

Last but not Least

For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission, with Special Reference to the Multi-Ecclesial Context in India

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Abstract

This paper explores Synodality within India's multi-ecclesial context, inspired by Pope Francis' vision of a "Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission." Rooted in Greek and Latin, "Synod" means "assembly" and historically referred to gatherings of bishops. Synodality seeks to unite the Body of Christ, promoting faith, communion, and participation. In India, diverse rites like Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara present unique challenges to synodality, requiring inclusivity and a shift in mindset. The paper examines the historical development and challenges of the Indian Catholic Church, offering insights into realizing a truly synodal Church that listens to and engages all members.

Keywords: Synodality, Communion, Participation, Mission, Multi-Ecclesial, India, Pope Francis, Eastern Churches, Latin Church.

Introduction

Pope John XXIII awakened and wondered the whole world through his visionary act of ordering "The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican," also known as the "Second Vatican Council." It broke the old clutches of traditional chains and initiated the Catholic Church to open its windows to the modern world and all the children of God. That open

mentality also offered a more significant role to laypeople, ushered in the concept of religious freedom, and led to a dialogue with other faiths. It also elucidated the Holy Bible in a human language, even when the Church followed some ecumenical hierarchy.

Nevertheless, the election of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who took the name Francis of Assisi as the 266th Pope in 2013, sparked a remarkable change in the Catholic Church. His words, deeds, encyclicals, apostolic letters, and convictions heralded a time of rebirth or renewal in the Catholic Church. By initiating the synodal process, he catalyzed the renewal of the Church in a unique way. Inaugurated on October 10th, the “Synod on Synodality” with the theme “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission” will offer a roadmap for the Church’s future, with each diocese holding a synod – listening to the voice of the faithful at the parish level - something that has rarely happened (Mathew, 2021). It’s a kind of reincarnation of the themes and views of the Second Vatican Council. In essence, the two-year Synodal process (October 2021-October 2023) is a God-given bounty to the entire humanity to tread along His pathway with communion, participation, and mission. But it’s a challenging path, *Ipso facto*.

Objectives of the paper

The research aims to explore the concept of Synodality within the Indian Multi-Ecclesial context, focusing on understanding Pope Francis’ vision of a Synodal Church, and examining the challenges and practical implications of Synodality for communion, participation, and mission in India.

Etymological and Historical

In the tradition of the Catholic Church, “Synod” is an important and venerable word. The word “Synod” is derived from the Greek word ‘*Synodos*’ which means “assembly” or “meeting.” Especially the word “*Synodos*” is equivalent to the Latin word “*Concilium*” meaning “council” (Britanica, 2020). Initially, in the early days of Church synods were meetings of bishops. The concept of “Synod” also imbibed the essence of early Church’s spirit and communion, which is nothing but according to Acts of Apostle 4: 32 “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” It is also an invitation to the people of God to have faith in God and live in communion and participation with whom we encounter and have concern for everyone in society as our duty and responsibility.

In other words, the word “Synodality” reminds the mission of the Church is to build up the Body of Christ in the world. According to John 14:6, both Jesus and his teachings were ‘the way, the truth, and the life.’ Christians in Jerusalem and elsewhere in the early Church were known as people of “the way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4, 22; 24:14, 22) due to the way they lived in public as “together on the way,” the Christian way. It was common for the early Churches of Jerusalem and other filial Churches to function as a federal union with numerous common practices, norms, and disciplines. In the early centuries, there were synodal meetings to strengthen and cultivate such modes of Christian unity and ways of living. According to Acts 15:1-35, the first such Synodal meeting was the Jerusalem Council. As well as this, the Church of the first millennium adhered to an age-old maxim, “that which affects all should be deliberated and approved by all” (*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet*). An overview of the Synodal process is provided by this maxim (Thomas, 2022).”

Pope Francis on Synodality

On the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis gave a magisterial address with His unique reflections on the Synod and the Catholic Church. At this event, Pope Francis emphasized the importance of Synodality as being a result of Vatican II and that today’s Church must be a Synodal Church. According to Pope Francis, the world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of ‘*Synodality*’ which God expects of the Church of the third millennium (Francis, 2015). On October 10, 2021, Pope Francis formally opened a two-year process called “a synod on synodality,” officially known as “Synod 2021-2023: For a Synodal Church.” In gist, it involves expanding an established institution called a “Synod of Bishops.” This means bishops from around the world will consult with everyone, from members both ordained and non-ordained, men and women, single, married, widowed, religious and clergy, members of various age groups and professions, before coming together for a discussion in 2023 (Clark, 2021).

The book of Acts of the Apostles is the primary inspiration for the theme. The Council of Jerusalem is described in chapter 15 of the Acts. At the Council of Jerusalem, discussions were conducted in a Synodal manner. In both Saints Peter and Paul, consultation and participation were essential parts of the decision-making process. Here, we find two different groups

of Christians: The Church of Jewish tradition and those newly received from another context, whom they referred to as gentiles. The Council of Jerusalem resolved the issues plaguing the Church. In our context today, it allows us to move forward in a ‘Synodal’ manner (Cleemis, 2021).

The Holy Father said to the theologians (international commission) that the Synod is not a walk in the park; the synod journey requires listening and patience. It is not holding hands and going for a walk, having a party with young people or surveying opinions, like “what do you think about women priests”. Synodality (journeying together) is an ecclesial journey that has a soul, which is the Holy Spirit, and without the Holy Spirit, there is no journeying together. Allow people to talk so that the wisdom of the people of God will come forth because Synod is nothing other than making explicit what *Lumen Gentium* promulgated for all Catholics: The whole people of God, all from bishops downwards, is infallible in belief... i.e., they cannot err when there is harmony among all (*Sensus Fidei*) (Machodo, 2021).

Role of the Church

Pope Francis consistently calls the Church to renewal and living the Gospels radically, as seen in his writings like *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato Si*, and *Fratelli Tutti*. The Synod represents another key step in this renewal, emphasizing the journey of the People of God together (Mulackal, 2021). The *Vademecum* envisions Synodality as a process of listening, discernment, and dialogue, under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, uniting the Church with humanity (*Vademecum*, 2021). Pope Francis acknowledges that while “journeying together” is easy to express, it is difficult to practice (Francis, 2015).

For Pope Francis, the Church’s mystery is rooted in communion and mission, both highlighted by the Second Vatican Council. St. John Paul II emphasized that Christian fellowship, or *koinonia*, strengthens the Church’s mission to unite God’s people with Him. Communion reflects the Holy Trinity’s nature, with the Holy Spirit uniting us through Christ to the Father. This unity is foundational in hearing God’s Word and the Church’s Tradition (*Vademecum*, 2021). Synodality, as an “ecclesiology of communion,” encourages clergy and laity to collaborate and share responsibility in decision-making (Machado, 2021).

Active participation is essential in Synodality. All faithful are called to contribute their spiritual gifts for the community’s benefit, overcoming

barriers of caste, ethnicity, and power (ICT Syn., 67-68). This inclusive participation is fundamental for building a Synodal Church that reflects God's covenant with His people (Vademecum, 2021).

Evangelization remains the Church's primary mission. The Synod's missionary nature focuses on witnessing the Gospel, especially to those on society's peripheries, and being a leaven for God's kingdom in the world (Vademecum, 2021). Communion has the love and unity of the Trinity at its roots and is expressed in God's covenant with his people. Participation is a call for all of the People of God to engage in listening deeply and respectfully to one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Finally, mission implies evangelization. We are all called to bear witness to the love of God in the midst of the world (Gregory, 2021).

The Indian Context

The Catholic Church is the communion of 24 Individual Churches. A Synodal process includes listening, dialogue, and community discernment in which everyone is welcome to participate and contribute. "In India, we have three *sui iuris* Churches: three Churches that are united in Christ, part of the Roman Catholic Church under the authority of Pope Francis but with their internal autonomy in many matters" (Gracias, 2021). On the theological perspective, "each of our episcopal bodies will conduct their procedure independent of each other: the Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI) for the Latin Church; the Syro Malabar Synod for the Syro Malabar Church and the Syro Malankara Synod for the Syro Malankara Church" (Gracias, 2021).

Church life has always been characterised by the nature of synodality, whether local or universal, from its basic dimensions. Councils and synods play a vital role in maintaining and promoting ecclesiastical unity and determining matters of faith and discipline. Communion is the essence of the Christian faith which means every Church. Because the Church is a communion of believers, the faithful, worthy and elected, members of the Church used to assemble as a group or community possessing authority, to consult and make decisions based on due deliberation guided by the Holy Spirit for the protection of the faith and morals, as well as the unity of the Church (Thonippara, 2017). The diocesan synods of particular churches exercise synodality at the first level. Secondly is the level of Ecclesiastical Provinces and Ecclesiastical Regions, and finally is the level of the universal Church. By joining together Episcopal collegiality with an entirely synodal

Church, the Synod of Bishops represents the Catholic episcopate. According to Pope Francis, the Church hierarchy is like a pyramid upside-down, with the top on the bottom, so ordained clergy are called ministers. It also indicates the existence and the practice of synodality in the Indian Churches.

Synod of Bishops is “a group of bishops who have been chosen from different regions and meet together at fixed times to foster closer unity between the Roman Pontiff and bishops, to assist the Roman Pontiff with their counsel in the preservation and growth of faith and morals” (CIC 1983, Canon 342). Then the Eparchial Assembly, “In the Eastern Churches, a parallel institute to the Diocesan Synod is the Eparchial Assembly which is periodically convened at the discretion of the eparch to advise him on matters of importance for the eparchy (CCEO, cc. 235-242).” And finally, Local Assemblies, In Indian Eastern Church of St Thomas evolved its quasi-synodal structure known as *palliyogam* or church-assembly, which had most of the powers of the previous provincial Synods except for the election of bishops.” However, synodality was practised in the Church. As Vatican II puts it, the Church is the people of God (LG chap 2). This emphasises the equality of members of the Church. Every baptised person is a member of the royal priesthood and is called to act on the promptings of the Holy Spirit. This was practised by the Indian Eastern Church in its real spirit. But this was not in the case of Latin Churches. For them, the concept of Synadoliy was a little wider and far perspective. Nevertheless, after the Vatican 2nd, they too imparted some spirit of Synadality.

Challenges of the Time

Eastern Churches have certain canonical reservations about the participation of all the faithful in the decision-making process of synodal institutions. It is generally understood that synod, when Latin code (CIC) refers to the synod of bishops and the diocesan synod, is different from its eastern connotation. The synod in CIC is viewed as a group or assembly of the people of God, including representatives of deacons, priests, laity, and members of consecrated life institutes and/or apostolic societies. Also, in the Latin Church, synods are seen as consultative bodies with no binding or special authority (Vazhapilly, 2021).

Contrary to this, in the “Eastern Code (CCEO), non-episcopal participation is excluded from the synod (CCEO c. 102 *1). “The synods in Eastern Churches, composed of only bishops, are legislative and judicial bodies with legislative and judicial power. They are not

considered merely consultative. “Eastern code views all institutions, which have only consultative vote not as synods but as assemblies like eparchial, patriarchal or major archiepiscopal assemblies. These assemblies ensure the broad participation of priests, religious and laity (CCEO cc. 140- 145) (Vazhapilly, 2021). “Eastern churches face a serious challenge in achieving a synodal church of the future. The effectiveness of synodality in particular churches is determined by how effectively the challenge of compromise with the traditional eastern understanding of synod and the participation of the people of God, at the very least with an advisory voice, if not with deciding vote, is resolved. Because even the presence of faithful observers at Synods will ground the Church in concrete realities, and this will be the Church of God’s people in its true sense (Vazhapilly, 2021).

Historical Aspects

During the period of Latin church (1599-1896), the regional and general ‘*yogams*’ became extinct because they were incompatible with the mediaeval concept of monarchic episcopal power prevalent in the West, which did not permit any participation of the Christian faithful in the administration and decision making of the Church. The former Mahayogam was renovated in 1998 and given Major Archiepiscopal Assembly (MAA). In the metropolitan *sui iuris* Churches, the core ideals of Vatican II, namely autonomy and self-government, are not fully realised. Before the Synod of ‘Diamper’, the concept of Synadality was very strong and relevant among the traditional St. Thomas Christians. The ancient traditions were replaced by the Latin vestment, rituals, and customs after the Synod of ‘Diamper’. As a result of this Latinization and disregard for local traditions, schisms developed among Thomas Christians by the mid-17th century. We have to emphasise this reality in the discussion of ‘Synodality’s challenges in the Multi-Ecclesial context in India’.

In the Latin Church, synods are seen as consultative bodies with no binding authority or special authority, which means the concepts of “Synodality: Communion, Participation, and Mission” are not applicable in its full spirit and vigour unless they change their way of approach and mentality. In gist, most importantly,

Strangely this time it is the Latin Church in India that finds itself in a situation of discrimination vis-a-vis the Orientals! While the synodal structure governs the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches,

according to the Eastern Code, which allows them to have their autonomy, including the power to elect bishops – only to be ratified by the Pope – the Latin Church is deprived of a self-governing synodal structure (Wilfred, 2021).

Pope Francis also expressed the two sides of “Synodality”, “What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word “Synod”. Journeying together — laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome — is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice” (Francis, 2015).

Practical Aspects

In this context, we have to think about how synodality is practical in the Multi- Ecclesial context in India. Actually, Synodality is the basic characteristic of the Church. Catholicism is a communion of individual churches. There are three rites in India. They have their heritage. Every Church needs to preserve its synodal ways of thinking within its context. As far as the common witness is concerned, “especially in Kerala, where the three individual Rites have a visible presence, the KCBC must function on a synodal manner, listening to one another, respecting one another, caring for each other and witnessing the mother church in a deeper sense of communion” (Cleemis, 2021). A synodal church is the only one capable of witnessing communion in the given contexts.

Conclusion

Synodality is a Christian way of life, emphasizing participation and communion in all aspects of the Church. In India, the Eastern Churches have a tradition of practicing synodality, focusing on practical rather than legal aspects. The Latin Church, however, only embraced synodality after the Second Vatican Council, and more changes are still needed for inclusiveness. For an authentic synodal Church in India’s multi-ecclesial context, mutual understanding, harmony, and the inclusion of all voices are essential. The Synod’s universal phase in October 2023 was a historic moment for the Syro-Malabar Church, marking the 100th anniversary of its hierarchy’s re-establishment. Synodality requires a change in mindset, moving away from territorial jurisdiction and majority-minority thinking, fostering a spirit of listening and inclusivity to reflect the vision of Pope Francis and the Holy Spirit (Vademecum 3.5; Gracias, 2021).

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