

Fr. Perozich comments —

The church has a **sensus** fidei, not a **census** fidei. It has the soul of the sense of faith, not an opinion gathering of the faith. If the listening sessions were used to gather opinions which advance the ideology of the synod leaders, then the synod cannot advance Jesus, the faith, or the grace of salvation.

“we are now being told that the synod is really about changing the Church’s teaching on same-sex unions, the indissolubility of marriage, and the sacrament of Holy Orders. To claim that this is what the Holy Spirit is calling for – because we have discerned the voice of the Holy Spirit by consulting the people of God through our synod workshops, and internet surveys that various committees of synod experts have collated and summarized – is to compound the dishonesty.”

This is long, buy thorough.

The Sacramental Nature of Authority and the Limits of Synodality

What exactly is meant by “synodality” or “synodal ecclesiology”? What are the specific proposals for implementing synodality at every level of the Church?

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Print



Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg, relator general of the Synod of Bishops, speaks at a news conference to present an update on the synod process at the Vatican Aug. 26, 2022. Looking on is Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the synod. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

St. Ignatius of Loyola's first rule for thinking with the Church is: "We must put aside all judgement of our own, and keep the mind every ready and prompt to obey in all things, the true spouse of Christ our Lord, our holy mother, the hierarchical Church." This loving obedience can be difficult; it requires discernment and a readiness to conform one's thinking to the mind of Christ and his immaculate bride – *sentire cum ecclesia*. One of the difficulties today concerns the idea of "synodality" as concretized in the current multi-year synodal process. Many Catholics who want to think with the Church are both embarrassed by and deeply apprehensive of the steady stream of images and documents generated by the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. We are embarrassed by the ugliness and ideological character of the images, by the low intellectual level of the documents, and by the displacement of a genuine sense of the Catholicity of the Church rooted in mystery of Jesus Christ by slogans about "acceptance", "equality", and the need to "embrace diversity".¹

In trying to understand the requirements of *sentire cum ecclesia* in this situation, it is helpful to recall the discernment undertaken by Henri de Lubac in the confusing period immediately following the Second Vatican Council. In particular, de Lubac criticized his *confreres* for adopting:

a false idea of openness to the world, shameless preached as if it were the thought of the Council, which takes away from the mass of the faithful that which was always the strength of Christians no matter how immersed they were in the world; that is: the awareness of their obligation to be the world's vivifying soul. Instead, it leaves them as poor creatures without an identity, trailing along in tow.²

These words about “trailing along in tow” – desperately trying to be fashionable and accepted by the world – are an apt description of many of the phrases scattered throughout the working documents of the synodal process. And it does not inspire confidence when ideological slogans about “embracing diversity” and the need to provide “a more welcoming space” for LGBTQ individuals are presented as the voice of the Holy Spirit. For example, the drafters of the recent “Working Document for the Continental Stage” of the synod exhort us to “enter these pages as on ‘holy ground.’” No and no thank you.

How did this situation come about? What exactly is meant by “synodality” or “synodal ecclesiology”? What are the specific proposals for implementing synodality at every level of the Church? Finally, what are some of the limitations of this new synodal ecclesiology? My aim in what follows is to explore these questions in two steps. The first part of my paper will trace the recent history of the concept of “synodality” and the ecclesiology undergirding recent proposals to build or construct a synodal Church. Part Two will raise some critical questions in light of the sacramental nature of ecclesial authority and the specific vocation of the laity.

Let me preface my remarks by addressing a possible misunderstanding or an objection. The objection can be framed as follows: The Church’s magisterium has proposed “synodality” as a key to renewing the life of the Church. **It follows that a fundamental criticism of the synodal process represents a form of disobedience to the shepherds of the Church.** I have two points to make in response to this concern, both of which will be elaborated in what follows:

1. The word “synodality” means walking together. The concept is based on the common dignity and co-responsibility of all of the baptized for the life and mission of the Church. At the heart of the synodal path is mutual listening, collaboration, and a renewed sense of shared responsibility of the part of all for the mission of the Church. Conceived in this general way, “synodality” is unobjectionable; it is a noble goal. In fact, it can be read as an attempt to take seriously the teaching of *Dei Verbum* that the deposit of faith is a common good uniting pastors and faithful in what the Council Fathers call a “*singularis conspiratio*.” The faithful, no less than their shepherds, have a role in receiving and transmitting the Word of God. Nothing in my remarks should be taken as a criticism of “synodality” conceived in this general way. Mutual listening, renewed forms of collaboration, and a sense of shared responsibility on the part of all the baptized are essential goods for the life of the Church. **My critical questions are not directed at “synodality” as such, but rather at the documents that aim to implement the synodal path by creating new structures and processes. In this sense, my criticism aims to restore a genuine co-responsibility and mutual listening from what I consider to be certain clerical distortions. This leads to the second point:**

2. **The target of my criticism is not the magisterium of the Catholic Church, but the non-magisterial documents generated by the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. The head of this bureaucracy, Cardinal Mario Grech, has specifically asked the laity for feedback, including critical comments on these documents.**

Part One: The Recent of History of the Concept of “Synodality” (1965-2021)

The word “synod”, derived from the preposition “*συν*” (with) and the noun “*ὁδός*” (path), suggests the notion of the “common journey” of Christians or the assembly of those who have been called together by God. More specifically, the word synod refers to “ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels (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.”³ From the time of the early Church councils or synods have played an essential role in the life and mission of the Church.

The contemporary emphasis on synodality can be traced to a decision of Pope Paul VI in 1965 to reintroduce the practice of regular meetings of bishops to address issues of concern for the universal Church. ⁴ The inspiration and theological foundation for instituting the Synod of Bishops was *Lumen Gentium's* teaching on "collegiality." The college of bishops is also (with the Roman Pontiff) the subject of supreme and full authority over the universal Church.

The Lord Jesus, after praying to the Father, calling to Himself those whom He desired, appointed twelve to be with Him, and whom He would send to preach the Kingdom of God; and these apostles He formed after the manner of a college or a stable group, over which He placed Peter chosen from among them. That divine mission, entrusted by Christ to the apostles, will last until the end of the world, since the Gospel they are to teach is for all time the source of all life for the Church. And for this reason the apostles, appointed as rulers in this society, took care to appoint successors.

The order of bishops, which succeeds to the college of apostles and gives this apostolic body continued existence, is also the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church, provided we understand this body together with its head the Roman Pontiff and never without this head.⁵

It is not the case that Christ bestows all authority on the successor of Peter, who then delegates some of his authority to other bishops. By virtue of the sacrament of episcopal ordination, each bishop is entrusted by Christ with authority to teach and govern the Church, and each bishop is co-responsible for the universal Church. In order allow the bishops and the Pope to better exercise their shared responsibility for the Church, it is fitting for there to be regular meetings to deliberate on questions of universal concern. As John Paul II noted, the Synod of Bishops, "representing the entire Catholic episcopate, demonstrates the fact that all the bishops are in hierarchical communion in solicitude for the universal Church."⁶ From the establishment of the Synod of Bishops in 1965, through the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the terms "synod" or "synodality" referred principally to the collegial exercise of episcopal authority.

More recently, a new idea has gained currency: the novel idea is that "synodality" pertains to the essence of the Church and to every aspect of the Church's life and mission. In short,

synodality is an essential and constitutive feature of the Church. What are the theological foundations and motivation for this analogical extension of the concept of “synodality”? The first and most basic concern of synodal ecclesiology is a renewed sense of the common dignity and vocation of all of the members of the Church. By virtue of the Sacrament of Baptism, all of the faithful participate in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly offices of Christ. Synodal ecclesiology seeks to confirm and deepen the participation and shared responsibility of all for the life and mission of the Church. The diversity of charisms and ministries in the Church is meant to serve and enrich our “common journey”, allowing each member to play an active role in the Church’s mission.

Undergirding the participation and co-responsibility of all of the faithful is the doctrine of the *sensus fidei fidelium*. In an important address on the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis developed the connection between synodality and the *sensus fidei*:

After stating that the people of God is comprised of all the baptized who are called to “be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood”, the Second Vatican Council went on to say that “the whole body of the faithful, who have an anointing which comes from the holy one (cf. 1 Jn 2:20,27), cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people of God, when ‘from the bishops to the last of the faithful’ it manifests a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals”. These are the famous words infallible “*in credendo*”. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, I emphasized that “the people of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*“, and added that “all the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients”. The *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and an *Ecclesia discens*, since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church.⁷

The *sensus fidei* establishes the whole Church, anointed by the Holy Spirit, as the bearer of apostolic tradition. In order to discern the voice of the Spirit, it is necessary for the Church’s pastors to consult the faithful and to listen to their voice. Reciprocally, synodality encourages the faithful to

become protagonists or active participants in the Church's missionary journey. Both the method and the goal of synodality is "a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth' (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he 'says to the Churches' (Rev 2:7)."⁸

A second, and related, aim of synodal ecclesiology is to overcome an exclusionary or one-sided "clericalism" that would preclude "the participation of all, according to each one's calling, with the authority conferred by Christ on the College of Bishops headed by the Pope."⁹ In the words of Pope Francis, "synodality, as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself."¹⁰ If every member of the Church is co-responsible for the Church, then every member should participate in the Church's governance. While acknowledging the distinction of gifts or charisms in the Church, including the charism of hierarchical ministry, the program of synodality seeks to develop new forms of collaboration and "mutual listening" as well as new structures that will allow the laity to participate in decision-making in the Church.

In summary, the recent history of the concept of synodality begins with a concern to implement the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* on collegiality. The institution of the Synod of Bishops was meant to express and realize the collaboration and shared responsibility of the Pope and the bishops for the universal Church. **The past few years have witnessed a development or analogical extension of the meaning of "synodality"; if the term initially referred to episcopal collegiality, the new idea is that the whole Church is constitutively and essentially synodal. In the words of the International Theological Commission, "synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church."¹¹**

Before considering some possible limitations of synodal ecclesiology, it is necessary to present some specific proposals for the implementation of synodality in the life of the Church. **"Synodality" is essentially a programmatic concept in the sense that it authorizes and requires new processes, structures, and events in order to realize the goal of "building a synodal Church."**¹² An important text from the International Theological Commission offers a description of synodality as an essential and constitutive dimension of the Church:

a. First and foremost, synodality denotes the particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the

People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church's ordinary way of living and working. This *modus vivendi et operandi* works through the community listening to the Word and celebrating the Eucharist, the brotherhood of communion and the co-responsibility and participation of the whole People of God in its life and mission, on all levels and distinguishing between various ministries and roles.

b. In a more specific sense, which is determined from a theological and canonical point of view, synodality denotes those structures and ecclesial processes in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed at an institutional level, but analogously on various levels: local, regional and universal. These structures and processes are officially at the service of the Church, which must discover the way to move forward by listening to the Holy Spirit.

c. Finally, synodality designates the program of those synodal events in which the Church is called together by the competent authority in accordance with the specific procedures laid down by ecclesiastical discipline, involving the whole People of God in various ways on local, regional and universal levels, presided over by the Bishops in collegial communion with the Bishop of Rome, to discern the way forward and other particular questions, and to take particular decisions and directions with the aim of fulfilling its evangelizing mission.¹³

There are several things to observe regarding this summary account of the three levels or dimensions of synodality. The first point to note is the logical connection between the three levels. The first level refers to synodality as a “style” that can and should be expressed in the ordinary life of the Church, especially in her liturgical life. However, the content and meaning of this “synodal style” is vague and generic. The real test of whether or not a synodal style is adequately present in the life of the Church is the attention given to the processes, structures, and synodal assemblies described as the second and third levels. In a reflection on these three levels in which synodality is expressed, the Preparatory Document for the 2023 Synod affirms that “if it is not embodied in structures and processes, the style of synodality easily degrades from the level of intentions and desires to that of rhetoric.”¹⁴

The second point to note is that synodality is a project or plan that requires new initiatives and new processes. By journeying together in a synodal way, “the Church will be able to learn through Her experience which processes can help Her to live communion, to achieve participation.”¹⁵ This requires “the ability to imagine a different future for the Church and her institutions”¹⁶ with the goal of “building a synodal Church.”¹⁷

What are some of the processes and structures in which and by which the synodal nature of the Church can be expressed? The answer to this question is complex insofar as different processes and structures are called for at the level of a parish, a diocese, a region, a nation, and the universal Church. It is helpful to focus on synodality at the level of the parish. For most members of the Church, the parish is the concrete place where the Church is encountered and experienced. Referring to the importance of synodality in the life of the parish, the ITC document on synodality notes:

In the parish there are two structures which have a synodal character: the parish pastoral council and the financial council, with lay participation in consultation and pastoral planning. In this sense it seems necessary to review the canonical norm which at present only suggests that there should be a parish pastoral council and to make it obligatory, as the last Synod of the Diocese of Rome did. Bringing about an effective synodal dynamic in a local Church also requires that the Diocesan Pastoral Council and parish pastoral councils should work in a coordinated way and be appropriately upgraded.¹⁸

The idea here seems to be that synodality involves participating in representative institutions or structures that allow the laity to share in the governance of the parish. Earlier in the text, the ITC explained that “the advanced demands of modern consciousness concerning the participation of every citizen in running society, call for a new and deeper experience and presentation of the mystery of the Church as intrinsically synodal.”¹⁹ The dynamic of “mutual listening” and shared responsibility within the Church should find expression in structures that allow the laity to participate in decisions that affect the life of the parish.

The second way for the laity to implement and realize the synodal nature of the Church is by means of their participation in “synodal events” convoked by a competent ecclesial authority. The current synodal process, which will culminate in a multi-year General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, is a key example of such an event. In its inception and planning, the current synodal process has been specifically designed to allow for the

participation of the whole Church. The first phase of the current synodal process involves “listening to and consulting the people of God in the particular Churches (October 2021 – April 2022).”²⁰ How exactly can the laity participate in this event? By participating in parish meetings or workshops on synodality or by responding to a synod survey on specially designed interactive websites. In both cases the questions which form the basis for the consultation phase of the synodal process, include the following:

How is [the synodal]“journeying together” happening today in the Church?

What space is there in your life to listen to the voices on the peripheries of the Church, especially cultural groups, women, the disabled, those who experience poverty, marginalization, or social exclusion?

What space is there our parishes for the voice of people, including active and inactive members of our faith?

How is authority or governance exercised in your local parish and in the Church?

How does your parish promote participation in decision-making within the hierarchical structures of the Church?

This synodal survey, let me stress, is designed to enact a consultation or listening to the voice of the laity as a way of hearing the voice of God. In the words of the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, Cardinal Mario Grech, “**by listening to the people of God – this is what consultation in the particular Churches is for – we know that we can hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.**”²¹ The answers to these questions have been collated and sifted through by a committee of synod experts first at the diocesan level, and then by a committee at the level of the national bishops’ conference, and then by a committee of experts at the general secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, who in turn have drafted documents summarizing the results of this consultation of the faithful.

Part Two: Critical Questions

The method and the goal of synodality consist in a deeper appreciation of the shared dignity and “common journey” of all the members of the Church. A synodal Church promotes participation, shared responsibility, and mutual listening for the sake of reform and a renewal that will reinvigorate the mission of the Church. As I noted earlier, stated in these general terms, the notion of “synodality” is unobjectionable.

The question requiring more discernment, however, comes from the fact that what is described as a “momentous and new teaching” on synodal ecclesiology is concretized and expressed in specific processes, structures, and events. The claim that needs to be tested is whether the documents guiding and informing these new processes and structures adequately reflect the sacramental nature of the Church, and the diversity of charisms in the Church founded by Christ. I have four questions or areas of concern.

The Sacramental Ground of Authority

One of the stated goals of the synodal process is to reflect anew on the exercise of authority in the Church. “Synodality,” writes Pope Francis, “as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself.”²² The Preparatory Document for the 2023 Synod on Synodality calls for an examination of “how responsibility and power are lived in the Church as well as the structures by which they are managed.”²³ The Preparatory Document returns to the theme of authority in a concluding section that lists key themes that should be considered during the first phase of consultation. Under the headings “Authority and Participation” and “Discerning and Deciding,” the following questions are posed:

A synodal Church is a participatory and co-responsible Church. . . . How is authority exercised within our particular Church? How are lay ministries and the assumption of responsibility by the faithful promoted? How do we promote participation in decision-making within hierarchically structured communities?

The guiding thread for these questions on the exercise of authority in the Church is a concern to correct a perceived imbalance or injustice that would exclude the lay faithful from participation in governance or “decision-making” in the Church. The remedy for this imbalance is “synodal conversion” that will inspire and generate new processes and

structures that involve the laity in decision-making within the hierarchical Church.

What is arguably missing from the various documents on synodality or the synodal process is an adequate reflection on the source and meaning of hierarchical authority in the Church. This is a significant *lacuna* given the modern tendency to reject as unjust any form of authority that has not been delegated or authorized by the individuals concerned. As noted above, the ITC mentions “the advanced demands of modern consciousness concerning the participation of every citizen in running society.”²⁴ If one assumes a modern conception of authority as essentially arbitrary power, then the path of ecclesial reform is to create processes and structures that distribute authority/power more widely. An authority authorized “from below” would appear to be the most just and participatory kind of governance.

Let me be clear that the difficulty I am raising does not concern the idea of “promoting participation” or mutual listening or consultation in the life of the Church. **The difficulty concerns the precise nature of lay participation in the specific tasks of hierarchical ministry.** That such a difficulty arises has to do with the fact that there is a certain confusion or ambivalence in the preparatory documents on the hierarchical nature of the Church. This ambivalence coincides with a modern faith in sociology and bureaucratic procedures, which are, on closer inspection, mechanisms of unaccountable top-down control.

In this context, it is necessary to recall the sacramental nature of ecclesial authority. Hierarchical ministry is not delegated or authorized by members of the Church; it is gift of grace. A text from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* unfolds the essential ground of ecclesial authority:

“Faith comes from what is heard” (Rom 10:17). No one can give himself the mandate and the mission to proclaim the Gospel. The one sent by the Lord does not speak and act on his own authority, but by virtue of Christ’s authority; not as a member of the community, but speaking to it in the name of Christ. No one can bestow grace on himself; it must be given and offered. This fact presupposes ministers of grace, authorized and empowered by Christ. From him, they receive the mission and faculty (‘the sacred power’) to act in persona *Christi Capitis*. The ministry in which Christ’s emissaries do and give by God’s grace what they cannot do and give by their own powers, is called a “sacrament” by the Church’s tradition. Indeed, the ministry of the Church is conferred by a special sacrament.²⁵

The implications of this teaching are endlessly rich. The authority to teach and govern the Church is a sacramental gift that *not all of the members of the Church receive*. Furthermore, **the grace of authority entails speaking and governing in the name of Christ. This requires fidelity to Christ, partaking of his life and mission, being configured by grace to the One who offered his life as a sacrifice for the redemption of all.** This is the opposite of despotism; to speak and govern in Christ's name is to participate in Christ's own way of personally uniting authority and love in representation of God the Father. By the same token, it is to display an icon of true authority as understood in its root meaning. For "*auctoritas*" (authority) is derived from "*augere*" meaning "to increase, or cause to grow." Genuine authority is distinct from the modern idea of arbitrary power. The nature and purpose of authority is to augment the life of the members of the community. This is the viewpoint of the *Letter to the Ephesians*, which explains how the distinction of charisms or ministries in the Church is for the sake of "building up the body of Christ. . . . speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. . . . each part working properly makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love" (Eph 4:12-16).

The sacramental nature of ecclesial authority arguably suggests a path of reform somewhat different from the idea of "promoting participation in decision-making" proposed by the synodal process. True reform, then, demands a return to the life-giving source of authority, Christ himself. This is more than a moral appeal for the Church's hierarchical ministers to act like servants. A return to the source of authority entails faithfully preserving the priceless gift of Christ which is the deposit of faith. This can and does require clear Magisterial teaching in the form of a precise confession of doctrine – Jesus Christ is *homoousios* with the Father (Council of Nicaea); "If anyone says that the sacrifice of the Mass is one only of praise and thanksgiving, or that it is a mere commemoration of the sacrifice consummated on the Cross but not propitiatory one . . . let him be anathema" (Council of Trent). What doctrinal statements like these reveal is the Church's bi-millennial confidence, founded in the promise and command of Christ, that the Magisterium is entrusted with authentically interpreting the deposit of faith and identifying its binding contents.

To be sure, the *sensus fidei* is an essential witness to the deposit of faith. Even more, all believers have a stake in receiving and transmitting this deposit. Now, their share in this task occurs *in persona Sponsae ecclesiae*; they are to receive and transmit in the spirit and attitude of the

immaculate Bride of the Lamb. But because no one is immaculate apart from Mary, we as believers need an authoritative office, other than ourselves, empowered to speak to us in the name of the Bridegroom and so to keep his word ever before us in all its life-giving, binding authority.

For this reason, there is a dimension of apostolic authority that cannot be delegated or shared. Of course, this authority was bestowed for the sake of “building up” all of the members of the body of Christ in love (cf. Eph. 4:11-16). Nevertheless, the sacramental grace of apostolic office is not simply a matter of listening to the voice of the People of God. There is also an obedient listening to apostolic tradition – “everything contained in the Symbol of Faith . . . and everything contained in the word of God, whether written or handed down in Tradition, which the Church, either by a solemn judgment or by the ordinary and universal Magisterium, sets forth to be believed as divinely revealed.”²⁶

The Clericalization of the Lay Vocation

A primary aim of the synodal process is to involve the lay faithful in the life and mission of the Church: “Synodality means that the whole Church is a subject and that everyone in the Church is a subject. . . The faithful are *synodoi*, companions on the journey. They are called to play an active role.” As noted above, the ITC document on synodality and the Preparatory Document for the 2023 Synod elaborate two ways for the laity to participate in the synodal process. First, the laity can join either the pastoral council or the financial council of their parish. Secondly, the laity can allow their voice to be heard by engaging the various means of synodal consultation, including answering internet “synodal surveys.”

The various documents on synodality or the synodal process are surprisingly silent on the specific vocation of the laity. According to Second Vatican Council, the essential or specifying feature of the lay faithful is their “secular character.” In the words of *Lumen Gentium*, the lay faithful “live in the world, that is, in every one of the secular professions and occupations. . . . in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life.”²⁷ The crucial point is that it is precisely from within this “secular setting” that the laity contribute to the life and mission of Church by ordering the world from within to the Kingdom of God. The laity “are called by God so that they, led by the spirit of the Gospel, might contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties.” An adequate appreciation of what is proper and specific to the lay vocation is essential for avoiding a self-

referential ecclesiology. The Church is essentially missionary, and the laity are called to embody and extend the mystery of ecclesial communion into the ordinary realms of family, work, and the social order in all of its dimensions.

Looked at in this light, the synodal process, as described in the relevant documents, seems liable to a subtle “**clericalization**” of the **laity**, in the sense that their contribution to the life and mission of the Church is measured by the extent of their involvement with tasks that are specific to the hierarchical ministry of the Church. In place of the Second Vatican Council’s emphasis on the unique contribution of the laity to the Church’s mission in the world, there is a turning inward to try to convince the laity that what really matters is their participation in “decision-making within the hierarchical structures of the Church.” Once again, this is not to deny the co-responsibility of the entire body of believers for receiving and transmitting the deposit of faith. The point is rather that the co-responsibility proper to the laity unfolds in and through configuration to the ecclesial bride—a configuration essentially requiring an obedience to the Word of God the Magisterium exists to foster and protect. Far from being a form of slavery to clerical overlordship, however, this obedience is an implication of the freedom of God’s children—just as the Magisterium is not the private good of clerics, but a service of the deposit of faith that demands the most radical expropriation for the sake of the *bonum commune* on their part.

Self-referential Synodality

In his hand-written notes that formed the basis of his intervention during the General Congregations prior to the Conclave of 2013, then Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio wrote:

When the Church does not go out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referential; she grows ill (like the stooped woman in the Gospel). The evils which appear throughout history in Church institutions are rooted in this self-referentiality – a kind of theological narcissism.²⁸

These reflections accord with a fundamental and oft-repeated concern of Joseph Ratzinger / Benedict XVI: **the first word of the Church is Christ**, and not herself. The Church is healthy to the extent that all her attention is focused on Him. The Second Vatican Council placed this concept masterfully at the pinnacle of its deliberations; the fundamental

text on the Church begins with the words: *Lumen gentium cum sit Christus*. . . . If one wishes to understand the Second Vatican Council correctly, one must begin with this first sentence again and again.²⁹

The shared insight of Jorge Bergoglio and Joseph Ratzinger is that **the center of the Church is outside of herself; she exists in order to faithfully bear witness to the mystery of Christ. A Bishops' Synod on Synodality is quintessentially a self-referential exercise.** Of course there are times when a look inward or a reform of structures is appropriate. The difficulty arises when this exercise of looking inward (and reforming structures) is presented as the most essential thing. The risk is that synodality be exhausted in the mere process of organizing synods. The impression that current thinking about synodality comes alarmingly close to such an adoption of modern bureaucratic faith in procedures (which turn out to be mechanisms of unaccountable top-down control) is unfortunately hard to dismiss in light of statements such as these: “Our ‘journeying together’ is, in fact, what most effectively enacts and manifests the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God.”³⁰ Or consider the claim of the ITC: “exercising synodality makes real the human person’s call to live communion, which comes about through sincere self-giving, union with God and unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ.”³¹

Dishonesty

This leads to my fourth and final concern. It’s hard to avoid the impression that there is something fundamentally dishonest about the current synodal process. Under the guise of a synodal process devoted the theme of synodality, the actual questions under discussion concern the Church’s moral teaching and sacramental order. This is especially true of the most vocal proponents of “synodality” in the United States. Consider, for example, the recent account of “synodality” by Phyllis Zagano in article that sharply criticizes Cardinal Pell, Cardinal Müller and others for raising questions about the current synodal process: After castigating them for not embracing synodality, she writes:

The synod’s issues are well known — women in ministry, a married priesthood, the status of divorced-remarried persons and considerations about homosexuality. These are the concerns of Catholics around the world.³²

I thought the synod was meant to reinvigorate the shared responsibility of all the baptized for the mission of the Church. **Instead, we are now being told that the synod is really about changing the Church's teaching on same-sex unions, the indissolubility of marriage, and the sacrament of Holy Orders. To claim that this is what the Holy Spirit is calling for – because we have discerned the voice of the Holy Spirit by consulting the people of God through our synod workshops, and internet surveys that various committees of synod experts have collated and summarized – is to compound the dishonesty.**

Conclusion

In his seminal essay on the priority of the Marian dimension of the Church, Hans Urs von Balthasar writes:

The Church since the Council has to a large extent put off its mystical characteristics; it has become a Church of permanent conversations, organizations, advisory commissions, congresses, synods, commissions, academies, parties, pressure groups, functions, structures and restructurings, sociological experiments, statistics: that is to say, more than ever a male Church. . . . May not the reason for the domination of such typically male and abstract notions be because of the abandonment of the deep femininity of the Marian character of the Church? . . . From the cross the Son hands his mother over into the Church of the apostles, from now on her place is there. In a hidden manner her virginal motherhood holds sway throughout the whole sphere of the Church, gives it light, warmth, protection; her cloak makes the Church into a protective cloak. It requires no special gesture from her to show that we should look at the Son and not at her. Her very nature as handmaid reveals him. So, too, she can show the apostles and their successors how one can be both wholly effective presence and wholly extinguished service. For the Church was already present in her before men were set in office.³³

The current pre-occupation with synodal processes and synodal re-structurings and plans to finally build a synodal Church represent a certain loss of vision or a forgetfulness of the true countenance of the Church. At the heart of the Church is the

immaculate faith of Mary, who goes before us in holiness with a love that bears all things. By looking to her the lay faithful can discern a form of listening and shared responsibility that is less visible to synodal surveys and worships but that is more likely bear fruit and renew the Church's mission. (**Editor's note:** This essay is a shortened and revised version of the essay titled **“Communion, Sacramental Authority, and the Limits of Synodality”**, published in the Winter 2021 **issue [48.4] of *Communio***.)

Endnotes:

¹ Cf. **“Working Document for the Continental Stage”**.

² Henri de Lubac, *Mémoire sur l'occasion de mes écrits* (Namur: Culture et Vérité, 1989) [*At the Service of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 150].

³ ITC, “Synodality in the Life of the Church,” § 4.

⁴ Paul VI, *Apostolica Sollicitudo*.

⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, 19, 22.

⁶ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis* (2003), 58.

⁷ Pope Francis, “Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops”.

⁸ Pope Francis, “Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops”.

⁹ ITC, “Synodality in the Life of the Church,” § 67.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, “Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops”.

¹¹ ITC, “Synodality in the Life of the Church,” § 6.

¹² General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops, **“Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,”** § 16 [hereafter Preparatory Document].

¹³ ITC, “Synodality in the Life of the Church,” § 38.

¹⁴ Preparatory Document, § 27.

¹⁵ Preparatory Document, § 1.

¹⁶ Preparatory Document, § 9.

¹⁷ Preparatory Document, § 16.

¹⁸ ITC, “Synodality in the Life of the Church,” § 84.

¹⁹ ITC, “Synodality in the Life of the Church,” § 38.

²⁰ Preparatory Document, § 3.

²¹ Cardinal Mario Grech, interview by Andrea Torielli, **“Transformation of Synod to Create Space for People of God,”** Vatican News, May 21, 2021.

²² Pope Francis, “Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops”.

²³ Preparatory Document,

²⁴ ITC, “Synodality in the Life of the Church,” § 38.

²⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 875.

- ²⁶ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio Ad Tuendam Fidem*.
- ²⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, 31.
- ²⁸ Jorge Bergoglio, [**].
- ²⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 13 (1986): 239-252, at 240.
- ³⁰ Preparatory Document, 1.
- ³¹ ITC, “Synodality in the Life of the Church,” § 43.
- ³² Phyllis Zagano, **“Can Pope Francis survive the scheming of ‘the schismatics’?”** *National Catholic Reporter* (2022)
- ³³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Marian Principle,” in *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (London: SPCK, 1975), 70-72.

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