

Pope Francis' Vision for a Synodal Church

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Abstract

'Synod' and 'synodality' have become synonymous with Pope Francis. Since Pope Paul VI instituted the Synod of Bishops as a permanent office in 1965, there hasn't been any pontificate that has given these matters as much profile and attention as his has. Why is this the case, and what is Pope Francis' vision for a synodal Church? More fundamentally, what is synodality, according to tradition of the Church, and Pope Francis? Several years into both local and global synodal-type processes and formation gatherings, it seems many people, even prominent Church leaders, readily admit that they still do not fully understand it. For this reason, this article sets out to provide a general overview and introduction.

Keywords

synodality, Pope Francis, People of God, bishops, Church

Introduction

'Synod' and 'synodality' have become synonymous with Pope Francis. Since Pope Paul VI instituted the Synod of Bishops as a permanent office in 1965, there hasn't been any pontificate that has given these matters as much profile and attention as his has. Why is this the case, and what is Pope Francis' vision for a synodal Church? More fundamentally, what is synodality, according to tradition of the Church, and Pope Francis? Several years into both local and global synodal-type processes and formation gatherings, it seems many people, even prominent Church leaders, readily admit that they still do not fully understand it. For this reason, this article sets out to provide a general overview and introduction.

I will begin by explaining that Pope Francis' intention is to embed the Synod of Bishops within an operative culture of synodality in the Catholic Church. I will then go on to suggest Pope Francis' vision for

a reformed synodal process is necessary, drawing upon my personal experience of participation in the XIII General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2012, which was the final synod to take place under Pope Benedict XVI. The remainder of the paper will argue that Pope Francis is giving effect to the vision for Church reform of the Second Vatican Council, and so, that his vision for a synodal Church is essentially a new phase in the reception of Vatican II.

The Synod of Bishops

The Synod of Bishops is an advisory body to the pontiff existing outside of and independently of curial governance structures; it is not an organ of the Roman curia. It is consultative only, assisting the Pope in governance, while always subject to his authority. In the intervening decades since its establishment by Pope Paul VI in 1965, in order to ensure that not just the documents of the Council would be transmitted but, equally importantly, the conciliar experience of universal collegiality, there have been fifteen ordinary assemblies of the Synod of Bishops as well as many special and extraordinary assemblies. The XVI General Synod of Bishops is currently underway (2021-2024), which we will discuss further on.

Pope Francis has called the Synod of Bishops 'one of the most precious fruits of the Second Vatican Council'.¹ Accordingly, he has significantly expanded its General Secretariat and given it increased prominence and stature. So, in terms of Pope Francis' vision for a synodal Church, we can say straight away that he envisages the Synod of Bishops becoming 'beefed up' in years to come; becoming ever more influential in the exercise of the Petrine ministry than heretofore. His motivation for doing this is to facilitate the entire People of God throughout the world, included among them bishops, priests and deacons, in exercising their distinctive charisms and responsibilities for the good of the Church. This is to happen, of course, *sub Petro et cum Petro*, under the authority of diocesan bishops who share in the Petrine ministry and guided by the Holy Spirit. My own view, as will be clear in what follows, is that the vision of Pope Francis for a synodal Church needs to become a reality if the Petrine ministry is to be exercised effectively in a genuinely global and universal Church.

There are compelling arguments as to why a synodal style in the Church, as Pope Francis advocates, is the best means of addressing the many crises faced by the Church, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*. In terms of *ad intra*, synodality offers a pathway towards cleansing the Church of current impediments to its mission, such as clericalism and loss of

¹ Pope Francis, *Episcopalis communio*, (2018), n. 1.

credibility. In terms of *ad extra*, it offers the best pathway towards marshalling and channelling the many gifts and charisms of God's people towards addressing the ecological crisis we face as a planet as well as challenges to authentic human ecology and the fracturing of fraternal humanism globally, a reality which is becoming all too apparent as war, famine, and migration increase.

What is a Synod?

The word 'synod' comes from the Greek and refers to an assembly or a meeting, or, more literally, to journeying along a common path. It is analogous with the term 'council', which is its Latin counterpart. In the Catholic Church, synodality has, or at least has until now, signified an assembly of bishops along with experts and advisers meeting together to advise the pope, or a similar event at diocesan or regional level established summoned to advise local bishops. So understood, synodality has been primarily at the service of manifesting and fostering episcopal collegiality, that is, the exercise of shared governance by the bishops. Under Pope Francis, however, we can observe over the course of the last decade a shift from synodality exercised solely or primarily in the service of episcopal collegiality to a properly ecclesial synodality, by which is meant the adopting of a synodal style of participation in decision-making by the entire People of God in a manner appropriate to their respective gifts and charisms. This is evident, for example, by the decision taken by Pope Francis to set aside 70 places for non-bishops to participate, with voting rights, in the first of the two general assemblies that are key moments within the Synod 2021–2024, and which will take place in October 2023.

Since coming into office in 2013, Pope Francis has held two ordinary general assemblies of the Synod of Bishops, one extraordinary general assembly, and one special assembly. The first assembly he convoked took place in 2014, the year following his election, and was an extraordinary synodal assembly on 'The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization'. Extraordinary synodal assemblies are relatively brief and small affairs; generally, apart from experts and advisers, only one bishop from each episcopal conference is in attendance. In contrast, ordinary general assemblies can involve hundreds of participants and are month-long events. The first of these under Pope Francis took place in 2015 on 'The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World'. The topic was deliberately aligned with that of the extraordinary synodal assembly that preceded it, and the intervening period of one year facilitated the most widespread consultation on pressing pastoral matters the global Catholic Church had then seen since Vatican II. These two synodal assemblies on the family were followed by the 2018 Ordinary General

Assembly on 'Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment', and in 2019 by a Special Assembly on the Pan-Amazonian Region.

The XVI Synod of Bishops 2021–2024

Each of the synods since Vatican II has had a particular focus or theme. The XVI Synod of Bishops is entitled, 'For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission'. In other words, it is a synod on the theme of synodality itself. Some commentators still speak as though this synod will only really commence when the General Assembly convenes in October 2023. They speak as though the consultations and discussions that have happened to date are merely a 'warm-up' phase for the synod, a phase that facilitates widespread consultation in advance and that, however valuable, is still merely a prelude to the 'big event'. This is not the case. The XVI Synod of Bishops was solemnly convoked on October 10th 2021 at a special Mass in St Peter's and, a week later (17th October 2021), in each diocese in the universal Church. Indeed, each of the elements that form part of the synodal process, from consultation through to implementation, are intended to be prayerful encounters during which, through honest and courageous speaking, on the one hand, and open and authentic listening, on the other, the will of the Holy Spirit comes to be revealed. According to *Communio episcopalis* (2018), consultation is now intrinsic to synodality. This respects and acknowledges the indispensable role played by the *sensus fidelium*, the sense of faith of all the faithful, in determining how the Church responds to the signs of the times. As part of Synod 2021–2024, over a hundred syntheses of consultations that took place in all parts of the globe were formulated into one document. This document was then considered at seven regional conferences during what was called the continental phase. The outcome of these seven conferences became the basis of a working document (*Instrumentum laboris*), published in June 2023, has formed the agenda for the October 2023 General Assembly.

The first phase of this consultation, which concluded in August 2022, was, according to Austen Ivereigh, the largest ever popular process of participation and consultation in world history. Apart from influencing the agenda of the October 2023 General Assembly, the consultation process was intended to be, in and of itself, a vibrant and dynamic experience of synodality in practice. Put differently, the consultation process, understood as a process of prayerful discernment by and within Church communities, is intended not just to feed into a synodal process taking place subsequently in Rome but rather here and now to be, in and of itself, a synodal event in the life of the local Church in which it takes place, albeit one that also has universal significance. So here is an important point for consideration: are local Churches actively harvesting for themselves and evaluating the data

that they gathered in the consultation phase? Are they utilising this in discerning pastoral strategies? Will they share this data with the various bodies of pastors on the ground and with relevant experts and advisers in order that everything that *can* be learned from the data *will* be learned from it? As Pope Francis wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*,

It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound 'decentralization' (n 16).

It would thus be a mistake, both theoretically and practically, to rely upon or expect either of the general assemblies taking place in the course of Synod 2021–2024 to come up with all the answers necessary for the renewal of the Christian faith in local communities. In the period between the two synods on the family (2014–2015) a much smaller scale but nonetheless significant consultation process took place in local Churches, but bishops' conferences didn't always discern this data sufficiently so that it could inform pastoral planning and influence strategies for evangelisation and catechesis in their region. If they had, some of the issues that have arisen in the current synod's consultation process, such as accounts of hurt and exclusion, might well have already been addressed. It would be best not to make the same mistake again.

So, in Pope Francis' vision for a synodal Church general assemblies have become only one moment, no doubt one key moment, yet nonetheless only one moment, in the functioning of the Synod of Bishops. Pope Francis has now formally institutionalised the process of consultation that is to take place in advance of all General Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops into the future. These consultations are no longer 'optional extras'. They are integral to the working of the Synod of Bishops.²

Pope Francis has also mandated an implementation phase as integral to the synodal process. In respect of the XVI Synod of Bishops currently underway, this will begin as soon as the General Assembly of Bishops concludes at the end of October 2024.³ Previously, the impact of synods had a short shelf-life; they tended to end with the publication of a post-synodal exhortation, often published just long enough after a synod had concluded for people to have all but forgotten about what it had discussed. Few post-synodal exhortations had much genuine follow-through or impact on the day-to-day life of the faithful. Now, however, with implementation envisaged from the outset as a key moment in the synodal process, this tapering away of the impact of a synod is unlikely to pertain in the future.

² Pope Francis, *Episcopalis communio*, (2018), n.7.

³ Pope Francis *Episcopalis Communio*, (2018), nn. 21-23.

We can see with Synod 2021–2024 a series of key moments beginning with consultation at the local (particular) Church level, gravitating towards the universal Church and then returning for implementation to the local Churches once again. This structure brings to life the rich and mutually sustaining relationship between the local Churches and the universal Church so beautifully articulated in *Lumen gentium* (n. 23).

For all this, it must be remembered that the whole synodal process is consultative and advisory only. Synodal processes and assemblies, therefore, whether regional or universal, though they have elements in common with democratic processes, are not parliaments, as Pope Francis has clarified on more than one occasion. Given that they are grounded in prayerful discernment they really don't have a secular equivalent.⁴ This leaves the unique concept of synodality in the Catholic Church readily open to misunderstanding.

I will now go on to explain why the Synod of Bishops as was, was not 'fit for purpose' and needed to be reformed. I will then detail some of the key elements of Pope Francis' vision for a renewed Synod of Bishops imbedded, as he wishes, within a synodal Church. Finally, I wish to suggest that the vision of Pope Francis for a synodal Church is essentially the vision of Vatican II.

Was Reform of the Synod of Bishops Needed?

I can address the matter of why the Synod of Bishops, as was, was not fit for purpose from first-hand experience. Ten years ago (2012) I participated in the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome as an expert adviser. The theme was 'The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith'. We didn't know it at the time but this was already intended by Pope Benedict XVI to be his final synodal general assembly and so he ensured that it focused on the primary concern of his pontificate, namely, the re-evangelisation of Europe. For Benedict XVI, as evident from his famous Regensburg Address (2006), the state of health of Christianity globally was dependent upon the wellbeing of Christianity in Europe. This was because of the decisive and irreplaceable 'inner rapprochement', as he saw it, between biblical faith and Greek philosophy. Yet Europe was now ravaged by secularism, which had resulted in the 'desertification' of its rich Christian heritage, massive decline in religious practice, and widespread doctrinal relativism. John Paul II's decade of evangelisation leading up to the new millennium hadn't resulted in the

⁴ Most recently to leaders of the French Catholic Action movement (Jan 13 2022). See <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/14893/synod-is-not-aiming-for-parliament-style-consensus-says-pope> \ Accessed July 8 2023.

resurgence of faith in Europe that his pontificate had hoped for. A new initiative was needed.

As advisers, we were seated near the back of the synod hall and our task was to take note of the various contributions from the Synod Fathers, all bishops, apart from a handful of male religious superiors. Women religious were not represented. We were required to identify similarities and differences in the bishops' presentations, report on emerging themes and topics of interest, and keep an eye out for any theological anomalies. As all contributions were scripted and, in effect, vetted in advance; it was largely a paper exercise. There was supposedly time for 'free interventions' in the evenings, but these didn't come across as such, as great care was exercised regarding who was called upon to speak. An American Benedictine who sat next to me summed up the experience well: it was like 'being on a transatlantic flight all day every day and you don't even get to choose the movie'. Early in the synodal assembly officials became concerned by bishops posting to social media from within the synod hall, and so the internet was switched off, causing lengthy queues in nearby phone shops as participants rushed out to buy data SIM cards for their iPads so they could keep posting to social media.

There were only three significant differences of opinion voiced during the synodal assembly. The first concerned the ordering of the sacraments of initiation. Cardinal Ouellet, widely believed to be representing the position of Pope Benedict, favoured returning to the traditional order of confirmation before communion. He was challenged on this by then-Archbishop of Washington and Relator for the Synod, Cardinal Wuerl, who, without denying the theological coherence of Cardinal Ouellet's position, nonetheless tactfully defended the pastoral usefulness of having a sacrament of initiation for celebration with older age-groups. The second difference of opinion was more serious because it had to do with power and authority, and it led to a last-minute compromise text being inserted overnight into the synodal assembly's concluding document to placate an influential minority. The issue was the role of the new ecclesial movements and the level of oversight in their regard that should be afforded to diocesan bishops.

The third difference of opinion was in regard to catechists. During the assembly there were several calls, primarily from Latin America but also from other regions, for the establishment of the position of catechist as a stable ministry in the Church. However, these were countered by bishops who were concerned that the establishment of stable lay ministries could diminish the distinctiveness of the priesthood, and so a firm proposal in this regard didn't find its way into the final propositions. Almost a decade later, in May 2021, Pope Francis formally instituted the ministry of catechist.

The small discussion groups (*circuli minores*) that took place in the second half of the general assembly were livelier than those on the

synod floor though they too were also carefully managed. Nothing found its way back into the general assembly unless it fitted into what seemed to many of us as relatively harmless, and that reflected already predetermined positions. Groups tended to 'elect' as their chair the most senior ecclesiastic present, and generally members were careful in what they said. The few lay people participating had been carefully selected and, if anything, bishops found themselves tempering the more extreme views of the laity present. For instance, in the group in which I participated one of the lay members lobbied repeatedly for the Synod on the New Evangelisation to make a clear headline statement reiterating the Church's teaching on artificial contraception. Cardinals Dolan and Pell, both members of the group, assured the lay member of their complete acceptance of the Church's teaching on this matter but also made clear, as diplomatically as they could, that a reiteration of the Church's teaching on artificial contraception couldn't be one of the main outcomes of a synod on evangelisation.

There were a few truly memorable contributions. In anticipation of the humbler magisterial tone the Church would subsequently adopt under Pope Francis, the then Archbishop of Manila, Luis Antonio Tagle, urged the Church to '...learn the power of silence. Faced with sorrows, doubts and uncertainties of people we cannot pretend there are easy solutions'. To Tagle's surprise, on the last day of the Synod, Pope Benedict XVI named him a cardinal and later appointed him to a senior curial position. Along similar lines, fellow Filipino, Archbishop Villegas, said that 'the Gospel can be preached to empty stomachs, but only if the stomach of the preacher is as empty as his parishioners'. Then-Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said that to proclaim the Gospel in today's culture, marked as it is by truncated understandings of what it is to live a human life, is simply to restore people's confidence that it is possible to be properly human. 'The humanizing enterprise will be empty', he said, 'without the definition of humanity given in the Second Adam'. Equal to Williams in insight and intellect, Pope Benedict made just one short but profound intervention during the Synod, an apparently *ex tempore* meditation he led at Morning Prayer to do with the beauty of the Gospel and the enduring hunger in every human heart for its message.⁵ He asked:

... the great suffering of man — then, as now — is this: behind the silence of the universe, behind the clouds of history, is or isn't there a God? And, if this God is there, does he know us, does he have anything to do with us?

Throughout the Synod there was hardly a better or more profound articulation of the task facing the Synod Fathers – addressing these

⁵ https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/october/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121008_meditazione-sinodo.html. Accessed September 12 2021.

questions of a suffering humanity - than Pope Benedict's beautiful words. Unfortunately, however, the way the general assembly was conducted stifled any possibility of an imaginative and creative response surfacing to the questions he had so articulately posed.

Meanwhile, as hundreds of bishops from all over the world deliberated on new strategies for evangelisation, a few hundred metres away from the synod hall a governance catastrophe of unprecedented proportions in recent Church history was unfolding in the papal apartments and the Secretariat of State. Earlier in the year, Pope Benedict's butler had been arrested for stealing confidential documents, but this was only the tip of the iceberg. Anxious to bring to light the full extent of wrongdoing, Pope Benedict XVI had commissioned an investigation headed by Spanish cardinal, Julian Herranz, the text of which would land on his desk a few weeks after the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of Bishops had concluded in December of 2012. Although never published, its findings were to dominate pre-conclave discussions between cardinals that would take place a few months later and cause them to seek out a pope they felt up to the task of bringing about badly needed reform in governance in the Church at every level.

Self-evidently, at a key low point in the Church's post-Vatican II history, the Synod of Bishops, established by Pope Paul VI for the purpose of assisting the pontiff in church governance and of sharing the burden of this responsibility with the bishops as a universal body, was in effect, inconsequential, attending to issues far removed from the pressing and serious matters immediately affecting the Church.

Pope Francis Takes Over

Pope Francis did not participate the 2012 Synod. Although he had reached the mandatory age at which a bishop has to submit his resignation, then-Cardinal Bergoglio was still Archbishop of Buenos Aires, so he could have been present. We have good reason to presume that the Synod of Bishops as it then operated held little attraction for him. Used by that time to the open debate, honest and self-effacing interventions from diverse voices and perspectives, and an underlying trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit that characterised the synodal-type gatherings of the bishops of Latin American episcopal conferences (CELAM), it is likely that the carefully contrived Roman synods may even have scandalised Cardinal Bergoglio. Also, he could well have had little interest in a synodal agenda he viewed as primarily Eurocentric. In fact, Francis takes a view diametrically opposed to Benedict XVI regarding the significance of Europe for the global Church by explicitly rejecting the expectation that 'peoples of every continent, in expressing their Christian faith (would) imitate modes of expression

which European nations developed at a particular moment of their history'.⁶

Within months of the conclusion of the 2012 Synod, as we know, Benedict XVI resigned, and Francis became pope. The XIII General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops is the only synod since Vatican II that doesn't have a post-synodal exhortation. When Francis took over, apparently the preparation of a carefully crafted exhortation by the committee of bishops the Synod appointed for that purpose was well-advanced, but Francis scrapped it for the most part and substituted his own text, *Evangelii gaudium* (2013), which, in effect, is the charter for his pontificate. And with that, the prefix 'new' before 'evangelisation', which owed its origins to John Paul II, became more or less consigned to the ecclesiastical history books.

Instead, Pope Francis pointed the Church back to Paul VI's *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1976), which he referred to on three separate occasions in the first few months of his pontificate, describing it as 'containing words that are as timely as if they had been written yesterday'; 'a very full text that has lost nothing of its timeliness'; 'that basic point of reference which remains relevant'; and, 'to my mind the greatest pastoral document that has ever been written to this day'.⁷ Straightforward and uncomplicated definitions of evangelisation soon started to appear on the @pontifex twitter account such as, 'What does 'evangelise' mean? To give witness with joy and simplicity to what we are and what we believe in'. The Latin American response to secularism is characterised more by a call to joyful witness than to glum jeremiads about desertification. During the 2012 Synod, several Latin American bishops commented upon how bishops from Europe generally seemed tired and frustrated by comparison with themselves. In retrospect, we know that this is because the Latin American Church had by then set a new and invigorating course for itself at Aparecida in 2007, one which was already bearing fruit.

Embedding Synods within a Synodal Church

It is quite evident that the institution of the Synod of Bishops needed revitalisation and that Pope Francis had it in his sights from the early days of his pontificate. In the Epilogue to *The Great Reformer* (2014) Ivereigh cites an interview Pope Francis gave in late 2013. There, Pope Francis recalled Cardinal Martini's desire to reform the process of councils and synods in the Church and noted how the cardinal knew it would be a long and difficult process, but that he (Pope Francis)

⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, (2013), n. 118.

⁷ <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2013/12/12/the-greatest-pastoral-document-that-has-ever-been-written/> Accessed Sept 12 2021.

was resolved to persevere down that path 'gently, but firmly and tenaciously'.⁸ This is what he has done. In retrospect, I believe people will look back at Pope Francis' pontificate and will realise that it was far more programmatic than it appeared to be at the time.

Pope Francis is attempting to revitalise the Synod of Bishops by embedding synodal assemblies within an operative culture of synodality that characterises the very mode of being of the Church (its *modus vivendi et operandi*).⁹ Collegiality among bishops, that is a shared spirit of communion and collaboration that finds expression in synodal assemblies, is being anchored within a deeper and more fundamental ecclesial synodality, that is, the synodal journey of the pilgrim of God as they journey through history.¹⁰

For Francis, synodality describes a style that reveals itself in how the Church is to go about its daily business and affairs, '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'.¹¹ In other words, synodality, if truly operative, shows itself in how as Church we celebrate liturgy, run our schools, look after our finances, prepare people for the sacraments, enable and empower our pastoral and finance councils, and so on. The era of clerical authoritarianism has had its day. Only by praying and working together in mutual respect as God's people, ordained and lay, and drawing upon our complimentary giftedness and charisms, will we be able to live out our mission as Christians in today's world. Synodality is operative when the fruits of our labours as the people of God are being harvested, when our collective experience of serving one another and our communities is being mined and is guiding the path through history that the Church takes.

Pope Francis insists that synodality is constitutive of the Church. It is not an add-on so that lay people can be drafted in to bolster a collapsing clerical caste. It flows from the recognition that each member of the Church has a unique and crucial role to play in its mission, unique gifts given by the Holy Spirit in baptism for the service of God's kingdom. To fulfil their responsibilities as Christians, the People of God must be given voice, listened to, and be heard. For Pope Francis, synodality begins with hearing from the People of God. The Church must listen before teaching.

⁸ Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, (New York: Henry Holt, 2014), p. 372 (citing an interview in *La Repubblica*, October 2013).

⁹ Preparatory Document for the Synod of Bishops 2021-2023.

¹⁰ See in particular Luciani and Nocetti's contribution to this volume on the shift from episcopal collegiality to collegial synodality to ecclesial synodality.

¹¹ See the *Vademecum* for the Assembly of Bishops, 1.2. <https://www.synod.va/en/documents/vademecum.html> accessed Sept 4 2021

Pope Francis is convinced that this approach to governance is essential to the Church, and it is precisely that to which God is calling the Church in the twenty-first century. His conviction is grounded in his own lived experience. Here in Europe, we are playing catch-up with other parts of the world that have made better progress than we have in shifting towards a synodal style of governance, in particular Pope Francis' native Latin America. After centuries of being a 'sending' Church, in terms of missionaries, models and mindsets, Europe is now experiencing a mission in reverse, for which Latin America, under the influence of Pope Francis, is a source. We do not have space to detail here just how much Pope Francis' vision of a synodal Church owes its origins to the work of CELAM over the past couple of decades or so and in particular to Aparecida (2007), to which we have already referred.

As a global Church we can say that we are being invited to discover, perhaps for the first time since the early decades of the Church, what it means for 'all who believed to be together and have all things in common' (Acts 2:44). Pope Francis is not imposing upon the Church some new understanding he has invented but rather paring away centuries of accretions that are stifling the proclamation of the Gospel, to disclose the Church's original nature as essentially synodal. He is inviting us to jettison clerical customs, structures, and practices in regard to Church leadership and governance that we tend to take for granted as to how things have to be but which in reality have no Gospel justification or mandate and never did. What he wants us to rediscover and place our confidence in is 'the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God'.¹²

Pope Francis has described the transformation that is required in terms of shifting from a pyramidal to a synodal Church:

There is a pyramidal Church, in which what Peter says is done, or there is a synodal Church, in which Peter is Peter but he accompanies the Church, he lets her grow, he listens to her, he learns from this reality and goes about harmonising it, discerning what comes from the Church and restoring it to her.¹³

A synodal Church can only come to be if it is led by bishops, priests, and deacons capable of providing a synodal style of leadership along the lines Francis has described here.

We now turn our attention to why Pope Francis' vision of a synodal Church is essentially the vision of the Second Vatican Council.

¹² See 'Synodality in the life and mission of the Church', Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2018

¹³ See Interview with Pope Francis, Dec 7 2016. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/12/07/161207a.html>

The Vision of Pope Francis is the Vision of Vatican II

Pope Francis is the first pope since the Second Vatican Council not to have participated in any of its sessions. Arguably, this has given him a freshness of perspective when it comes to determining the Council's legacy. As Massimo Faggioli has noted, Francis' papacy marks 'a second reception... under the matrix of mercy' and a re-inculturation of the papacy in the global Church.¹⁴ The legitimacy for the synodal path Pope Francis is urging us to take is found firstly in the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, specifically, in Chapter 2 'On the People of God', and in the fact that this chapter precedes treatment of the hierarchical structure of the Church and the role of the episcopate. More specifically still, Pope Francis points to one sentence that contains a concept that is quite significant though not self-evident to understand. Speaking last year to the Italian bishops, Pope Francis explained that,

The Synod is nothing more than making explicit what *Lumen Gentium* says: The totality of God's people, everything from the bishop down, is 'infallibile in credendo' (infallible in belief), i.e. cannot be wrong.¹⁵

Pope Francis is the first Pope since Vatican II that has required the Church to take seriously this key aspect of conciliar teaching, and although more theological ink still needs to be spilled in unpacking what precisely the 'infallibility in belief' of the People of God means, already many scholars see in Pope Francis' vision for a synodal Church an effort for the first time to put into action this central teaching of Vatican II.¹⁶

Legitimacy for Pope Francis' approach is also to be found in the Council's Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, that shifts our understanding of revelation away from primarily that of a body of more or less static doctrines handed down from Christ to Peter and the apostles and on to the 'least' of the faithful, to an invitation into an interpersonal relationship with God the Father through Christ who speaks to us as friends and invites us into fellowship with Godself:

Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends

¹⁴ Böttigheimer, Christoph; Dausner, René (Eds.), *VATICANUM 21, Die bleibenden Aufgaben des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils im 21. Jahrhundert*. (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), p. 29, p. 31.

¹⁵ See Pope Francis, Address the 74th General Assembly of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Italy, 24 May 2021.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Miryam Wijlens, 'The Church of God is convoked in Synod: Theological and Canonical Challenges Concerning the 2021-2023 Synod' (unpublished paper presented at the Centro pro Unione, Rome, Oct 14, 2021).

(see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself.

The former understanding, the handing on of a static body of doctrine, leaves little room for the Holy Spirit. It also lends itself to the mistaken view that the magisterium is a source of revelation. In contrast, *Dei Verbum* teaches that the magisterium is a safeguard for revelation but is not its source. Its source is the Word of God written down, that is, Scripture, and the Word of God handed down, that is, Tradition; in both instances handed down to the whole Church as the People of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If revelation is primarily a process of dialogue between God and humanity (see also *Dei Verbum* nn 21, 25) then both partners in the dialogue must be listened to with reverence, that is, God's word, and, God's people. Hence, the need for a synodal Church which is the *ecclesia audiens* before it is the *ecclesia docens*, that is, a Church that listens before it teaches. Not coincidentally, the first words of *Dei Verbum* are 'Hearing the Word of God with reverence...').

There is one more point to be made about how the Second Vatican Council provides the basis and justification for Pope Francis' vision of a synodal Church. We need to consider not just the *texts* of the Council but also the *process* of the Council. For Pope Francis, reception of the Council involves not just another reading of the conciliar texts in the light of changing circumstances. It also includes recovering the *style of deliberation* the Council adopted; the open and confident way it engaged with the pressing questions of the time in light of the Tradition. Francis is therefore implementing Vatican II when he urges us to imbed synodality into the daily life of the Church. He sees the synodal way the Second Vatican Council approached challenges the Church was facing at that time as just as important a legacy in charting the way forward as the conciliar texts themselves. While the Council documents remain normative, they are necessarily limited in that they couldn't have anticipated the profound transformation, the change of era and epoch as Pope Francis has called it, affecting both people and the planet today. Besides the conciliar texts, then, an enduring legacy of the Council is also to be found in the way it modelled intense listening to the Holy Spirit by the universal Church. The Council rediscovered that such listening to the Holy Spirit is constitutive of the Church's nature and intended it to endure after the Council through the institution of the Synod of Bishops by Pope Paul VI in 1965.

Conclusion

We shouldn't underestimate the conversion of mindset and of mentalities that will be required if we are to embrace Pope Francis' vision of

a synodal Church. There will be the temptation to embrace synodality only half-heartedly, to *appear* to go along with things in the hope that a new pontificate will become preoccupied with different priorities. Some will point to the reality that we have tried synodal-type processes in the Church in the past and that they failed, causing profound disillusionment to many. Yet it is worth considering if this latest effort is more likely to succeed because the ground is being better prepared. Synodal events will no longer be tolerated as isolated events in a wider Church culture that still goes about its business in a hierarchical and authoritarian manner.

There will be others in the Church who are quite comfortable with and personally invested in a hierarchical and authoritarian way of being Church. They may take the view that they have much to lose personally. However, this is not the case, because a hierarchicalist and clericalist Church simply has no future. It has nothing to offer the Church, whether *ad intra* or *ad extra*.

Instead, this is a time to trust, to hope, and to dream, or, as Pope Francis often urges us, to see, to judge, and to act. Our planet, faced with an ecological crisis unthinkable heretofore needs the voice of a strong and vibrant Church to protect it. Our Church, faced with virtually a complete loss of credibility in several parts of the world, needs a form of governance that is healthy, mature, and respectful of all. As Pope Francis says, 'It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium'.¹⁷

Acknowledgments

Open access publishing facilitated by The University of Notre Dame Australia, as part of the Wiley - The University of Notre Dame Australia agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

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¹⁷ International Theological Commission, 'Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church', n. 1. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html. Accessed 3 March 2022.