

Emotional Maturity in the Light of Synodality: Contributions from Internal Family System Therapy

Daniel Barretto

Institute of Formative Spirituality and Counselling DVK, Bengaluru

Abstract

The author brings to light that the synodal mindset that is demanded by the synod on synodality demands the adequate development of emotional maturity, especially in relationships. To genuinely consider differing viewpoints, collaborate with the laity on an equal basis, and refrain from succumbing to clericalism, it is essential to address attachment wounds first. The author proposes that the Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy approach can help heal relational wounds through inner work. This can have positive repercussions with the development of emotional skills required to develop this new mindset. It examines similarities between the IFS way of dealing with the inner world of the person and Synodal practices like listening, collaboration, and leadership in the outer world.

Keywords: Synodality, Emotional Maturity, Internal Family System Therapy

Introduction

While synods have been a part of Church governance since ancient times, the concept of synodality has gained renewed emphasis in recent years, particularly under Pope Francis's pontificate (Pinto, 2023, p. 363). The proposed Synodal Church by Pope Francis would lead to changes in the pastoral arena. The first significant impact would be reduced clericalism within the Church, prompting each pastor to

reconsider their role as a missionary disciple, actively seeking out and caring for their congregation, much like the Good Shepherd, who personally tends to and knows his flock (Pinto, 2023, p. 374).

During the fiftieth anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis expressed the importance of the Church embracing synodality in the third millennium. He referred to Vatican II's call to move away from the understanding of the Church that developed in the second millennium, specifically the hierarchical, institutional model of evangelisation that emerged from the Gregorian reforms at the Council of Trent. Pope Francis emphasised the need for the Church to continue the spirit of reform rooted in the Council and move away from being stuck in the second-millennium way of being Church (Luciani, 2022, p. 26). With this spirit of reform, Pope Francis inaugurated a two-year synodal process titled "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission" in October 2021 (Pius, 2023, p. 324). This reform highlights that all members of the Church, as part of the People of God, have a role in proclaiming the Gospel (ITC, 53).

The Synod on Synodality does not explicitly address priestly formation. Neither the Preparatory Document nor the Vademecum refers to priestly formation. However, the Synod on Synodality concerns itself with the nature and operation of the entire Church, suggesting a need to integrate Synodality into priestly formation. Considering this perspective, it is appropriate to explore new perspectives on priestly formation based on the principles of synodality. While applying the synodal process to priestly formation may appear challenging, it is a significant effort. Neglecting to use the implications of the synodal process to priestly formation and allowing new priests to continue with the traditional clerical mindset could render the entire Synodal exercise futile (Kulandai, 2023, p. 528).

Synodal Skills

Synodality involves a transformation process, discovering how the Spirit can operate within the community. It entails exploring fresh and different approaches to engaging with people outside of our usual social, political, and religious customs. Efforts should be undertaken to eliminate the obstacles of distrust and suspicion in our society (Parayil, 2023, p. 5). Several fundamental principles guide this transformation, shaping its implementation and spirit. These principles define the synodal process and indicate the necessity of becoming more emotionally mature.

Synodality calls for a change in how religious and seminary formation is approached. For example, trained religious and seminarians need to transform emotional contamination into proactive empathy (Parayil, 2023, p. 8). In light of the Synod's call on Synodality, emotional maturity will consist of developing the emotional skills that help in genuine listening and collaboration. In addition, overcoming the temptation to fall into the error of clericalism will demand a high level of emotional maturity.

The Skill of Genuine Listening

The concept of synodality is rooted in the practice of profound, attentive listening. Genuine listening and dialogue involve attentively listening to others from their perspectives, worldviews, experiences, and backgrounds. Additionally, it requires genuinely considering and acknowledging what has been heard from them. This might also involve rectifying any misinterpretations or misunderstandings of the other person. The act of listening consists of recognising that everyone is created in God's image and treating them with the respect and dignity they deserve (Pinto, 2023, pp. 368–369).

Synodality, as a journey, is not a fixed endpoint but rather an ongoing process that demands a readiness to heed others perspectives, be receptive to fresh viewpoints and concepts, and participate in the mutual learning and development process (Kujur, 2023b, p. 71). Synodality demands that one develop the skill to listen to voices that oppose each other on specific issues. Only when one can open oneself to listening to new perspectives can one find what newness the Holy Spirit is inviting the church to adopt (Moons, 2022, pp. 380–381). It is not merely an act of charity but an obligation of the leaders of the ecclesial community to develop the art of listening to the church's lay members, who are members of the body of Christ and guided by his Spirit (Borras, 2022, p. 702).

The Skill of Collaborating with the Laity

The teachings found in Scripture and Tradition indicate that synodality is a crucial aspect of the Church (ITC, 42). The word synod consists of the preposition "with" and the noun "path," symbolising the path that the People of God journey together (ITC, 3). Synodality thus refers to the practice of journeying together in the life and mission of the Church (Dantis, 2023, p. 115). The key to walking together is the understanding of *sensus fidei*, which refers to the 'sense of faith'

that the faithful possess. It highlights that through the anointing of the Holy Spirit, all the baptised are urged by the sanctifying power of the Spirit to evangelisation. The *sensus fidei* enables the faithful to discern what is true of God and guides them in truth (ITC, 56). This implies that the mission of the Church is a collective effort that involves the active participation of all members of the People of God. It is every individual's responsibility to understand and proclaim the faith of the Church. This emphasises the importance of the community's involvement in the Church's mission of sharing its teachings (Pius, 2023, p. 331).

That is why, according to Pope Francis, journeying together as a community is not limited to pastors and the bishop of Rome but also includes laypeople (Francis, 2015). The *sensus fidei* prevents a strict division between a teaching Church and a learning Church, as the faithful also have an innate ability to recognise the new ways the Lord reveals to the Church. This is why the synodal process requires attentively listening to the People of God without considering their rank or position in the Church. Pope Francis revitalises the concept of the *sensus fidei* by affirming that through this gift of being free from error in matters of faith and morals, all baptised individuals are called to be missionaries (Pius, 2023, p. 332). Thus, the exchange of ideas within the Church should involve not just Bishops and their official theologians or endorsed writers but also all qualified members of the faith community – including laity, clergy, and theologians – whether they support or oppose specific ethical teachings of the Church (Lawler & Salzman, 2020, p. 116).

Overcoming the Temptation of Clericalism

In his teachings, Pope Francis strongly condemns clericalism; he has called it “a perversion of the Church” (Francis, 2018b). He views it as a significant facilitator of the sexual abuse scandal within the clergy. He firmly believes that eradicating abuse necessitates the unequivocal rejection of all forms and manifestations of clericalism within the church (Francis, 2018a). Hence, the call for a synodal Church is not only a critical step in bringing the vision of Vatican II into reality but is also particularly significant given the crisis the Church is currently facing. The scandals involving the sexual abuse of minors and the mishandling of abuse accusations by Church leaders, especially diocesan bishops, emphasise the necessity for a change in the approach to leadership within the Church (Wijlens, 2022, p. 414). Pope Francis emphasises

that clericalism distorts the identity of priests and laypeople, introduces injustice into ecclesial relationships, and fails to move away from a hierarchical view of the church. Pope Francis stresses that clericalism primarily affects the self-awareness of the clergy and is deeply rooted in the ecclesial system (Noceti, 2023, pp. 77–78).

Importance of Emotional Maturity

Some recent research and studies reveal that emotional formation is the weakest link in the whole formation cycle (Parappully, 2012, p. 110). This is an area of concern because emotional maturity is a very important prerequisite for effectiveness in the priesthood (John & Varkey, 2012, p. 50). As a man of communion, the priest will always be responsible for the community. It is, therefore, essential for him to develop the capacity to relate to others in an emotionally mature way (Paul II, 1992, 43). To effectively lead a diverse church, one needs to be relational (McClone, 2009, p. 6).

Maturity is a term utilised in psychological studies to signify that an individual is able to react to life circumstances and their environment in a suitable and flexible manner (Kuttianimattathil, 2012, p. 28). When it comes to maturity, it's crucial to understand that maturity is a continuous process, a journey that lasts throughout one's life. It's not something achieved once and for all. Today, the field of psychology discusses various life stages, each with its tasks that must be mastered to attain maturity for that stage. Since maturity is an ongoing process, we can only consider a person as a mature child, teenager, or adult if they have achieved the appropriate growth for their particular stage. For example, a child is considered mature even though it depends on its mother for everything, whereas the same characteristic in a teenager would be a sign of immaturity (Kuttianimattathil, 2012, pp. 4–5).

Emotional maturity refers to the emotional behaviour typically achieved by adults after adolescence. It enables individuals to display well-balanced emotional behaviour in their daily lives. Individuals are considered emotionally mature when they experience the appropriate emotions in the proper situations and express them appropriately (Sanwal et al., 2023, p. 76). Emotional maturity can be described as taking ownership of our emotions, experiences, actions, and situations in our lives (Muk, 2013, p. 22). Individuals are considered emotionally mature when they can recognise when to manage their emotions and when to allow them to guide them (John & Varkey, 2012, p. 51).

Emotionally mature persons can form intimate relationships that involve making and keeping commitments with individuals. They are ready to make sacrifices for the sake of these commitments. They are open to creating transparent and trusting close relationships that involve psychological nakedness where they are present to the other without any masks or pretences (Parappully, 2012, p. 99).

Affective or Relational Maturity

Affection is a feeling that surfaces within interpersonal connections. Therefore, affective maturity refers to emotional maturity directed at establishing close relationships with others (Srampickal, 2012, p. 68). Affective maturity involves having the interpersonal skills to accurately recognise, understand, and express genuine emotions with people from diverse backgrounds and the ability to listen, understand, and empathise with their experiences (McClone, 2009, p. 6). The capacity for healthy relationships is the fundamental component of affective maturity (Parappully, 2012, p. 27).

Affective maturity enables the priest to handle authority, his subordinates, those under his care, and individuals of the opposite sex with maturity (*Program of Priestly Formation: In the United States of America*, 2022, p. 78). A person with affective maturity can accept differences in opinion and criticisms in a healthy manner (D'Souza, 2007, p. 87). These individuals demonstrate the capacity to grow in self-awareness and operate from an internal sense of control, taking responsibility for their behaviour (McClone, 2009, p. 6). Such persons learn from their mistakes and are willing to accept the consequences of their mistakes (D'Souza, 2007, p. 88). Signs of affective maturity are the presence of prudence, compassion towards others, ability to express and acknowledge emotions, esteem and respect for interpersonal relationships between men and women (*Program of Priestly Formation: In the United States of America*, 2022, p. 90).

Childhood Attachment Wounds and Relational Maturity

Children learn to communicate their feelings by watching their primary caregivers, and emotional regulation develops within the framework of these relationships. Additionally, it has been suggested that children with secure attachments who have had supportive and adaptable parents are more likely to express their emotions effectively and acquire skills to cope with challenging situations. Early attachment theory highlighted that adult attachment influences emotions, behavioural approaches,

and emotional regulation within relationships (Mortazavizadeh et al., 2022, p. 2).

The capacity for growing in intimacy can thus be blocked due to early childhood experiences in terms of the person's relationship with their primary caregivers. People who, in their earliest childhood days, experienced their mothers as caring and loving find it easier to experience positive emotions such as love and trust later on in life and thus have a greater capacity to have intimate relationships with others. Those who experienced their mothers as rejecting, impersonal and cold in their early childhood tend to have negative emotions such as jealousy and emotional instability that severely reduce their capacity to have intimate relationships. Those who experience their mother's love as fluctuating with their moods and needs, i.e. unstable, tend to later on in life experience obsession, jealousy and excesses in sexual attraction in their relationships, which severely diminishes their capacity for healthy intimacy. Thus, a critical support for affective maturity in attaining intimacy is to achieve emotional maturity by healing childhood attachment wounds (Srampickal, 2012, pp. 69–70). It is in this light that IFS therapy would prove very beneficial in healing from relational wounds (Anderson, 2021, p. 13). By healing these relational wounds, one would develop the appropriate affective maturity, which is emotional maturity in relationships that enables one to adopt the skills required for the synodal mindset. The following text will now elaborate a bit on IFS and how its principles have a positive influence on encouraging synodality.

Overview of IFS Therapy

IFS Therapy, developed by psychologist Richard Schwartz in the 1980s, offers a unique perspective on the human psyche and is a powerful approach to healing and personal growth (Crete, 2024, p. 72). By 2015, IFS therapy had been acknowledged as an evidence-based practice, with published research demonstrating its clinical effectiveness in treating various conditions, like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and the physical symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis (Mok, 2023, p. 29). IFS therapy is rated effective for improving general functioning and well-being by the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). IFS is also considered promising for dealing effectively with phobias, panic attacks and generalised anxiety disorders (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020, p. 5). IFS

is currently the most comprehensive model for successfully dealing with trauma. This is because it deals with the cognitive, somatic, and emotional aspects of trauma and is thus holistic in its approach (Anderson, 2021, p. 6).

The Internal Family of Parts

At the heart of IFS is the idea that the human mind is not a monolithic entity but a complex system of distinct sub-personalities known in IFS as ‘parts’. The human mind is naturally composed of various different parts. Each part has its distinct personality, abilities, and desires. These parts live together to form an inner family or tribe, much like the structure of human societies. Recognising that the mind inherently consists of diverse parts in IFS therapy is crucial (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020, p. 39).

The IFS model uses many concepts from family therapy with one twist: It applies the family therapy principles not just to external families but also to internal families consisting of parts. These parts have relational dynamics similar to external families (Mones, 2014, p. 7). Parts are normal aspects of the personality; however, when something overwhelming happens, they usually take on specific roles classified into three categories: exiles, managers, and firefighters. Exiles carry the emotional pain of the overwhelming traumatic event. They hold the emotional wounds of shame, lack of love, and betrayal. Managers and firefighters try to protect the internal system from being overwhelmed by the emotional pain of the exile. The managers take on preventive roles, while the firefighters take on reactive roles in protecting the system (Anderson, 2021, pp. 7–8).

Managers focus on preserving social connections and attempt to hide traits they view as weak or undesirable. They primarily use inhibition, which can manifest in various forms, such as symptoms of psychological distress like dissociation or denial, self-directed criticism, warnings or threats, and pessimistic perspectives on opportunities. Firefighters respond to this inhibition with rebellious and uninhibited behaviour to lessen emotional pain. If the firefighter’s strategy works toward getting relief in the short term from emotional pain, then the firefighter will not bother with long-term consequences. Common firefighter behaviours include substance abuse, eating disorders, pornography consumption, promiscuity, and engagement in other high-risk activities that serve as distractions from the emotional pain of the exile. While some protector

parts inhibit and others disinhibit, all protectors work to keep emotional pain suppressed and are not aware that pushing away the exile exacerbates their panic and suffering. When exiled parts experience panic and manage to emerge into awareness, protectors intensify their efforts to exclude them. This recurring and draining dynamic consumes significant mental and emotional energy (Herbine-Blank & Sweezy, 2021, p. 3).

Self as the Compassionate Leader Uniting the Internal Family

A crucial aspect of IFS is the concept of the Self, which Schwartz describes as the core essence of an individual. Each individual possesses a Self. He chose this term because his clients used it to describe their experience when their parts worked together instead of competing for control. They felt more relaxed, open, and accepting and would express that they felt more like themselves. The concept of Self in IFS is distinguished from the more typical uses of the word by author Schwartz's use of a capital 'S'. In IFS, the Self is perceived as an intrinsic, undamaged resource. When clients are in touch with their Self, they exhibit "qualities like curiosity, calm, courage, compassion, creativity, connection, confidence, and clarity, which Schwartz dubbed the 8 C's of Self-energy" (Sykes et al., 2023, p. 22). The Self is seen as the natural leader of the internal system, capable of healing and harmonising the various parts (Earley, 2022, p. 35).

IFS Therapy as Internal Attachment Work

IFS therapy can be considered as "internal attachment work" (Anderson, 2021, p. 47). IFS therapy aims to help individuals achieve Self-leadership, where their parts feel loved by the Self and trust in the Self's guidance. This connection with the Self can bring about a significant sense of inner peace and the ability to engage with life's challenges and others with clarity, serenity, confidence, courage, and empathy. Individuals led by their Self, experience the joy of reclaiming the energy their protectors previously used for restraint, containment, distraction, and defiance. Additionally, they gain access to the creativity, happiness, and innocence of childlike parts that were previously exiled, allowing them to experience play once more (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020, p. 23).

IFS therapy aims to transform the extreme roles of the different emotional parts into functional capacities and promote their cooperation under the Self's guidance (Earley, 2022, p. 40). This aim can be elaborated into

four primary goals. The first consists of helping parts free themselves from the roles that have been forced upon them and to be allowed to be who they were intended to be. The second goal is to help parts trust the leadership role of the Self. The third goal is to help the inner system reharmonise with the new roles of the parts under the leadership of the Self. The fourth and final goal is to extend the internal Self-leadership style to outside relationships (Schwartz, 2021, p. 34).

IFS Thinking Complementing Synodal Practices

This section explores how the IFS framework can help foster ways of thinking that support the emotional maturity required for a synodal mindset to thrive. It will focus on three topics covered before: genuine listening, collaboration, and overcoming clericalism.

Genuine Listening & IFS

The emotional maturity required to develop the skill of genuine listening demanded by the concept of synodality resonates with the IFS emphasis on treating each part with respect and considering the opinions of all the parts before making any change in the system. Each part of the internal family has unique talents that contribute to the system's efficient functioning (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020, p. 39). In IFS, all internal parts are approached with curiosity and compassion to understand their roles and acknowledge their impact. The focus is on establishing a collaborative relationship of care and reliance with each part to address its needs and support healthy functioning. The IFS methodology emphasises engaging with internal parts from this perspective. Instead of attempting to eliminate or suppress challenging parts, the model encourages curiosity about their roles and origins to foster internal collaboration rather than conflict (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020, p. 38).

Collaboration & IFS

The concept of harmony relates to the interconnections among individuals within a system. In harmonious systems, there is an effort to identify the appropriate role for each member and the role that best suits them. Individuals work together toward a shared vision while acknowledging and supporting individual differences in approach and vision. A harmonious system allows each person to define and pursue their vision while also working to align that vision with the overarching vision of the system. In this setting, individuals are open to compromising some of their resources and goals for the greater good,

as they feel valued for their personal qualities and contributions and are mindful of each other's well-being. Polarisation occurs when harmony is replaced by its opposite. Within a polarised relationship, each moves from a flexible, harmonious stance to a rigid, extreme stance that opposes or competes with the other person's position (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020, p. 27). IFS aims "toward healing and harmony in our inner and outer worlds" (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020, p. 23). Thus, collaboration resonates with the IFS concept of internal harmony and collaboration among parts. Just as IFS seeks to create a harmonious internal system led by the Self, synodality aims to foster a unified yet diverse Church community guided by the Holy Spirit.

Overcoming Clericalism and the Self as a Compassionate Leader

The concept of a Synodal Church necessitates the exploration of new models of leadership that will support a synodal mindset. Individuals' perception of the Church dramatically influences their leadership style. How one comprehends the Church is evident in their approach to leadership. Embracing the concept of the Church as a pilgrim in a state of journey should catalyse a shift in its leadership structure. Pope Francis has presented a vision of a Synodal Church, which requires Church leadership to relinquish former ecclesiological views and embrace new ones for this vision to come to fruition (Fernandez, 2023, p. 659).

A synodal approach means the faithful play an essential role in moving forward together. The faithful's active participation is crucial in the Church's mission and evangelisation (Kujur, 2023a, p. 81). Leadership thus involves taking the opinions of all. In IFS, the Self can compassionately care for and depolarise warring parts, lead discussions with parts on significant life decisions, and handle interactions with the external world. Under Self-leadership, parts do not disappear, but their extreme roles do (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020, pp. 38–39). The IFS concept of the Self as a compassionate leader can inform a priest's understanding of his role as a servant-leader, thus combatting clericalism and enhancing Synodal leadership styles.

Conclusion

The Synod on Synodality proposes a new way of being a church. It demands a change in the mindset of all the people of God. This mindset change is seen primarily in how the lay faithful and clergy relate to each other. From the viewpoint of the clergy, it involves priests overcoming

the temptations of clericalism and developing the skills of genuine listening and collaboration. The development of these skills requires first the development of affective maturity, which is emotional maturity in the area of relationships. The development of affective maturity, in turn, can be blocked by attachment wounds. So, to develop the affective maturity required to adopt a synodal mindset, it is necessary to heal these attachment wounds. With this regard, IFS therapy has a twofold contribution to make. One, IFS therapy helps in overcoming attachment wounds through internal attachment work. On the other hand, it accomplishes this attachment healing by facilitating similar skills required to bring about synodal communities in the external world.

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