

# Synodality through a Eucharistic Lens

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**Abstract:** Eucharist and Synodality are important and related practices of the Church. This article contends that the practice of Eucharist at the local level can either enhance or inhibit our growth as a synodal church with an appropriate synodal spirituality. To achieve this, the article reviews the nature of synodality, and then considers three key aspects of synodality (communion, participation and mission) in their eucharistic enactment.

**Keywords:** Synodality • Eucharist • Communion • Participation • Mission

## Introduction

The topic at hand today is synodality, specifically through a eucharistic lens. The goal is not only to explore the intersection of eucharist and synodality, but specifically to consider the practices that reside at the core of both of these and discern to what extent they may promote synodality as a way of being church.

Eucharist, like all liturgy, is essentially a practice. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* makes this clear when it teaches “that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of his body, which is the church, is a preeminently sacred action. No other action of the church equals its effectiveness by the same title nor to the same degree.”<sup>1</sup> Even though folk too easily equate eucharist with a book or a teaching, a consecrated host or a cup of wine, it is first and foremost a verb – what David Power christened an “eventing” of God’s grace and human response in verbal and nonverbal

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<sup>1</sup> *Sacrosanctum concilium*, no. 7 [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html)

languages within a given historical continuum in space and time.<sup>2</sup> It is in the eventing of eucharist – in what is classically understood as the *lex orandi* (law of praying) – that our believing and living (the *lex credendi* and *lex vivendi*) are actualized.

Similarly, synodality essentially is also a practice.<sup>3</sup> While there are theologies behind this practice – as with our eucharistic acting – synodality is not simply a theoretical concept or proposed new hierarchical structure but a form of ecclesial path-building: what the International Theological Commission calls the *modus vivendi et operandi* of the church.<sup>4</sup> Synodality is the way Pope Francis is calling us to live and work together in faith; it is the manner in which the whole people of God are to be involved and participate in the life and mission of the church.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, since both eucharist and synodality are practices, and since the eucharistic action has been dogmatically defined as the central act – the *de facto* source and summit – of the church,<sup>6</sup> then it is both appropriate and necessary to consider how the pivotal practice of eucharist can promote the desired practice of synodality. Happily, the essence of reformed worship finds deep resonance in the “motto” for the official synodal process, as highlighted in the title of the preparatory document for the 2023 synod of bishops: “For

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<sup>2</sup> David Power, *Sacrament: the Language of God's Giving* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), pp. 51ff

<sup>3</sup> Jos Moons, “A Comprehensive Introduction to Synodality: Reconfiguring Ecclesiology and Ecclesial Practice,” *Roczniki Teologiczne* 2 (2022) 83.

<sup>4</sup> International Theological Commission [hereafter, ITC], “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” no. 6 [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html) [accessed 30 May 2023].

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Sacrosanctum concilium*, no. 10

a synodal church: communion, participation and mission.” Furthermore, that preparatory document specifically lifts up the celebration of the Eucharist as a privileged way in which synodality is articulated as a constitutive dimension of the church.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the basic thesis of this article is that the manner in which we celebrate the eucharist at the local level not only articulates but also rehearses synodality as a way of being church.

First, a necessary word about the language of “rehearsal.” For some – maybe because of experiences with school plays and amateur theater – to rehearse conjures up the exercise of endlessly repeating action or dialogue until actors finally get it right. Such a definition, while appropriate in helping amateurs get through a theatrical production without a major catastrophe, is inadequate for thinking about worship as a rehearsal. The form of rote rehearsal known to most amateur actors and directors – what psychologists labeled “maintenance rehearsal” – is helpful for keeping information in our working memory for short periods of time. However, this way of appropriating information never really works its way deep into our psyches, and easily evaporates. Different from maintenance rehearsal is what psychologists call “elaborative rehearsal,” which is not simply repeating dialogue and blocking over and over again, but instead involves probing the meaning of the action or language to be remembered. This requires relating the information to prior knowledge and then making the information personally meaningful. Crafting personal connections to words, makes it easier to remember this information; the result of such connective work is that the relevant information can be permanently

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<sup>7</sup> “Preparatory Document: For a synodal church: Communion, Participation, and Mission,” No. 27, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-preparatory-document.html>

stored in long-term memory.<sup>8</sup>

While elaborative rehearsal is ordinarily cued to language, it has parallels in non-linguistic frameworks. I would argue that the weekly cycle of worship is one of those. The model of elaborative rehearsal is a valid way to understand how eucharist extends an invitation to the baptized to make deep connections to the words and actions of this central worship event. It is akin to what Nathan Mitchell calls thinking with the whole human sensorium, in which “the ritual is inscribed on the skin, borne by the blood, carved in the bone.”<sup>9</sup> Mitchell’s approach respects the broadly held understanding that ritual action possesses a power unto itself, and is not reliant, for example, upon the intentions of the presiding ministers.

The U.S. bishops honestly reckoned with this truth in the 1972 document *Music in Catholic Worship*, teaching: “Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations weaken and destroy faith.”<sup>10</sup> While a revised version of that document attempted to soften that statement with “poor celebrations *may* weaken and destroy faith,”<sup>11</sup> it could not diminish the original’s truthfulness. In the language of James and Evelyn Whitehead, every liturgical event is an opportunity for grace but also for malpractice.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the cycle of

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<sup>8</sup> <https://sites.psu.edu/intropsychf19grp5/2019/10/15/maintenance-and-elaborative-rehearsal/>

<sup>9</sup> Nathan Mitchell, *Liturgy and the Social Sciences*, American essays in Liturgy, ed. Edward Foley (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 73.

<sup>10</sup> “Music in Catholic Worship,” no. 6, [https://archive.ccwatershed.org/media/pdfs/13/12/17/11-37-54\\_0.pdf](https://archive.ccwatershed.org/media/pdfs/13/12/17/11-37-54_0.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> The 1983 revision read, “Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken and destroy it”; this formulation is repeated in the 2007 Bishops’ Document, “Sing to the Lord” (no. 5) <https://www.yakimadiocese.org/pdf/SingToTheLord.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry*, rev. ed. (Lanham: Sheed & Ward, 1995), p. 8.

community eucharist can substantially nourish the practice of synodality or it can impede and even resist it. Such is the power of ritual.

## Synodality

Before exploring the nexus between eucharist and synodality, it is first necessary to offer some broad clarifications about the nature of synodality itself. It is well recognized that the somewhat awkward language of synodality is a recent invention. The Vatican even calls it a neologism,<sup>13</sup> the technical name for a newly fabricated word. Apart from this newly contrived label, this is not a new idea and is deeply rooted in our tradition. These two ideas need to be parsed.

Something can be deeply rooted in our tradition but still new. There is widespread agreement, for example, that Vatican II was deeply rooted in and contiguous with our tradition. Pope Benedict XVI recognized that Vatican II reviewed and even “corrected certain historical decision” made by the Church over the years yet concludes that “in this apparent discontinuity it has actually preserved and deepened her inmost nature and true identity.”<sup>14</sup> Preserving the past, however, was not the only achievement of the Second Vatican Council. The keen analysis of Jesuit historian John W. O’Malley and his colleagues makes that clear: “yes, something new occurred.”<sup>15</sup> One of O’Malley’s most intriguing examples of the newness of Vatican II lies in the style of its

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<sup>13</sup> ITC, “Synodality,” no. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia (22 December 2005), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_spe\\_20051222\\_roman-curia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html)

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Komonchak, John W. O’Malley, Neil J. Ormerod and Stephen Schloesser, *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007).

language: a remarkable shift from juridical and condemnatory church-speak to a pastoral lexicon of “people of God, friendship, cooperation, dialogue, collegiality, and holiness.” O’Malley is convinced that these linguistic shifts, threading through all of the Council’s documents, indicate a dramatic transformation of a way of being church: from one ready to castigate the world, viewing science and global social advances with suspicion, to one that sees the Church planted squarely in the modern world and in dialogue with it. *Gaudium et spes* thus speaks of the Church’s involvement with the world as a form of mutual exchange, recognizing that the Church may contribute to the well-being of the human family but is also “abundantly and variously helped by the world.”<sup>16</sup>

In a similar way synodality, even though the very word is recognized as a “linguistic novelty,” has deep ecclesial roots.<sup>17</sup> The emergence of synods of bishops in the modern era began when Pope Paul VI – at the last session of Vatican II in 1965 – established them as a permanent institution, largely in response to the desire to keep alive the positive experience that emerged from the Second Vatican Council.<sup>18</sup>

Long before this, however, synods have an ancient history. The word “synod” (Greek *σὺνοδος*) was a synonym for the word “council” (Latin *concilium*); in the history of the church those two words have been used interchangeably. O’Malley defines a council as “a meeting, principally of bishops, gathered in Christ’s

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<sup>16</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, nos. 40 and 43, and nos. 40, 44 and 45 respectively [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

<sup>17</sup> ITC, “Synodality,” no. 5.

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_01011995\\_profile\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_01011995_profile_en.html)

name to make decisions binding on the church.”<sup>19</sup> The so-called Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) “is the cornerstone for the assertion that synods are the oldest form of church governance ... that claim is further validated by the emergence as early as the 2nd century of numerous synods across the Roman world. In that century alone, we have evidence of at least 50 such gatherings in Palestine, North Africa, Gaul and elsewhere.”<sup>20</sup>

In the midst of Vatican II, Patriarch Maximos of Antioch stressed that synods were the ordinary way the Eastern Churches governed.<sup>21</sup> He himself was elected Patriarch by the Synod of Bishops of the Melkite Church in 1947.

Paul VI’s reintroduction of synods into the West was in continuity with this tradition but also modified it in one dramatic way. In O’Malley’s definition, synods were decision making bodies. According to *Apostolica sollicitudo*, “The Synod of Bishops is directly and immediately subject to the authority of the Roman Pontiff,” rendering it largely a consultative body.

Pope Francis’ revitalization of the synodal process does not reverse this decision, but is nonetheless new, particularly in its breadth. Beyond O’Malley’s synodal definition as principally a meeting of bishops, Pope Francis envisions synodality as embracing the entire People of God: a term occurring 91 times in the ITC’s

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<sup>19</sup> See his “The History of Synodality: It’s older than you think,” *America* (17 February 2022), at <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/02/17/synodality-history-john-omalley-242081>; this accessible piece is drawn from his magisterial work on Vatican II cited below in note 21.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> John O’Malley well documents the Patriarch’s many powerful interventions in Vatican II in his *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 2008), e.g., pp. 123-125, 135-136, etc.

document on synodality,<sup>22</sup> and almost two dozen times in the preparatory document for the 2021-2023 Synod.<sup>23</sup> Vatican II's hotly debated teaching on collegiality – cemented in the Decree concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops (*Christus Dominus*) – recognizes that the authority of bishops is not derived from papal appointment but rather from episcopal ordination. Thus, not only are they responsible for guiding the faithful in their particular local church, but with the Pope and under his authority, they also exercise a teaching and guiding role for the universal church.<sup>24</sup>

Francis' call to synodality places collegiality squarely in the broader context of the people of God noting that:

It is in the fruitful bond between the *sensus fidei* of the People of God and the magisterial function of the Pastors that the unanimous consensus of the whole Church in the same faith is realized. Every synodal process, in which the Bishops are called to discern what the Spirit is saying to the Church, not by themselves but by listening to the People of God, who “shares also in Christ's prophetic office” (*Lumen gentium*, no. 12), is an evident form of that “journeying together” which makes the Church grow.<sup>25</sup>

This revitalized synodal way of being church is marked by key characteristics. We will consider three of these individually and then examine how they intersect not only with the eucharistic rhythm that marks local churches and their many communities, but also with an

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<sup>22</sup> ITC, “Synodality.”

<sup>23</sup> <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/09/07/210907a.html>

<sup>24</sup> *Christus Dominus*, no. 2, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651028\\_christus-dominus\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_christus-dominus_en.html)

<sup>25</sup> Preparatory Document for the 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of bishops, no. 14.

underlying eucharistic spirituality which should nourish and motivate our baptismal living.

### **Building communion**

Communion language is prominent both in the preparatory document for the 2023 Synod of Bishops, and in the ITC's document on synodality. Pope Francis highlighted this theme in his address commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, asserting synodality as a constitutive element of the Church. While specifically addressing episcopal communion – especially manifest in synods of bishops – he emphasizes that this “dynamism of communion ... inspires all ecclesial decisions,” both at the universal and local level.<sup>26</sup>

Parallel language supporting communion building is the often-repeated phrase (with its many variants) “journeying together.” This language jump-starts the preparatory document,<sup>27</sup> and prompts its questions about how the church follows this path in faithfully proclaiming the gospel. Such “walking together”<sup>28</sup> is a blossoming of the communion ecclesiology that emerged from Vatican II. Communion ecclesiology is a broad umbrella term that can designate sometimes strikingly different perspectives. However, Dennis Doyle believes that we can generalize about this ecclesiological perspective as one

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<sup>26</sup> Pope Francis' address commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015) [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html)

<sup>27</sup> Preparatory Document for the 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of bishops, no. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Pope Francis Address to the Italian Episcopal Conference (22 May 2017) [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170522\\_70assemblea-cei.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/may/documents/papa-francesco_20170522_70assemblea-cei.html)

which emphasizes relationships over juridical or institutional understandings of the Church, strongly emphasizing the mystical, sacramental, and historical.<sup>29</sup> Pope Francis stresses that such relationality is achieved through mutual and humble listening,<sup>30</sup> in which “everyone has something to learn,”<sup>31</sup> “the only authority is the authority of service” and each must “lower himself or herself, so as to serve our brothers and sisters along the way.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, building communion becomes a spiritual exercise intended to nurture both an attitude and a spirituality of communion.

## Participation

A second characteristic of a synodal church is that it is participatory at its core. The language of participation reverberates throughout the preparatory document for the 2023 synod. Such language is grounded in the revolutionary teaching of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, which called for the fully conscious and active participation of the faithful in worship.<sup>33</sup> This *Constitution* was not only the first document promulgated during Vatican II, but as Massimo Faggioli demonstrates, it also anticipated much of the agenda that played out in the rest of the Council. Faggioli thus links that *Constitution* with “the ultimate meaning of Vatican II” and insists that “only a hermeneutic based on the liturgy and the Eucharist, as developed in the liturgical constitution, can preserve the riches of the overall

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<sup>29</sup> Dennis Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Vision and Versions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 12-13.

<sup>30</sup> A term that appears over a dozen times in his short address referenced in note 28 above.

<sup>31</sup> Preparatory Document, no. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Pope Francis’ address commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops.

<sup>33</sup> *Sacrosanctum concilium*, no. 10.

ecclesiology of Vatican II.”<sup>34</sup> From this perspective, the *Constitution* serves as a clarion call for the fully conscious and active participation of the faithful in the whole life and mission of the church.

This is a summons to recognize that certain voices have not been heard. The preparatory document admits that many folk find themselves on the margins of ecclesial life and processes, with especially young people and women.<sup>35</sup> Without the involvement of such voices the validity of any ecclesial dialogue is questionable.

The language of dialogue was introduced into the context of Vatican II by Pope Paul VI. Between the second and third sessions of the Council the pope made history by publishing an encyclical in the midst of an ecumenical council: *Ecclesiam suam*.<sup>36</sup> The key word in this document, occurring almost 80 times in the text, is “dialogue.” Indeed, over half of the encyclical is grouped under the title of “The Dialogue,”<sup>37</sup> language which the Pope exploits not simply as a strategy for negotiating the challenges facing the church *ad intra* and *ad extra*, but in order to introduce into church discourse what O’Malley calls a “more human voice.” Paul VI believed that a dialogical path reveals the church as more concerned and loving, and that dialogue is the proper name for the church’s “internal drive of charity which seeks expression in the eternal gift of charity,” since it mirrors the dialogue

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<sup>34</sup> Massimo Faggioli, *True Reform: Liturgy and Ecclesiology in Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 16.

<sup>35</sup> Preparatory Document, nos. 2 & 7 respectively

<sup>36</sup> *Ecclesiam suam*, [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_06081964\\_ecclesiam.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html)

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 58-119. O’Malley believes this language was borrowed from Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue (e.g., his seminal 1923 essay *I and Thou*) that had been picked up by Catholic Theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and the French philosopher-Theologian Jean Guittton. See, *What Happened at Vatican II*, p. 204.

between God and Humanity renewed in Christ.<sup>38</sup> The multiple repetitions of the word “love” in this section underscores dialogical practice as an exercise of care, respect, and even affection. This language reminds us that synodality is ultimately a spiritual practice intended to nurture a particular spirituality.

## Mission

A third characteristic of synodality as promoted by Pope Francis is mission. Francis emphatically sounded this theme in his first apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*: the word itself shows up 119 times in that text. Besides this verbal abundance, ideas of mission are a bedrock of that document providing much of its impetus. Francis teaches that “missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all of the Church’s activity”; the first major chapter of that work is on “The Church’s Missionary Transformation,” deeming the Church a communion of missionary disciples.<sup>39</sup> This is a theme that permeates his other teachings.

Similar language resonates through the ITC’s position paper, aptly titled “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church.” Aside from invoking the term dozens of times, ITC’s document continuously pairs mission with the very life of the church. Synodality is explained in conjunction with “the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and Mission of the Church.”<sup>40</sup> The implication of this pairing is that the Church does not have a life without a mission.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ecclesiam suam*, nos. 63, 64 & 70 respectively.

<sup>39</sup> *Evangelii gaudium*, nos. 15 & 39 respectively, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)

<sup>40</sup> Preparatory Document, no. 7.

David Bosch famously asserted that mission is not so much a work of the church as an attribute of God. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is a “missionary God.”<sup>41</sup> This revolution in thought prompted the now widely accepted maxim that it is not so much that the church has a mission, but that God’s mission has a church. Without mission we are not authentically church.

The preparatory document, in sync with Pope Francis’ teaching, underscores how the baptized are summoned as missionary disciples with shared responsibility for the Church’s mission.<sup>42</sup> The ITC document also smartly links this missionary commitment with the potent language of “journeying together,” which characterizes the current exploration of synodality at every turn. Journeying together is *de facto* entering into mission together and such journeying “allow[s] the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to her.”<sup>43</sup>

## Spirituality

It is important to stress that these three key synodal characteristics are not ecclesial strategies but a spiritual path.<sup>44</sup> Synodality is not a theory but a practice: a form of ecclesial path-building. This path-building is neither strategic planning nor a technique for engineering ecclesial democracy: rather it is a “spiritual practice,”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 389-90.

<sup>42</sup> Preparatory Document, V.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 2.

<sup>44</sup> This emphasis on spirituality, heart and conversion – while present in the Preparatory Document for the 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of bishops (e.g., nos. 9, 13, 30:II, 30:X, 32) – is not as strongly emphasized as the theological statement of the ITC.

<sup>45</sup> Towards a spirituality for Synodality, prepared by the subgroup “Spirituality for synodality” of the Commission on Spirituality,

an “ecclesial habitus” realizing the rich “dowry” received in baptism too often neglected.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout the ITC’s document there is continuous reference to God’s Spirit leading us into synodality as a “conversion process.” This is especially clear in references to “the spirituality of communion<sup>47</sup> and formation for synodal life,”<sup>48</sup> yet this communion path does not exist without participation and mission. The “dispositions” required for forming people in a synodal spirit embrace participation and an awareness of being sent.<sup>49</sup>

Synodality is first and foremost a “conversion of heart and mind” wed to “disciplined training for welcoming and listening to one another.” At its depth, it is about supplying every “institutional reality with a soul!”<sup>50</sup> Multiple times the ITC speaks about a conversion of heart,<sup>51</sup> evoking the biblical tradition of being provided new hearts by God. It notes how Pentecost shaped communion and mission in the hearts of all who welcomed the kerygma. It recalls St. Augustine’s and St. Paul’s exhortations “to be of one heart and mind” in journeying towards God. It recognizes that evangelization itself requires the commitment to open hearts and minds and even taking on the heart of God.<sup>52</sup> It also makes it crystal clear that journeying into synodality is

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“Introduction,” p. 6 at <https://www.synod.va/en/highlights/towards-a-spirituality-for-synodality.html>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> This language is borrowed from Pope John Paul II in his 2000 apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 43 [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/2001/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_20010106\\_novo-millennio-ineunte.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html)

<sup>48</sup> ITC, “Synodality,” nos. 9 & 4.2 respectively.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., no. 108.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., no. 107.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., nos. 14, 107, 109, 115.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., nos. 14, 44, 109, 118, 15 & 120, respectively.

not a wager with structures but a reshaping of spirits in hopes of acquiring the *affectus synodalis*.<sup>53</sup>

## The Eucharistic Turn

Having laid some groundwork for understanding synodality and its three key characteristics of communion, participation, and mission, it is now for us to examine how local eucharistic practices can enhance or impede the synodal journey. Previously we noted that the preparatory document specifically lifts up the celebration of the Eucharist as a privileged way in which synodality is articulated as a constitutive dimension of the church.<sup>54</sup> That document further underscores that journeying together is only possible “if it is based on communal listening to the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist.”<sup>55</sup> The ITC document is even more fulsome in weaving connections between synodality and eucharist, noting among other things that

- “ecclesial community is created and at its clearest in the eucharistic synaxis presided over by the bishop”
- “the church’s synodal path is shaped and nourished by the eucharist”
- “the source and summit of synodality are ... in a unique way in our full conscious and active participation in the Eucharistic synaxis”
- the “*modus vivendi et operandi* (of synodality) works through the community listening to the Word and Celebrating the Eucharist,” and
- “the Eucharistic synaxis is the source and paradigm of the spirituality of communion,” which is the appropriate response to renewed synodality.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., no. 109.

<sup>54</sup> Preparatory Document, no. 27.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., no. 30:4.

<sup>56</sup> ITC, “Synodality,” nos. 25, 47, 71a, 109 and 103 respectively.

Regarding the first of the key characteristics of synodality, i.e., **communion**, the ITC document cites Pope Francis who stressed that “Eucharist creates communion and fosters communion.”<sup>57</sup> Or, given the caution of the U.S. bishops previously referenced, it is at least ideally suited to do so.<sup>58</sup> Creating and fostering communion is more than receiving the consecrated bread. Rather, it presumes from entrance to dismissal rites that all members of the community are welcomed, valued, and respected. Thus, the space itself must be a model of communion with entrances as well as the sanctuary accessible to folk of every ability. Can folk in a wheelchair enter the church, the sanctuary, designated spaces for musicians, and read from the ambo? Is there an adequate sound system with listening devices for those with diminished hearing? Is the lighting sufficient for people with reduced sight to read the worship aids and hymnals? Are there adequate spaces for rambunctious toddlers and parents without sequestering them in sound- and prayer-proof rooms at margins of the worship space? And for those who cannot attend physically, is there accessible and beautiful live-streaming worship so that they may experience a gracious degree of digital communion?

A well-designed space is important, but it is no substitute for a well-crafted community and welcoming people animating that space. Ministers of hospitality are key here, as their welcome – or lack thereof – is the beginning of communion. Their attentiveness and care finds resonance throughout the assembly: a warmly welcomed community in turn learns to be welcoming as well.

While all ministers must take responsibility for creating an atmosphere of communion, it is especially the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., no. 108d.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. note 10.

presider who sets the tone. The prophetic document “Music and Catholic Worship” baldly states: “No other single factor affects the liturgy as much as the attitude, style, and bearing of the [presider]:<sup>59</sup> his sincere faith and warmth as he welcomes the worshipping community; his human naturalness combined with dignity and seriousness as he breaks the Bread of Word and Eucharist.”<sup>60</sup>

A trusted barometer of synodal eucharistic leadership is the homily, both in its composition and delivery. Since synodality is about journeying together, homilies resonant with this spirituality are marked by “we” rather than “you” language. As homilists and assembly are in this venture together, preachers must constantly attend to the experiences of the assembly and regularly weave those into the preaching. A homilist who consistently privileges his own experiences or opinions fails to respect members of the assembly as “subjects in” and not simply “objects of” the preaching. Synodal preaching also presumes a distinctive delivery style, what various sources characterize as “conversational” and “empathetic” in tone. Pope Francis characterizes such preaching as a mother’s conversation, writing “the Church is a mother, and ... she preaches in the same way that a mother speaks to her child, knowing that the child trusts that what she is teaching is for his or her benefit, for children know that they are loved. Moreover, a good mother can recognize everything that God is bringing about in her children, she listens to their concerns and learns from them. The spirit of love which reigns in a family guides both mother and child in their conversations; therein they teach and learn, experience correction, and grow in

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<sup>59</sup> The original language here was “celebrant,” but since the assembly itself is a “celebrant” of the eucharistic liturgy with Christ, the language of presider is theologically more accurate.

<sup>60</sup> Music in Catholic Worship, no. 21.

appreciation of what is good.”<sup>61</sup>

**Participation:** We regularly invoke the second synodal characteristic, participation, in reference to liturgy. The call for full, conscious, and active participation in worship<sup>62</sup> was one of the most memorable directives from any liturgical document. In a post-Faggioli<sup>63</sup> revisiting, we now understand that this was not simply an instruction about how we act in worship but an invitation to a renewed way of being church.

It’s been almost 60 years since that document was promulgated. There has been unquestionable progress in the faithful’s participation in worship. Without diminishing the many advances in participation, it is yet necessary to admit that we still have a long way to go. Thus, the synodal energy in this regard is both welcome and necessary.

Some liturgy types, including me, too quickly judged “participation” in terms of empirical data. How loud were community members singing? Did they engage in the vernacular responses? Were more folk showing up, or going to communion, or even daring (in pre-COVID days) to drink from the cup? Was the new participation judged according to how much resistance arose when the sanctuary was renovated or devotions were reshaped?

These are important questions and do give some indication about the strength of emerging participation in a post-Vatican II era. They are also insufficient on multiple grounds, as they “siloize” participation as essentially a worship stance rather than a profound invitation to immerse oneself in building up God’s reign. What is indispensable in liturgical participation, like participation in upbuilding God’s reign, is an invitation.

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<sup>61</sup> *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 140.

<sup>62</sup> *Sacrosanctum concilium*, no. 14.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. note 34 above.

Pope Paul VI's previously referenced encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* powerfully foregrounds the importance of invitation in his consideration of the nature of dialogue. The Pope makes clear that any and all ecclesial or liturgical dialogue is properly understood only if it is framed by the holy interchange between God and people. In that sacred dialogue it is God who takes the initiative, which renders the ensuing dialogue a "Christ conversation" with us. Consequently, the very dialogue of salvation is a God initiative and a divine invitation.<sup>64</sup>

Full, conscious, and active participation in the Church and its eucharistic liturgy is difficult if not impossible to realize without invitation: both from God – whose invitation is unrelenting – and from those who dare to invoke God's presence in and for the community. Presiders and lectors, musicians and ministers of hospitality, ministers of communion and particularly those who plan the worship share critical roles in facilitating the faithful's engagement in this dialogue. In one fascinating passage, Paul VI confirmed that one of the revolutions in Vatican II was its striving to "inject the Christian message into the language, culture, customs and sensibilities of [people] as [they] live in the spiritual turmoil of this modern world." He continued that the church must forego "the use of unintelligible language and adopt the way of ordinary people in all that is human and honorable."<sup>65</sup> Pope Francis specifically targets homilists in this regard and urges each homilist to abandon "his own language that he thinks everyone naturally understands" and, instead, take up the language of the people.<sup>66</sup>

Learning the language of the people in eucharistic liturgy suggests unexplored synodal exercises. It requires

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<sup>64</sup> *Ecclesiam suam*, nos. 71, 70, 72 and 81 respectively.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 68 & 87.

<sup>66</sup> *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 158.

entering the languages of people's ethnicity, their religious sensitivities, musical capacities, political leanings, spiritual and vocational yearnings. Does the liturgical planning take into account the vernaculars of our communities, or only the preferences of clergy and specialists? Do we sing music that stirs their souls or, instead, conforms to some outdated hymnal in the pews or the most recent Christian-rock hit on the internet? Is the worship crafted to comfort an aging population without serious intergenerational sensitivities?

As many of our Sunday assemblies are diminishing, these questions become especially pertinent in the many "occasional" services – especially weddings and funerals – that gather assemblies, which sometimes appear more like ritual flash mobs than pious adherents to the faith. How do we invite "participation" in worship to the marginalized and deconverting as a model of journeying together with so many of the baptized whose Catholic identification is still strong but whose participation in Catholic life is peripheral? This form of participation is undoubtedly daunting but is one that has authentic resonance with synodality as communion and its parallel call to mission.

**Mission:** While the language of communion and participation seem familiar and thus appropriate when we ponder the mystery of the eucharist and even its link with synodality, the language of mission is a less frequent part of our eucharistic vocabulary. We are used to praying for missionaries at the eucharist, and sometimes visiting missionaries are eucharistic guest presiders and preachers, but most of us were not catechized to imagine eucharist as a missionary act. More to the point, few if any of our liturgical leaders have been formed in a eucharistic spirituality that is essentially missionary.

While the briefest section in our regular celebration

of Mass, “The Concluding Rites” amply summarizes the missionary core of the Christian life. The ancient imperative “to go forth” (Lat., *Ite*) is not simply a dismissal. Rather it is a ritual announcement of the great commission to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). The current eucharistic liturgy amplifies that gospel injunction with texts charging the baptized to process into the world glorifying the Lord with their lives and enjoins them in their leaving to announce the gospel of the Lord.

This commissioning is not an abrupt signal for folk to leave, but a ritual summary of the multiple missionary prompts that have been rehearsed throughout the eucharistic liturgy. During the preceding liturgy, the faithful have been gathered for a purpose and summoned to respond to God’s Word. We have been invited into praise and belief in a God who sent the Only Begotten on his world-altering mission. We have been called into reconciliation, urged to share peace, and craft a vibrant communion with God, the whole of creation and all of humankind. Thus, at this final commissioning we are poised to be launched into the world and fulfill our vocation rehearsed at the very center of the eucharistic prayer:

Open our eyes  
to the needs of our brothers and sisters;  
inspire in us words and actions  
to comfort those who labor and are burdened.  
Make us serve them truly,  
after the example of Christ and at his command.  
And may your Church stand as a living witness to truth  
and freedom, to peace and justice,  
that all people may be raised up to a new hope.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Eucharistic Prayer IV for Various Needs.

A cascade of Mass texts affirm the expansive and generous energy of the eucharistic liturgy. Solemn blessings such as that for Epiphany pray that the community be made “a light for your brothers and sisters” and the blessing IV for Ordinary time prayers that we might be “effective in good works.” Multiple orations scattered throughout the current Roman Missal ask that the faithful might

- “display the gentleness of your charity in the service of our neighbor” (feast of St. Francis de Sales)
- “work for justice among the poor and the oppressed” (feast of St. Katharine Drexel)
- “share our food with the hungry” (feast of St. Isidore)
- “become peacemakers” (feast of St. Elizabeth of Portugal)
- “love our neighbor in deeds and in truth” (feast of St. Peter Claver)
- “respond ... to the needs of the world today” (feast of Blessed Marie Rose Durocher)
- “not be afraid to lay down our life for others” (feast of St. Josaphat)
- “serve with unfailing charity the needy and those afflicted” (feast of St. Elizabeth of Hungary)
- share God’s “gifts in loving service” (Thanksgiving Day, USA).

This missiological vector, so clearly confirmed in the prayers and actions of the Mass, is repeatedly endorsed in magisterial teachings and eucharistic practices. For example, in 2000 Pope John Paul II (d. 2005) recognized that “the celebration of the Eucharist, the Sacrament of the Lord’s Passover, is in itself a missionary event.”<sup>68</sup> That insight is reflected in the practices and directions of Eucharistic Congresses, which the Catholic Church has

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<sup>68</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2000/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_20000621.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20000621.html)

convened with such regularity since 1881. As Cardinal Peter Turkson has observed, “It is instructive ... to notice how many of the themes are explicitly social or public ... and how few, by contrast, are explicitly about Adoration, contemplative prayer, holiness, or spirituality.”<sup>69</sup> Memorable for the United States was the Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our country: the theme was “Eucharist and the Aspirations of the Human Family.”

Such a missionary impetus can be impeded when prayer options consistently focus on personal piety or intra-ecclesial concerns rather than nourishing our participation in God’s love affair with the world (John 3:16). Avoiding the eucharistic prayers for various needs and occasions and opting instead for Eucharistic Prayer I (the old Roman Canon), crafting prayers of the faithful that are more focused on ecclesial and local needs rather than the instruction to prayer for world leaders and those in need, continuously opting for ritual Masses tuned more towards devotion (e.g., for the Blessed Virgin) and never exploring the treasury of official Mass texts grouped together in the Missal as Masses for Civil needs (e.g., for Refugees and exiles, For the Preservation of Peace and Justice, etc.), singing hymn texts that consistently promote a centripetal rather than centrifugal spirituality: together these have a cumulative effective of suppressing a missionary spirituality, and undercutting the synodal call for journeying together into the world as missionary disciples.

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<sup>69</sup> Peter Turkson, “Adoration as the Foundation of Justice,” in Alcuin Reid, ed. *From Eucharistic Adoration to Evangelization* (London: Burns & Oats, 2012), 174.

## Conclusion

While synodality and eucharist are not synonyms it is irrefutable that they are deeply related siblings in theology, spirituality, and practice. Of course, it is not synodality but the eucharistic liturgy which is the dogmatically defined font and summit of the Churches life. At the same time, Pope Francis' embrace of synodality weds it in a distinctive way to the communion ecclesiology that emerged at Vatican II and furthers the eucharistic center of our faith community. A communion ecclesiology is newly revealed as a synodal ecclesiology.

We sometimes forget that eucharist is both an event and a privileged mode of Catholic-Christian spirituality: spirituality distinctly understood here not as an academic study or elite lifestyle, but as the way believers live their lives in faith.<sup>70</sup> Synodality is not an alternate but an intertwined vision of spirituality – marked by communion, participation, and mission – which brings us back to a reinvigorated vision of eucharist.

Because of the powerful coupling of eucharist and synodality, the performance of both impact each other. This reflection has privileged eucharistic practice, as does the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. The fundamental contention here is that the way local faith communities perform eucharist and its radiating spirituality, so does the local faith community either advance or impede the synodal call to journey together. I pray that we only advance in this authentic eucharistic renewal under a synodal banner, through Christ our Lord.

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<sup>70</sup> Walter Principe, "Toward Defining Spirituality," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 12:2 (1983), 135-37.

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