

TOWARDS A SYNODAL CHURCH IN TAIWAN: BRINGING OUT NEW AND OLD TREASURES

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Abstract

Mission is inextricably intertwined with the task of translation into the world's various languages. After recounting some of the challenges of translating synodality terms and concepts into Chinese, this essay recalls some past lived experiences of synodality by Chinese-speaking Catholics in Taiwan. From those experiences of communion and mission, participation and power, resolutions and results, selected insights for synodality are offered.

Keywords: Chinese-speaking Church; Church in Taiwan; Synodality; Taiwan Catholicism

Synodality evokes the earliest Tradition of the Church, in both style of the People of God on pilgrimage and also the organizational structures and ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels to discern how the Spirit guides the life and mission of the Church. The term "synodality," as a constitutive dimension of the Church, is also a sign of something new that has been maturing in the ecclesial consciousness following Vatican Council II.¹ Not surprisingly, then, the call to synodality likewise brings forth new and old treasures for

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¹International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church" (2018), nn. 3-5, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html

Chinese-speaking Catholicism. “Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Mt 13:52).

After recounting some of the challenges of translating synodality terms and concepts into Chinese, this essay recalls some past lived experiences of synodality, whether so-named or not, by Chinese-speaking Catholics in Taiwan. Finally, some reflections on insights and prospects for synodality are offered. Learning from the past may provide helpful guidance for synodality moving forward in Taiwan and throughout the world.

Synodality Translations

“For though languages differ throughout the world, the content of the Tradition is one and the same. The Churches established in Germany have no other faith or Tradition, nor do those of the Iberians, nor those of the Celts, nor those of the East, of Egypt, of Libya, nor those established at the center of the world...”² Catholic mission is inextricably intertwined with the task of translation into the world’s various languages and social contexts. The process for the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops opened with papal address, in Italian, on *sinodalità*, accompanied by prepared translations into *sinodalidad* (Spanish), *sinodalidade* (Portuguese), *synodality* (English), *Synodalität* (German), *synodalité* (French), and *synodalności* (Polish).³ cursory inspection suggests that languages differ throughout Europe, though not by much. Translation into other, more diverse languages throughout the wider world would await, involving more substantial translation difficulties and needing much more time to complete. As the Church talked about journeying together, the three-week successive Roman, diocesan, and parish launches were challenging especially for those languages with only partial or preliminary translation of the Synod’s preparatory documents. More consideration and time for different languages

²*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 174 quoting St Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* I, 10, 1–2: PG 7/1, 552–553.

³Papa Francesco, “Momento di Riflessione per l’inizio del percorso sinodale,” Aula Nuova del Sinodo, Roma, 2021.10.9, available with translations from the official Vatican website, at: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/it/2021/10/9/apertura-camminosinodale.html>. Arabic translation was also provided, perhaps reflecting increasing numbers of Arabic speakers in contemporary Europe.

throughout the world would be an appreciated expression of synodality and Catholicity.

The Chinese-speaking part of the world relies on a non-alphabetic language which would not admit simple homophonic romanization of *synodality*. During the preceding years, as synodality emerged as an increasingly prominent theme for Pope Francis,⁴ at least one salient question became increasingly unavoidable: how to translate the terms “synodality,” “synodal,” and “synod” into Chinese. Moreover, if the local churches in Taiwan,⁵ Hong Kong, Macau, mainland China, and elsewhere could concur on the same Chinese translation, that would be a desirable and fitting expression of synodal journeying together.

Without detouring unduly into Chinese linguistic and grammar issues which go beyond the scope of this present study, it bears noting that it is difficult to use variations of the same Chinese characters to translate the noun “synod” (event or organization), the adjective “synodal” (style or spirit) and the abstract noun “synodality” (concept).⁶ Thus the relationship between synodal style and synod assemblies is not necessarily readily evident in Chinese. Moreover, Chinese translations have not distinguished synods from other forms of ecclesial assemblies or councils, neither for the synods of early Church history nor for those of the Eastern churches. “In the Catholic Church the distinction between the use of the words ‘council’ and ‘synod’ is a recent one.”⁷ Where such words have not

⁴Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), n. 246; Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* (2018), nn. 3 and 4; Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* (2019), nn. 3, 203, 206; Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (2020), nn. 96 and 103. After convocation of the current synod, see also: Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* (2022), n. 4.

⁵This study focuses on the Taiwan context, with limited mention of other Chinese-speaking local churches insofar as relevant.

⁶The Chinese translation of “synod,” *tóngdào xiéxíng*, which also has the meaning of “Synodal Process,” does not share any obvious linguistic relation with the adjective “synodal,” *gòngyì xìng*, such that the synod’s logo, “Synod, 2021–2024: For a synodal Church—communion, participation, mission,” is translated “*Tóngdàoxiéxíng, 2021–2024: Yì gòngróng, cānyù jí shǐmìng lái tǎxiàn gòngyìxìngde jiàohuì*,” which then begs the Chinese-language question of the relationship between “Synod” and “synodal.” Translations from: Secretariat of the Chinese Regional Bishops’ Conference, Taiwan, at: https://www.catholic.org.tw/synod_info16.html; most of those translations are also available from the official Synod website’s, under the heading “Resources: Official Documents—Other Languages,” at: <https://www.synod.va/en/resources/official-documents.html>.

⁷ITC, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” n. 4. Cf. *Codex Iuris Canonici* (1983), cc. 336–348, 439–468.

been translated distinctly in the past, current developments in distinction and usage are even more difficult to comprehend.

In brief, for Chinese, the current synodality nomenclature is genuinely new, composed for present purposes, with no explicit linguistic relation to ecclesial assemblies such as the upcoming General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. In a Babel of languages, journeying together is not simple. The content of the Tradition, old and new, may be one and the same throughout the world; nonetheless, comprehension may be substantially conditioned by languages which differ substantially.

Synodality Experiences

Nonetheless, the Chinese-speaking Church identifies relatively well with the importance of convening in assembly to express and realize identity as Church, discerning how the Spirit guides the life and mission of the Church in contemporary realities. Historically, emergence of a Chinese local church made significant progress with convocation of the First Plenary Council of Shanghai, in 1924. Although not a “synod” in name, the Plenary Council’s General Assembly was prepared by seven regional meetings, in the preceding year.⁸ In more recent times, in 1967, the Archdiocese of Taipei convoked a Diocesan Synod, primarily for the purpose of implementing Vatican Council II.⁹ Similarly, Hong Kong convoked a Diocesan Convention, 1970-1971, with active participation of clergy, religious, and laity.¹⁰

For Taiwan Catholics and their regional episcopal conference, the experience of three evangelization congresses serves as significant background for understanding experience of the current Synod on synodality. In 1988, Taiwan convoked an Evangelization Congress which was preceded by four years of extensive consultations, with participation by clergy, religious, and laity, including representatives

⁸Anthony Lam, “Archbishop Costantini and The First Plenary Council of Shanghai (1924),” *Tripod* 148 (2008), pp. 29-47. This Council is also characterized as “The Catholic Synod of Shanghai 1924” in Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, *Christians in China: A.D. 600 A.D. 2000*, trans. M.N.L. Couve de Murville (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 7.

⁹The Chinese-language title *huìyì* has no specific “synod” connotations and could also be translated as “meeting,” “council,” “convention,” etc. Nonetheless, the official English translation was “Diocesan Synod.” *Text of the Synod of the Archdiocese of Taipei 1967* (Taipei: Archdiocese of Taipei, 1967).

¹⁰Sergio Ticozzi, “The Diocesan Convention (1970-71),” in *Historical Documents of the Hong Kong Catholic Church* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives, 1997), 186-190.

from Chinese-speaking Catholic communities throughout the world, and with main priorities focusing on lay identity and mission, communion, formation, and the signs of the times.¹¹ In 2001, Taiwan Catholics convened another evangelization congress, focusing on New Evangelization for Taiwan, with two general assemblies, in January and November, and committees met extensively with wider participation, during the intervening ten months.¹² Recently, Taiwan's third Evangelization Congress was announced in 2017, with initial plans for meeting in 2018. Due to desires for more comprehensive planning and greater participation, the preparatory period was extended. Subsequent coronavirus pandemic complications contributed to decisions to conduct this Evangelization Congress in successive parish, diocesan, and national stages, 2019-2021. That multi-stage process preceded—even prefigured—the current synodality process of the Synod of Bishops.

Thus, the October 2021 papal announcement of a Synod on synodality encountered a local church in Taiwan which was familiar with some of the synodal processes, even if lacking a common nomenclature to identify those experiences. Ordained and lay leaders, in fact, even consciously referenced the experience of the preceding three years in starting this synodal process, without—of course—denying that something new is emerging in the Church's synodal consciousness.

Synodality Insights and Prospects

Out of the treasury of Taiwan's past experiences of convening in ecclesial assembly, there may be both old and new gifts offering insights into current synodality efforts. Learning from the past may contribute to a more fruitful future. The following selected observations draw on Taiwan's experiences and are shared insofar as they may be relevant for other local churches.

Communion & Mission

In principle, efforts to renew ecclesial structures and enliven faith life are integral to and constitutive of increase in evangelization and

¹¹*Documents of the Symposium on Evangelization*, Taipei, Chinese Bishops Conference, 1988, p. 13. The Chinese name *Fuchuan Dahui* is better translated as "Evangelization Congress," *pace* title of this little-known English abstract of the voluminous Chinese documents.

¹² *Xīnshìjì xīnfúchuán dàhuì mǔhán juéyàn* (New Century, New Evangelization Congress pastoral letter and resolutions) (Taipei: Secretariat of the Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference, 2002).

mission. Yet, tension has been encountered between Church *ad intra* renewal and *ad extra* outreach. How much resources, including time, should be invested in enhancing faith life and advancing structural reform before commensurate enhancement in evangelical activity may be expected? Surely internal restructuring and external outreach are intimately linked, but on a practical level the two do not necessarily progress simultaneously. For a synodal Church, the pressing need for attention to improving communion and participation may leave greater attention to mission for a later time. Even so, excessive delay in missionary growth may also leave structural renewal depleted of vitality. Both communion and mission are important for moving forward.

When convening in Taiwan, in 1974, the First Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences declared: "To preach the Gospel in Asia today we must make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our people. The primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local church."¹³ At some times in history, building ecclesial communion may be the primary focus of evangelizing mission. Even now, there continues to be a need to focus on how the People of God is built up in communion, not as an alternative or diversion, but as a constitutive element of evangelizing mission. Yet, finding a suitable balance may likely continue to challenge the Church, especially as the Synod explores how to improve the quantity and quality of participation by members in the life and mission of the Church.

Participation & Power

The Church—at least, but certainly not only, in Taiwan—has heard the call of the Second Vatican Council to increase lay participation and responsibility in the Church's life and mission. Nonetheless, the Church—at least, but certainly not only, in Taiwan—continues to be characterized by clericalism. Ecclesial power is centrally concentrated, and culturally ingrained paternalism engenders an overly deferential attitude on the part of laypeople, impeding efforts to increase participation and share responsibility. This tension is obviously not

¹³FABC Plenary Assembly I, "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia," n. 9, in *Fifty Years of Asian Pastoral Guidance: Collection of the Statements of the Asian Bishops' Meeting and the Plenary Assemblies of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) (1970-2020)*, ed. Vimal Tirimanna (Hong Kong: FABC Central Secretariat, 2020), 4.

easy to overcome; even this well-intentioned call for synodality is incited by papal initiative—for which we give thanks.

Taiwan's synodality consultations affirmed that acknowledging the proper vocation and mission of laypeople involves overcoming clericalism and giving the laity greater responsibility in the Church's mission; moreover, "Synodality must not be confined to the spiritual sphere. It should be incarnated in the organizations of Church in terms of parishes, deaneries, dioceses, and in the administration framework of the Bishops' Conference."¹⁴ Overcoming obstacles to greater participation and shared responsibility inevitably involves reconsideration of the structure and style of ministries in the Church. Years earlier, when the First FABC Plenary Assembly convened in Taiwan, the late Catalino G. Arévalo, SJ, Filipino theologian, seminal FABC peritus, and "Father of Asian Theology," posited: "For Asian countries, may I submit that the question of the structures and shapes of ministry is of the very first importance. No discussion of the problems of evangelization in Asia can overlook this area."¹⁵ No discussion of synodality in Taiwan can overlook the issue of ministries, especially ordained ministries, and their relation to fuller lay participation and shared responsibility in the Church's mission.

Resolutions & Results

Taiwan Catholics evince no shortage of ability to convene assemblies, propose plans, and ratify resolutions. The Church in Taiwan also does not lack ability to acknowledge sincerely that results thus far remain limited. By way of example, *ad intra*, repeated calls to develop basic ecclesial communities have yielded modest results thus far. *Ad extra*, resolutions to strengthen evangelization efforts and increase Catholic membership have yet to achieve substantial breakthroughs. Reasons are many; brief and partial sharing is the most that is possible by way of conclusion to these reflections.

Taiwan Catholicism acknowledges difficulties in sustained efforts to implement plans and resolutions. Sometimes, official pronouncements may diverge substantially from actual situations or sentiments, eliciting responses that are dutiful but *pro forma* on the part of parishes

¹⁴"Bishops' Synod (2021-2023) Synthesis of Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference (CRBC)" (2022).

¹⁵Catalino G. Arévalo, "A First Working-Paper on Some Aspects of Evangelization in Asia Today," n. 40, in *Evangelization in Asia Today: Part One, A Compilation of Selected Papers for Use in Study and Discussion Groups in Preparation for the 1974 Synod* (Quezon City: Cardinal Bea Institute/Loyola School of Theology, 1974), 62.

and other ecclesial organizations. Sometimes, current plans and initiatives are quickly overshadowed by subsequent developments or directions. For example, Taiwan's third Evangelization Congress promulgated results in August 2021,¹⁶ which should have led to implementation. Nonetheless, in less than a month's time, by September 2021, Taiwan's limited ecclesial resources had turned to translation and introduction of synodality. What may follow synodality in 2024?

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfil" (Mt 5:17). Especially in this contemporary world, there seems to be an ongoing need for new initiatives. Yet, from time immemorial, such initiatives take time for implementation and fulfilment. As we endeavour to journey moving forward together, hopefully the 2025 "Pilgrims of Hope" Jubilee Year¹⁷ may not set aside current synodality efforts but allow jubilee time for fulfilling these plans with depth and creativity.

¹⁶See *Pastoral Guide for the Parishes of the Catholic Church in Taiwan* (Taipei: Secretariat of the Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference, 2021).

¹⁷See Pope Francis, "Letter to Msgr. Rino Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, for the Jubilee 2025," 2022.2.11.