

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF SYNODALITY

International Theological Commission

42. The teaching of Scripture and Tradition show that synodality is an essential dimension of the Church. Through synodality, the Church reveals and configures herself as the pilgrim People of God and as the assembly convoked by the risen Lord. Chapter 1 showed, in particular, the exemplary and normative character of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15,4-29). That shows, in the face of a decisive challenge for the early Church, the method of communitarian and apostolic discernment which is an expression of the very nature of the Church, the mystery of communion with Christ in the Holy Spirit^[43]. Synodality is not simply a working procedure, but the particular form in which the Church lives and operates. With this in view, and in the light of the ecclesiology of Vatican II, the present chapter will focus on the basis and theological content of synodality.

The theological basis of synodality

43. The Church is *de Trinitate plebs adunata*^[44], called and qualified as the People of God to set out on her mission "to God, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit"^[45]. In this way, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, the Church shares in the life of communion of the Blessed Trinity, which is destined to embrace the whole of humanity^[46]. In the gift and commitment of communion can be found the source, the form and the scope of synodality, inasmuch as it expresses the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the People of God in the responsible and ordered participation of all its members in discerning and putting into practice ways of fulfilling its mission. 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^[47].

44. In order to implement the plan of salvation, the risen Jesus conferred the gift of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles (cf. *John* 20,22). On the day of Pentecost the Spirit of God was poured out on all those who, whatever their origins, heard and welcomed the *kérygma*, prefiguring the universal gathering of all peoples in the one People of God (cf. *Acts* 2,11). In the depths of their hearts, the Holy Spirit brought into being and shaped the communion and mission of the Church, the Body of Christ and the living Temple of the Spirit (cf. *John* 2,21; *1 Corinthians* 2,1-11). "To believe that the Church is 'holy' and 'Catholic', and that she is 'one' and 'apostolic' (as the Nicene Creed adds), is inseparable from belief in God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit"^[48].

45. The Church is *One* because she has her source, her model and her goal in the unity of the Blessed Trinity (cf. *John* 17,21-22). She is the People of God on pilgrimage on earth in order to reconcile all people in the unity of the Body of Christ, through the Holy Spirit (cf. *1 Corinthians* 12,4).

The Church is *Holy* because she is the work of the Blessed Trinity (cf. *2 Corinthians* 13,13): made holy by the grace of Christ, who has given Himself to her as a Bridegroom gives himself to his Bride (cf. *Ephesians* 5,23), and made alive by the love of the Father poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (cf. *Romans* 5,5). The *communio sanctorum* becomes real in her in both of its senses: communion with holy things (*sancta*) and communion between people who have been made holy (*sancti*)^[49]. In this way, the holy People of God journeys towards perfection in holiness - the calling of all its members - accompanied by the intercession of Our Blessed Lady, the Martyrs and the Saints, having been constituted and sent forth as the universal sacrament of unity and salvation.

The Church is *Catholic* because she preserves the integrity and totality of faith (*cf. Matthew 16,16*) and she has been sent to gather into one holy People the peoples of the earth (*cf. Matthew 28,19*). She is *Apostolic* because she has been built on the foundation of the Apostles (*cf. Ephesians 2,20*), because she hands on their faith and because she is taught, sanctified and governed by their successors (*cf. Acts 20,19*).

46. The principle of synodality is the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God. Actually, as the *nexus amoris* in the life of God as Trinity, the Spirit gives this same love to the Church, and she is built into the *κοινωνία τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος* (*cf. 2 Corinthians 13,13*). The gift of the Holy Spirit, which is one and the same in all who have been baptised, is manifested in many forms: the equal dignity of the baptised; the universal call to holiness^[50]; the participation of all the faithful in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Jesus Christ; the richness of hierarchical and charismatic gifts^[51]; the life and mission of each local Church.

47. The Church's synodal path is shaped and nourished by the Eucharist. It is "the centre of the whole of Christian life for the Church both universal and local, as well as for each of the faithful individually"^[52]. The source and summit of synodality are in the celebration of the liturgy and - in a unique way - in our full, conscious and active participation in the Eucharistic synaxis^[53]. Because of our communion with the Body and Blood of Christ, "we, although there are many of us, are one single body, for we all share in the one loaf" (*1 Corinthians 10,17*).

The Eucharist represents and visibly brings about our membership of the Body of Christ, which we share with each other as Christians (*1 Corinthians 12,12*). Local Churches are formed around the table of the Eucharist and gather there in the unity of the one Church. The Eucharistic synaxis expresses and brings into being the ecclesial "we" of the *communio sanctorum*, in which the faithful are made sharers in God's grace in its many forms. The *Ordo ad Synodum* from the Councils of Toledo in the seventh century, and the *Cærimoniale Episcoporum*, promulgated in 1984, show the liturgical nature of a synodal assembly, and stipulate that it should begin with and be centred on the celebration of the Eucharist and the proclamation of the Gospel.

48. The Lord pours out His Spirit in all places and at all times on the People of God, to allow them to share His life, feeding them with the Eucharist and guiding them in synodal communion. "Being truly 'synodal', therefore, means moving forward in harmony, spurred on by the Holy Spirit"^[54]. While synodal procedure and events have a beginning, a process and a conclusion, synodality offers a specific description of the historical development of the Church as such, breathes life into her structures and directs her mission. The Trinitarian, anthropological, Christological, pneumatological and Eucharistic dimensions of God's plan of salvation, which is at work in the mystery of the Church, are the theological horizon which has been the context for the development of synodality across the centuries.

The synodal path of the pilgrim and missionary People of God

49. Synodality manifests the 'pilgrim' character of the Church. The image of the People of God, gathered from among the nations (*Acts 2,1-9; 15,14*), expresses its social, historical and missionary character, which corresponds to the condition and vocation of each human person as *homo viator*. The path is the image that clarifies our understanding of the mystery of Christ as the Way that leads to the Father^[55]. Jesus is the way from God to man and from man to God^[56]. The

grace-filled event whereby He made Himself a pilgrim by pitching His tent among us (*John 1,14*), goes on in the synodal path of the Church.

50. The Church journeys with Christ, through Christ and in Christ. He, the wayfarer, the Way and our homeland, gives His Spirit of love (*Romans 5,5*) so that, in Him, we may follow "the most perfect way" (*1 Corinthians 12,31*). The Church is called to retrace the footsteps of her Lord until He returns (*1 Corinthians 11,26*). She is the People of the Way (*Acts 9,2; 18,25; 19,9*) towards the Kingdom of heaven (*Philippians 3,20*). Synodality is the historical form of her journeying in communion towards final rest (*Hebrews 3,7-4,44*). Faith, hope and love guide and inform the pilgrimage of the assembly of the Lord "in sight of the future city" (*Hebrews 11,10*). Christians are "pilgrims and strangers" in the world (*1 Peter 2,11*), honoured with the gift and responsibility of proclaiming to all the Gospel of the Kingdom.

51. The People of God is journeying towards the end of time (*Matthew 28,20*) and towards the ends of the earth (*Acts 1,8*). The Church lives through space in the various local Churches and travels through the time of Christ's Passover until His *parousia*. She is a single historical subject; already present and working in her are the eschatological destiny of definitive union with God and the unity of the human family in Christ^[57]. The synodal form of her journey expresses and promotes the exercise of communion in each of the local Churches and between them in the one Church of Christ.

52. The synodal dimension of the Church implies communion in the living faith of the various local Churches with each other and with the Church of Rome, both in a diachronic sense - *antiquitas* - and in a synchronic sense - *universitas*. The handing on and reception of the Symbols of faith and of the decisions of local, provincial and - in a specific and universal sense - ecumenical Synods, have expressed and guaranteed in a normative way that communion in faith professed by the Church everywhere, always and by everyone (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*)^[58].

53. Synodality is lived out in the Church in the service of mission. *Ecclesia peregrinans natura sua missionaria est*^[59]; she exists in order to evangelise^[60]. The whole People of God is an agent of the proclamation of the Gospel^[61]. Every baptised person is called to be a protagonist of mission since we are all missionary disciples. The Church is called, in synodal synergy, to activate the ministries and charisms present in her life and to listen to the voice of the Spirit, in order to discern the ways of evangelisation.

Synodality as an expression of the ecclesiology of communion

54. The dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* offers the essential principles for a correct understanding of synodality in the perspective of the ecclesiology of communion. The order of its first chapters expresses an important step forward in the way the Church understands herself. The sequence - the Mystery of the Church (chapter 1), the People of God (chapter 2), the Hierarchical Constitution of the Church (chapter 3) - stresses that the ecclesiastical hierarchy is at the service of the People of God in order that the Church may carry out her mission in conformity with God's plan of salvation, in the logic of the priority of the whole over its parts and of the end over the means.

55. 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. They are called to play an active role inasmuch as they share in the one priesthood of Christ^[62], and are meant to receive the various charisms given by the Holy Spirit in view of the common good^[63]. Synodal life reveals a Church consisting of free and different subjects, united in communion, which is dynamically shown to be a single communitarian subject built on Christ, the corner-stone, and on the Apostles, who are like pillars, built like so many living stones into "a spiritual house" (*cf. 1 Peter 2,5*), "a dwelling-place of God in the Spirit" (*Ephesians 2,22*).

56. All the faithful are called by virtue of their baptism to witness to and proclaim the Word of truth and life, in that they are members of the prophetic, priestly and royal People of God^[64]. Bishops exercise their specific apostolic authority in teaching, sanctifying and governing the particular Church entrusted to their pastoral care at the service of the mission of the People of God.

The anointing of the Holy Spirit is manifested in the *sensus fidei* of the faithful^[65]. "In all the baptised, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelisation. The People of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*. This means that it does not err in faith, even when it cannot find words to explain that faith. The Spirit guides it in truth and leads it to salvation. As part of His mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an *instinct of faith - sensus fidei* - which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively"^[66]. This connaturality shows itself in a "*sentire cum Ecclesia*: to feel, sense and perceive in harmony with the Church. This is required not just of theologians, but of all the faithful; it unites all the members of the People of God as they make their pilgrim journey. It is the key to their 'walking together'"^[67].

57. Taking up the ecclesiological perspective of Vatican II, Pope Francis sketches the image of a synodal Church as "an inverted pyramid" which comprises the People of God and the College of Bishops, one of whose members, the Successor of Peter, has a specific ministry of unity. Here the summit is below the base.

"Synodality, as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the most appropriate interpretative framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself... Jesus founded the Church by setting at her head the College of Apostles, in which the Apostle Peter is the 'rock' (*cf. Matthew 16,18*), the one who must "confirm" his brethren in the faith (*cf. Luke 22,32*). But in this Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located below the base. Consequently, those who exercise authority are called 'ministers', because, in the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all"^[68].

70. To sum up, in the light of its normative sources and its theological foundations, which we have recalled in chapters 1 and 2, we can conclude with a precise description of synodality as an essential 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 programme 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 evangelising mission.

(Synodality in the life and mission of the Church - Chapter 2)