excluded must always have a privileged place in the heart of the Church.”¹⁰ Sometimes institutional routines have to be put aside in order that new needs can be attended to and new relationships forged. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for certain groups to be neglected because they do not fall within existing structures or ministries in the diocese or parish. What is even more challenging is a synodal conversion of existing community members in terms of putting aside their prejudices and enlarging the tent of their hearts.

Ecumenism is an equally important area that needs attention. The consultation for the Synod 2021–2024 reveals that ecumenical dialogue in its various forms have been mostly lacking in depth and wide participation.¹¹ Dioceses can do more in this regard by partnering with other Christian communities so as to jointly evaluate the progress made and discern more effective courses of action. At the same time, bridge-building pertains not only to cultivating unity within the Christian community but also reconciliation and dialogue in the wider society. A synodal church is one that endeavours to foster closer relations among various groups in society and sow peace amidst division. After all, synodality in the Church is a sign of the fraternal communion that all humankind is called to live. Thus dioceses and parishes can play a prophetic role by reaching out to groups in conflict, engaging in dialogue, and using their media channels to promote peace and mutual understanding. Just as important, synodality calls for local churches to build bridges with one another. Inter-parish and inter-diocese collaboration, relationships, and sharing of resources could be strengthened and episcopal conferences could walk more closely with one another. All these interactions should extend beyond existing platforms which tend to involve only the local ordinary or the clergy. Rather, it is the whole faith community that needs to cast its gaze beyond parochial concerns and be more engaged with the Church’s life and mission at the regional or international level.

Consultation and Communal Discernment

A major implication of synodality is that all the People of God have a right and a responsibility to engage in discernment regarding

¹⁰Congregation for the Clergy, *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church*, Vatican City, Vatican Press, July 20, 2020, para. 32.

¹¹See DCS 47–49.

ecclesial life and mission. Diocesan and parish pastoral councils, presbyterial councils, and synodal assemblies have been delineated in the Church's formal regulations and serve as important vehicles for this purpose.¹² Pastoral councils, in particular, should be mandated not only at the diocesan level but also at the parish level through canonical revisions. It is worth recalling that

the theological significance of the Pastoral Council is inscribed in the constitutive reality of the Church, that is, in her being 'the Body of Christ', that generates a 'spirituality of communion' ... Far from being simply a bureaucratic organ, the Pastoral Council highlights and realizes the centrality of the People of God as the subject and active protagonist of the evangelising mission, in virtue of the fact that every member of the faithful has received the gifts of the Spirit through Baptism and Confirmation.¹³

Hence the Pastoral Council is a key instrument through which the faith community exercises pro-active agency in mission as a unified corporate subject. In relation to this, regular diocesan and parish pastoral planning with the participation and discernment of the whole community is essential.

At the grassroots or intermediate levels, suitable channels for listening, speaking, and discerning must be established to ensure accessible participation by all. Some parishes have made good use of BECs and village associations for this purpose. At the same time, capacity building and formation are needed so that all these vehicles can function meaningfully. A close examination of what actually goes on in some council, synod, or community meetings might reveal less synodal realities, such as monologue rather than dialogue, top-down chairmanship, domination by a few, interest group jostling, disorganized processes, token consultation, and the lack of any real communal discernment.

What it actually means in practice to harness the *sensus fidelium* has not been widely and systematically experienced in the Church, let alone evaluated and improved upon. In this regard, theologians can collaborate with experts in pastoral methodologies so as to further develop the understanding and practice. The Synod 2021–2024 has raised attention to this issue, and a variety of models for communal discernment have come to light. These typically include mutual sharing of and listening to diverse viewpoints in an orderly manner,

¹²See The Code of Canon Law, c. 460–468, 495–502, 511–514, 536, accessed February 16, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/cic_index_en.html.

¹³Congregation for the Clergy, *Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community*, para. 109–110.

bringing all these into prayer and reflection, and attending to how God's spirit is moving within oneself and in the community. A systematic study of these processes is needed, including a better understanding of the affective experiences of participants when they are going through the process—an area relatively neglected in theology. Moreover, the integration of these experiential processes with other elements of discernment, including Scripture and Tradition, culture, the signs of the times, and knowledge and tools from various disciplines has to be worked out.

One major area that has encountered increasing calls for clarification is the relationship between decision-making and decision-taking. The ITC provides a brief note on this point and much more needs to be studied theologically, pastorally, and legislatively.¹⁴ In practice, consensus is strong and sustained when both leaders and community members participate fully and transparently in a co-discernment. Although it usually falls upon leaders to take the final decision as per their formal authority, they should do so with continued transparency and discernment. Thereafter, the commitment and accountability of leaders and community members in implementation, evaluation, reporting, and revising where necessary, are equally important. In the feedback for the Synod 2021–2024, a major observation is the lack of consultation and communal discernment in many local churches, including a lack of trust between pastors and the laity. Pastors are perceived to be unwilling to listen while the laity are perceived to be unable to contribute adequately to a discernment.¹⁵ Dioceses and parishes need to address these challenges in mindset. They could begin by learning more about communal discernment, practicing it on smaller-scale issues with lower risks, involving people who are ready and able, engaging experienced trainers and facilitators, and adopting realistic expectations about outcomes. The practice of communal discernment can then be widened gradually. What is most important is to cultivate in the local church a culture of mutual listening, reflective speaking, genuine dialogue, and attentiveness to the Spirit of God.

Liturgical Renewal

Finally, the liturgical life of a community is integral to synodality. In particular, the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist not only expresses and actualizes synodality but also shapes people's understanding of

¹⁴See ITC, *Synodality*, 69.

¹⁵See DCS 33, 78–79.

synodality. There is much room for improvement in terms of how liturgy is celebrated in local churches. In the consultation for the Synod 2021–2024, many people say they no longer find their local liturgical celebrations uplifting or meaningful. It seems liturgical activities have become mechanical routines which fail to engender whole-hearted participation. Homilies have been especially singled out as an urgent area for improvement.¹⁶ Thus, parishes need to be more creative in re-imagining liturgies, and dioceses need to support priests to examine and develop their homiletic effectiveness. Steps can be taken to make the experience of the Holy Mass more resonant with synodality, such as sharing responsibility with the whole community for various aspects of the celebration, improving hospitality, deepening inculturation, encouraging spiritual preparation and reflection, promoting interaction, and re-examining practices that might be reinforcing clericalism or inequality among the laity. In addition, the Congregation for the Clergy aptly highlights “the need not to ‘commercialise’ the sacramental life, and not to give the impression that the celebration of the Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist, along with other ministerial activities, are subject to tariffs.”¹⁷

A prevailing area of tension is the exclusion of certain groups from the Eucharistic table such as the divorced and re-married. Since the Eucharist is intimately bound up with the life and mission of the Church, these groups consequently feel cut off from the ecclesial community as a whole. Additionally, there are certain people who, though not disallowed from the Eucharist, nevertheless experience ostracism, prejudice, and even hostility. The Eucharist is supposed to be the fount of mercy, forgiveness, and communion, and the sacrament of Christ’s unconditional self-giving to all. It is not meant to be used as a means of exclusion or division. The Church’s teaching on morality is currently the predominant lens that underpins this issue. Perhaps a wider variety of theological perspectives can be brought to bear, such as a renewed theology of the Eucharist, and new pathways explored. Meanwhile, parish communities can enhance their efforts to accompany persons who are excluded or feel ostracized at the Eucharistic table.

Conclusion

The areas outlined above serve as a general framework from which specific adaptations can be made to suit the local contexts of each

¹⁶See DCS 91–93.

¹⁷Congregation for the Clergy, *Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community*, para. 40.

diocese and parish. It can be seen that each area of the framework calls for a profound synodal conversion. As has often been said, changes in structures and programs are ineffective unless they are animated by an evangelical spirit and a culture of synodality. Indeed there is much to be overcome in terms of resistances to listening or to sharing power, complacency in mission, prejudices against those who are different, fear of speaking up, and reluctance to be engaged. Nevertheless, although interior conversion is the work of God's Spirit and a necessary precedent to genuine outward change, it is not a matter of waiting until there is some evident metanoia in the hearts of leaders and community members before any action can be taken. Rather, in the footsteps of those who followed Jesus of Nazareth, the journey of conversion starts with tentative steps that proceed in trial-and-error manner, sometimes even half-heartedly. It is along the way that the disciples become more open to the presence of God's Spirit, who increases their understanding, supports their conviction, and strengthens their pace. Such is the gradual, pilgrim way of synodality. Indeed, not a few among the hierarchy and some laity initially resisted or hesitated to engage in the consultation process for the Synod 2021–2024. However, those who subsequently did so found that they had experienced a new way of being Church that is not only refreshing and unifying, but also fruitful and life-giving. These are encouraging reminders that the Spirit of Christ is at work in every local church, bringing people to walk together in the reign of God's love.