

Synodality as a Way of Being a Church Today: Implications, Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

Since its introduction, the Synod of Bishops has been a platform where a group of bishops gather to deliberate on issues of concern to the Church and make recommendations for possible implementation by the Pope. In so doing, as Paul VI had desired, the Synod fathers have been of great help to the Pope in advising him on crucial matters of the Church. Even though not all the recommendations have been considered by the Pope, the mere exposure of the issues during the deliberations have opened up more debate among theologians, scholars and the wider Church. This article examines the concept of synodality as a new way of being Church. Originating from a Synod, synodality is emerging as a model of a Church in which all members, both lay and clerics, are interested in and participate in the affairs that affect them as members of the Church and all take time to listen to one another. The article argues that with all its challenges, such a model is faithful to the idea of the Church as a community of baptized members and encourages all to feel being part of the Church.

Introduction

In 1965, immediately after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI announced the establishment of the Synod of Bishops. His intention was that such a platform of bishops should help him in deciding on some crucial matters of the Church.¹ This meant deciding on matters of urgency to be discussed, deliberating on such issues and finally recommending some resolutions to the Pope. Perhaps, Pope Paul VI came up with such an initiative based on how the Bishops who participated in the Second Vatican Council helped during the deliberations and resolutions of the council. When establishing the Synod of Bishops, Pope Paul VI left the idea open for possible improvements. Over the years, the concept of a Synod has undergone a lot of developments. During his

papacy, John Paul II used it as a tool for continental Churches to renew their Christian commitment as they were approaching the second millennium. This can be evidenced by the convocation of the African Synod in 1994, the American Synod in 1997 and the Asian Synod in 1998. Pope Francis too has used the synod to deliberate on crucial issues relevant to our time such as the family and the youth. Pope Francis has already convoked the next synod which will be held in 2022 and will deliberate on the theme of synodality. When he announced the theme for the next synod, in his remarks, Pope Francis stated that “From the beginning of my ministry as Bishop of Rome, I sought to enhance the Synod, which is one of the most precious legacies of the Second Vatican Council. It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”² True to his words, the synod has become an important platform in the papacy of Pope Francis. The synod has not just remained a platform where bishops meet to discuss ideas that they feel are relevant for the Church. It has rather become a platform where all members of the Church are consulted for contributions, either directly or through chosen representatives. It has also become a platform where continental Churches express concerns particular to them and express their right to be heard. As such, the International Theological Commission was right when it stated that with synodality there is “something new that has been maturing in the ecclesial consciousness starting from the Magisterium of Vatican II.”³ In a way, the synod is becoming an emerging and a new model of the Church. This article examines the implications of synodality as a new way of being Church. It also outlines the challenges and prospects that such a model offers.

Fundamental Concept of a Synod

The term synod derives from the Greek words *sun-* meaning ‘together’ and *hodos* meaning ‘way.’⁴ Therefore, from its etymological definition, the term synod has connotations of ‘walking together.’ The International Theological Commission affirms this as it defines a synod as indicating “the path along which the People of God walk together.”⁵ However, according to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, a synod is “a general term for ecclesiastical gatherings under hierarchical authority, for the

discussion and decision of matters relating to faith, morals, or discipline.”⁶ This entails that if a meeting discusses matters of faith, morals and discipline but yet it is not an ecclesiastical gathering, it cannot be called a synod. In the same way, any ecclesiastical gathering that does not discuss matters of faith, morals and discipline under the direction of the Church hierarchy cannot be called a synod.

According to the document entitled *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* the word “synod” has been widely applied, with a specific meaning, to the ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels whether diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal or universal to discern, by the light of the Word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by.⁷ However, this article is only interested in the Synod of Bishops. *The Code of Canon Law* states that the “synod of bishops is a group of bishops who have been chosen from different regions of the world and meet together at fixed times to foster closer unity between the Roman Pontiff and the bishops, to assist the Roman pontiff with their counsel regarding the preservation of faith, morals and ecclesiastical discipline.”⁸ This is in line with Pope Paul VI’s motive for establishing the synod of bishops in 1965.

The Synod of Bishops, as stated earlier, is subject to the authority of the Pope. He, therefore, is the one who convokes the synod, chooses participants, determines the agenda, presides over it and approves its resolutions.⁹ This means that the Pope has the authority too to disapprove some resolutions and recommendations made by the bishops at a synod.

There are three main types of synods. The first one is called an ordinary general assembly. This type of synod is convened to reflect on matters pertaining to the good of the universal church.¹⁰ An example of this type of synod was the Synod on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment held in October 2018. The second type of synod is called an extraordinary general assembly. This too deals with matters pertaining to the good of the universal church. However, the difference is that an extraordinary general assembly treats those matters that are urgent.¹¹ Such synods are not very common as up to date, there have been only three extra-ordinary synods. The last type of synod is called a special

assembly. This deals with matters pertaining to the Church in a specific geographical area.¹² An example of this is the synod on the Pan-Amazon region held in 2019. Worth-noting is the fact that a synod is held in phases. Such phases may include breaks for further consultations and reflections. At the end of every synod, the Pope issues a post-synodal exhortation.

Synodality: Definitions and Implications

Synodality is defined as “the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church.”¹³ This means that everyone participates by the virtue of being a member of the Church rather than his or her status in the Church. Thus, synodality promotes the baptismal dignity and co-responsibility of all, makes the most of the presence in the people of God of charisms dispensed by the Holy Spirit. This implies that consulting and listening to all members of the church is essential for discerning a path forward. For instance, Martin Coffey recalls that during the preparations of the first African synod, “the local parishes and the small Christian communities the people met to reflect on their Christian experience to review the past and to dream of the future.”¹⁴ He goes on to say that even during the Synod deliberations, while the bishops were meeting and deliberating in Rome, the people back home were watching, waiting and praying for an outcome that would give new life and vigour to the Church in Africa.¹⁵ The connection between the deliberating bishops and the faithful who keep interested in the synodal process postulates a Church that unites by the virtue of belonging to one community without interfering with one another’s position within the Church community. In other words, the bishops remain fully Christian and fully cleric, while the laity remain fully Christian and fully lay and yet every one of them fulfils their Christian responsibility.

Synodality does not, however, seek to do away with Church hierarchy. In fact, synodality leans on two pillars: the *sensus fidei* of the entire People of God and the sacramental collegiality of the episcopate in communion with the See of Rome.¹⁶ It leans on the entire people of God in as much as every member participates and contributes to the Church and it leans on the collegiality of the Bishops in as much as the bishops are the ones who convene for deliberations and forward the resolutions

and recommendations to the Pope. Synodality could rightly be described as the fruit of the renewal promised by Vatican II in its promotion of ecclesial communion and episcopal collegiality.¹⁷

A Brief Historical Overview of the Development of the Synod

As already pointed out, the synod of bishops was established by Pope Paul VI in 1965 after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. He officially launched the synod of bishops first with the issuing of the Apostolic Letter *Apostolica Sollicitudo*. In the Letter, Paul VI explicitly states that the idea of the synod was born out of an apostolic concern. He adds that the Synod of Bishops is meant to provide information and offer advice to the Pope. It can also enjoy the power of making decisions when such power is conferred upon it by the Roman Pontiff.¹⁸ However, he left it open that the idea of the synod could be improved with the passing of time depending on the needs and demands of the time. And indeed, the synod has undergone changes throughout the years. Paul VI himself issued *Ordo Synodo Episcoporum* in 1966 which contains all the Norms regarding the manner of conducting the Synod of Bishops. The 1983 Code of Canon Law also devoted a chapter on the synod. The latest update on the synod is by Pope Francis, who, in *Episcopalis Communio* articulates the purpose of the synod and its various components.¹⁹

Biblical Foundations of Synodality

The Bible has a number of references which can be considered as connotations of synodality. For instance, in Matthew 20:24, the disciples get indignant when the mother of the sons of Zebedee asks for favours from Jesus on behalf of her children. They were getting jealous that these two disciples would be favoured by Jesus. Noticing their reaction, Jesus immediately warns them that “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their superiors exercise authority over them. It shall not be this way among you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Mt 20:25-26). Jesus also says the same words when a dispute arose among his disciples about who is the greatest (Lk. 22:24-30). Jesus teaches them a new way of exercising authority over one another. Authority among his disciples, must not be the one of dominion.

Instead, the greatest would be one who would consider himself the least among his brothers. Jesus does not want to get rid of authority as if it were not important at all. He rather wants his disciples to emphasize on it so much to the extent of forgetting their brotherhood. In the same way, synodality does not mean to put aside and underrate the leadership and hierarchy of the Church but that the emphasis should be laid on belonging to the community of the Church.

In Acts of the apostles, we also encounter a Church that really makes use of the model of the Church as the body of Christ. The members make decisions together, contribute to the well-being of the Church and take care of the side-lined (Acts 5:19-21; 8:26,29,39; 12:6-17; 13:1-3; 16:6-7,9-10; 20:22). This is evident from the introduction of the ministry of diaconate after the complaint of the widows (Acts 6:1-6). This symbolizes a listening Church at its best, a Church that cares for the needs of each member of the community, a Church that walks together with every member.

Theological Basis of Synodality

The idea of synodality in its basic and fundamental sense is not opposed to Catholic theology. In the long run, it actually affirms true Catholic ecclesiology. Theologically, therefore, synodality is inspired, first of all by the Holy Trinity itself. In the mystery of the Holy Trinity, all the three persons are distinct from one another and yet remain one. The presence of one person does not diminish the existence of another. The idea of synodality is neither meant to get rid of Church hierarchy nor to engage the Church in a democratic process. Rather, it is about discerning together as members of one community that is the Church and yet each maintains his distinctness in identity. And so, the Church is One because she has her source, her model and her goal in the unity of the Blessed Trinity.²⁰

Secondly, the concept of synodality also resonates with the model of the Church as a mystical communion. Of this model, Avery Dulles states that the Church is seen in the analogy of a human body equipped with various organs.²¹ Alluding to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he further adds that such a community is constituted by a complete self-forgetfulness of love.²² Here too the emphasis is on the baptismal consecration that each

Christian shares by the virtue of belonging to the Christian community. It is a community that prioritizes love and self-forgetfulness by choosing to walk together and listen to one another.

Synodality in the Contemporary World: Some Challenges

The first challenge of synodality in the contemporary world is the political ideologies that are currently reigning the world. For quite some time, people had always fought for the right to participate in government affairs of their country. This is why many countries opted for democracy as a system of government. However, there have been many occasions when the right to participate has been abused. With such a mindset hovering all over, a synod can be mistaken for a forum where people express their preferences by imploring the game of numbers while foregoing the discernment which comprises the process. Avery Dulles also recalls that in nations accustomed to the liberal democratic tradition, there has been a movement to introduce into the Church the principles of the constitutional government and something corresponding to the bill of rights.²³ Marie-Dominique Chenu refers to the challenge as public opinion. He writes that “public opinion with its associated problems only became prominent in society and within the church from the birth and expression of popular awareness in social and political life.”²⁴

Secondly, while the synod is meant to foster the unity and universality of the Church, specifically the unity between the Pope and bishops, it may be used as a platform for threatening the unity of the Church. This may be, for example, recommending issues that threaten the purity of the Christian faith and teaching. The other challenge can be the erratic understanding of synodality. Even though synodality implies that every member of the Church should participate in the affairs of the Church, there are other areas that do not need the consultation of the laity. And so, synodality has its own limits.

Synodality can also be a threat to the authority of the Church especially the Pope. The mere chance of bishops having the ability to decide on crucial matters of the Church side by side with the Pope can instil an attitude that can underrate the papacy. In line with this, Jessica Murdoch, associate professor of fundamental and dogmatic theology at Villanova

University, also cautions against interpretations of synodality which negate the importance of the Church's order of authority. According to her, "good ecclesiology preserves the distinctions in the hierarchy and in the Church as a body."²⁵ In other words, it must always be remembered and respected that the bishops are under the authority of the Pope and the Church is under the authority of God.

Prospects of Synodality

Synodality as an emerging model of the Church has a high chance of being adopted in the Church today. First of all, synodality is faithful to the fundamental calling of Christians. Thus, all Christians attain their identity by the virtue of Baptism and through this sacrament all are members of the same family. It is after the reception of other sacraments that their roles are distinguished. The International Theological Commission also adds that "the ecclesiology of the People of God stresses the common dignity and mission of all the baptized, in exercising the variety and ordered richness of their charisms, their vocations and their ministries."²⁶

Ladislas Örsy describes synodality in terms of the teaching and learning Church which, in Latin, he calls *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens*. According to him, the whole Church, no one excepted is a learning Church. There is no person who does not have the invitation and duty to learn more and more about the word of God.²⁷ Örsy does not intend to do away with Church authority as he notes that there is a distinction between the clergy and lay. He, however, cites that when an ecumenical council solemnly proclaims the Catholic doctrine, it teaches in the name of the whole Church. But the bishops also learn a lot from the reflections of theologians, for instance, from the commentaries on the documents after the Second Vatican Council.²⁸ In this sense, Örsy proves that synodality is in fact not a strange idea or one incompatible with Church doctrine.

Örsy further shows some optimism as he notes that since the Second Vatican Council a better balance has been sought and there is a gradual progress in involving the laity in contributing to the crucial matters of the Church. As such, synodality is in fact already in practice.²⁹ According to Örsy, the Church can no longer challenge this world out of its own

institutional aspirations. There is a need for a listening Church rather than a promulgating Church.³⁰ O'Brien is also for the idea that synodality is in fact already in force. He, however, suggests that before a questionnaire stage is reached during the preparations for a synod, there has to be a less formal but a deeper kind of listening to the joys and hopes and struggles and anxieties of the people of God.³¹ Otherwise, synodality risks being a shallow idea.

Gaudium et Spes too affirms that from the beginning of her history the Church has learned to express the message of Christ with the help of the ideas and terminology of various peoples, and has tried to clarify it with the wisdom of philosophers and with the help of the Holy Spirit.³² The Constitution further states that to ensure that such messages are helpful to the people of God, it is the task of the entire people of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age and to judge them in the light of the divine Word.³³

Dulles proposes that the Church must adopt the idea of creative interaction and resourcefully respond to the initiatives of others. This does not entail taking over the slogans of secular nature but by sifting and reshaping them to fit the Christian message. Such creative interaction refers to the exchange of ideas between the laity and clergy. He adds that the creative interaction that was brought about by Vatican II has brought positive fruits.³⁴

Conclusion

Since Vatican II, the Church has experienced a lot of changes. Just as Popes John XXIII and Paul VI desired that the Church should renew herself internally and externally in her interaction with the world, there have been efforts to realize the same. The establishment of the synod after the Second Vatican Council was a step-ahead on this. With so much talk about synodality and active participation of the laity in crucial matters concerning the Church nowadays, the Church cannot avoid more introspection on it. Synodality simply means that the whole Church is a subject and that everyone in the Church is a subject.³⁵ In the words of Theodore Steeman the Church as it is today is a Church in movement, a Church in change, in search of something.³⁶ And indeed, since Vatican II there was

born a new Church striving to retain its baptismal community definition.

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- ¹ Paul VI. *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, Apostolic Letter on Establishing the Synod of Bishops for the Universal Church. 15th September, 1965. http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi-motu-proprio_19650915_apostolica-sollicitudo.html.
 - ² Vatican News. “Synod of Bishops to Take up Theme of Synodality in 2022.” 7th March, 2020. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/synod-of-bishops-to-take-up-theme-of-synodality-in-2022.html>
 - ³ International Theological Commission. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*. (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2018), #5.
 - ⁴ Fanning, William. “Synod.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 14. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912). <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14388a.htm>
 - ⁵ International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, #3.
 - ⁶ Fanning, William. “Synod.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.
 - ⁷ International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, #4.
 - ⁸ Code of Canon Law #342.
 - ⁹ Code of Canon Law #343.
 - ¹⁰ Code of Canon Law #345.
 - ¹¹ Code of Canon Law #345.
 - ¹² Code of Canon Law #345.
 - ¹³ International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, #6.
 - ¹⁴ Coffey, Martin. “Introduction,” In *The African Synod a Step Forward: Post-synodal Special Assembly Held at the Carmelite Centre*. (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995), 6.
 - ¹⁵ Coffey, Martin, “Introduction,” 6.
 - ¹⁶ Ed Condon. “What is ‘Synodality’? Experts Explain.” Catholic News Agency. Published on 25th October, 2018. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/what-is-synodality-experts-explain-60147>.
 - ¹⁷ International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, #8.
 - ¹⁸ Paul VI, *Apostolica Sollicitudo*.
 - ¹⁹ Vatican News. “What is a Synod of Bishops?” accessed on 4th October, 2019. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2019-10/what-is-synod-bishops-faq.html>.
 - ²⁰ International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, #45.
 - ²¹ Dulles, Avery. *Models of the Church: A Critical Assessment of the Church in All its Aspects*. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd, 1976), 46.
 - ²² Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 44.
 - ²³ Dulles, Avery. *The Resilient Church: The Necessity and Limits of Adaptation*. (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1977), 35.
 - ²⁴ Chenu, Marie-Dominique. “Public Opinion in the Church.” In *Rethinking the Church*. Edited by Mario Cuminetti and Fernando Vittorino Joannes. Translated by Edmund Burke (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan Ltd, 1970), 112.
 - ²⁵ Ed Condon, “What is ‘Synodality’? Experts Explain,” Catholic News Agency, 25th October 2018. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/what-is-synodality-experts-explain-60147>.
 - ²⁶ International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, #6.

- ²⁷ Örsy, Ladislav. *The Church: Learning and Teaching*. (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987), 40.
- ²⁸ Ladislav Örsy, *The Church: Learning and Teaching*, 40.
- ²⁹ Ladislav Örsy, *The Church: Learning and Teaching*, 41.
- ³⁰ Ladislav Örsy, *The Church: Learning and Teaching*, 140.
- ³¹ John, O'Brien. *Seeds of a New Church*. (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1994), 149.
- ³² *Gaudium et Spes* #44.
- ³³ *Gaudium et Spes* #44.
- ³⁴ Dulles, Avery. *The Resilient Church*, 33.
- ³⁵ International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, #55.
- ³⁶ Steeman, Theodore. "Conflict in the Conciliar Church." In *Rethinking the Church*. Edited by Mario Cuminetti and Fernando Vittorino Joannes. Translated by Edmund Burke (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan Ltd, 1970), 129.