

## ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SYNODALITY

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the ethical dimensions of synodality, a perspective rarely addressed in current scholarship yet essential to understanding the Church's present trajectory. Drawing on the Preparatory Document, the *Vademecum*, the Working Document for the Continental Stage *Enlarge the Space of Your Tent*, the International Theological Commission's 2018 text, and the teachings of Pope Francis, the study situates synodality within the broader horizon of moral theology. It argues that synodality is not simply a procedural or structural innovation but a journey of moral and spiritual conversion, rooted in the cultivation of virtues, renewal of ecclesial structures, and formation of Christian character. Framed by three guiding questions – What kind of Church are we now? What kind of Church do we want to become? How do we get there? – this research highlights synodality as an ethical path toward communion, participation, and mission, requiring transformation at personal, communal, and institutional levels.

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Really and truly, when I embarked on my research through printed and online literature on synodality, to my surprise I found no specific article with explicit reflections on the ethical perspectives of synodality. This lack of resources on this issue has encouraged rather than demotivated me to take this task earnestly in order to sieve out the ethical implications of synodality endorsed in the Preparatory Document for the 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, the *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality, the Working Document for the Continental Stage “Enlarge the space of your tent,” the document on *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* published in 2018 by the International Theological Commission, and the reflections articulated by Pope Francis in his homilies, addresses and speeches.

To my mind, these sources on synodality raise the following three fundamental questions: What kind of Church are we now? What kind of Church do we want to become? How do we get there? The answers to these questions reflect a significant ethical perspective.

### Synodality as a Journey of Moral Conversion

The more I read and reflected on the synodal process launched by Pope Francis on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2021, the more it transpired to me that morality is truly at the centre of this *kairos* experience in the Church’s trajectory. There is no doubt that Pope Francis’ vision and mission to steer the ecclesial community towards a Vatican II church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can never be realised without first and foremost individual and ecclesial moral conversion. The Second Vatican Council presented ecclesial conversion as an openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ: “Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling ... Christ summons the Church as she goes her pilgrim way ... to that continual reformation of which she always has need, in so far as she is a human institution here on earth.”<sup>1</sup>

Every renewal of the Church is essentially grounded in a genuine commitment to nurture unwavering fidelity to her own calling. In essence, synodality is a process that aims at pursuing with vigour the change or *aggiornamento* initiated by the Second Vatican Council. It is

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<sup>1</sup>Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6.

a commitment to moral conversion or transformation at the three levels of ecclesial life on an individual, community and universal level. Conversion, understood as the cultivation of good attitudes and dispositions on all levels of ecclesial life and structures, is fundamental for the task of building a synodal Church.

In biblical ethics *metanoia* is a key concept which denotes that spiritual conversion is much more than a recognition of one's sins. It implies a change of heart and mind which are the seat of one's attitudes and dispositions towards oneself, others, the environment and God. As Pope Francis remarks when citing the Dominican theologian Yves Marie-Joseph Congar, it is only through this process of change of heart and mind on both a personal and ecclesial level that the Church becomes not another Church but a different Church.<sup>2</sup> The International Theological Commission's document on synodality reminds us of the central message of the prophets, which is to "invite [the People of God] to *conversion* of their hearts to God and to *justice* in their relationships with their neighbours, often the poorest, the oppressed, and the foreigners, as a tangible witness to God's mercy (cf. Jeremiah 37, 21; 38, 1)."<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the "Church is called to constant conversion, which is also a 'pastoral and missionary conversion', this involves a renewal of mentalities, attitudes, practices and structures, in order to be ever more faithful to her vocation."<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the document on *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* explicitly notes that "without conversion of heart and mind, and without disciplined training for welcoming and listening to one another, the external instruments of communion would be hardly of any use; on the contrary, they could be transformed into mere heartless, faceless masks."<sup>5</sup> The Working Document for the Continental Stage, *Enlarge the Space of Your Tent* is more unequivocal on synodality as a journey to moral and spiritual conversion:

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<sup>2</sup>Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synod" (9<sup>th</sup> October 2021), <https://adct.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ADDRESS-OF-HIS-HOLINESS-POPE-FRANCIS-ON-OPENING-OF-THE-SYNOD-9-OCTOBER-2021.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church," 2018, par. 14, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_synodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html)

<sup>4</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 104.

<sup>5</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 107.

Walking together as the People of God requires us to recognize the need for continual conversion, individual and communal. On the institutional and pastoral level, this conversion translates into an equally continuous reform of the Church, its structures and style, in the wake of the drive for continuous ‘aggiornamento,’ the precious legacy of the Second Vatican Council to which we are called to look as we celebrate its 60th anniversary.<sup>6</sup>

The same working document states that in the long-term horizon the synodal church “takes the form of a perennial call to personal conversion and reform of the Church.”<sup>7</sup>

Full communion among those journeying together cannot be achieved without ecumenical commitment which

demands conversion of heart and openness to each other in order to demolish the walls of diffidence which have separated Christians from each other for centuries, in order to discover, share and rejoice in the many riches that unite us as gifts of the one Lord in virtue of the baptism we share: from prayer to hearing the Word and experiencing the love we have for each other in Christ, from witnessing to the Gospel to serving the poor and outcasts, from commitment to a society of justice and solidarity to a commitment to peace and the common good.<sup>8</sup>

The image and narrative of ‘enlarging the tent’ articulated in the Working Document for the Continental Stage denotes a “willingness to die to oneself out of love” to welcome “others into it, making room for diversity.”<sup>9</sup> All faith communities are called to work together since they share the same vocation of proclaiming the Gospel and serving others.

It is worth noting that the word ‘conversion’ is copiously present in the Preparatory Document, the *Vademum* and the Working Document for the Continental Stage, appearing thirty-five times, but it is never in the sense used by St Augustine, namely, as a turning away from created goods towards the Creator as the highest good. Instead, conversion means self-distancing from the old, and a reception of the new and the different. The Preparatory Document points out that, “True and proper conversion is the painful and immensely fruitful

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<sup>6</sup>Working Document for the Continental Stage, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” 101, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf>

<sup>7</sup>*Enlarge the Space of Your Tent*, 98.

<sup>8</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 115.

<sup>9</sup>*Enlarge the Space of Your Tent*, 28.

passage of leaving one's own cultural and religious categories."<sup>10</sup> In order to accomplish synodality, "we are called to abandon attitudes of complacency and comfort that lead us to make decisions purely on the basis of how things have been done in the past."<sup>11</sup> We need to abandon the attitude that says: "We have always done it this way."<sup>12</sup> The danger lies therefore in applying old solutions to new problems.

The protagonist behind this ongoing personal and communal process of *metanoia* is the Spirit of God who sets us free from every form of self-absorption, revives what is moribund, loosens shackles, and spreads joy. The Spirit of God, who unfailingly accompanies the itinerant Church, is the source of synodal conversion through the empowerment of every person of good will to progressive human and spiritual maturity, thereby enhancing the quality of ecclesial life.<sup>13</sup> The Church becomes authentic to its vocation and mission as "a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race"<sup>14</sup> only through ongoing personal conversion to the spirituality of communion.<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that the synod on synodality does not focus on a theme like so many others, but on the key issue of the deeper identity and authenticity of the Church as communion and mission with the participation of all. Nobody is excluded from this transformative process because "all the Church's members are called to accept this conversion as a gift and pledge of the Spirit to be lived out in deference to His guidance, and to learn to live in communion the grace received in baptism and brought to fulfilment in the Eucharist."<sup>16</sup> This paschal conversion sets every baptised person free to move forward from the self-centred "I" to the ecclesial "we."

### **Synodality as Cultivation and Practice of Moral Virtues**

The fundamental question raised by Pope Francis to the People of God in the synodal process primarily focuses on what sort of persons

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<sup>10</sup>Preparatory Document for the 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2021, par. 23.

<sup>11</sup>*Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality, 2021, 2.3.

<sup>12</sup>*Evangelii gaudium*, 33.

<sup>13</sup>Preparatory Document, 2.

<sup>14</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 107.

<sup>15</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 107.

<sup>16</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 107.

the faithful have to become in order to nurture a synodal church. A change of attitudes among those journeying together is an unconditional prerequisite for experiencing among themselves deep fraternity and conciliar friendship.<sup>17</sup> The style of relationships; the attitudes of inclusivity and tolerance to divergent opinions; respect for others as equal partners in decision-making; mutual trust without stereotypes and prejudices; patience towards others; flexibility and courage; treating everyone justly and honestly; the disposition to communicate honestly, openly and transparently; humble listening to everyone attentively; a sense of accountability for others; and a compassionate support and tender love for one another, particularly those who are weary, vulnerable and lagging behind; all these virtues are the hallmark of a successful journeying together. The dynamics of relationships of those journeying together attain maturity when they are nourished and graced by the life of the Spirit. Fraternity, solidarity, hospitality, inclusion and communion in the synodal journey are nurtured by graced and ordered relationships.

These virtues, which are cultivated by 'good practices' according to Alasdair MacIntyre, require embodiment in the dynamic relationships of those journeying together. For MacIntyre, practices embody goods internal to the practice agreed upon according to the telos of the social community.<sup>18</sup> The *Vademecum*, referring to Pope Francis, sets synodality as both the way and the telos of the Church: "It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium... This common journey together is both a gift and a task"<sup>19</sup> MacIntyre nuances how the Aristotelian concept of telos is understood not as something achieved at any point in time, but as the way human life is constructed. Thus, living shared good practices in relationship to a community is a dynamic process which is never completed. MacIntyre's notion of telos as 'a certain kind of life'<sup>20</sup> parallels the Christian life in which the People of God are journeying toward God's heavenly reign (telos) in the sense that they embody the way of this reign which they learn as they journey together. The Christian community embodies a particular way of life only when the virtues of the philosophical and Christian traditions are visible and

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<sup>17</sup>*Vademecum*, 2.3.

<sup>18</sup>See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007 [Third Edition with Prologue]), 218.

<sup>19</sup>Francis, *Address for the ceremony commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17 October 2015); *Vademecum*, 1.2.

<sup>20</sup>MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 204, 223.

embodied in the community's practices.<sup>21</sup> Such practices do not always look the same because they are carried out in relationship with the Christian community in different times and places. Thus, communal discernment and formation are central to how practices are shared, reshaped, and carried out over time and within contexts.

Clearly, synodality is a metaphor which denotes a renewed way of being and walking together; it is a journey of moral growth which has to be experienced rather than defined. Really and truly, this is the Church's true nature, form, style and mission. Since the Christian community is synodal in its very identity and nature, the practice of shared common virtues keeps those journeying together united in communion. The imposition of a bureaucratised unity through institutional arrangements fosters individualism rather than synodality. Without the cultivation of good dispositions and attitudes and the flourishing of good practices, the process of synodality fails. Structures and institutions have to be "inhabited by people properly formed and sustained by living spirituality."<sup>22</sup> As the relator general of the synod on synodality, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, remarked that synodality does not mean changing doctrines, but rather a fostering of attitudes that inspire communion, participation and mission of those journeying together to become one church where everyone matters and feels welcome.<sup>23</sup>

Certainly, the thrust of the synodal process endorses unequivocally the 'virtues approach' of Christian ethics, which has been the most important development in method in moral theology over the past thirty years or so. Reading the Preparatory Document, the *Vademecum* and Working Document for the Continental Stage through the lens of virtue ethics, one comprehends unmistakably the roadmap to be followed by the Church for her successful journeying together in the Third Millennium.

Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* wrote that "every human act is a moral act" (I.II.1.3c). This means that the way one talks with others and listens to one another, and how one cares for others in one's life journey, what sort of relationships one develops with others, bear moral significance. Since all these are human acts, they have consequently an ethical import. Ordinary human acts could become

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<sup>21</sup>See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 201.

<sup>22</sup>*Enlarge the Space of Your Tent*, 11.4.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.romereports.com/en/2022/08/26/card-hollerich-synod-is-not-meant-to-change-doctrine-but-attitudes/>

actual moral acts. One's moral character is revealed in one's daily actions and decisions. The way one behaves in concrete situations determines the moral nature of that person. Whatever one does shapes one's moral orientation. Thus, as Aquinas states in the prologue of the *Secunda Secundae*, "We may reduce the whole of moral matters to the consideration of the virtues."<sup>24</sup>

Renewed interest in virtue ethics has emerged as a dissatisfaction with the way ethics has been perceived as a set of duties and rules. For many years, ethics has been conceived as an ability of resolving moral quandaries and dilemmas without focusing on how persons should become and what virtues one requires to become a good person. According to the Synod's Preparatory Document, the *Vademecum* and the Working Document for the Continental Stage, the path to a synodal church does not concern the teaching of the faithful on how to debate on specific thorny issues in Christian ethics, but the acquisition of good character traits known as moral virtues which make a huge difference in the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the church as the People of God. It is their virtues, namely their moral attitudes and dispositions, which give substance to their being together in one journey as one participatory communion.

Virtue ethics does not only raise the question concerning what type of person one ought to become in journeying together with others as God's people, but also what personal and communal goals one ought to seek out in order to create an authentic Christian community through its awareness of the Lord's presence, thereby becoming a synodal church. Growth in virtues is an important goal for every baptised person since good dispositions and attitudes are not acquired easily and instantaneously but require constant efforts, relentless courage, unfailing resilience and persistent determination. Thus, synodality is an ongoing process because those journeying together need to grow and mature in their faith in God and their trust in the Holy Spirit who has the power to renew their minds and hearts. The Christian community grows in communion, participation and mission through the gradual embracement of a set of virtues which are progressively put into practice. This is achieved when those journeying together see themselves as they really are, assess themselves, and discern who they can actually become in order to attain an authentic community of God's people. Only virtuous actions

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<sup>24</sup>See for example, James F. Keenan, *A History of Theological Ethics* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2022), 147.



can actually guarantee unity in diversity among the members of the entire Christian community journeying together, thereby experiencing and witnessing the authentic nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God.

The theological virtues of faith, hope and charity are the bedrock of the synodal process because they nourish and sustain the life of every Christian, thereby strengthening the relationships of those journeying together. As the International Theological Commission states in its 2018 document, “Faith, hope and love guide and inform the pilgrimage of the assembly of the Lord ‘in sight of the future city’ (*Hebrews* 11, 10).”<sup>25</sup> In today’s experiences of suffering and discrimination, environmental degradation and global injustices the journeying community needs to cultivate hope and faith in the goodness of the Creator and his creation.<sup>26</sup> The theological virtues guide and inspire those in authority to listen and serve others, and at the same time open the way to the active participation of every member of the Body of Christ. The lack of faith, hope and love within the Church, manifested in the abuses of clericalism and minors, has deeply wounded the synodal path.<sup>27</sup>

### **Synodality as Institutional and Structural Conversion**

The working document on synodality has called for the institutional and structural conversion of the Church at all levels in order to better incorporate synodality into ecclesiastical life.<sup>28</sup> These structures and institutions are called to re-evaluate the exercise of their functions and mission in order to renew their systems and procedures. The process of institutional and structural reform of the Church does not imply simple amendments to prevent their decay but a redirection towards new goals, functions or purposes. It is a call to bring to light and correct prejudices and distorted practices of governance within the local churches and the universal church that are not rooted in the Gospel.<sup>29</sup>

Institutional and structural reforms within the Church cannot be implemented without a process of conversion from clericalism to a participatory church. Clericalism arises from an elitist and exclusivist

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<sup>25</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 50.

<sup>26</sup>Preparatory Document, 6.

<sup>27</sup>James F. Keenan, “Vulnerability and Hierarchicalism,” *Melita Theologica* 68, 2 (2018): 129–142.

<sup>28</sup>*Vademecum*, par. 2.4 (4).

<sup>29</sup>Preparatory Document, 2; *Vademecum*, 1.3.

vision of vocation that interprets the ministry received as a power to be exercised rather than as a free and generous service to be given. A clericalist culture reinforces and perpetuates clergy advantages and status to secure power and privileges rather than service and mission.<sup>30</sup> In his address at the opening of the synod on October 9, 2021, Pope Francis explicitly expressed his desire for a structural conversion that empowers the participation of everyone within the church. The “overly vertical and distorted” hierarchical model of the Church needs to introduce structures that facilitate dialogue and interaction within the People of God, especially between priests and laity. The *Vademecum* raises the following questions:

How do we promote participation in decision-making within hierarchical structures? Do our decision-making methods help us to listen to the whole People of God? What is the relationship between consultation and decision-making, and how do we put these into practice? What tools and procedures do we use to promote transparency and accountability? How can we grow in communal spiritual discernment?<sup>31</sup>

The cultivation and practice of synodal virtues reject the clerical mind-set which considers the laity’s role as simply restricted to ‘praying, paying and obeying.’ The prevailing culture that the clergy knows what’s best has led to many types of abuse (power, economic, conscience, sexual). What is needed is docility to God’s Spirit to renew the hearts of the clergy and laity alike. Communion would remain a wishful thinking if the laity are relegated to a subordinate role. Change of mentality and conversion of attitudes open up spaces in which the laity can express themselves and share the wealth of their experience as disciples of the Lord.<sup>32</sup> Baptism is the identity card that empowers all members of the ecclesial community to full participation in the life and mission of the Church. It is only when the Holy Spirit renews the Church that synodal attitudes and dispositions are nurtured to give up the clerical mentality and embrace the equal dignity shared by all baptised.

Structural and institutional conversion finds its inspiration in an ecclesiology of communion whereby the Church really and truly becomes a welcoming space for listening, dialogue, and participation in decision-making, since all baptised are called to be missionary disciples. The Church is like a tent which stretches out and moves

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<sup>30</sup>James F. Keenan, “Hierarchicism,” *Theological Studies* 83, 1 (2022): 84–108.

<sup>31</sup>*Vademecum*, 5.3.

<sup>32</sup>*Evangelii gaudium*, 102.

around in order to become “a space of *communion*, a place of *participation*, and a *foundation* for mission”<sup>33</sup> for everyone. At the universal level the Church is transformed into a synodal Church only when the baptismal authority and responsibility of all members are acknowledged. The entire People of God share a common dignity and vocation through baptism. Together, all the baptised are the subject of the *sensus fidelium*, the living voice of the People of God. Thus, attitudes which reflect the “concentration of responsibility for mission in the ministry of Pastors; insufficient appreciation of the consecrated life and charismatic gifts; rarely making use of the specific and qualified contribution of the lay faithful, including women, in their areas of expertise”<sup>34</sup> need to be eliminated. Everyone’s gifts and roles, without clericalising lay people and without turning the clergy into lay people, can contribute to the Church’s mission of evangelisation.<sup>35</sup> The *Vademecum* raises a series of pertinent questions for the ecclesial community’s examination of conscience to promote the active participation of the People of God in the process of decision-making and decision-taking.<sup>36</sup>

The creation of structures alone does not transform the collective psyche of clericalism. The temptation to focus only on structures needs to be overcome by an ongoing formation to support and implement a widespread synodal culture. The *Vademecum* explains that

the experience of synodality should not focus first and foremost on structures, but on the experience of journeying together to discern the path forward, inspired by the Holy Spirit. The conversion and renewal of structures will come about only through the on-going conversion and renewal of all the members of the Body of Christ.<sup>37</sup>

According to the Working Document for the Continental Stage, adequate formation is indispensable for animating structures and institutions by a culture of synodality.<sup>38</sup> The attitudes and dispositions of moving forward in a co-responsible way, thereby opening up people’s hearts to welcoming God’s fruits together over time,<sup>39</sup> are necessary for replacing clericalism with “greater transparency,

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<sup>33</sup>*Enlarge the Space of Your Tent*, 11.

<sup>34</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 105.

<sup>35</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 104.

<sup>36</sup>*Vademecum*, 5.3.

<sup>37</sup>*Vademecum*, 2.4.

<sup>38</sup>*Enlarge the Space of Your Tent*, 84.

<sup>39</sup>*Vademecum*, par 2.4 (6)

accountability and co-responsibility.”<sup>40</sup> True participation of all the faithful becomes a reality when the virtues of humility, respect, tolerance, trust, listening, patience, compassion, fraternity, flexibility, friendliness, forgiveness, justice, courage and honesty are embraced.

### Synodality as a Learning Process in Character Formation

The synodal process is a learning opportunity for the Church. It is a *kairos* to acquire the *ethos* to practice communion, dialogue, participation and mission through the creation of a culture of encounter. By journeying together and reflecting together on the journey that has been made, the Church will be able to learn through her experience which processes can help her to live communion, to achieve participation, to open herself to mission. Thus, synodality is a learning process, a paschal journey for a “new birth,” a missionary renewal to enter into a new vision of the church that is discerning, relational and inclusive.

In this regard, the Preparatory Document notes that, “in order to ‘journey together,’ we need to let ourselves be educated by the Spirit to a truly synodal mentality, entering with courage and freedom of heart into a conversion process that is indispensable” for the “continual reformation of which [the Church] always has need, in so far as she is a human institution.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the *Vademecum* notes that

synodality entails receptivity to change, formation, and on-going learning. How does our church community form people to be more capable of “walking together,” listening to one another, participating in mission, and engaging in dialogue? What formation is offered to foster discernment and the exercise of authority in a synodal way?<sup>42</sup>

What do we mean by the spirituality of communion as the guiding principle of education for the formation of Christians?

If the spirituality of journeying together becomes the educational principle of the Christian community, then the language of authority transforms itself into a language of synodality. The type of language used in a community shapes its structures and the interpersonal relationships of its members. The German thinker and philosopher Jürgen Habermas claims that a community that communicates and listens to one another does not foster power and control but promotes

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<sup>40</sup>*Enlarge the Space of Your Tent*, 20.

<sup>41</sup>Preparatory Document, 9. Cf. *Unitas Redintegratio*, 6; *Evangelii gaudium*, 26.

<sup>42</sup>*Vademecum*, 10.

communion and mutual understanding.<sup>43</sup> The entire Church, including the hierarchy, are called to learn and adopt a synodal attitude of communication. The People of God, including the clergy, is called to enrol in the language school of synodality to learn the new grammar, semantics, syntax and vocabulary of synodality. This is what the Preparatory Document meant to say when referring to the Church as “the home and school of communion.”<sup>44</sup> The entry requirements for a successful process of learning at the school of synodality are the attitudes of docility, humility and openness of heart to the Holy Spirit. These virtues are important for avoiding the pitfall of wanting to lead ourselves instead of being led by God.<sup>45</sup>

A synodal Church flourishes through its learning process of distancing itself from ‘strategic rationality’ to embrace the art of ‘communicative rationality.’ “Synodality is not a corporate strategic exercise. Rather it is a spiritual process that is led by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>46</sup> According to Habermas, human interaction in one of its fundamental forms is communicative rather than strategic in nature, in so far as it aims at mutual understanding and agreement rather than the achievement of the self-interested goals of individuals. Whereas strategic rationality strengthens bureaucratic and administrative structures of power, communicative rationality fosters mutual understanding, respect and acceptance. Moreover, communicative rationality acknowledges that truth is historically located and open to critique. Habermas stresses that all participants can only arrive at the truth when language facilitates mutual understanding via effective communicative action. The *Vademecum* echoes Habermas’ thinking when claiming that in a synodal Church all “participants are encouraged to share with honesty and openness about their real-life experiences, and to reflect together on what the Holy Spirit might be revealing through what they share with one another.”<sup>47</sup> Respect for the right of every baptised to enter into an honest, open and transparent dialogue without coercion opens up the possibility of reaching a shared truth through inter-subjective understanding. Communion, participation and mission do not

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<sup>43</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Reason and the Rationalisation of Society*, vol. 1, (trans. by Thomas McCarthy) (Boston: Bacon Press), 1981.

<sup>44</sup>Preparatory Document, 135.

<sup>45</sup>*Vademecum*, 2.4 (1).

<sup>46</sup>*Vademecum*, 2.4 (1).

<sup>47</sup>*Vademecum*, 2.4 (1).

flourish in ecclesial communities that are burdened with strategic rationality that is nourished with the language of power.

The ethos of the school of synodality cultivates mentalities and nurtures appropriate ethical attitudes to embrace a paradigm shift in the exercise of power so badly needed by the Church to become a communion. According to the Preparatory Document, one objective of the synod on synodality is precisely to examine “how responsibility and power are lived in the Church, as well as the structures by which they are managed, bringing to light and trying to convert prejudices and distorted practices that are not rooted in the Gospel.”<sup>48</sup> The linguistic paradigm of synodality is far from the concept of power. It starts by asking questions and not by giving solutions. The fundamental goal behind language is mutual understanding rather than supremacy and dominance. The grammar of the language of communion, participation and mission cannot be grasped “without conversion of heart and mind and without disciplined training for welcoming and listening to one another,” since “the external instruments of communion would be of hardly any use; on the contrary, they could be transformed into mere heartless, faceless masks.” As the document of the International Theological Commission states,

while the wisdom of the law, by providing precise rules for participation, attests to the hierarchical structure of the Church and averts any temptation to arbitrariness or unjust claims, the spirituality of communion, by prompting a trust and openness wholly in accord with the dignity and responsibility of every member of the People of God, supplies institutional reality with a soul.<sup>49</sup>

## Concluding Reflections

If “synods are a time to dream and ‘spend time with the future,’”<sup>50</sup> no one should be excluded to participate in this dream “to create a vision of the future filled with the joy of the Gospel.”<sup>51</sup> The synodal process on synodality was launched “to promote and develop the practice and experience of *being Synodal* in the course of the process and in the future moving forward.”<sup>52</sup> The synodal process raises the question concerning what kind of church we want to become. As Pope

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<sup>48</sup>Preparatory Document, 2.

<sup>49</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 107.

<sup>50</sup>*Vademecum*, 2.3.

<sup>51</sup>*Vademecum*, 2.3.

<sup>52</sup>*Vademecum*, 3.1.

Francis exhorts in *Christus vivit* to the young people and the entire people of God, the dream of a synodal church comes true if the belief that Christ is eternally alive is kept alive and if pessimism is replaced with optimism, courage and determination that the present generation can and should bequeath an authentic synodal Church to future generations.<sup>53</sup>

It is a fact that the experience of change creates fear, uncertainty or even scepticism. Change pushes people out of their comfort zones. However, people fear change if they do not understand the reason for it. God is not afraid of new things and continuously surprises us by opening our hearts and guiding us in unexpected ways. The hope to create a synodal church for the benefit of both present and future generations “depends largely on the decision to initiate processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every person can participate and contribute.”<sup>54</sup>

The Church’s roadmap is to grow into a synodal church by transforming itself into an expandable tent capable of sheltering all those journeying together through the desert. Indeed, enlarging the space of the tent to welcome all others who feel called to enter it and thus making room for diversity, “entails a willingness to die to self out of love, finding oneself again in and through relationship with Christ and one’s neighbour.”<sup>55</sup>

Let us hope that future generations will be grateful to the present one for bequeathing to them a synodal Church that is a missionary and participatory communion!

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<sup>53</sup>*Christus vivit*, 127.

<sup>54</sup>Preparatory Document, 9.

<sup>55</sup>*Enlarge the Space of Your Tent*, 28.