

On the Synodality of the Church

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One of the key expressions found in Church documents on synodality is the term the “culture of encounter”¹. Synodality is to create a “culture of encounter” between people in a world where encounters are increasingly impossible or extremely difficult. The war in Ukraine has laid bare a global crisis of today; many say it is the “end of the world as we know it”. Some speak about post-liberalism, post-democracy, or post-globalisation², yet these political terms reveal an even more fundamental crisis which refers to the very term “we”, i.e. the capabilities and possibilities of being together. In this sense, the synodality of the Church may be a “social diakonia”³, a prophetic service of the Church in a divided society, if we properly take advantage of this intuition of Pope Francis to build the synodal Church.

1. Sources of the notion of synodality

Pope Francis’ pontificate will be remembered, among other things, for the urge to build a synodal Church. One of his first and most important speeches on the subject was delivered in Rome on 7 October 2015, during the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on marriage and the family, during a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops by Paul VI. The Holy Father said: “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium. What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word ‘synod’”⁴. In his speech, the Pope calls synodality a “constitutive element” of the Church; sometimes he simply uses the term “a synodal Church”.

¹ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 106. In large measure, the reflections offered here are based on this magnificent document. Drafted by the International Theological Commission in the years 2014-2017, approved by Pope Francis, it was published on 2 March 2018. The document is available at: www.synod.org.pl.

² Cf. P. J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2018; J. Kurlantzicki, *Demokracja liberalna w odwrocie*, Warszawa: Wyd. Nowa Konfederacja, 2022; E. Wnuk-Lipiński, *Świat międzyepoki : globalizacja, demokracja, państwo narodowe*, Kraków: Znak, Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2004.

³ Cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 118-119.

⁴ Francis, *Synodality as a constitutive aspect of the Church. 7 October 2015. Address of His Holiness Pope Francis during a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.pdf.

In his address, the Pope indicated the ancient roots of the synodality of the Church. St. John Chrysostom identified the Church with synodality seen, in line with its etymology, as walking together: σύν and ὁδός. In the saint's explanation of Psalm 149 we read: "The Church is the name of the synod" (Ἐκκλησία συνόδου ἐστὶν ὄνομα)⁵. From the very first centuries, the term "synod" (σύνοδος), translated from the Greek into Latin as *synodus* or *concilium*, has been used to denote "church assemblies convened at various levels (diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal, and universal)"⁶.

One of the earliest manifestations of synodal ecclesiology after the apostolic period are the epistle of St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Churches in Asia Minor. In a Letter to the Church in Ephesus, Ignatius calls her members "σύνοδοι", "companions on the journey"⁷. Writing a century later, St. Cyprian of Carthage also points to synodality as a principle of decision-making in the local Churches and in the universal Church: "while in the local Church nothing should be done without a bishop - *nihil sine episcopo* - it is equally true that nothing should be done without a synod (presbyters and deacons) - *nihil sine consilio vestro* - and without the consent of the people - *et sine consensu plebis*"⁸.

The theology of synodality has its ancient origins and is present throughout the history of the Church. Nevertheless, the immediate context of this theology is the Second Vatican Council and its renewal of the vision of the Church. In order to understand the ecclesiological significance of the last Council and the relevant breakthrough then achieved, we need to know something about the pre-conciliar ecclesiology. The earlier view of the Church was primarily juridical and based on the notion of the "*societas perfecta*"⁹. In this vision, the Church was seen primarily externally as an institution, analogous to the state, i.e. with her own goal (the salvation of people) and all the means necessary to realise this goal (ways of sanctification, i.e. above all the sacraments), a corresponding hierarchical power structure with the power of the Pope analogous to that of the monarch, and the faithful subject to the clerical power. According to Prof. Choromański, "the hierarchy and the lay faithful constitute two categories of Church members,

⁵ St. John Chrysostom, *Exp. in Psalm.*, 149, 1 (PG 55, 493); quoted in: Francis, *Synodality as a constitutive aspect of the Church*.

⁶ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 4.

⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Ephesios*, IX, 2.

⁸ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 25; cf. Cyprian, *Epistula*, 14, 4 (CSEL III, 2; p. 512).

⁹ Cf. A. Choromański, "Vaticanum II: sobór eklezjologicznego przełomu", *Studia Theologica Varsaviensia* 50/2, p. 22-27.

presented in opposition to each other: the hierarchy celebrates, teaches and governs, while the laity are the recipients of these ministries”. Significantly, “the one-sided identification of the Church with the ecclesial institution and focus on external aspects of the ecclesial community have led to forgetting that in its inner realm, the Church is the supernatural communion of grace and the mystery of God’s living with people”¹⁰.

We can say that the ecclesiology of the “*societas perfecta*”, which stresses the independence of the Church from the State, emerged to defend the institutions of the Church against the urge of the modern state, often anti-Christian and absolute, to subject the Church to it. The weakness of this ecclesiology is its concentration on the visible in the Church and a certain one-sided reduction of the mystery of the Church. The invisible and what can only be seen by means of supernatural faith is core to the Church, as the Second Vatican Council reminded us. In the ecclesiology of the Council, the Church is seen as a sacrament: “a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race”¹¹. As in every sacrament, the visible in the Church, i.e. her institutional and legal aspects, serves to convey what is invisible and most essential: the presence of the Triune God in the Trinity. The truth that it is only in faith that we come to know what, or perhaps Who, the Church is, is also relevant to the synodal process. Indeed, we can sometimes get the impression that synodal discussions also focus only on the institutional aspect of the Church and on what is visible: the structure of power and prestige, of importance and public perception, sociological data, and the influence of the media.

In order to propose a new ecclesiology capable of portraying the Church as a supernatural reality, the Second Vatican Council drew on rich biblical and patristic inspiration to portray the reality of the Church through a series of biblical metaphors pointing to the mystery (*mysterium*) of life with God: Kingdom of God, the sheepfold, the cultivated field, the edifice of God, the undefiled Bride of the immaculate Lamb, or the body of Christ¹². The concept of the People of God is a privileged one among these biblical ecclesiological terms. In the decades following the Council, this notion was supplemented by the concept of communion (*communio, koinonia*).

2. Synodality rooted in the ecclesiology of communion

¹⁰ A. Choromański, “Vaticanum II: sobór eklezjologicznego przełomu”, p. 26.

¹¹ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 1.

¹² Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 5-7.

In the New Testament, *koinonia* indicates one of the fundamental elements of the new Christian identity, a way of Christian life where supernatural participation in Christ creates a community of persons: “The horizontal aspect of *koinonia* must be seen as arising from the vertical bond; only in this way can it be understood”¹³. Ecclesiology of communion draws attention to the unity of the Church, which is not merely institutional, legal, and external, but is based on the action of the grace of the Risen Lord in the various parts of the Church. In this perspective, the Church appears first and foremost as a community, as one people whose diversity and unity is rooted in the supernatural unity and difference between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit¹⁴. The primacy of the supernatural aspect of the Church in the ecclesiology of *communio* does not mean undermining or abolishing the institutional aspect, but it implies that it is secondary and is a historical means of the Church’s pursuing her supernatural goals.

Referring to synodality in the context of ecclesial communion, the International Theological Commission aptly notes: “Synodality means that the whole Church is a subject and that everyone in the Church is a subject. The faithful are *σύνοδοι*, companions on the journey”¹⁵. This attention to the subjectivity of all faithful within the one subjectivity of the Church indicates the necessity and need for each person to act for the good of all. This desire to activate everyone means that there are no superfluous persons in the Church, or those who are deprived of gifts that could be used for others. At the same time, the subjectivity of each and everyone must have as its goal the single subjectivity of the Church.

We could call this approach to the Church pneumatologic egalitarianism; it excludes elitism in the Church. We often automatically equate elitism with clericalism, a reality where prestige and power, contrary to the nature of the Church, is “seized” by the clergy, for ulterior motives. However, it is worth remembering that today it is not uncommon for an elitist vision of the Church to also be linked to various groups of laity who use their influence: money, access to mass media, to promote their vision of the Church, not necessarily Catholic, but often under the banner of synodality. True synodality obliges the shepherds of the Church to allow all parts and circles in the Church to speak; not necessarily the most active or noisy ones.

¹³ J. Hammer OP, *The Church is a Communion*, New York 1964, p. 162.

¹⁴ As the council will indicate, quoting St. Cyprian, “Thus, the Church has been seen as a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 4; St. Cyprian, *De Oratione, Dominica*, 23; PL 4, 553).

¹⁵ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 55.

Furthermore, pneumatologic egalitarianism promotes a certain model of the priest. Over the past few decades, we have struggled in the Church against a model of the bishop and priest who is inaccessible, celebrates his own authority, and feels superior to the laity. We value bishops and priests who are open, humane, welcoming, promoting different environments, and do not exclude anyone. We could call such a pastor's spirituality "synodal". Still, today we might encounter and ponder over a different kind of the pastor model: one who basks in the spotlight, is comfortable at various parties, popular, and favoured by mass media. The question is increasingly being asked: what is the price of this popularity? Is he loved for his fidelity to the Gospel or for the fact that he is silent on matters essential to Christ's teaching?

3. Love as a way of exercising communion synodality

Regarded in its supernatural reality, the Church partakes "in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, the Church shares in the life of communion of the Blessed Trinity"¹⁶. Pneumatology in particular helps discern the deepest aspect of synodality. The International Theological Commission will go as far as to call the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church the "synodality principle"¹⁷; the Holy Spirit is the bond of love (*nexus amoris*) in the life of the Holy Trinity and sustains this bond of unity through the supernatural *agape* (*caritas*) in the Church. That is why the Eucharist is the cornerstone of synodality: "The source and summit of synodality (...) is active participation in the Eucharistic synaxis"¹⁸. It is in the Eucharist that the individuals, communities, and societies come to be a single "we" of the Church.

Discussion on love in the Church must consider two factors. Firstly, love is not only a precondition for a synodal community, but also the most important criterion that can be used to check whether we are dealing with a true Catholic, ecclesial synodality. In other words, when other categories are used to describe synodal reality, such as, for example: social conflict, discrimination, class struggle, or gender struggle, it is possible that we do not deal with true Catholic synodality, rooted in the *nexus amoris Trinitatis*. Similarly, if the appeal to synodality serves to silence or banish a group of Catholics from the space of conversation and encounter, we are not necessarily dealing with an authentic synodal process.

¹⁶ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 4; cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 43.

¹⁷ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 46.

¹⁸ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 47.

The second assertion concerns authority in the Church. It is not uncommon for synodal discussion about the Church to focus precisely on this visible, institutional aspect of the Church; we consider how different parts of the Church can participate in the exercise of authority in the Church. The obvious danger of such a focus on power is the one-sided use to describe the Church of categories taken from political life, where different factions and groups use different, sometimes violent and vicious methods to realise the greatest possible influence over a given community. Discussing responsibility for the Church, the International Theological Commission underlies that “Synodality is not simply a working procedure, but the particular form in which the Church lives and operates”¹⁹. No one can reform the Church if they do not first live according to the daily rhythm of glorifying God, striving for holiness, and attending to their salvation. A one-sided focus on the mechanisms of power and power-taking in the Church (not infrequently expressed by superficial criticism of bishops and priests) is indicative of a misunderstanding of the nature of the Church, the Bride of the Lord, and an attempt to mould it in one's own image.

Since the Church is a theological reality, for the sake of epistemological realism, authority in the Church must be seen in a theological perspective. The fundamental truth of the Hebrew Bible is that God is the true ruler and king of all creation (cf. Psalms 47). He rules over His people via his chosen stewards: patriarchs, judges, prophets, and kings. Jesus Christ does not pose as God's steward in the exercise of authority, but as the one who Himself possesses the Divine prerogative. He has the authority to absolve sins (Mt 9:6ff), to heal (Mt 8:8ff), to control the natural elements (Mt 4:41), demons (Mt 12:28), and is the Lord of the sabbath (Mk 2:28). After Resurrection He will say “all power (*eksousia*) in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (cf. Mt 28:18).

This authority concerns above all the salvation that Jesus brought to the world; the Church is its instrument. Therefore, He gives the Apostles a share in His authority: they participate in the Saviour's mission, speak in His name, cast out evil spirits by His power, and ultimately will also experience the rejection and persecution which their Master suffered (cf. Mt 10:40; 16:18-19). The mission of the Apostles is perpetual; they will pass on the authority received from Christ to their successors, creating, as we confess in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: the structure of the Apostolic Church (*Ecclesia apostolica*).

¹⁹ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 42.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church stresses that the Apostles and their successors partake in the treble authority of Christ: of teaching, sanctifying and governance²⁰. This authority is administered through a synod; referring to the authority of bishops we speak about collegiality, in the unity with the Bishop of Rome and with one another²¹. The Second Vatican Council reiterated that bishops, as the successors of the Apostles, receive their office directly from Christ; they are not the delegates of the pope or the Roman curia, which role is performed by papal nuncios. Importantly, this truth, *tout proportions gardes*, applies to all the faithful in the Church.

Through the sacrament of Baptism, all the faithful receive a share in Christ's three offices: royal, prophetic, and priestly.²² Thus, in line with their calling in the Church and in the world, they get a share in the authority (*ekousia*) of the Risen Lord: “The Lord’s ἐξουσία is expressed in the Church through the variety of spiritual gifts (τα πνευματικά) or charisms (τα χαρίσματα) the Spirit shares out among the People of God for the upbuilding of the one Body of Christ. In exercising them we need to respect an objective τάξις, so that they can develop in harmony and bear the fruit they are meant to bear for the good of all (cf. 1 Cor 12:28-30; Eph 4:11-13)”²³.

The objective order of the exercise of authority and the exercise of the various ministries and offices in the Church, as stated by the International Theological Commission, ensures through the exercise of authority no part of the Church violates its Christ-established structure. This violation can happen in a number of ways, such as through the appropriation of authority or ministry belonging to another part of the Church. This can occur when priests deny the laity their rightful place in the Church, when theologians teach truths contrary to the *depositum fidei*, or when priests or laity refuse obedience and respect to their bishop. It is important to remember that the exercise of authority in the Church must be consistent with her supernatural structure; it cannot simply imitate the political mechanisms present in secular societies. A synodal Church must be a synodal community of life, of conversion and the pursuit of holiness, before it can follow the synodal procedure of exercising authority.

4. Synodal listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit

²⁰ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 888-896.

²¹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 880-887.

²² Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 901-913.

²³ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 18.

Consultations are in the Church a form of participation in decision-making and responsibility for the Church. Nevertheless, the International Theological Commission warns against perceiving consultations in terms of political parliamentarianism, conciliarism, i.e. a voice (or vote) which is solely consultive in the sense of secular law. Synodal consultations take place in the faith and are a shared listening to what “what the Spirit is saying to the Church through the Word of God which resonates in their situation and interpreting the signs of the times with the eyes of faith”²⁴.

When thinking about the synodal Church, we need to reflect very seriously on what proportion of the faithful participating in the synodal process are really able to listen to the voice of the Spirit of the Risen Lord resounding in their hearts. Therefore, the theology of synodality is a great commitment to the formation of Christians. Today, it involves both the evangelisation of people who have not heard of Christ (although there are more and more such people), and the deepening of the faith of those who belong to the parish and come to our churches.

Today, one of the essential factors in the synodal process is the growing secularisation in our part of the world. Its impact is felt both outside and inside the Church. One of its effects is the departure of the faithful from the Church and the abandonment of the faith. However, it is worth remembering that secularisation is first and foremost a change in worldview, in the way people see themselves, their families, their social relationships, and the whole of reality²⁵. Importantly, this change in worldview affects people not only outside, but also inside the Church and relates to the lay faithful. Increasingly, we are confronted with a situation where the faithful show astonishing ignorance in matters of Christian faith and morals. This obviously creates special problems for the synodal process and reminds us of the need for formation as a prerequisite for the synodality of the Church. It could be said that the synodality of the Church practised on a daily basis in our parishes and communities does not primarily call us to participate in the structures of power and decision-making, but first and foremost in the formation and deepening

²⁴ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 68; cf. also: J. Kupczak, “Debata na temat teologii znaków czasu (*signa temporum*) w czasie Drugiego Soboru Watykańskiego”, *Studia Loviciensia* 15 (2013), p. 225-243.

²⁵ This change is discussed by Dr Michał Kędziński in his article, widely discussed recently, “Przemija bowiem postać tego świata. LGBT, Ordo Iuris i rozpad katolickiego imaginariumI”, (<https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2020/08/08/przemija-bowiem-postac-tego-swiatea-lgbt-or-do-iuris-i-rozpad-katolickiego-i-maginarium>). My reply to this text: “Upadek katolickiego imaginarium i Strajk (niektórych) Kobiet” (<https://teologiapolityczna.pl/jaroslav-kupczak-op-upadek-katolickiego-imaginarium-i-strajk-niektorych-kobiet>). Naturally, the most competent discussion of the modern secularisation process is Charles Taylor’s seminal *A Secular Age* (London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

the existential engagement of the faithful in a relationship of communion with God and the Church²⁶.

In this context, the International Theological Commission quotes Joseph Ratzinger's statement from 1996: "Being truly 'synodal' means a harmonious moving forward under the influence of the urge of the Spirit"²⁷. We must therefore always examine whether we move "under the influence of the urge of the Spirit", or rather influenced by an article from a prestigious journal or by some governing clique. If we properly discern the voice of the Spirit, we will be able to renew the Church in the spirit of synodal ecclesiology, which Pope Francis calls us to do. If, however, we mistake the voice of the Spirit for other voices, synodality may become a road towards the destruction of the Church.

²⁶ Cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 107-109.

²⁷ J. Ratzinger, "Le funzioni sinodali della Chiesa: l'importanza della comunione tra i Vescovi", *L'Osservatore Romano*, 24 January 1996, p. 4.