

The First Object of the Church: Holiness

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Thursday, October 24, 2024

When I was asking myself, **why has the Synod on Synodality been a failure (as I think we can agree that it is), or why is “synodality,” that is, “walking together,” irrelevant** to me and to everyone else I know, the following words came to mind:

We can walk as much as we want, we can build many things, but if we do not confess Jesus Christ, nothing will avail. We will become a pitiful NGO, but not the Church, the Bride of Christ. . . .When one does not profess Jesus Christ – I recall the phrase of Léon Bloy – ‘Whoever does not pray to God, prays to the devil.’ When one does not profess Jesus Christ, one professes the worldliness of the devil.

Perhaps you remember these words also. They are from the [very first homily of Pope Francis](#) ^[1].

And there was my answer: **the Synod is church people “walking as much as they want” but without seeming to be confessing Jesus Christ. That is why it strikes me and others as, at best, the proceedings of a pitiful NGO.**

Does my conclusion seem too harsh? I will compose an argument, based on the *Instrumentum Laboris* (IL) of session II,

and more fundamentally on a fundamental “source document” of the Synod, a 2018 study by the International Theological Commission (ITC) entitled, “[Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church](#) [2].”

Although the latter was clearly crafted to provide a justification for a Synod on Synodality, it makes some disquieting admissions along the way, as for instance when it admits that “**synodality is not explicitly found as a term or as a concept in the teaching of Vatican II.**” (n. 6) Rather, as the ITC points out, *communio* (Gr. *koinōnia*) was the operative notion there, as also in the magisterium of Saint Pope John Paul II.

The ITC also warns that in any conciliarist initiative “there is always a danger of schism lying in wait, which cannot be shrugged off.” (n. 34) It also observes that Protestant churches and especially the Lutherans have long claimed that their form of government is attractively synodal. (n. 36)

I summarize, bluntly: **synodality, without any outright basis in the Council, seems inherently schismatic, and is similar to Protestantism.**

Nonetheless, the ITC also stretches and strains to provide its justification, as when it claims that John Henry Newman was an early promoter of synodality, because of his love for patristic thought and his vindication of the *sensus fidelium*! (n. 38)

Yet most revealing is how the ITC tries to anchor synodality in the magisterium of Pope John Paul II, and particularly in his charter for the Church in the new millennium, [Novo millennio ineunte](#) [4].

Some background is necessary here. The very first assertion of Vatican II, in *Lumen Gentium*, was that “the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.” This assertion was the basis for the Council’s concern with *communio* in the Church, and its hope that if, as the Council

Fathers said, **they were simply to “unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission,” the Church would be able to draw all peoples to Christ.**

Things didn’t pan out that way, because of the dissent and disunity that followed in the wake of the Council. Hence, John Paul II in *Novo millenio* could reasonably write: “To make the Church the home and the school of communion: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God’s plan and respond to the world’s deepest yearnings.” (n. 40) He accordingly drew attention to various instruments of *communio*, such as episcopal conferences, councils of priests, and pastoral councils – just as the Synod of Synodality is doing today.

But here is the crucial difference. **In *Lumen Gentium* the *communio* of the Church is not meant to do any great work on its own apart from holiness.** Its discussion of the “People of God,” (ch. 2), the hierarchy (ch. 3), and the laity (ch. 4) are all in service to what it teaches in chapter 5, on “The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church”: “all the faithful of Christ are invited to strive for the holiness and perfection of their own proper state. Indeed they have an obligation so to strive.” (n. 42)

Novo millenio likewise teaches very explicitly that **the first object of the Church is not *communio* but holiness: “all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness.”** (n. 30) “The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this high standard of ordinary Christian living,” the pope said, and then he discussed the necessary means of holiness such as prayer, the Sunday Eucharist, regular confession and Bible study.

I forgot to say that the ITC also observed that **synods in the history of the Church were *for the implementation of something*, not for the sake of mere synodality.** For example, the many synods following the Council of Trent were

meant to implement the teachings of Trent. Today, by analogy, a synod should be for the sake of implementing the necessary means to holiness.

Yet although it asserts in general terms that “synodality is rooted in this dynamic vision of the People of God with a universal vocation to holiness” (IL, n. 2), the Synod on Synodality seems to give no attention to holiness – as if being synodal were itself the essence of holiness, as if true belief and following the moral law were dispensable, as if Christian charity were purely procedural, as if we could walk all we want without professing Christ.

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[1] very first homily of Pope Francis: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130314_omelia-cardinali.html

[2] Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html

[3]

Christ and the Apostles : <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/wp-content/uploads/Rouault.jpeg>

[4] Novo millennio ineunte: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html