

A Synodal Process on Synodality Synodal Missionary Journeying and Common Apostolic Discernment

Jacques Haers SJ

Abstract. — We are currently witnessing theory-building on synodality in the Roman Catholic Church. From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has promoted a theology and pastoral praxis of synodality based on the understanding of the Church as the journeying people of God with its unerring sensus fidei under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. An important source of inspiration for the pope is Ignatian spirituality with its emphasis on common apostolic discernment, which may be translated as synodal missionary journeying. Various synods of bishops, as well as the work of the International Theological Commission, have provided a space to explore and practice this emerging ecclesiology at the level of the Magisterium. The upcoming synod of bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission” (2022), will provide a stimulus among theologians and in pastoral circles to unfold the idea of synodality so as to allow it to grow into a praxis at various levels in the Church.

1. Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church is walking an interesting journey. In line with the Second Vatican Council, and true to his own human, spiritual, theological, and pastoral experience, Pope Francis is changing our way of understanding the church and its mission, as well as our theological praxis. His leadership has been characterized by personal growth: here is a pope who listens, discerns, and journeys with the people entrusted to him, and in whom he perceives the voice and work of God’s Spirit building the Church. In him, several impulses join forces and lead us to a rediscovery of the theological and missionary meaning of the church as a precious gift of God to our world: the broadening of the idea of synod to synodality; the experience of the church as the people of God on an indeterminate journey guided by the Spirit who guarantees its unerring *sensus fidei*; the intimate relationship to Jesus inviting us to enter into the world; the indignation calling us to commit wholeheartedly in the

face of human suffering at the margins of society and in a neglected common house; a sense of mission as ecclesial service with a view to re-kindling in our societies the sense of sustainable and dignified community; the strength of Ignatian spirituality, particularly its spiritual apostolic discernment, both personal and common.

Pope Francis' emphasis on the importance of synods will not come as a surprise to those familiar with the history of the Christian churches, with the texts of the Second Vatican Council and with Pope Paul VI's 1965 *Apostolica Sollicitudo*.¹ Moreover, Pope Francis likes to refer to *Lumen Gentium* 12 where we find the council's powerful understanding of the idea of the 'People of God' journeying through history, with its unerring 'sense of the faith' (*sensus fidei*) under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This emphasis on the people of God allows the pope to broaden the understanding of the 'synod' from institutional and hierarchical practice to ongoing processes of synodality as crucial dynamic features of the church as the people of God at all its levels. Here, Pope Francis is innovative and critical, introducing new possibilities for our understanding of the church, its hierarchical structures and leadership, and its service to the world.

Those of us who are familiar with Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, as well as the dynamic governance and leadership principles set out in the *Constitutions* of the Society of Jesus, will easily draw a parallel between Pope Francis' understanding of synodality and the dynamics of spiritual discernment – particularly common apostolic discernment, the need for indifference, the journey with Jesus, the challenge to feel with the church (*sentire cum ecclesia*),² the criterion of inner joy and consolation in processes of decision-making, the regular practice of the examination of conscience, trust in the work of the Spirit in individuals and communities, and the determination of religious superiors to act in concord with their appointed counselors.

Common discernment, as understood by the pope, is an excellent tool to put synodality into practice. Discernment, apostolic, faithful to tradition and shaped by the desire to share the joy received, is geared towards a synodal missionary journey of community building. It is 'ecclesiality' at the service of community building in the larger world, which

1. See: http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19650915_apostolica-sollicitudo.html (access 20/08/2020).

2. For references to Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* (*SpirEx*), I will use the Penguin Classics edition: Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters, Including the Text of The Spiritual Exercises*, Translated with introduction and notes by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin Books, 1996). We find the "Rules to follow in view of the true attitude of mind that we ought to maintain within the Church militant": ## 352-370.

is so in need of communities and societies of compassion and solidarity. Perhaps we could say that, in the pope's language, 'common apostolic discernment' translates into 'synodal missionary journeying'.

2. A Theological Framework

An article I wrote in 1997 on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, will help to set out a theological framework for Pope Francis' ideas.³ My starting point then was that the Roman Catholic Church (as also our societies and our world in general) experienced a profound crisis. Such a crisis is also spiritual: we are shocked to the point that we are forced to seek our inner strength and resilience to confront the chaos. If anything, I would not hesitate to claim that this crisis has deepened over the years and unfolds increasingly as a crisis of life-together. In ever more competitive, anthropocentric and individualistic contexts, to which Pope Francis often refers, and which translate, within the church, into clerical power games, we lose the sense of co-belonging and of the common good; we lose our capacity to dialogue with one another. 'Common' is understood as a struggle between I-centred individuals and their interests, not as a joint endeavour. 'Discernment in common', at the service of the common good and community building, in which we do not need to fear one another while learning to listen to one another, becomes more difficult in this competitive context. Fittingly, the Greek roots of the word 'crisis' suggest the importance of discernment and decision-making in situations that challenge us to explore the roots of our (common) existence. So, our communities and societies, as well as the church, undertake a perilous journey or pilgrimage, without clear knowledge of the end result of the journey. Not surprisingly, the acronym VUCA is used to describe our contemporary world: volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.⁴ A possible temptation in such situations consists of adhering to reassuring fixed frameworks. Unfortunately, such an attitude deepens the crisis of togetherness, imprisoning us in clerical, hierarchical, and authoritarian patterns. What we need is

3. Jacques Haers, "Kerk: Plaats van ontmoetingen, veld van spanningen en ruimte voor onderscheiding" ("Church: Place of Encounters, Field of Tensions, and Space for Discernment"), in *Een werkzame dialoog: Oecumenische bijdragen over de kerk 30 jaar na Vaticanum II*, ed. Robrecht Michiels and Jacques Haers, Nikè-reeks 38 (Leuven and Amersfoort: Acco, 1997), 187-227.

4. A good introduction to VUCA is found on the Wikipedia page "Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volatility,_uncertainty,_complexity_and_ambiguity, access 22/08/2020).

the willingness to engage on a risky and uncertain journey, looking out for creative new approaches. Conversational relationality and not competitive individual auto-sufficiency will have to be our guide.

The Christian faith, when understood in its foundational relational strength, may provide an invigorating spirit for the journey, both in the church and in the larger world, overcoming our fears of change in turbulent times. Here lies the basic form of a relational theology: the personal encounter with God in Jesus the Christ, transmitted narratively over the ages, enables us to focus, under the impetus of the Spirit, on the vision of the Kingdom of God as a promise for the church and for the world. Discernment, in which we attempt to connect to the Spirit, leads us on in building a sustainable and dignified community that increasingly embodies the vision itself. The Church as a community called forward (the French 'église' is connected to the Greek 'ek-kaleō' and reminds us of the meaning of the Hebrew 'qahal') by, and around, the Lord (the English 'church' is connected to the Greek 'kyriakos') can provide inspiration for the task of community building. The four *notae ecclesiae* in our creed (the church is: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic) suggest tensions that arise between, on the one hand, a church that protects and shares the message entrusted to us in the incarnation and, therefore, emphasizes authority, hierarchy and fixed, neat structures, and, on the other hand, a church that explores Christian commitment in an ever-changing world in which it learns to read the signs of the times. These tensions initiate an arduous and sometimes conflictive journey and a quest, undertaken together as a community, on the road towards its self-definition, in dialogue with a covenant- and promise-based tradition that presents itself as an adventure.⁵ In the article mentioned above, I launched a plea for a church involved in dynamic and creative processes of decision-making, open to the signs of the times in the world, discovering in the process its faithfulness to the treasures received. This means a networked and richly diverse church, one exploring its own dynamic identity on a missionary journey, exploring God's presence in a strange and dangerous world, particularly its frontier spaces of suffering and exclusion, and practising common discernment with a view to a future that can only be imagined and requires us to listen precisely to those voices that are excluded.⁶ This ecclesiological perspective provides inspiration for its own community

5. See my: *Het avontuur van de traditie (The Adventure of Tradition)* (Averbode: Altiora, 1999).

6. See my: *Kansanderen: Liefhebben vanuit de marge (Other Opportunities: Love at the Margins)* (Averbode: Altiora, 2000).

building and for our world. The Church, then, is not just an environment for the Christian faith to be passed on as an unchangeable treasure; the very praxis of this faith consists in community building through common discernment, at the service of a world on its journey towards more just and sustainable societies. To transmit the faith, one has to dare to engage in it, together with those who need the changes brought about by relationships in solidarity and mutual support.

3. Pope Francis' Understanding of Synodality

We find, in Pope Francis' thought, a clear emphasis on these communal, conversational, and relational aspects of reality and of the Christian faith, as well as on the challenge to listen to God's voice in the stranger and outcast. His understanding of creation in *Laudato Si'* is fundamentally relational in a holistic sense: reality is interconnected and interdependent. The pope lives out of the close and intimate relationship with Jesus the Christ who feeds his concern for the church on its journey in which the people of God discern together the road to take, relying on its sense of the faith guided by the Holy Spirit. We discover in the pope a powerful desire to serve the poor, the outcasts and the forgotten, i.e., those who do not participate in the fruits of caring societies and communities. He wants to listen to their voices, as in them the voice of the Spirit resounds. The pope is aware that this leads to a journey in which we have to learn from our mistakes and entrust ourselves to processes of forgiveness and reconciliation in the perspective of the Kingdom of God and salvation for all, for human beings as well as for nature and the universe.

Synodality is Pope Francis' word to operationalize this relational perspective into a practical attitude towards the constitution of ecclesial communities, as well as in the service this ecclesiological effort represents in a world in need of the rediscovery of genuine, sustainable and dignified relationships in solidarity. I quote the description of synodality given by the pope in his opening greeting to the recent Panamazonian Synod (Oct 7, 2019).⁷

We have come here to contemplate, to comprehend, to serve the peoples. And we do so by taking a synodal path; we do so as a synod, not at round tables, not in conferences and further discussions: we do so as a synod, because a synod is not a parliament; it is not a

7. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/october/documents/papa-francesco_20191007_apertura-sinodo.html (access 20/08/2020).

parlour; it is not demonstrating who has more power in the media and who has more power on the web, in order to impose some idea or some plan. (...) Synod means walking together under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the primary actor of the synod. (...) Now we must allow the Holy Spirit to express himself in this Assembly, to express himself among us, to express himself with us, through us, to express himself “despite” us, despite our resistance, which is normal that there be, because this is the life of a Christian. Therefore, what will our work be here, in order to ensure that this presence of the Holy Spirit may be fruitful? First and foremost, pray. Sisters and brothers, I ask you to pray, a great deal. Reflect, dialogue, listen with humility, knowing that I do not know everything. And speak with courage, with *parrhesia*, even if I am embarrassed to do so, to say what I feel, to discern, and all this in here, safeguarding the fraternity that must exist herein, in order to favour this approach of reflection, prayer, discernment, of listening with humility, and speaking with courage. After four interventions we shall have four minutes of silence. (...) Lastly, being in synod means being encouraged to enter a process. It does not mean occupying space in the hall but to enter a process. And ecclesial processes have a need: they must be protected, cared for like a baby, supported at the beginning, cared for delicately. They need the warmth of the community; they need the warmth of Mother Church. This is how an ecclesial process grows. It is important to foster the attitude of respect, the fraternal atmosphere, the air of intimacy. (...) But a process such as a synod can be somewhat ruined if, when I exit the hall, I can say what I think, voice my opinion. And then there will be that feature that I saw at several synods: that of the “inside synod” and the “outside synod.” The inside synod which follows the journey of Mother Church, the synod of attention to processes; and the outside synod which, because information given with levity, communicated with imprudence, leads those who have the duty to inform, to misinform.

A synodal process, as here in the case of an institutional synod in Rome, opens up to the work of God’s Spirit, who expresses himself through the participants and, therefore, requires from the participants a conversational and self-critical attitude, that avoids needless discussions aimed at gaining the upper hand, and unmasks our resistance, prejudices, and competitive postures.

These principles for an ‘official’ synod will appear to be valid on a broader (church) scale for the whole people of God. Moreover, synodality is an attitude of faith inspired by the Gospel. The Final Document of the Panamazonian Synod⁸ reflects the desire of the participants to

8. See: <http://www.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.html> (access 20/08/2020).

broaden the synodal process to the whole church: they have understood the momentum in Pope Francis' thought.

4. Common Apostolic Discernment

The synodal dynamism connects easily to processes of common apostolic discernment. It reminds us of procedures at several important meetings in the Society of Jesus, such as provincial and general congregations, but also meetings of consultors in a house or in a province or region. There is a synodal governance or governance by common apostolic discernment.

In this article I suggest that the idea of synodality gains by being understood from the perspective of the Ignatian processes of common apostolic discernment: the *synodal missionary journey* dear to Pope Francis is very similar to the *common apostolic discernment* he discovered in Ignatian spirituality. The body of thought of Pope Francis introduces us here to new accents in theology, in terms of both methodology and content.

It may be good at this point to clarify some of the important elements of Ignatian common apostolic discernment. I can only briefly summarize a fast-growing body of literature, based in a growing number of concrete experiences and praxes in the Society of Jesus, as well as in the official encouragements to enter into processes of common apostolic discernment.⁹ Each of the four last generals of the Society of Jesus has written a letter on common apostolic discernment: Pedro Arrupe on December 25, 1971, "On Communitarian Spiritual Discernment;" Peter-Hans Kolvenbach on November 5, 1986, "On Apostolic Discernment in Common;"¹⁰ Adolfo Nicolás on January 19, 2009, "Common

9. A very practical handbook on processes of common apostolic discernment is: Michel Bacq, Jean Charlier and l'équipe ESDAC, *Pratique du discernement en commun: Manuel des accompagnateurs* (Namur and Paris: Fidélité, 2006). Recent collections of articles can be found in: "Synodaliteit in de christelijke kerken," *Collationes* 50, no. 2 (2020); "Towards a Discerning Church," *The Way – A Review of Christian Spirituality Published by the British Jesuits* 58, no. 4 (2019); "El discernimiento en común," *Manresa – Revista de espiritualidad ignaciana* 90, no. 354 (2018); "Onderscheiden met paus Franciscus," *Cardoner* 2019, no. 3. See also: Amanda C. Osheim, "Stepping toward a Synodal Church," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2019): 370-392; Ormond Rush, "Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church," *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2017): 299-325. A resource webpage is: <https://www.ignatianresources.org/> (access 20/08/2020). For excellent introductory articles on Ignatian themes, see: Grupo de Espiritualidad Ignaciana (GEI), *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana*, 2 vols. (Bilbao: Mensajero and Santander: Sal Terrae, 2007).

10. See: <https://kolvenbach.jesuitgeneral.org/uploads/on-apostolic-discernment-in-common/On%20Apostolic%20Discernment%20in%20Common.pdf> (access 20/08/2020).

Apostolic Discernment;”¹¹ Arturo Sosa on September 27, 2017, “On Discernment in Common.”¹² In the last contribution, common apostolic discernment is combined with apostolic planning. Moreover, several meetings on common apostolic discernment have taken place to train people in these processes. Narratively, the report of the *deliberatio primorum patrum*, the common apostolic discernment that took place among Ignatius’ first companions to decide on the foundation of the Society of Jesus, remains an inspiring guide.¹³

Common apostolic discernment – translated as *synodal missionary journeying* – is best explained by referring to the three words.

Spiritual discernment refers to a double dynamism: to descry (to catch sight of), and to choose. It indicates careful decision-making: we listen to how the deep source of life in us, God’s Spirit, moves us through the various competing spirits at work in our heart. We are drawn in many directions, some moving us towards God, and others separating us from God. Indifference is required in order to focus on God alone, regardless of our condition, trusting that in all situations, even when we commit evil, God remains faithful to us, thereby allowing our distance from God to become a journey towards God. The criteria for discernment, unveiled in Ignatius’ rules for discernment, are consolation and desolation, and they require fine-tuning, something which Ignatius invites us to acquire by means of a regular examination of conscience: discernment becomes an attitude of life. Discernment is narratively mirrored in the life of Jesus, in his humility and meekness in the experience of the cross, and in his joy at the resurrection. Pope Francis emphasizes all these elements in his various writings, and pays attention to God’s mercifulness, to the joy experienced from the resurrection, to humility and meekness, to openheartedness and magnanimity, to the struggle between the various spirits in our hearts, to the Spirit who guides us faithfully in our lives.

This discernment is **common**: God’s Spirit is at work not only in ourselves, but also in others at the service of us all. To discern our own hearts, we need people who discern with us, who accompany us on our spiritual journey: all ‘individual’ discernment is common, because it

11. See: *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* 122 (2009): 9-20, <http://212.77.12.71/documents/cis/pdfenglish/200912202en.pdf> (access 20.08.2020).

12. See: https://3eh4or43gk9g3h1uu7edbbf1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/documents/2019/08/2017_09_27_letter_p_general_on_discernment_english_-2.pdf (access 20/08/2020). Here, common apostolic discernment is combined with apostolic planning.

13. See: Ignace de Loyola, *Écrits, traduits et présentés sous la direction de Maurice Giuliani*, Collection Christus. Textes 76 (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991), 277-281.

involves engaging with the depths of our own person(ality), our creational and visionary relational interconnectedness in God – we exist as community. Once we realize that all discernment is common, the criteria of consolation and desolation become more complex to gauge, as we are socially intertwined in consolation and in desolation. ‘Synodality’ requires this careful attentiveness to the spirits that relate us to one another (e.g., spirits of sympathy or anger) so as to gain indifference in our relationships, and to discover how, in each one of us, God is speaking and relating to all of us individually and in the common journey of community building. The ‘*sentire cum ecclesia*’, cast in rules by Saint Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises*, and often referred to by Pope Francis, reflects the profound ‘common’ and ‘synodal’ features of reality and the role of the church in articulating this common reality, in light of the vision of the Kingdom of God, and as a service to the world, particularly to our world in crisis.

The word **apostolic** refers not only to a tradition narratively connected to the apostles and the first companions of Jesus the Christ, and in which we are invited to be embedded as Christians. It also indicates the missionary dimension as a desire to enter into the world to spread the joy that inhabits us as a gift for all. We offer a discerning community to the world in order that the world may enter into processes of discernment and synodality. This also means that our church-community grows in view of the contact with the world, particularly with the poor and despised people in whom we are invited to hear God’s voice calling us to change our community life, to journey towards the Kingdom. Gradually, during this pontificate, this ‘missionary’ dimension has received more attention in its double meaning: learning from the world in which we discover the signs of the times, and offering to the world what shapes us. Not surprisingly, the pope likes to speak about *parrhesia* and humility: we are invited to speak out of God, we are invited to listen to God.

The Pope challenges his fellow Jesuits to common apostolic discernment as a gift to be shared.

In his address to the participants of the 36th General Congregation¹⁴ (October 24, 2016), the pope reminds the Jesuits to move towards the margins of the world, at the service of the others, so that they may benefit. The journey is ‘communal’, in solidarity. The Jesuits initiate processes (*magis*). The pope invites the Jesuits to ask for consolation and joy, and to contemplate the task of offering consolation. He asks them to be moved

14. See: https://jesuits.eu/images/docs/GC_36_Documents.pdf (access 20/08/2020), 38-43.

by the Lord on the Cross so as to enter into the experience of mercy and compassion. Ultimately, he asks of the Jesuits to do good with a good spirit by “thinking with the Church”: “The service of good-spiritedness and discernment makes us men of the Church – ecclesial men, not clerical men – men for ‘others’, having nothing that isolates us but placing everything we have in common and at the service of others.” In the dialogue that followed the address, the pope answered questions from Jesuits. Pope Francis invites the Jesuits “to discern ‘where’ the *magis*, the prophetic audacity, the *parresía*, must be directed.”¹⁵ He also pleads for the insertion of discernment in the formation of priests so as to avoid dangerous rigidity and emphasizes the relational theology of the people of God: “No one is saved alone. I believe that this principle must be kept very clear: salvation is for the People of God, no one is saved alone.”

When meeting with Polish Jesuits on July 30, 2016,¹⁶ the pope emphasizes that the Church must “grow in the ability to discern.” Jesuits should help people to discern the different spirits at work in their hearts. We recognize the meditation of the Two Standards (*SpirEx* 136ff.) and the spiritual struggle in our hearts, a theme dear to the pope which will return in *Gaudete et Exsultate*.

In a November 7, 2019 address to participants at the meeting of the social justice and ecology secretariat of the Society of Jesus,¹⁷ Pope Francis declared, “Help the Church in the discernment which we must undertake today, also concerning our apostolates. Do not cease to network among yourselves and with other ecclesial and civil organizations in order to speak out in defence of the most needy in this increasingly globalized world.” Discernment is necessary in the Church if the Church to be of real help to the most needy in our world. This is a missionary dimension of discernment, that is present in the word ‘apostolic’. The activity of discernment is geared toward the greater service of the poor and needy.

5. Common Apostolic Discernment and Synodality

Pope Francis’ official interventions illustrate how common apostolic discernment and synodal missionary journey are intertwined.

15. https://jesuits.eu/images/docs/GC_36_Documents.pdf, 44-52.

16. See: <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/today-the-church-needs-to-grow-in-discernment-pope-francis-meets-with-polish-jesuits/> (access 17/08/2020).

17. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/november/documents/papa-francesco_20191107_giustiziasociale-ecologia-gesuiti.html (access 20/08/2020).

During an interview on August 19, 2013, the pope programmatically revealed the priorities of the pontificate.¹⁸ He had learned from his mistakes as an authoritarian, young Jesuit provincial in Argentina, the crucial importance of consultation, which also requires structural and institutional forms, such as consistories or synods. He connects the process of consultation to the ecclesiology of the journeying People of God as found in *Lumen Gentium* 12:

No one is saved alone, as an isolated individual, but God attracts us looking at the complex web of relationships that take place in the human community. (...) the church is the people of God on the journey through history, with joys and sorrows. Thinking with the church, therefore, is my way of being a part of this people.

This perspective broadens and amplifies the idea of synod – a hierarchical and institutional concept – to synodality as a constitutive feature of the people of God on its journey. This journey requires discernment and a consultative leadership so as to listen to the Spirit in each one of us. Synodality is, therefore, critical of clerical positions of power: “We must not focus on occupying the spaces where power is exercised, but rather on starting long-run historical processes.”¹⁹ This remark was followed by a description of how to encounter God, which is also a description of the process of discernment and the importance of joy and consolation:

The senses that find God are the ones St. Ignatius called spiritual senses. Ignatius asks us to open our spiritual sensitivity to encounter God beyond a purely empirical approach. A contemplative attitude is necessary: it is the feeling that you are moving along the good path of understanding and affection toward things and situations. Profound peace, spiritual consolation, love of God and love of all things in God – this is the sign that you are on the right path.²⁰

Processes of discernment and synodality require humility, since we do not know where our journey will lead us:

Uncertainty is in every true discernment that is open to finding confirmation in spiritual consolation. (...) Our life is not given to us like an opera libretto, in which all is written down; but it means going, walking, doing, searching, seeing... We must enter into the adventure of the quest for meeting God; we must let God search

18. An English version of the interview is available on: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis> or https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20130919_1.htm (access 17/08/2020).

19. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html (access 20/08/2020).

20. Ibid.

and encounter us. (...) God is always a surprise, so you never know where and how you will find him. You are not setting the time and place of the encounter with him. (...) You must, therefore, discern the encounter. Discernment is essential.²¹

This path leads those who walk it to the margins of society, and it turns the church into a field hospital, near those who suffer in this world. “Ours is not a ‘lab faith’, but a ‘journey faith’, a historical faith.”²²

In the 2013 encyclical *Lumen Fidei*,²³ planned by Pope Benedict XVI and further developed by Pope Francis (LF 7), some characteristic ideas of the new pope surface: the church is on a journey for which Abraham’s journey to the future city (Hebrews 11) is paradigmatic. The invitation to proceed, “seeing through the eyes of others,” is based on the trust and faith that “the experience of love shows us that a common vision is possible, for through love we learn to see reality through the eyes of others, not as something which impoverishes but instead enriches our vision. (...)” (LF 47); the church as one body in Christ (LF 22).

The 2013 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*²⁴ emphasizes the experience of consolation and joy for a church on the road as people of God (EG 20, 23). Its “Mission Embodied within Human Limits” (EG 40-45) requires discernment, that takes into account human frailty and mistakes, and learns from God’s love that the church has to be self-critical (EG 43). The church should not be afraid that, on its missionary journey, “its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street” (EG 45).

Chapters II and IV of the exhortation point to the communal and relational character of the Gospel and the mission to evangelize. The pope emphasizes the “social dimension of evangelization”: “To evangelize is to make the kingdom of God present in our world” (EG 176), and “the kerygma has a clear social content: at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others” (EG 177). The threats to the world today are precisely those that imperil the building of a just and sustainable society. The church, as the people of God, is “the leaven of God in the midst of humanity” by encouraging, giving hope, showing mercy (EG 114). Because of this “crisis of communal commitment” the church has the responsibility to practice an “ever watchful scrutiny of the

21. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista_spadaro.html.

22. Ibid.

23. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_encyclica-lumen-fidei.html (access 20/08/2020).

24. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (access 20/08/2020).

signs of the times,” to recognize and discern the spirits that move us, and to choose the spirit of the good and reject the spirit of evil (EG 51). One recognizes Ignatius’ meditation on the two standards (*SpirEx* 136-148).

The pope’s reflections on preaching illustrate the importance of listening during the process of discernment, which will allow one to speak openly: a preacher needs to listen to the people and display a “spiritual sensitivity for reading God’s message in events.” The “preparation for preaching thus becomes an exercise in evangelical discernment wherein we strive to recognize – in the light of the Spirit – ‘a call which God causes to resound in the historical situation itself’” (EG 154). The pope also emphasizes the importance of personal discerning accompaniment in processes of growth (EG 169), an example of common apostolic discernment, building up the people of God towards its missionary endeavour.

On June 10, 2014, the International Theological Commission (ITC) published its document on the “*Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*,”²⁵ a subject dear to the pope who, in an address to the ITC on December 5, 2014,²⁶ highlights the document’s insistence on humble listening. The document points out (69-71) that the ‘*sensus fidei fidelium*’ is not only anchored in the past, but, in a process of discernment, and is also

proactive and interactive, as the Church and all of its members make their pilgrim way in history. (...) The *sensus fidei* gives an intuition as to the right way forward amid the uncertainties and ambiguities of history, and a capacity to listen discerningly to what human culture and the progress of the sciences are saying (70).

The document also proposes ways of consulting the faithful (120-126): public opinion in the church and various institutional features of the church. The general principle remains “humble listening at all levels, and proper consultation of those concerned.” These “are integral aspects of a living and lively Church” (126). In his 2013 address to the ITC (December 6, 2013),²⁷ the Pope had clarified that this listening should not aim at the “sociological reality of majority opinion” but should concentrate especially on “the humble and the little ones.”

25. See: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html (access 20/08/2020).

26. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/december/documents/papa-francesco_20141205_commissione-teologica-internazionale.html (access 20/08/2020).

27. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/december/documents/papa-francesco_20131206_commissione-teologica.html (access 20/08/2020).

In his October 6, 2014 address²⁸ to the **first general congregation of the third extraordinary general assembly of the synod of bishops**, the pope emphasized “the work of collegiality and synodality” and clarified a double feature of the process of such synodality, which he repeats often: how to speak honestly (with *parrhesia*) and how to listen with humility and welcome.

Although the pope doesn't use the word ‘discernment’ very often in *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015)²⁹ (only LS 79, 185; LS 135 indicates a dynamic of discernment in common), the encyclical itself is clearly part of an ongoing discernment process, that reflects a synodal attitude in the pope's openness: he involves not only Roman Catholic authorities, the bishops, and faithful Roman Catholics, but also speaks ‘interreligiously’, and enters into dialogue with non-Christians and with scientists. There is a frequent appeal to dialogue regarding “how we are shaping the future of our planet” (LS 14). The encyclical is meant to enter into dialogue with all concerned people and wants to offer the contribution of the Roman Catholic Church, which is one of the many participants at the table of discernment on these issues. Important themes that stress the ‘common’ and the ‘missionary’ attitude of synodality are: universal communion (LS 88-92); the cosmic Christ (LS 99); the plea for integral ecology where several perspectives enter into dialogue; the principle of the common good; the many paths of dialogue (LS 163) at various levels such as the international community, new and local policies, transparency in decision making, politics and economy, religions in dialogue with science. There is also an important chapter on ecological education and spirituality. Here the ideas of covenant (which articulates co-belonging), ecological citizenship, conversion and reconciliation, joy and peace, and Trinity, are emphasized, as well as the omnipresent background theme of journeying (LS 243-244).

The idea of discernment or synodality is not developed in its ‘deep’ theological sense, but it is present in the background. Moreover, the encyclical may well provide an occasion to further deepen our understanding of both synodality and discernment. Could one say that, in its interdependent evolution over millions of years, the universe is caught up in a kind of synodal discernment processes in which, at this stage of history, human beings play an important role in reflecting this history

28. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141018_conclusionone-sinodo-dei-vescovi.html (access 20/08/2020).

29. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (access 20/08/2020).

and process? Could one – because of the universe’s creational and original interconnectedness – speak of a call to synodality in reality itself: affirming one’s own existence with *parrhesia* in the presence of everything that exists in the universe, while humbly taking into account (listening to) all that exists and upon which our own existence depends? I suggest that, for a deep theological analysis of both synodality and common discernment, we will need to consider creational dynamics and creation’s holistic relationality.

In his introductory remarks to the **Synod for the Family** (October 5, 2015),³⁰ the pope again reflects on the meaning of a synod:

The Synod is also a protected space in which the Church experiences the action of the Holy Spirit. In the Synod, the Spirit speaks by means of the tongue of every person, who lets himself be guided by God, who always surprises, God, who reveals himself to little ones.

The synod had been preceded by a worldwide survey and one may wonder whether the following words do not reflect a certain caution with regard to controversial subjects:

[T]he Synod is not a parliament in which to reach a consensus or a common accord by taking recourse to negotiation, to deal-making, or to compromise: indeed, the only method of the Synod is to open oneself up to the Holy Spirit with apostolic courage, with evangelical humility and confident, trusting prayer, in order that he guide us, enlighten us and make us keep before our eyes, not our personal opinions, but with faith in God, fidelity to the Magisterium, the good of the Church and the *salus animarum*.

In the exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (March 19, 2016),³¹ Pope Francis focuses on dialogue (AL 136-141). His sound advice can also be applied to the process of synodality itself:

Take time, quality time. This means being ready to listen patiently and attentively to everything the other person wants to say. It requires the self-discipline of not speaking until the time is right. Instead of offering an opinion of advice, we need to be sure that we have heard everything the other person has to say. This means cultivating an interior silence that makes it possible to listen to the other person without mental or emotional distractions (AL 137).

The pope also emphasizes the importance of discernment in the accompaniment and integration of weakness (AL 291ff.), by paying attention

30. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151005_padri-sinodali.html (access 20/08/2020).

31. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html (access 20/08/2020).

to growth and gradualness, by showing mercy and a desire to reconcile. This is applicable to synodality and common discernment where we learn through our faults and where desolation also happens when we hurt one another, willingly or unwillingly.

The pope's address on the **50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops** (October 17, 2015)³² emphasizes the church's missionary responsibility in the synodal process:

The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and to serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.

This means paying attention to the people of God and its *sensus fidei*. It clarifies the role of an institutional synod "as the supreme witness to the *fides totius Ecclesiae*." The hierarchical ministry is put in perspective: "in this [synodal] Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base. (...) the only authority is the authority of service, the only power is the power of the cross." The missionary synodal church "journeys together' with men and women, sharing the travails of history" in which "a rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and of the function of authority as service will also be able to help civil society to be built up in justice and fraternity." A synodal church is, through its synodality, a seed for change in the broader world. We feel in this address a growing awareness that synodality is not only a method by which to proceed, but also a structural and missionary feature of what it means to be church.

In 2018, the ITC published its document "**Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church**."³³ This technical theological document will certainly be of great help in preparing the forthcoming synod on synodality in 2022. The idea of the church as the journeying people of God is assumed. The parallel between synodality and communitarian and apostolic discernment (42) is clearly stated, and provides a theological and ecclesiological approach, the implications of which will be unfolded in the years to come:

The teaching of Scripture and Tradition show that synodality is an essential dimension of the Church. Through synodality, the Church

32. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html (access 20/08/2020).

33. See: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html (access 20/08/2020). See also: Santiago Madrigal, ed., *La sinodalidad en la vida y en la misión de la Iglesia: Texto y comentario de la Comisión Teológica Internacional* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2019).

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. 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 (42).

A reference to *Lumen Fidei* in 111 clarifies the relational approach in a document that leaves no doubt about the connection between synodality and communal discernment: “Exercising discernment is at the heart of synodal processes and events” (113). “Communal discernment implies carefully and courageously listening to the ‘groans’ of the Spirit which emerge through the explicit or sometimes silent cry that goes up from the People of God” (114). The second quote may well offer a possibility to integrate in a more explicit way *Laudato Si’* in a theology of synodality and discernment, thereby opening up both these concepts from a creational point of view. The document concludes by describing synodality as “journeying together in the parrhesia of the Spirit.”

In his address to the ITC on November 29, 2019,³⁴ the pope showed his gratitude for:

the implementation, in the history of the People of God on their journey, of the Church as a mystery of communion, in the image of Trinitarian communion. As you know this theme is very close to my heart: synodality is a style, it is walking together, and it is what the Lord expects of the Church in the third millennium. (...) Synodality is an ecclesial journey that has a soul, which is the Holy Spirit.

In *Gaudete et Exsultate* (March 19, 2018)³⁵ some of the crucial ideas for synodality received further development: *parrhesia* as boldness, enthusiasm, apostolic fervour and passion and a gift of the Spirit (GE 129ff.). We all too easily flee into our safe havens, but

God is eternal newness. He impels us constantly to set out anew, to pass beyond what is familiar, to the fringes and beyond. He takes us to where humanity is most wounded, where men and women, beneath the appearance of a shallow conformity, continue to seek an

34. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/november/documents/papa-francesco_20191129_commissione-teologica.html (access 20/08/2020).

35. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html (access 20/08/2020).

answer to the question of life's meaning. God is not afraid! He is fearless! He is always greater than our plans and schemes (GE 135).

We also hear a criticism of clericalism, formalism and bureaucracy within the church. There is, again, an emphasis on community, as in GE 6:

In salvation history, the Lord saved one people. We are never completely ourselves unless we belong to a people. That is why no one is saved alone, as an isolated individual. Rather, God draws us to himself, taking into account the complex fabric of interpersonal relationships present in human community. God wanted to enter into the life and history of a people.

The missionary character of communities is clearly stated (GE 142). We also find a special section at the end on "Spiritual combat, vigilance and discernment." Here, the pope analyses discernment from the perspective of a spiritual combat as set out in Ignatius' meditation on the two standards and he does not hesitate to speak about the devil. What follows is what could be seen as a treatise on personal discernment, with an invitation to the examination of conscience, and attention paid to listening to the Spirit. There is also a very explicit statement on the relationship between the Gospel and the Magisterium: "Naturally, this attitude of listening entails obedience to the Gospel as the ultimate standard, but also to the Magisterium that guards it, as we seek to find in the treasury of the Church whatever is most fruitful for the 'today' of salvation" (GE 173). This emphasis may indicate that, in view of the coming synod on synodality and of the ITC text, clarifications on the notion of synodality will surface. Hopefully, the synodal spirit will encourage and include attention to the movements in the hearts of those who are called to participate in the process.

In the apostolic constitution *Episcopalis Communio On the Synod of Bishops* (September 15, 2018)³⁶ several themes that have surfaced over the past years appear: the sense of mission, the awareness that bishops are appointed for the service of the "people of God, to whom they themselves belong through the sacrament of Baptism," the synod as an instrument to listen to the people of God. The procedure for the synod of bishops reflects a methodology of common discernment.

In his address at the opening of the **Synod on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment** (October 3, 2018),³⁷ Pope Francis

36. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communicio.html (access 20/08/2020).

37. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html (access 20/08/2020).

once more emphasizes *parrhesia* and humility in listening as necessary for the synodal process which is “an ecclesial exercise in discernment,” “based on the conviction that God is at work in history.” Several temptations are threatening a process of discernment: clericalism and self-sufficiency or hasty conclusions. The pope also mentions the importance of the Holy Spirit in the synodal process: “[The] Synod is not a parliament. It is a protected space so the Holy Spirit may act.”

The synodal process for a synod of bishops has evolved: there has been a previous survey and also a pre-synod with young people. The final document of the synod will be published and complements the papal exhortation. Both documents recount the journey of God’s people in its common discernment. This requires new ways of communicating and documenting the process. Therefore, the website for the synods of bishops has become more complex.³⁸

There are remarkable differences between the final document and the exhortation, and both documents should be read.

The final document³⁹ uses the story of the disciples of Emmaus on their journey and emphasizes the art of discernment (104ff.), particularly in vocational accompaniment. Important features of processes of discernment are highlighted. Its focus on the taking of important decisions is broadened: “in so far as it involves seeking to recognize the Spirit’s voice and accept the Spirit’s call, discernment is an essential dimension of Jesus’ manner of life, a fundamental attitude rather than a particular action” (104). Moreover, discernment is a communal practice:

The horizon of community is always implied in every discernment, which can never be reduced to the merely individual dimension. At the same time, every personal discernment puts a question to the community, inviting it to listen to what the Spirit is saying through the spiritual experience of its members: like every believer, the Church, too, is always in discernment (105).

The church has a synodal and discerning missionary character that pays attention to the margins:

Synodality characterizes both the life and the mission of the Church, which is the People of God formed of young and old, men and women of every culture and horizon, and the Body of Christ, in which we are members one of another, beginning with those who are pushed to the margins and trampled upon (121).

38. See: <http://www.synod.va/content/synod/en.html> (access 20/08/2020).

39. See: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20181027_doc-final-instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani_en.html# (access 20/08/2020).

A participatory and co-responsible church is inevitable, and allows us to escape clericalism and to elaborate a new understanding of authority as service in the journey or walking together of the people of God. Therefore,

pastors need to have the capacity to increase cooperation in witness and mission and to accompany processes of joint discernment so as to interpret the signs of the times in the light of faith and under the guidance of the Spirit, with all the members of the community contributing, starting with those on the margins (124).

The synod pleads for “joint formation courses for young lay people, young religious and seminarians, especially where matters like the exercise of authority of collaborative ministry are concerned” (124).

In the postsynodal exhortation *Christus Vivit* (March 25, 2019),⁴⁰ the pope refers to the final document and speaks about “a pastoral care that is synodal.” This means that “young people themselves are agents of youth ministry” (203) and, though they may need guidance, they are invited to audacious creativity. Youth ministry will involve “walking together” and promoting a participatory and co-responsible church. The chapter on discernment refers to *Gaudete et Exsultate* and focuses on vocational discernment and the importance of the formation of conscience. The importance of openness in accompaniment, free from roadmaps, is stressed.

One hears in the final document a voice that comes from, and accompanies, young people, while *Christus Vivit* seems to be more a word spoken challengingly to young people. The exhortation ends up looking more cautious and less daring than the final document and its strong plea for a synodal church. The **Panamazonian Synod** (held between 6 and 27 October 2019)⁴¹ reflects a similar tension.

Earlier on in the article, we quoted the elaborate description given by the pope in his opening greeting (October 7, 2019) of the synodal process. We now concentrate on the final document and the exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (February 2, 2020).

Chapter V of the final document boldly focuses on “New Paths of Synodal Conversion” and asks for important ecclesial changes.

To walk together the Church requires a synodal conversion, synodality of the People of God under the guidance of the Spirit in the Amazon. With this horizon of communion and participation we seek

40. See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html (access 20/08/2020).

41. See for all the documents: http://www.synod.va/content/synod/en/synodal_assemblies/2019-special-assembly-for-the-amazon--amazonia--new-paths-for-th.html (access 20/08/2020).

new ecclesial paths, especially in the area of ministry and sacramental life of the Church with an Amazonian face. Religious life, the laity and especially women, are the always and ever new protagonists who call us to this conversion (86).

How can co-responsibility in a church suffering from a lack of priests be promoted?

In order to walk together, the Church today needs a conversion to the synodal experience. It needs to strengthen a culture of dialogue, reciprocal listening, spiritual discernment, consensus and communion in order to find areas and ways of joint decision-making and to respond to pastoral challenges. In this way, co-responsibility in the life of the Church will be fostered in a spirit of service. It is urgent to go forward to make proposals and take on responsibilities to overcome clericalism and arbitrary impositions. Synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church. We cannot be Church without recognizing a real practice of the *sensus fidei* of all the People of God (88).

A process of discernment is at the core of the synodal conversion:

The Church in the Amazon is called to walk in the practice of discernment, which is at the centre of synodal processes and events. It is a question of the Church, through the lived theological interpretation of the signs of the times and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, determining and following the path to be taken in the service of God's plan. Community discernment makes it possible to discover a call that God makes clear in each particular historical situation. This Assembly is a time of grace for reciprocal listening, sincere dialogue and community discernment for the common good of the People of God in the Amazon Region, and then, when implementing decisions, to continue walking under the impulse of the Holy Spirit in small communities, parishes, dioceses, vicariates, prelatures and in the whole region (90).

The discernment becomes very concrete: evolving towards a synodal style; involving the participation of women; leadership mandates for laity; religious life with indigenous vocations; the possibility of married priests to allow the eucharist to be celebrated, as well as the sacraments of reconciliation and anointing; regional synodal structures in Amazonia; a rite for indigenous people, and so forth. Audacity characterizes the final document and, to some, the pope's exhortation, although he refers to the final document and encourages everyone to read it in full (QA 3), will seem insufficient. However, the ecclesial synodal proposals of the final document are still the object of a process of discernment, and the call to follow them up is taken seriously. In his exhortation the pope emphasizes another set of priorities for the Amazon region, responding by way of four dreams to the

many injustices and exploitations that also call for an ecclesial response: justice for the poor, the original peoples and the least of our brothers and sisters; the preservation of cultural diversity; the preservation of natural beauty; and Christian communities giving the Church new faces with Amazonian features. We should not, by focusing on the differences between the final document and the exhortation, pit them against one another, but gain a sense of their complementarity.

On March 7, 2020 came the announcement that there will be a 16th ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2022: “**For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.**” It shows how deeply the interwoven themes of synodality and common discernment are structuring a new understanding of the church and a new practice of theology. Sr. Nathalie Becquart has written that, “To fulfil her mission in taking account of our contemporary contexts and cultures to serve the common good of our ‘common home’, the Church has to embody the path of synodality.”⁴² She connects *Laudato Si’* with the whole synodal research programme and with the idea of the people of God and its *sensus fidei*, which articulates the equal dignity of all the baptized. Synodality, to her,

is a way of being and acting, promoting the participation of all the baptized and people of good will. It means to ‘walk together’ in a pilgrim church, a church on the move, the church of the people of God, where everyone has a voice and takes an active part whatever their age, sex or state of life.

She carefully broadens the synodal vision “of a Church in emergence from, and in the midst of, the ‘people of the earth’” and connects it “with the concept of ecclesiogenesis or ecclesiogenetics.” This allows us to see that “the identity of the Church is a dynamic identity, not a static one. It is a religious identity of communion-mission rooted in the Trinitarian mystery and the Eucharistic mystery.” Intertwined with this vision of synodality, “embodied in the image of the inverted pyramid is an understanding of the hierarchical ministry itself.” Becquart sets out a possible, important, direction for further research and exploration of the concept of synodality: “In conclusion, to follow up this perspective of an interconnection between the approach opened by *Laudato Si* and the ecclesiology of synodality, we have to envision how the ecological conversion, the cultural conversion, the pastoral conversion and the synodal conversion are interrelated.”

42. See: <http://www.internationalunionsuperiorsgeneral.org/synodality-way-implement-laudato-si/> (access 15/08/2020).

6. Conclusions

There is a growing body of insight, publications, and praxes of synodality. The emphases of Pope Francis on the unerring *sensus fidei* of the journeying people of God moved by the Holy Spirit and his practice of common apostolic discernment as a governance principle, have enriched and furthered the reflection on synodality. The missionary perspective of a synodal church reflects the willingness to open up to differences both inside and outside ecclesial communities; the call to move to the margins of society and to listen to the poor; and the missionary or apostolic desire to share the synodal processes experienced as a grace with larger communities and with the broader world.

Common apostolic discernment and *synodal missionary journeying* constitute an ecclesial and ecclesiological project which needs to be pursued, and which, I suggest, includes, among others, the following steps:

- broadening the ideas of synodality and common discernment from a creational perspective, so as to deepen our relational theologies and how they represent deep structures in reality. *Laudato Si'* may provide us with some clues;
- defining the parameters and praxes for a discerning or synodal theology and heuristics;
- clarifying some of the tensions present in both discernment and synodality processes, e.g. the tension between the individual and the communal that reveals the 'personal' character of synodality and discernment;
- clarifying the meaning of mission as sharing the wealth of a received treasure, and also as attentiveness to God's presence in the other encountered in synodal and discerning processes beyond one's own ecclesial borders;
- clarifying the role of vision and imagination in processes of discernment and synodality: What is their relationship to the future and how do they cope with a future that is undecided?
- re-articulating the characteristics of discernment in a communal perspective: notions such as indifference and consolation usually refer to individual spiritual realities; they need unfolding on the communal level;
- clarifying the tension in synodality and discernment between a punctual decision-making event, and an attitude or habit;
- designing concrete steps for processes of synodality and discernment in common, clarifying in those the role of leadership and decision-

- making. Some social approaches, such as Theory U⁴³ or relational (social) constructionism,⁴⁴ may be useful here.
- processes of synodality and common discernment are processes of reconciliation and include learning from one's mistakes. The approach to the *Spiritual Exercises*, in the light of common apostolic discernment and reconciliation, as is being developed by Elías López, a fellow Jesuit, may be of great help here, in its idea of leadership from the future and the vision of peace.⁴⁵

Jacques Haers (°1956) is a Jesuit and Professor of Systematic Theology and the Study of Religions at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium. He is also the Chaplain of the University Parish. His main research interests are relational and discerning theology. Address: Windmolenveldstraat 44, BE-3000 Leuven (Belgium). Email: Jacques.Haers@kuleuven.be.

43. Otto Scharmer's "Theory U" offers a tool for creative transitional thought drawing its strength from a vision of the future. See: <https://www.ottoscharmer.com/theoryu> (access 15/08/2020).

44. See, on Kenneth Gergen: <https://paperity.org/p/12995052/kenneth-j-gergen-and-social-constructionism> (access 15/08/2020).

45. See: Elías López Pérez, "Reconciliados – reconciliadores al discernir: Antropología de la unión de los ánimos en los Ejercicios Espirituales," in *El sujeto: Reflexiones para una antropología ignaciana*, ed. Rufino Meana Peón, José García de Castro, Francisco Ramírez, and Jaime Tatay, Colección "Manresa" 71 (Madrid: Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Santander: Sal Terrae, and Bilbao: Mensajero, 2019), 513-533. See, also, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaUxy93na1w> (access 20/08/2020).