

Of Skeptics and Believers: Observing the Synod on Synodality from the Margins

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Abstract: From a theological perspective, this article explores the degree of anticipation, indifference, and critique regarding the Synod on Synodality, beginning from the concerns expressed at the national, continental, and universal syntheses, the essential elements of synodality in Pope Francis' teachings, the expectations of young people as well as those who voice their concerns on the digital space. To an extent, it is a theological evaluation of the margins mostly expressed in the public space regarding the objectives that the Synod sets out to realize, which raises the question of the validity and practicality of the claim that synodality offers the Church an opportunity to reform itself. If the invitation to synodality is to be valid, how can it overcome the problems of ideological divides and pseudo-propheticism? Overall, this article explores how the Synod on Synodality presents a chance and an opportunity for the Church in its struggle to remain faithful to the Catholic faith.

Keywords: Synod • Synodality • Pseudo-propheticism • Pope Francis • Indifference • Church

The synodal project and the taint of indifference

Various national syntheses¹ in the current synodal process dedicated sections to outlining the difficulties and challenges that dioceses face, and sometimes in direct reference to the organization of the synodal conversation. In almost all of the reports, there is an observation that most people are generally getting disinterested in Church life, and even more in the

¹ One can find the official documents of the Synod on Synodality, including the syntheses at the various stages and of the First Session of the Synod, at the website of the secretariat. See <https://www.synod.va/en/resources.html> (accessed 27 December 2023).

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conversation on synodality. The Belgian report states that there are "insufficient number of volunteers" as well as the "absence of young people, which raises the question of the transmission of the faith to the next generations." Similarly, the US report also mentions "a deep ache in the wake of the departure of young people." Most of these are either disinterested or have been discouraged by the crises that plague the Church and the world. In what is even a very direct way, the Nigerian report mentions that "some (of the faithful) remained indifferent to the whole synodal process because they felt it will yield no fruit and that it will be business as usual." The same problem was mentioned in the Hungarian report. For these people, much has been said while little is done in concretely renewing the Church. Even the encouragement to 'speak out' is hindered by "mistrust due to breach of confidentiality." More still, for the Church in Japan, there is a "weakening of solidarity" in the Church and the hesitation to evangelize. These and many factors, including ineffective communication, contribute to apathy in local communities.

Even the Synthesis Report of the First Session of the Synod on Synodality bears markers of non-consensus in its tripartite methodology. Under the sub-title 'matters for consideration' which is sandwiched between 'convergences' and 'proposals', individual chapters of the three parts of the Synthesis point to areas of tension that "summarise points about which it is necessary to continue deepening our understanding pastorally, theologically, and canonically." The Synthesis further describes this section as similar to "being at a crossroads where we need to pause so we can understand better the direction we need to take." It is a clear recognition that the dialogue within the Synod, even where it represents a culmination of a bottom-top process of conversation, cannot exhaustively resolve the questions and concerns

that people have, not only in specific issues for deliberation but also in the deliberation process itself. This implies that conversely, the Synod cannot be indifferent to the genuine concerns of the faithful, even where they express dissenting opinions towards the Synod.

In the light of the above, there is a concern about the presence of indifference in promoting the goal of synodality. Given the crises in the Church, it may not have been unexpected. Thus, the program of synodality is aimed at pulling through the hard wall of indifference, justified or not, to rediscover a lively, dynamic, and joyful Church in which every faithful will be eager to belong and in whose life, they would wish to participate. Often the apathy is blamed on the hierarchy in the Church, but there is a difference between the *reality* of hierarchy and the *practice* of hierarchy. Pope Francis while describing synodality as constitutive of the identity of the Church, insists that it “offers us the most appropriate interpretative framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself.”² What is left unsaid is the inappropriate interpretation of hierarchical ministry that replaces ‘service’ with ‘power’ leading to a disordered sense of ministry, and which has over the years created a lot of cynicism in the Church. Interestingly there is an evident presence of a synodal spirit in the life and ministry of the Pope himself, a fact that renders his words credible rather than an example of empty, diplomatic lip service. Indeed, the emergence of Pope Francis ignited a lot of excitement among many people both within and outside the Church and held a lot of promises in terms of the

² Pope Francis, Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html (accessed 20 December 2023).

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yearning for a new face of the Church – a Church that listens and is open to both God and the world. It was, so to say, an anticipation of the deepening of the *sensus fidelium* in profound ways. It was therefore not a surprise from Pope Francis’ earliest actions that we might end up with a Synod on synodality at the end of the day. A good ecclesialogist would easily have predicted that.

The imagination of a renewed Church, defined by the idea of synodality expressed in its very key concepts – listening, discernment, communion, participation, and structure of governance – was thus clearly present in Pope Francis’ programmatic Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium* (24 November 2013).³ A clear reading of the encyclical uncovers how, from the outset, the Pope has remained consistent in calling the Church to the pathway of reform and renewal that is guided by the Holy Spirit. This clarion call is not only defined by *what is to be done* but also by *what we are called to be* as a Church, some sort of renewed self-understanding that is well articulated in the ecclesiology of synodality. As such while the transformation of structure remains important, the fundamental “ecclesial conversation” that guarantees “openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ” remains indispensable. The Pope contends that “even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining, and assessing them. Without new life and an authentic evangelical spirit, without the Church’s “fidelity to her own calling”, any new structure will soon prove ineffective” (EG §26). A considerable number of problems in the Church could be linked to some of the structures that are in place that

³ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium* – *On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World* (24 November 2013), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (accessed 20 December 2023). Hereafter EG in text.

constantly alienate people. According to the Pope, we have to face this rather uncomfortable truth: "We must recognize that if part of our baptized people lacks a sense of belonging to the Church, this is also due to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes and communities, or to a bureaucratic way of dealing with problems, be they simple or complex, in the lives of our people. In many places, an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach, as does a concentration on administering the sacraments apart from other forms of evangelization" (EG §63). The Pope cautions that the Church should be bold to avoid getting trapped within the structures that no longer serve the evangelizing mission (EG §49). Added to this is the avoidance of 'new structures of welcoming' that care little about the spiritual concerns of believers in favor of public affirmation of openness and inclusivity. This explains why communal discernment that is rooted in the Gospels and the Tradition is very critical in living out synodality.

Communal discernment leads, and demands, pastoral conversation, which for Pope Francis begins with the papacy, and serves to dissipate the atmosphere of suspicion and doubts in the Church. Pope Francis' embrace of "a wider more collaborative and participatory understanding of the church and forms of authority is itself a further break with his immediate predecessors,"⁴ and this is notwithstanding a similar invitation that was offered by Pope John-Paul II in *Ut unum sint* (1995). Participation and communion are at the center of synodality as measures that promote greater responsibility and

⁴ Gerard Mannion, "Francis' Ecclesiological Revolution: A New Way of Being Church, a New Way of being Pope," 93-122, in Gerard Mannion, ed., *Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism: Evangelii Gaudium and the Papal Agenda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 122.

transparency. This implies embracing differences and diversities across levels of ministry in the Church—clergy, religious, lay, and the multiple variations within each of these categories. A deep appreciation of the diversity in the Church, and by extension the society is one way of maintaining unity and communion amid disagreements and conflicts (EG §228). Diversity is never a threat to ecclesial unity, since the Holy Spirit who is the principle of communion and "a multifaceted and inviting harmony" is at once the one who through diverse gifts (*charisma*) creates "a unity which is never uniformity" (EG §117). The authenticity of the charism is proven by ecclesial communion, particularly when it is difficult to maintain it (EG §130). In practice, this means that the dignity of each person (in his or her diversity) is put before the possible problems that might arise during common participation or communion-building. The point is that conflict must not be avoided or simply glossed over. There must be courage to address it without destroying unity. By implication within the call to synodal praxis at the level of the parish or diocese, attention must be paid to the universal synodality of the Church. This explains the importance of the parish community and the bishop in fostering real communion and participation in the Church (EG §§28, 31).

Communion and participation also presuppose the act of discernment which is at the heart of pastoral discernment – where believers walk together under the leadership of the bishops in the "task of rethinking the goals, structures, style, and methods of evangelization in their respective communities" (EG §33). This task of discernment in the service of evangelization is not reserved for people in the parish community or the particular churches (EG §30). It equally involves everyone including theologians some of whom are often detached from real pastoral life or engagement in the

lived experience of “the Church’s saving mission” (EG §133). Discernment operates in a way that respects the shifts in ecclesial structure that Pope Francis alludes to. Hence, he calls for a form of healthy “decentralization” (EG §16) that makes for the principle of subsidiarity in the governance of the Church, particularly in relation to the pope and the local bishops. Perhaps what is also insightful in *Evangelii gaudium* is an understanding of what discernment does: “In her ongoing discernment, the Church can also come to see that certain customs not directly connected to the heart of the Gospel, even some which have deep historical roots, are no longer properly understood, and appreciated. Some of these customs may be beautiful, but they no longer serve as a means of communicating the Gospel. We should not be afraid to re-examine them. Such a re-examination does not imply outrightly doing away with them in areas where they still serve communion. At the same time, the Church has rules or precepts which may have been quite effective in their time, but no longer have the same usefulness for directing and shaping people's lives. Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed out that the precepts which Christ and the apostles gave to the people of God 'are very few'. Citing Saint Augustine, he noted that the precepts subsequently enjoined by the Church should be insisted upon with moderation 'so as not to burden the lives of the faithful' and make our religion a form of servitude, whereas 'God's mercy has willed that we should be free'. This warning, issued many centuries ago, is most timely today. It ought to be one of the criteria to be taken into account in considering a reform of the Church and her preaching which would enable it to reach everyone.” (EG §43) This rather long quote also speaks to the question of contemporary customs that are not connected to the heart of the Gospel and that must not be taken on as part of ecclesial life. Such customs must remain within the

precinct of pastoral solicitude as the Gospel challenges the entire Church to unending conversion. But does this imply an ‘easy’ or perhaps a ‘crossless’ form of Christianity? Not at all, since Christianity takes upon itself the radicality of witnessing to God’s love even to the point of martyrdom. Discernment involves sorting out these issues both in the past and in the present.

In the process of discernment, listening takes place across the board—listening to God and listening to one another. According to Pope Francis: “We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God’s love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives” (EG §171). In the praxis of listening in the Church, we come to a greater appreciation of our faith and a clear understanding of what it means to be a community of believers, through the difficulties, challenges, and joys. Listening involves patience, and the resolution not to take the easy path of non-engagement, the result of which is an artificial community that is only sustained by individualistic attraction to the divine. In the process of listening, we also experience the fluidity and dynamicity of the hierarchical pyramid in the Church, whereby the inversion of the hierarchical pyramid happens now and again without any feeling of contradiction. The acceptance that the pyramid is at once reversed and unreversed is a better way of understanding the nature of communion and the variety of gifts that sustain it, rather than the options of either an *unreversed pyramid*

that quickly slips into clericalism and authoritarianism or the *reversed pyramid* that is prone to anti-clericalism and confusion. To illustrate, the priest cannot preside over the Eucharist and still be on the pew at the same time, just as he is conscious that without the people there is no parish, and in fact, his ministry would cease to exist. The baseline of synodality presented by Pope Francis already points to problems in the Church and the tensions that they generate. In addressing these challenges, one must confront the continued feeling of exclusion in all its manifestations, including the many young people who often perceive themselves as standing at the margins of synodal conversations and praxis.

Young people, and the crisis of belonging and non-belonging

In their disposition toward the Church, most young people feel that they exist only at the margins of ecclesiality. Except in instances where young people reach out for participation in the Church, often through responding to priestly or religious vocation, there is an impression that not enough is done to bring them to the center. Of course, for most young people in the Church today the pathway of belongingness to the Church is marked by spirituality, which sometimes can be fluid. The contrast between the fluidity of spiritual expressions and the stability that is offered by ecclesial belonging is captured in Robert Wuthnow's categorization of young people into "dwellers" and "seekers". Wuthnow's classification is based on his conviction that people's understanding of the sacred reveals a shift from the "traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places" to "a new spirituality of seeking."⁵ According to him, dwellers

⁵ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3.

represent a spirituality that is marked by “habitation,” and seekers by “negotiation.” Spirituality in this case is understood as consisting of “all the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to God or to a divine being or some other conception of a transcendent reality.”⁶ For dwellers, the emphasis on habitation is based on the understanding of God as occupying “a definite place in the universe” while at once creating “a sacred space in which humans too can dwell.”⁷ Beyond the categorization, one could consider young people in the Church as representing, through their spiritual disposition, an “integrated seeker–dweller/ negotiation–habitation model that gives a sense of stability in fluidity.”⁸ Theologically, the integrated model is grounded in the paradigm of the pilgrim Church, which is on the way (*synodoi*) and at the same time a ‘community of disciples’⁹ (*koinonia*), a home¹⁰ (*oikos*). That means that young people’s commitment to the Church is from a place of deep spiritual connection rather than in the very definitions and boundaries of doctrines. This could either mean that they are not invested in the details of the Synod on Synodality except for the spiritual vibrancy that they expect in parishes and communities, or they are not given enough space for their voice to be heard in the Church. The Synthesis of the First Session

⁶ Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, viii.

⁷ Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 3.

⁸ Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke, “Shifting Grounds: Can Spiritual Ecumenism Satisfy the Legitimate Quest of Millennials?,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 14, no.1 (2021): 86-103; 102.

⁹ This is one of the five models of the Church by the American theologian, Avery Dulles.

¹⁰ Pope Francis uses the model of ‘home’ to describe the church in one of his daily homilies. See Elise Harries, “Pope: The Church is Not a Rental House, but a Home,” Catholic News Agency (5 June 2014), <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/29790/pope-the-church-is-not-a-rental-house-but-a-home> (accessed 27 December 2023).

indicates that the experience of a relationality in which the Church becomes truly God's home and family points to "the Church that young people first declared they desired in 2018 on the occasion of the Synod of Youth" (1.b), and this confirms "the need for a preferential option for young people" (16.e).

In fact, the Frascati document of the continental phase of the synod, as well as the Synthesis of the First Session, confirms that: "There is universal concern regarding the meager presence of the voice of young people in the synod process, as well as increasingly in the life of the Church."¹¹ The document also mentions the problem of passivity among the laity.¹² For many of these young people, there is some sort of indifference to issues concerning the politics of power distribution and the often undefined agenda of inclusiveness which focuses mostly on structures rather than the spiritual animation of the People of God. One wonders if this explains why traditional Catholicism with its emphasis on spirituality seems to attract most young people, irrespective of whatever critique one may have of it. This is something to ponder on. Where traditionalism is rooted in rigid historical consciousness, one might argue that a truly synodal Church is not only grounded in history but primarily rooted in God, and this makes humility an indispensable attribute she must possess. And it is "only this attitude of humility, of self-decentralization, can make it possible to abandon particular interests to truly seek the good of the Church in the service of the universal

¹¹ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, "Enlarge the space of your tent" (1s 54:2): *Working Document for the Continental Stage* (Rome: Vatican Press, 2022), §35; Synthesis of the First Session, §16.k.

¹² Secretaria Generalis Synodi, "Enlarge the space of your tent", §19.

common good.”¹³ Of course, this might prove difficult for many in the Church, many of whom were formed over the years in a non-flexible way of relating to the world. There is, therefore, the need to be patient with everyone while paying attention to what the Holy Spirit is doing with both the old and the young in the Church.

In paying special attention to the bearers of the complexities of today, synodality further uncovers how the young people’s participation, questions, and concerns can contribute to the healing, renewal, and reform of the Church. The pope remarks that “all young people who love Jesus Christ and his Church...can be a source of great healing if they employ their great capacity to bring about renewal, to urge and demand consistent witness, to keep dreaming and coming up with new ideas” (*Christus vivit* §101).¹⁴ This is exactly the case. Several living parish communities and campus ministries run on the creative energy of young people who display profound love for Christ and the Church and are committed to making the world better. These young people take advantage of synodal spaces in their Christian communities to witness the Gospel, particularly through their identity as ‘digital natives’ (The Synthesis 17.a). The Synthesis underscores that the Church’s evangelization of the digital culture can come through young people who possess “profound and direct experience of it” and so are “best suited” for this mission (17.d). Within such digital synodal spaces, a new ecclesiology emerges in which leadership is dispersed –

¹³ Nathalie Becquart, “The Synod of Young People, a Laboratory of Synodality,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 45, no.4 (2021): 411-426; 416.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* (25 March 2019), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html (accessed 23 December 2023). Hereafter CV.

most times lay-led but without any confusion about the role of the ordained. A typical example is the Daily Rosary X (Twitter) Space that is hosted by Olusola Olabode, and assisted by Valentine Patrick Tom, both young lay Nigerian Catholics. The Rosary Space has remained consistent since it was first hosted in January 2022, with a daily average of 1000 participants, most of whom are young people from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and other parts of the world. Many young priests also join the Space and are given the duty to share a short reflection and to give the final blessing. Sometimes the reflection is also assigned to female religious or anyone in the absence of any priest or religious. For many of these young people, the Space has become an opportunity to rekindle their Catholic faith, build communion, and enjoy a safe space from whatever discomfort they may have experienced in the parish communities. In most cases, it also provides them with the opportunity to better relate with and to appreciate deeply their local parishes. There is yet another model of digital synodal space in the work of the FAITHCHAT Platform that was founded by the celebrity TikTok Nigerian-British priest, James Anyaegbu, who is a missionary in the little Scottish village, called Beaulieu. What began as a fun, youth-friendly means of evangelization during the COVID lockdown in 2020 has turned into a digital Catholic community with members spread across the world. The group hosts daily prayers, faith conversations, catechesis, and monthly Eucharistic adoration on their Instagram handle. Members also organize charity events across the world, so far in Nigeria, Scotland, Kenya, Ghana, Mozambique, and the United States. Like the more global youth-populated movements, like Taizè and Nightfever, these emerging digital synodal spaces have remained unrelenting in animating the Church through their presence, prayers, and caritative missions. They testify indeed that “being

young is not only about pursuing fleeting pleasures and superficial achievements” (CV §108) but also a search for meaning that can only be satisfied by a living faith in God. Perhaps how committed young people practice their faith could serve as a model for a faith praxis that flows from a synodal interiority.

On the ranks of skeptics and critics

If the commitment of most young people borders on the spirituality that allows them to navigate reality within the Church that is welcoming, we still must confront the stronger reactions that emerge from the ranks of those who strongly agree or disagree with the process, agenda, and direction of the Synod on Synodality. Despite the theological quality of synodality in its invitation to a radical shift in the self-understanding of the Church through a co-responsible process of discernment, one must contend with the fact that “such a process of discernment is not free from dispute.” Judith Gruber puts it more poignantly that synodal ecclesiology “makes space for disagreement and conflict in the theological conception of the church” to the point of provoking “a theology of conflict and contestation.”¹⁵ Apart from presuming that the call for a synodal Church necessarily involves conflict and contestation, there is a need to interrogate the possible source(s) of the conflicts. Does conflict emerge from merely 'walking together' or from the determination of the destination of the journey? If the nature of the Church as an assembly of God's people is the journey of all these same people towards salvation, what then is that *extra* of synodality that differentiates it from what

¹⁵ Judith Gruber, “Consensus or Dissensus? Exploring the Theological Role of Conflict in a Synodal Church,” *Louvain Studies* 43, no.3 (2020): 239-259; 242.

has always been the case? Is synodality really about the faith journey of the faithful in the Church or essentially a ‘political’ process of re-ordering the decision-making structures of the Church? Where the latter is the case, then it might be a bit problematic to highlight the literal meaning of synodality over and above the real intentions behind it. Notwithstanding the theological justifications that are always projected in defense of synodality, a focus on the issues that create conflict and tension in the Church might be a first step towards identifying the source(s) of the conflicts. But where the impression is given that the Synod is aimed at fostering a more discerning, listening, and co-responsible ecclesia,¹⁶ then the projection of a set of agenda becomes very defeating, and indeed, capable of creating more confusion among the faithful. Yet tensions and conflicts are inevitable since the synodal acts of ‘listening’ and ‘discernment’ must answer the questions of ‘what’ and ‘why’.

Put interrogatively: What are the reasons for which the Church should adopt a more listening and co-responsible habitus? Why is it important that the Church becomes a listening and co-responsible body? The answer could be found in the long list of crises and tensions that have shaken the Church in recent times, most of which constitute obstacles to the synodal process. One of these is “the scandal of abuse by members of the clergy or by people holding ecclesial office: first and foremost, abuse of minors and vulnerable persons, but also abuse of other kinds (spiritual, sexual, economic, of authority, of conscience).”¹⁷ There is also the matter of those who “feel a tension between belonging to the Church and their loving relationships, such as: remarried divorcees, single

¹⁶ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality* (Rome: Vatican Press, 2021), §1.3.

¹⁷ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, “*Enlarge the space of your tent*”, §20.

parents, people living in a polygamous marriage, LGBTQ people, etc."¹⁸ Another problem emerges from the conditions of those at the periphery, namely "the poorest, the lonely elderly, indigenous peoples, migrants without any affiliation and who lead a precarious existence, street children, alcoholics and drug addicts, those who have fallen into the plots of criminality and those for whom prostitution seems their only chance of survival, victims of trafficking, survivors of abuse (in the Church and beyond), prisoners, groups who suffer discrimination and violence because of race, ethnicity, gender, culture, and sexuality."¹⁹ These areas of crises and tensions indeed call for a more listening Church and pastoral conversion. These also require a Church that allows itself to be challenged by the Gospel in different ways through a commitment to the good and conversion from sin. If the mission of salvation of the soul (*salus animarum*) is to be at the center of the Church, then there must be a serious desire to reject sin despite the acknowledgment of our sinfulness. Walking together on the way is also a metaphor for conversion and repentance, of the arduous but grace-filled movement toward the holiness of all the faithful.

Speaking of conversion invokes a moral implication that is often lost in the debate regarding inclusion and exclusion. The eschatological template of Matthew 25 is predicated on this moral paradigm. Sometimes where the moral boundaries are rendered unclear skepticism becomes the safe space for most believers. In fact, in his *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, Benedict XVI validates skepticism as the natural response when ecclesial memory is subjected to confusing

¹⁸ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, "Enlarge the space of your tent", §39.

¹⁹ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, "Enlarge the space of your tent", §40.

interpretations. An instance is where the basic biblical understanding of marriage is nuanced with a fluid interpretation of love and/or of blessing, like in the case of the controversial 2023 Declaration by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Fiducia supplicans*.²⁰ Concerning the Synod on Synodality, signals of unclear interpretations of ecclesial norms and memory have led to a form of meta-interrogation, which does not make the concerns of skeptics and critics easily dismissible. It is the question of who is listening. Who is discerning? Who is being listened to, and who is being ignored? What is the scope of the listening process of the Synod? In exploring the questions, I shall appeal to the voices in the digital space, which are often ignored. As far as I know, there seems to be no feedback collation mechanism from social media space despite the use of the same space by the secretariat of the Synod in promoting synodality.

In one of its communications on social media, precisely on Instagram, sometime in 2022, the Secretariat for the Synod on Synodality posted on its social media handle a picture that celebrates the LGBTQ community and female priests as the ‘future’ of the Church. This is wrongheaded and may be interpreted by some as already presenting a predetermined outcome of a process that is dedicated to conversation and listening. In a synodal process, it is counterproductive to work from an answer to the questions. Most comments under the post show a level of confusion, distress, and strong disagreement. The lack of any response to the series of complaints raises the question of the synodality value of social media. Social media is not just a space for enter-

²⁰ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Fiducia Supplicans, Declaration on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings* (18 December 2023), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dof_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html (accessed 27 December 2023).

tainment but also a place of knowledge sharing, information, and social engagement, a synodal space for listening and discernment for believers, as acknowledged in “The Church Listens to You” Project, the ‘Digital Synod’ initiative of young Catholic ‘digital evangelists’ (The Synthesis 17.e).²¹ Most posts on social media from corporate institutions are often taken as ‘ideological kites’ flown to evaluate public reactions and measure the degree of reception or rejection of a particular idea. This is normally the case where there is no dialogue or consensus on any idea that is projected to the public sphere. In the context of the examples above, one wonders if the Synod Secretariat was engaging in ideological kite-flying. Or is the Synod Secretariat convinced *a priori* that the images represent the synodal direction of the Church? The fact is that even where the action is motivated by the need for inclusion, the approach could end up being counterproductive.

On the Facebook page of the Synod, there were also other additional concerns about the images used by the secretariat which do not measure up to the artistic, theological, and biblical tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. For many of the respondents, this is a classical betrayal of what the Church has always represented. The concern is whether non-doctrinal issues of ecclesial heritage, such as art, matter in all cases. Certainly, a deviation from the symbolic markers of communal identity could be considered offensive by most members. A comment from Matheus Rodrigues of the Archdiocese of Montes Claros reads: “It’s hard to think that we are working in our dioceses trying to save the synod purpose from the ideological influence, trying to show people that

²¹ José Manuel De Urquidi Gonzalez and Xiskya Lucia Valladares Paguaga, Testimony of the Digital Mission, General Congregation 8-13 October 2023, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/info/2023/10/13/231013c0.html> (27 December 2023).

we can make it good, without these (sic) kind of ideology, and now we are seeing that we do not have even the support of the Vatican. How can the Catholic Church go with these ideological ideas? Kyrie Eleison!” A similar comment was made by one Luciane Robeiro Capundag, a young lady from New Zealand, and a host of others. We can easily dismiss these comments either on the grounds of pedestrianism, the likelihood of trollism or for the fact that the Church should not be swayed by social media popularity, yet to ignore these is to contradict the synodal principle of listening. Most comments were negative, and a simple examination shows that most of these are coming from Catholics, when put together with the fact that attendance of synodal meetings is largely based on selective representation, then it would be wise to listen more broadly to the Catholic sidelines. More still, a compelling argument would be that synodality is not to be presented as some sort of liberal agenda that ridicules most elements of ecclesial tradition that do not injure communion in any way, neither should it mirror fundamentalist, conservative posturing of gatekeeping that seek to determine the valid actions of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

It has already been made clear that, unlike the other synods that have been enjoyed exclusively by the bishops, the Synod on Synodality “consults the entire people of God: lay and ordained, religious and nonreligious, Catholic and beyond.”²² In doing so, we must be mindful that the actions that ought to follow the consultation or discernment process of any category of the people of God must be differentiated properly. Consulting the 'non-religious people of God' is different from consulting the 'Catholic people of God', with differing outcomes, responses, and actions. Well, some may argue that the

²² Michael J. Sanem, *Your Church Wants to Hear from You: What Is the Synod on Synodality?* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2022), 6.

objective is not to be defined in terms of actions that ought to follow at the end and that the aim of the Synod is essentially captured in the phrase "the journey is the destination". Explaining, Michael Sanem opines that "This pilot experience makes it possible to grow in synodality through synodality. By engaging in this process, we hope to become a church that fosters dialogue and listening among all people, especially the poor and vulnerable."²³ The point is to recognize the gradations of listening and to prioritize the act of listening within the Church since many who are inside the Church already consider themselves as being on the sidelines. Failure on this path is a recipe to further polarization and weakening of ecclesial communion.

Ideological polarizations, pseudo-propheticism and ecclesial critics

The desire to have a synodal Church is linked to a praxis in ecclesial Tradition that is captured in the ancient Roman legal principle, *Quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet*, "what affects everyone ought to be discussed and decided by everyone." Richard Gaillardetz comments that this synodal principle "challenges the clerical paternalism that informs Church governance at every level. A clerical paternalism is unlikely to yield to the demands of this principle without a thorough reconsideration of the bishop's structural relationship to his flock."²⁴ While highly commendable, the problem with the principle is the tendency to democratize matters of faith thereby subjecting them to popularity contests. Given the radicality of the Christian message, opinions that are contrary to the

²³ Sanem, *Your Church Wants to Hear from You*, 9.

²⁴ Richard R. Gaillardetz, "The Synodal Shape of Church Ministry and Order," *Concilium* 2 (2021): 98-108; 104.

Gospel might be more attractive to the whole range of people who are invited to speak and be listened to. While these contra-evangelical opinions might tell us something about the 'signs of the times', they necessarily do not require an abandonment of the Gospel in a manner that fails to inspire conversion and holiness. Attempts to redefine marriage and even reformulate the Lord's Prayer within Anglicanism are very sad examples. Also, despite its positives, the downsides of the German *Synodale Weg* constitute a Catholic example of what happens when there are no caveats or even when the red lines are intentionally crossed. It is understandable for some to argue against caveats when it comes to synodality, but the Church is not built on nothing. In his letter to the German bishops, Pope Francis reaffirms this under two points. First, he insists that "the synodal path of personal and ecclesial renewal must be linked to the Church's central task of evangelization and be guided by the Holy Spirit." Second, the pope states "any process of synodal renewal must guard against the twin dangers of polarization and fragmentation by means of a strong *sensus ecclesiae* and connectedness to the universal Church."²⁵ To ignore these principles, including a rightly ordered *sensus fidei*, is to further subject the Church to ideological twists and turns. In other words, every synodal conversation should lead to a true synodal conversion.

In fact, in an article in *La Croix*, Massimo Faggioli recognizes a possible ecclesiological risk that emerges from a conversation on synodality that lacks the required synodal conversion. According to him, the synodality fever of today necessarily needs "an unwritten wisdom for a synodal conversion that has to face a variety of

²⁵ Declan Marmion, "A Church that Listens': Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church," *New Blackfriars* 102, no.1100 (2021): 442-458; 454.

obstacles.”²⁶ He outlines and explains these obstacles as including the following: First is the challenge of hyper-polarization, which requires that the Synod in its communication and listening process dismantles the “partisan way of understanding synodality.” Second is the danger of perceiving synodality as another form of “bureaucratic ecclesiastical apparatus” by skeptics. The fact is that if there are no palpable spiritual changes arising from this Synod, then skeptics who consider it as all about “paperwork Church” as Faggioli puts it must have been vindicated. Third is the lack of patience fueled by “an unreasonable desire for the spectacular,” and an exaggerated claim to a comprehensive knowledge of how to ‘fix’ the Church. This may arise both from the camp of passionate proponents and those who loudly and dramatically dismiss the synod as “the theological *tragedy* of modern Catholicism”, that is, Faggioli explains “the impossibility of Church reform, of the inevitable and inescapable fate of decline.” Fourth is the danger of reducing synodality to structures, particularly in creating new ones where the existing ones are not even functioning at all. Of course, it is not simply a matter of reviving old ones but of living them differently in the light of today’s ecclesial challenges. Fifth is the desire “to decide everything all at once” which is linked to the third obstacle of impatience. Here, Faggioli appears to have put a finger on several problematic elements in the synodal conversation, which in themselves are also crisis-revealing ideological wings that operate both in the society and in the Church.

²⁶ Massimo Faggioli, “All Roads Lead to ... the Synod in Rome: A Bit of Synodal Wisdom,” *La Croix: Signs of the Times* (9 March 2023), <https://international.la-croix.com/news/signs-of-the-times/all-roads-lead-to-the-synod-in-rome-a-bit-of-synodal-wisdom/17430> (accessed 28 December 2023).

In a celebrated 'last lecture' on 23 September 2022, Gaillardetz, as the Joseph Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College, remarks that we are confronted by what seems to be a contemporary crisis in ecclesial life. This crisis is defined by the ideological polarization that lays claim to being prophetic while brandishing a critique of the Church. For Gaillardetz, this crisis is a result of "our failure to maintain a reflective equilibrium." According to him, "We are becoming divided into two camps, those who embrace the tradition, whole cloth, as a reality that stands beyond critique, and those whose sweeping denunciations leave us only a few salvageable fragments of a largely failed tradition."²⁷ This is evident in many instances of Church life. In the reaction to papal legislation on the old Latin rite, in the German *Synodale Weg* project, and in the ongoing Synod on Synodality there is little evidence of maintaining equilibrium and 'living in the tension'. The National Report of the US dioceses on the Synod on Synodality, involving 700,000 participants, 30,000 opportunities, and 22,000 reports, acknowledges the level of division in the Church even within the liturgy and the hierarchy. The Report appreciates "a tension between how to walk with people while remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church."²⁸

The failure to wrestle with this tension breeds a surge in the number of ideological analysts, theologians, and commentators that promote what Gaillardetz called a

²⁷ Joshua J. McElwee, "Theologian Gaillardetz warns Against Over-critique of Church in 'Last Lecture'," *National Catholic Reporter* (28 September 2022), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/theologian-gaillardetz-warns-against-over-critique-church-last-lecture> (accessed 27 December 2023).

²⁸ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Synthesis of the People of God in the United States of America for the Diocesan Phase of the 2021-2023 Synod* (Washington DC: USCCB, 2022), 7.

“pseudo-propheticism” given their singular wish to critique the Church at every turn. Often for those who cannot easily have their way then either the Pope or Rome is made the scapegoat to the cheers and applause of those who belong to the ideological camp. For instance, for some in the *Synodale Weg*, it is the German Church *versus* the Vatican, rather than a particular Church *versus* the universal Church. Gaillardetz observes that “among more progressive, reformist Catholics, there is a temptation to applaud any and all criticisms leveled at church authorities, church structures or the received tradition, regardless of the objective merits of the critique itself.”²⁹ The same goes to the so-called traditionalist Catholics some of who develop a rather toxic attitude towards the Church as she reaches out to the world out there. In fact, for most of them, the Second Vatican Council ought not to have happened.

To live in the tension is to fully acknowledge the ecclesial heritage of the *living* Tradition together with the *immutability* of the Truth of Divine Revelation. Both must be held together in a contemplative disposition of a Church that prays and listens. On 26 August 2022, during a press conference to inaugurate the continental phase of the Synod on Synodality, the Luxembourg Cardinal, Jean-Claude Hollerich who also doubles as the Relator General of the Synod captures an understanding of the tension by underscoring his conviction that the synodal process is not about changing doctrine but to listen to the people of God and develop “a change of attitude” that would make the Church a home for everyone. The Cardinal dismisses any fear that the Synod might be hijacked, saying: “I’m not afraid, because I believe in God, prayer, meditation, and listening to people gives me hope and strength. You have

²⁹ McElwee, “Theologian Gaillardetz warns Against Over-critique of Church.”

to walk and when you walk in the desert like in the Book of Exodus, there are some temptations, but with the help of God, we can pass through these temptations.”³⁰ Such uncommon witness to the centrality of faith, prayer, and meditation are critical in the synodal process.

Conclusion

An account of those who might be indifferent, skeptical, or confused about the Synod on Synodality is an invitation to caution on the process of synodality. If the synodal process does not lead the Church to greater fidelity to Christ and the Gospel, then it will only be remembered as an exercise in which ideology triumphed over faith. To safeguard ecclesial fidelity, it is necessary to be completely open to the Holy Spirit and be committed to personal and ecclesial conversion. Otherwise, we face a great ecclesiological risk that further deepens the crisis in the Church instead of fostering healing and communion. While it is expected that certain things will change in the Church following the Synod on Synodality, we must live with the fact that some decisions will take a long time to mature, and there are even things that will remain the way they have always been. It is not a matter of ‘do or die’. If the outcome of the Synod heads towards a direction of hyper-polarization, then no one knows where it will lead the Church in the future. One thing is however clear, this is exactly the path that the Synod on Synodality should avoid.

³⁰ Hannah Brockhaus, “Synodality Process Reaches the Continental Stage,” *African Synodality Newsletter* Iss.4 (2022): 2.

Conflict of Interest Statement

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