

Elements of synodality

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The following thoughts about the concept of synodality were offered to the church by the International Theological Commission in 2017 in the document "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church." The full essay with footnotes for quotes and references may be found online: tinyurl.com/8869rymm.

Synodality, a new term

6. Although synodality is not explicitly found as a term or as a concept in the teaching of Vatican II, it is fair to say that synodality is at the heart of the work of renewal the Council was encouraging. 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. In this context the concept of communion expresses the profound substance of the mystery and mission of the Church, whose source and summit is the Eucharistic synaxis. This is the res of the Sacramentum Ecclesiae: union with God the Trinity and unity between human persons, made real through the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus.

In this ecclesiological context, synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission.

Call for a change in church culture

105. Pastoral conversion for the implementation of synodality means that some paradigms often still present in ecclesiastical culture need to be quashed, because they express an understanding of the Church that has not been renewed by the ecclesiology of communion. These include: the concentration of responsibility for mission in the ministry of pastors; insufficient appreciation of the consecrated life and charismatic gifts; rarely making use of the specific and qualified contribution of the lay faithful, including women, in their areas of expertise.

Listening and dialogue for communal discernment

110. The synodal life of the Church comes about thanks to the implementation of genuine communication of faith, life, and missionary commitment among all its members. It gives expression to the *communio sanctorum* which lives from prayer, is nourished by the sacraments, flourishes in love of each other and of everyone, grows by sharing the joys and trials of the Bride of Christ. Communication needs to become explicit through the community listening to the Word of God in order to know "what the Spirit is saying to the Churches" (Rev. 2:29). "A synodal Church is a Church which listens.... The faithful People, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other; and all listening to the Holy Spirit."

111. Synodal dialogue depends on courage both in speaking and in listening. It is not about engaging in a debate where one speaker tries to get the better of the others or counters their positions with brusque arguments, but about expressing whatever seems to have been suggested by the Holy Spirit as useful for communal discernment, at the same time being open to accepting whatever has been suggested by the same Spirit in other people's positions, "for the general good" (1 Cor. 12:7).

The criterion according to which "unity prevails over conflict" is of particular value in conducting a dialogue, managing different opinions and experiences and learning "a style of constructing history, a vital field where conflicts, tensions and opposites can reach a pluriform unity which generates new life," making it possible to "build communion amid disagreement" [Evangeliium Gaudium 228]. Actually, dialogue offers the opportunity to acquire new perspectives and points of view in order to shed light on the solution of the matter in question.

It is a matter of adopting "a relational way of viewing the world, which then becomes a form of shared knowledge, vision

most especially on service.” Because truth—as Benedict XVI emphasized—“is *lógos* which creates *diá-logos* and hence communication and communion.”

112. An essential attitude in synodal dialogue is humility, which inclines each one to be obedient to God’s will and obedient to each other in Christ. The Apostle Paul, in the Letter to the Philippians, illustrates what it means and how it works in relation to the life of communion to be “of a single mind (*φρόνησις*), one in love (*ἀγάπη*), one in heart and one in mind” (2:2). He homes in on two temptations which undermine the life of the community: The spirits of jealousy (*ἐριθεία*) and vanity (*κενοδοξία*) (2:3a). By contrast, the attitude to have is humility (*ταπεινοφροσύνη*): either by seeing others as more important than ourselves, or by putting the common good and interest first (2:3b-4). Here Paul recalls Him in whom, through faith, we became a community: “Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus” (2:5). The *φρόνησις* of the disciples must be that which we receive from the Father if we are living in Christ. The kenosis of Christ (2:7-10) is the radical form of His obedience to the Father, and for the disciples it is the call to feel, think, and discern together with humility the will of God in following the Master and Lord.

113. Exercising discernment is at the heart of synodal processes and events. That is the way it has always been in the synodal life of the Church. The ecclesiology of communion and the specific spirituality and praxis that follow on from it involve the mission of the entire People of God, so that it becomes “necessary today more than ever ... to be formed in the principles and methods of a way of discernment that is not only personal but also communitarian.” It is a matter of the Church, by means of the theological interpretation of the signs of the times under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, traveling the path that is to be followed in service of God’s plan brought to eschatological fulfillment in Christ, which also has to be fulfilled in every *kairós* throughout history. Communal discernment allows us to discover God’s call in a particular historical situation.

114. Communal discernment implies carefully and courageously listening to “the groans” of the Spirit (cf. Romans 8:26) which emerge through the explicit or sometimes silent cry that goes up from the People of God “to listen to God, so that with Him we may hear the cry of His People; to listen to His People until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us.” A disciple of Christ must be like a preacher, who “has to contemplate the Word, but he also has to contemplate his people.” Discernment must be carried out in a space of prayer, meditation, reflection, and study, which we need to hear the voice of the Spirit; by means of sincere, serene, and objective dialogue with our brothers and sisters; by paying attention to the real experiences and challenges of every community and every situation; in the exchange of gifts and in the convergence of all energies in view of building up the Body of Christ and proclaiming the Gospel; in the melting-pot of feelings and thoughts that enable us to understand the Lord’s will; by searching to be set free by the Gospel from any obstacle that might weaken our openness to the Spirit.

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