

PROPOSAL OF THE KOREAN MODEL OF SYNODALITY IN THE LIGHT OF THE HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN KOREA

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Abstract

This paper seeks to identify and propose key tasks for the Catholic Church in Korea in realizing synodality. To this end, it first provides an overview of the Korean Church's experience of synodality during the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2021–2023). During this period, the faithful in particular experienced listening, dialogue, and a renewed sense of belonging to the Church, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of synodality. The historical traces of a synodal Church in Korea not only serve as a foundation for realizing synodality in the present and future but also offer direction for its implementation. The history of the Catholic Church in Korea vividly demonstrates both the active role of the laity and the mutual cooperation between clergy and laypeople. Today, however, the Catholic Church in Korea faces numerous challenges, including secularization, relativism, the weakening of community bonds, rampant individualism, and growing social anxiety. In this context, drawing upon the style of synodality and the heritage of faith and life embedded in the Church's history, this paper proposes four key tasks: Stimulating and fostering the initiative of the faithful; Expanding opportunities to experience the value of journeying together; Overcoming division and

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alienation among groups by emphasizing the Word and the Sacraments as common points of reference; Accompanying and strengthening solidarity in the concrete realities of members' daily lives.

Keywords: Catholic Church in Korea; Laypeople; Solidarity; Synodal Life; Synodality

Introduction: *Status Quo*

The Church in Korea began her synodal journey from 15–17 October 2021, with the opening Mass. Almost every diocese organized the synodal team and conducted education on and promotion of synodality and synodal journey. The synodal meetings were convened in various groups in the parishes and were expanded to the whole parish and the whole diocese. This journey made the faithful to experience what synodality is and how the listening and dialogue can be alive. In the listening process, the Church in Korea listened to the active faithful in the church, especially women and the young adults. Also, the Church strived to listen to the lukewarm faithful, the disabled, immigrants, LGBTQ+, North Korean defectors, people of other religions and even those without any religion.

Through the synodal journey, the voices of both the faithful and the pastors were collected, and it revealed the requests for the renewed Church in Korea. However, the most significant matter for the faithful was the experience that they 'belonged to the Church.' They experienced that they were not just receivers of grace or the followers of the pastors' decisions but the ones who could actively speak up and be the principal agents in the life of the Church. This experience is actually the experience of living the synodality.

The Synodal Church, at least in its original meaning, is not a new idea in the history of the whole Church,¹ and we can find examples of synodality in the history of the Church in Korea. The idea of synodality, which is theologically conceptualized recently, urges the Church to live by her very nature, and it also urges the Church in Korea to be renewed. In this article, synodality in the history of the Church in Korea will be analyzed. Then, a model for the realization of synodality in the unique living context of Korea will be proposed, considering the challenges the Church in Korea faces in the present.

¹Cf. CTI, *La sinodalità nella vita e nella missione della Chiesa*, nn. 20–41.

Trace of Synodal Church in the History of the Church in Korea

Synodality, which consists of the mission, communion and participation, allows all the members of the Church to participate in the common mission of evangelization. This mission is conducted through the true life of the Church, the life in communion with God and with all brothers and sisters. Therefore, identifying the synodal life experienced in the history of the Church in Korea will build the foundation of the decision and style that she will take in the future for the inculturation of synodality in Korea and for her renewal in the face of various challenges that the whole Korean society stands against now.

Examples of Synodal Church in the Era of the Establishment and Persecution of the Church in Korea

One of the distinct and unique features of the Catholic Church in Korea is that the establishment was made by the Korean laymen without any priests, religious, or missionaries in 18th century.² At that time, some noble scholars studied the Catholic books, which were translated into Chinese and flowed into Choseon (name of Korea then), just as an academic work. However, they found the Truth in those books and their studies were developed to the practices of faith. They sent the representative to Beijing to receive the Baptism and after, they offered the baptism to each other, chose a day in every seven days of the lunar calendar as Lord's Day and practiced the teaching of the Church. These people developed the Church by themselves for 56 years, until the French missionaries came into Choseon. When those missionaries came, there were already about 5,000 baptized.

The initial period of the history of the Catholic Church in Korea was challenging. From the very beginning until 1886, persecutions continued for nearly 100 years. During these years, tens of thousands of faithful died as martyrs. A number of the faithful ran to hide in the deep mountain, where they lived their faith with a lay chairperson's leadership as a community of faith, called *Gyowuchon* (Catholic Village). This history of establishment and development of the Catholic Church in Korea left priceless heritage such as seeking the Truth voluntarily, embracing the Truth with faith, voluntarily practicing the faith and living in a community of faith.

²Papa Giovanni Paolo II, "Omelia nella Santa Messa per la canonizzazione di 103 martiri coreani," http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19840506_martiri-coreani.html[01.12.2022]

In this heritage we can see excellent realization of the essential spirit of synodality: communion, participation and mission.

The Spirit of Synodality Realized in the History of the Catholic Church in Korea

After the establishment of the Vicariate Apostolic of Korea (Choseon) on September 9, 1831, during the Persecution era, three synods of the Vicariate were held each in 1857, 1868, 1884, before the freedom of religion was allowed in 1886. Through these three synods, the missionary challenges were examined, the missionary policy was made and the guidelines were prepared. Since the end of the persecution era, sixteen dioceses have held synods frequently to listen to the faithful and reflect on their voice in each diocese's pastoral policy until now.³

The spirit of synodality was realized remarkably in the process of the preparation of *Schema of the Pastoral Congress of Korea for the bicentennial of the Catholic Church in Korea* after Vatican II. In 1984, marking the bicentenary of the establishment of the Catholic Church in Korea, the whole Church in Korea worked on an initiative for examining her present situation and seeking the direction for her future in the light of Vatican II. The abovementioned *Schema* was one of the results from that initiative, and it was written for 4 years (Nov. 1980–Dec. 1984), and it was the very first time in the history of the Church in Korea that the priests, religious and laymen participated together in it. It had nine parts: priest; religious; laity; liturgy; faith movement; local pastoral work; catechism; pastoral work on families; pastoral work on special mission; mission; society. It was an attempt of the Church in Korea to exercise the same work that Vatican II did for the universal church.⁴

Schema listened to the People and identified the current situation of each part and then proposed the direction for the tercentenary of the Catholic Church in Korea on the basis of Vatican II. In particular, the concern was on the inculturation of faith and the attempt to build the missionary plans for the evangelization of the nation. This *Schema* has its ecclesiological basis in *Lumen Gentium*, specifically the ecclesiology

³Chang, Dong-Ha, "History and Evaluation of Diocese Synod in Korean Church," *Pastoral Research* [Incheon: Pastoral Institute, Catholic University] 9 (2001): 33–90.

⁴*Pastoral Meeting 1 Clergy, Marking the Bicentenary of the Catholic Church in Korea* (Seoul: The Pastoral Commission, 1984), 17.

of communion. The *Schema* did not use the term, but it aimed at the realization of synodality.

Synodal Life Realized within the Community

In the history of the Catholic Church in Korea, the synodal life is found in *Gyowuchon*,⁵ built by the faithful from 1830s. The towns had features of being autonomous, having Sacraments, being in small size, having the same destiny and being ideal ecclesial communities like the early apostolic community. They gathered voluntarily to pray and after communal prayers they discussed matters raised in the town. They read the Bible, studied catechism and shared what they learned from it. Moreover, they lived in communion and kept close relationship between the priest and the laity by protecting each other and devoting to each other. During the era of persecution, the faithful risked their lives to bring the priests in and protect them; similarly, the priests sacrificed their lives for their flock. *Gyowuchon* was the place where the Catholic faithful kept and lived their faith together, the school of faith.

The lifestyle of the community of faith continued after the era of persecution. After the Korean Independence and the Korean War, the parishioners gathered by regional districts and dividing in small groups to pray, to study the Bible and catechism, and to share life's problems. They proclaimed the Gospel by witnessing the faith in their place of living. The two visits of Pope John Paul II in 1984, on the occasion of the bicentenary of the establishment of the Catholic Church in Korea, and in 1988, to the International Eucharistic Congress, resulted in the rapid growth of the Catholic Church in Korea.

On the other hand, this rapid growth made the parish become huge in its size, led the small groups centring in the life of parishes, and thus weakened the features as community. As fresh method for evangelization became necessary, the Archdiocese of Seoul kept solidarity with Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPa) in 1992 and started the movement of the Small Christian Community (SCC). The movement expanded throughout all the regions in Korea and now its contribution to make the faithful to live their faith life more active and autonomous, to care for the poor and to illuminate the society in the light of Gospel is fairly recognized.

⁵Cf. The Catholic Conference of Korea, "The Community of Gyowuchon and Father Choe Yang-eop," *Samok* 260 (2000/9): 70–81; Mintaeg Han, "Community Life and Liturgy of Catholic Villagers during the Period of Persecution," *Catholic Theology and Thought* 85 (2021): 107–146.

It can be recognized that the life and spirit of community in the Catholic Church in Korea in *Gyowuchon*, small parish groups and SCCs were the realization of the synodal Church in the context of Korean society.

The Active Faith Life of the Laity in the History

A Lay Chairman

The institution of a lay chairman was great help during the Persecution era to keep the faith of the faithful solid. At the same time, it took a very significant and unique role in spreading the faith to neighbours and in the development and settlement of the ecclesial structure in Korea while preserving the unity of the faith. The lay chairman had to cultivate virtues such as faith, intelligence, diligence, obedience, and truth to perform his role and he was recognized as the one who received special vocation. The lay chairman was generally nominated by the parish priest or bishop, but sometimes the faithful made recommendations of the candidates or had a vote but in this case the parish priest or the bishop had the power to appoint. The lay chairman took care of the faithful and assisted the priests, and in the area where the priests could not reach, he took the pastoral care of the faithful.⁶

Prayers for Souls in Purgatory: The Funeral Tradition in the Catholic Church in Korea

One of the distinct traditions in the Catholic Church in Korea that continued since the era of persecution is the voluntary participation of the faithful in the funeral.⁷ In 1830s, there were groups called *Maegoehoe* and *Seonguihoe* and they took care of the sick and the deceased. The faithful served at the funerals without any remuneration, because it was a service undertaken out of charity. Since then, the service of the faithful at the funerals was promoted more. With a lay chairman at the centre, the faithful organized the service and worked like a voluntary service group. In 1880s, the group called *Inaehoe* was organized and the faithful served even more ardently. The work of *Inaehoe* contributed significantly to the rebuilding of the Catholic Church in Korea and the proclamation of the Gospel at that time. One main reason of the persecution of Catholics in Choseon was a misunderstanding that the Catholics did

⁶Chang, "History and Evaluation of Diocese Synod," 47–48.

⁷Sang-Keun Bang, "A Study on 'The Society of Assisting the Souls in Purgatory' in the Catholic Church of Korea," *Suwon Research Institute of Catholic History* 21 (2022): 241–272.

not follow the ancestral rites and did not respect their ancestors. However, as the faithful helped the poor people's funeral and prayed for the souls of the deceased, the misunderstanding was gradually cleared and the positive awareness of Catholic faith was created. In particular, when the contagious diseases were around, the Catholic faithful took care of the patients and their families and helped the funeral of the deceased and these works led many non-faithful to the Catholic Church. Since then, a group called *Yeonryeonghoe* has been continuing these works until today. Its services and prayers are not only voluntary practice of love by the faithful, but also the realization of communion in concrete terms in the life of human beings. It takes a significant role in witnessing to the Truth of faith to people in the world.

Today's Challenges and the Proposal of Korean Model for the Realization of Synodality

The Challenges

In today's society in Korea, indifference to transcendental and religious values, the first priority on economy, relativism and individualism are expanding while the communal spirit is weakening. Moreover, the number of pseudo-religions, exploiting the anxiety of people, is considerable. Korea had experienced rapid changes in just some decades, which had been made during hundreds of years in western countries. This rapid change caused the separations between generations, gender, social and economic status, and they are serious problems now. All these social challenges also affect the Church. In the recent synodal process (2021–2022), the authoritarianism, clericalism and the lack of communication were criticized and pointed out as huge problem.

In this context, how the Catholic Church in Korea can realize synodality? The Church that realizes synodality does not mean 'another totally different church.' Therefore, the synodal church seen in the history of the Catholic Church in Korea can offer a clue for the realization of synodality.

The Proposal of Korean Model for Synodality

First, the most important element of Korean Model for Synodality is to stimulate and develop the initiative of the faithful's voluntary willingness. This autonomy is the most distinct feature of the Catholic faithful in Korea since her establishment and it is also her impetus. It is necessary to seek the way to promote and develop the voluntary

willingness of the faithful to proclaim the Gospel and to practice the faith. Above all, the faithful need to experience the joy of Christian faith and the pastoral method for this experience should be made. Furthermore, the top-down process of decision making should be overcome but it is not about changing the process to the down-up. The multi-directional communication between the priests and the faithful and among the faithful is essential. Planning and working on the common task through the multi-directional communication is itself an experience of synodality, and at the same time, it is a way to promote the autonomy of the faithful.

Second, on the basis of a principle of the unity between faith life and secular life, all members including pastors and believers should strengthen the 'solidarity of life.' The firmness of *Gyowuchon* as the community of faith was due not only to sharing the faith but also that of life. Even though nowadays it is impossible to live the same but bringing the style seems helpful. It will be the best if the people in this culture of individualism, can experience the beauty of the life and journeying together. The tradition of praying for souls in purgatory at the funeral is continued from the past until now, and it becomes the experience of how the community can be together with the bereaved in front of one's death, the most tremendous event of human life. The Church needs to study how to be together within the concrete life of the people in modern society and how to lead them to the experience of faith, love and hope.

This sharing and solidarity of life is one of the ways to overcome the lack of communication and alienation among community members. When members of the community do not leave a specific issue of a member as his or her own business alone, but share the burden, reflect on it and pray for the issue together, the spirit of the community will be strengthened. When the problems of the young, the elderly, the prime-aged, women, men, the disabled, LGBTQ+, the divorced and the remarried, the divorced, etc., they do not remain as one's own problems alone. Instead, when they are shared within the People of God and considered in the community, the communal solidarity of life and of the faith community can be strengthened. In fact, the rapid expansion of the pseudo-religions and the firm communion among them is due to this solidarity of life.

The enhancement of solidarity through the sharing of life cannot be fulfilled by a pastor alone. The pastor has his unique role; sharing the life can be more concrete when it is done by the one who actually lives that life. As the faithful in the past voluntarily shared their lives, every

faithful and every pastor today should share their lives in their own way. For this, the formation of the laity is indispensable. It is necessary to remind how significant the role of the lay chairman was and how careful the training of them was.

Third, to not make these sharing of life just some social gathering, it is necessary to have the common referential point of the faithful, which we have seen in *Gyowuchon* and 'Prayers for Souls in Purgatory.' The Word, Sacrament and faith are that reference point. The mutual devotion of the priest and the faithful during the era of persecution was possible because they were ardent in the same faith, longed to receive the Sacraments, and hoped for the eternal life. This common referential point will contribute for overcoming the separation between groups and the lack of communication.

Conclusion

Just like any other local churches in modern society, the Church in Korea is also facing crises. These crises remind the Church to ponder about who she is, for what she exists and for what she is called. Synodality is the style of the life of the Church, the way suggested by Vatican II, and now it is the process of conceptualization for the concrete realization of it. The conceptualization shows the way that the Church should follow and allows to think how to realize it concretely in the Church. As the Word of God became flesh in human history, the lifestyle of the Church always needs to be renewed, and inculturated. This inculturation will make the universal Church rich and bring certain new inspirations in the living tradition.