

Advancing the reception of the Council
Episcopal collegiality, collegial synodality, synodal ecclesiality

Rafael Luciani and Serena Noceti

Synodality, a *constitutive dimension* of the Church

During the *Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, Pope Francis described a new model of Church: “A synodal Church is a Church that listens, with the understanding that listening ‘is more than hearing.’ It is reciprocal listening in which everyone has something to learn.”¹ Listening becomes a characteristic mark defining the identity of the *faithful* or *ecclesial subjects* by reason of the “*tria munera*” — the threefold functions of teaching, sanctifying, and governing— in which *the whole People of God* — Pope, bishops, laity, etc, — take part in the common priesthood. Furthermore, if according to the Council (*LG* 10) “the common priesthood and ministerial hierarchical priesthood” are “ordered to one another,” listening also characterizes the whole *process* of interaction and connection that occurs among all of them: “Faithful people, episcopal college, Bishop of Rome: each one listening to the others, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of Truth’ (Jn 14,17), to know what he ‘is telling the churches’ (Rev 2,7).”² It is “each one listening to the others” and “all listening to the Holy Spirit” that links together both the subjects and the processes in a reciprocal and horizontal dynamic. But the teaching body not only listens *to* the People of God but listens *as part of the People of God* (cf. DV 10). What is heard from the People should then find ecclesial channels and structures —or as Francis said, “concrete mediations”— that link it to magisterial decisions.

The Council had developed the theme of collegiality (*LG* 22–23) but not that of synodality, which was often identified with the collegial activity of the bishops in conciliar meetings. The Council had not produced a clear expression or a juridical articulation of spiritual convergence such as would unite the prophetic charism and the *sensus fidei* of the People of God together with the discernment of the college of bishops and the action of the Roman Pontiff. The immediate post-conciliar hermeneutic used the concept of collaboration to refer to the participatory relations that should exist among all members of the church. However, this concept corresponded to a vertical relationship established between laypeople and bishops, one derived from the *communio hierarchica*, as it was understood and practiced during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Synodality, on the other hand, is a new *mark* of the Church, a mode of being and acting that affects the Church’s life, its instruments of discernment, and its structures of government. We should not confuse synodality with synods. We cannot treat synodality simply as a concept derived from collegiality or conciliarity. Therefore, it is not just a specific event or a functional method. It is a *constitutive* dimension that qualifies *ecclesiality*, and defines a *new way of proceeding* that provides a *form* to the Church as *People of God*, an “ecclesial *we*” where all

¹ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html

² http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html

subjects, from the Pope to the Laity, are equals and articulated in a *communion of faithful* with the same responsibility in regards to the identity, vocation and the mission of the Church.

For most Catholics, even in the academy, synodality is just a way of enhancing processes of consultation and listening in the Church, but they do not realize the implications that it has for the reform of the Church, not only in terms of *mentalities*, but especially in regards to *structures* and *relations* among all ecclesial subjects, from Bishops to Laity. Vatican II had proposed *episcopal collegiality* and Francis has given a step forward while proposing a *collegial synodality*, especially through the Synod of Bishops, inspired by the practice on how Latin American Episcopal Conferences work. But currently, unknown to many in the Global Church, the Latin American Church is advancing in the reception of synodality, giving birth to what we call an *ecclesial synodality*. In this brief article we will offer some key elements that may help to start a conversation around this new way of being Church.

“What is permanent is the people of God; what is transitory is the hierarchical service”

During the Second Vatican Council many debates expressed the necessity of overcoming mentalities and structures that were inspired by the triumphalism, juridicism, and clericalism that had dominated the Church’s life and mission for almost a millennium. In this conception, the relations among ecclesial subjects — pope, bishops, clergy, laity — were viewed in the light of an *unequal society*. During the conciliar discussions Bishop Émile-Joseph De Smedt explained it in these terms: “You are familiar with the *pyramid*: pope, bishops, priests, each one of them responsible for teaching, sanctifying, and governing with their due authority. Then, at the base are the Christian people, who are mostly receptive, in a way that accords with the place they seem to occupy in the Church.” What was at issue was not a simple reversal of positions of power in the Church or the creation of an inverted pyramid. De Smedt was very clear affirming that “*what comes first is the People of God.*” An ecclesiological shift was taking place, one that included *all the faithful* in the category of the People of God, granting them equal dignity and thus making them subjects with the same rights and duties as an *ecclesial we*. Therefore, “in the People of God we are all united with one another. We have the same basic laws and duties. We all share in the real priesthood of the people of God. The Pope is one of the faithful: bishops, priests, laity, religions, *we are all the faithful.*”³

This was a call for a *new way of proceeding*, one that included all ecclesial subjects as part of a *totality* of the faithful, opening a horizontal exercise of the *sensus fidelium* that integrates and qualifies the episcopal college and the successor of Peter into this totality of the people of God. This had important implications. As Bishop De Smedt stated: “It needs to be noted that hierarchical power is only transitory (...). What is permanent is the people of God; what is temporary is the hierarchical service.” It’s interesting that in 1959 during the consultation with the Latin American Bishops to express their *vota* or proposals before the coming Council, Bishop Leonidas Proaño from Ecuador had already envisioned this ecclesiology of the People of God affirming that “in the Church we are *all faithful*, baptized in Christ”.

In accord with the Conciliar spirit, Pope Francis states that “in this Church, as in an *inverted pyramid*, the peak is found below the base. That is why those who exercise authority are called

³ Cf. *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, 1/4, 142-143.

‘ministers’: the original meaning of the word is ‘the smallest of all.’ Every bishop, by serving the People of God, becomes part of the flock that has been entrusted to him”⁴. Therefore, the objective of inverting the pyramid is not to improve episcopal practice by seeking a better balance between papal primacy and the episcopal college, nor is it simply a redistribution of ecclesial co-responsibility. The real novelty consists in understanding the *People of God* as the *basic active and communal subject* of the whole Church and thus giving priority to evangelization — a responsibility of all — rather than to sacramentalization, which is reserved to the ministers, because the power of evangelizing — of *all* — is always superior to the power of baptizing — of *some* (1 Cor 1:17). Together with evangelization, the Church lives and grows thanks to the communication and witnessing of faith among all the baptized, so that the understanding of faith is deepened and common decisions are made by mature individual consciences of all believers. In all of this, none of the faithful can be excluded from any ecclesial structure because the final objective and the *raison d’être* of any institutional structure of the Church is its *mission*, and the mission is determined and qualified by the participation of *all* in the *tria munera Christi* — priest, prophet, and king —, and not by the exercise of the ministerial authority resulting from ordination. Yet, this implies that a Synodal Church is only possible by *situating the hierarchy within the Ecclesiology of the People of God*, so that authority must be exercised within the framework of synodality.

“The renewal of the ecclesial hierarchy does not in itself produce transformation”

One of the necessary elements to implement Synodality today is the renewal of the hierarchy recognizing the inherent circularity that exists among the priesthood of the faithful and the ordained priesthood. Ordained ministry cannot exist nor be exercised in isolation, without the other members of the faithful that form the People of God. In this perspective, one of the greatest advancements of the pontificate of Francis in regards to the reception of the Council has been aligning chapters II and III of *Lumen Gentium* and proposing that both primacy and collegiality should be reformed by understanding their existence and exercise in function of the People of God. Such an understanding reveals both collegiality and primacy to be services of a transitory and historical nature, rather than ontological, eschatological, or self-referential.

We can understand this better if we situate ourselves within chapter III of *Lumen Gentium*, recognizing that the unresolved juxtaposition between primacy and collegiality has given rise to a type of subordinate relationship that has not helped synodal reform. Even the notion of “college” did not have an easy time making its way through the Council. Countering the pressure of the conservative minority, who wanted to save the doctrine of primacy promulgated by Vatican I, Paul VI added an explanatory note to *Lumen Gentium*, making it clear that “the Supreme Pontiff, as Supreme Pastor of the Church, may freely exercise his power at any time, as his own ministry requires of him. In contrast, the College, although it always exists, does not for that reason act permanently with *strictly* collegial action. ... It acts with strictly collegial action only at intervals and *with the consent of the Head*” (*LG. Nota Praevia* 4)⁵. This created an unresolved juxtaposition (*LG* 22) between chapters—two [People of God] and three [Hierarchy]

⁴ Francis, *Discourse at the Commemoration of 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*. 17 October 2015.

⁵ For a correct interpretation of *Lumen Gentium* it is good to remember that the *Nota praevia* is not part of the documents of the Council.

of *Lumen Gentium*, and led to a concentration of power and authority in the hierarchy by reason of ordination, thus provoking a difficulty in understanding synodality not only in terms of more participative relations among ecclesial subjects, but also in terms of the structural reform of the institutions.

Trying to solve this, the International Theological Commission in its document on *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church* — sadly not read or studied by a great number of theologians, pastors or lay people, especially in the U.S. — recovers the hermeneutical key to reading the Council's ecclesiology: “the sequence [of *Lumen Gentium*] —Mystery of the Church (chapter I), People of God (chapter II), Hierarchical Constitution of the Church (chapter III)— makes it clear that the *ecclesiastical hierarchy is placed at the service of the People of God* so that the mission of the Church is carried out in conformity with the divine design of salvation, following the logic that gives priority to the whole over the parts and to the end over the means.”⁶

Therefore, while collegiality refers to the nature and form proper to the episcopacy as it is exercised among bishops with and under Peter (*LG* 22-23), synodality is instead *a constitutive mark of the whole ecclesial life and its form*; it is *the whole Church's way of proceeding*, and, therefore, it involves the totality of the People of God joined together by means of reciprocal identities. This being the case, collegiality must be conceived and understood on the basis of synodality, and not vice versa. Therefore, whereas collegiality and papal primacy have their *raison d'être* in service to the People of God, it can be said that synodality “offers us the most adequate interpretative framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself.”⁷

Here we find the authentic ecclesiological shift of the Council received and advanced by Francis' pontificate: what we call the *principle of the totality of the faithful*. The institutionalization of this principle is what will allow the Church to move beyond the clericalization of ecclesial culture, the sacerdotalization of ministries and the lack of accountability. The words Francis addressed to the Chilean bishops are instructive: “the Church's immune system resides in that *faithful* and silent people (“Private Letter to the Bishops of Chile”). But assuming the centrality of the ecclesiology of the People of God in the Council and recognizing synodality as a new *mark* of the Church, brings new meaning and powerful implications to this word — *faithful*.

The people of God as the totality of the faithful

While it is true that the Church builds up communion to the extent that it becomes constituted as the People of God (*EG* 113), it cannot achieve this goal except through a *synodal form* and a *synodal way of proceeding*⁸. This means giving primacy to the ecclesial form of knowing called *sensus fidei*, which is a capacity given to every baptized person, but only when exercised as *sensus fidelium*, that is, as part of the totality of baptized persons. This is what Vatican II teaches when it states that “The *entire body of the faithful*, anointed as they are by the Holy One (cf. 1 John 2.20,27), cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of

⁶ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_sp.html

⁷ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html

⁸ Cf. Rafael Luciani, “Reforma, conversión pastoral y sinodalidad. Un nuevo modo eclesial de proceder”, Rafael Luciani (ed.), *La sinodalidad en la vida de la Iglesia. Reflexiones para contribuir a la reforma eclesial*, San Pablo, Madrid 2020, 41-66.

the whole people's supernatural discernment in matters of faith when 'from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful' they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals" (LG 12). As we have explained before, the ecclesiological shift of the Council has to do with the notion of the *totality of the faithful*, or all the faithful understood within a logic of reciprocity. From this point of view, we can then speak of the novelty of synodality.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG 119, 198), we find further this development of the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* (LG 9 and 12), with the use of the notion of *sensus fidei*, when speaking of the whole People of God as called to discipleship and mission. The faithful are not understood as a collection of individuals or as an undifferentiated mass; rather, they are understood as a *body* joined in the *reciprocal interaction* that arises from the participation of each member *suo modo et pro sua parte* (LG 31) in the mission of the Church in the world by way of discipleship.

According to this vision, we can say that the *sensus fidelium* and the *magisterium* are distinct but *complementary* subjects whose constant reciprocity produces and regulates the intelligence of faith. If this were not so, the *depositum fidei* would become an abstract, unilateral reality without any connection to the People of God. The unity between these two subjects does not result from the similarity in the way they exercise that function, but in the necessity of interrelating both subjects in order to achieve an authentic *sensus fidei ecclesiae*, that should express itself in a mandatory *ecclesial consensus*. If the two subjects are complementary, the *consensus omnium fidelium* should be the fruit of a *sensus fidei totius populi* because all ecclesial subjects are called to interact.

It is proper to the task of the bishops, as guarantors of the Apostolicity of the faith and custodians of the *Ecclesial We*, to promote and guide everyone to the *consensus fidelium*. This implies, for example, that, in a synodal Church, the elaboration of a *consensus* among all ecclesial subjectivities depends on the discernment of the whole, and not of the Bishops (the *many*) or the Pope (the *one*), since discernment is not only done in the Church, but it *makes the Church* insofar it should be a true expression of the *sensus ecclesiae* and not of the Bishops.

As Francis remembers, in his way of understanding *collegial synodality* — different from an *episcopal collegiality* —, some processes stand out. First, the "listening of all the faithful", and not only of the Bishops or the Episcopal Conferences. In the recent Pan-Amazonian Synod, over 50,000 people were consulted, involving also hundreds of institutions. Second, "processes of community discernment" in two phases: by local or regional assemblies that are convoked prior to the Synodal Assembly, leading to a *Working Document* that is not prepared nor imposed by the Curia; and by the Synodal Assembly with the participation of those who vote and those who do not vote. And third, the interpretation proper to the episcopal college assembled together leads to a "final decision" made by the Pope —who also participated in the Pan-Amazonian Synod as one more member of the faithful. Decisions are made after discerning what the assembly of Bishops voted for and expressed in the *Final Document* of the Synod. What links the whole process is the recognition of the *fidelium conspiratio* of all members of the People of God that achieves and "constitute a singular consensus of all the faithful" (*Dei verbum* 10).

This form and way of proceeding can be appreciated in the way in which Francis has advanced in the understanding and realization of his different Synods, that led to a reform in *Episcopalis*

Communio in 2018. But let us remember that synodality is more than a Synod, because it's a new *mark* of the whole Church. Not distinguishing this, limits the understanding of the novelty and the ecclesiological implications of synodality in regards to the reform of the Church mentalities and structures.

The elaboration and the making of decisions in the construction of consensus

Pope Francis follows Paul VI's teaching in *Apostolica sollicitudo*, then assumed in *Christus Dominus* 5, considering the Synod of Bishops as an instrument at the service of the exercise of Papal primacy. But, on the other hand, the Pope broadens the perspective and relocates the service of the college of Bishops and the Pope on the horizon of an entirely Synodal Church. We can say that Pope Francis continues in the line of privileging the "affective collegiality", already present in the self-understanding of the Latin American Episcopate (CELAM), which is then institutionalized by the 1985 Synod. This view may end up blocking structural reforms as a result of an "effective" collegiality.

Throughout the Synods, Francis has advanced from *episcopal collegiality*, proper to the Second Vatican Council, to *collegial synodality*, proper to the ecclesiology of this pontificate. The form and the way of proceeding of the Synods that the Pope has convoked can be considered as an emergence of a *collegial synodality*, yet to become a *synodal ecclesiality*. As Francis explains: "although structurally it is essentially configured as an episcopal body, this does not mean that the Synod exists separately from the rest of the faithful. On the contrary, it is a suitable instrument to *give voice to the entire People of God*" (*Episcopalis Communio*, 6).

The reform of a structure like that of the Synod cannot be seen only as a problem of *method*; such a reform has already been achieved in the recent synodal assemblies convoked by Francis. A more thorough reform of this institution or the creation of another one, needs to be seen in the relationship between *collegial synodality* and *synodal ecclesiality*, which is evidently expressed in the processes of discerning and elaborating decisions in order to build an ecclesial consensus. This means considering the forms of interaction among the different ecclesial subjects during all stages of the processes that lead to a final decision.

A first and initial approach to this perspective can be recognized in the former Synod for the Amazon that started out from the lowest point possible so that the *process for elaborating decisions* began with the whole People of God and not with a pre-elaborated document. A next step should need to think how the *subsequent process*, which corresponds to the one (Pope) or the many (Bishops) who make the decisions, can *ratify what was elaborated by all* (the faithful). This will truly express the fruit of an interaction of the totality of the faithful, from below and from within, so that the consultative organs *elaborate* the decision which the pastoral authority then *assumes*, because they all participate as faithful in the whole process.

Although the Code of Canon Law gives the Pontiff the ability to concede a deliberative and binding force to the decision of the bishops (canon 343), the episcopal institution continues to be a body of collaboration and counseling that expresses only affective collegiality (*Christus Dominus* 5). In order for this to change and become effective, the Pope would have to *ratify and promulgate* the conclusion reached by the synodal fathers, as we have said. However, even here

we can find an advancement that allows the practice of *episcopal collegiality* as *collegial synodality*, when Francis opens the possibility — in article 18 of *Episcopalis Communio*— to ratify and promulgate the *Final Document* of a Synod making it part of his ordinary Magisterium as Successor of Peter. In an initial way, this appears in *Querida Amazonia*, the Post-Synodal Exhortation of the Pan-Amazonian Synod, where the Pope clearly states that the Post-Synodal Exhortation does not substitute the *Final Document of the Synod* (QA 2), but rather *assumes* it (QA 3) inviting people to read it integrally (QA 3) and *apply* it (QA 4). This represents a recovery, though yet to be realized, of a Local Churches ecclesiology, central to the Council and its reception in the unique way in which the Church in Latin America functions and structures herself through CELAM.

The emergence of a *synodal ecclesiality*: new paths from the peripheries

As we have explained, Vatican II had proposed *episcopal collegiality* and Francis has made a step forward while proposing a *collegial synodality*, especially through the Synod of Bishops, and with his proposal of reform of the curia. But currently, coming from the peripheries, the Church in Latin American, as a *Source Church*, is taking a new step in regards to the reception of Synodality and implementing it as a *mark* of the Church. It's giving birth to what we have called *synodal ecclesiality*.

This has already happened in *Medellín*⁹ — the Second General Conference of the Latin American Bishops — and more recently at the *Venezuelan Plenary Council*, the first Plenary Council celebrated after the Vatican II to renew the whole structure of a Local Church¹⁰. But more recently this way of proceeding has been reassumed with great novelty in the current process of re-structuring of the *Latin American Bishops Council* (CELAM) and the creation of the *Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon* (CEAMA). It's important here to emphasize that it's not an *Episcopal* but an *Ecclesial Conference*. Here, we appreciate a beginning of a *synodal ecclesiality*, with decisions made on the basis of an understanding of the faith that is confronted with the *signs of the times*, with the necessary enhancement of the competences and charisms of lay people, which allow us to welcome the voice of the Spirit in the languages and cultures of our time (GS 43-44).

A *synodal ecclesiality* is the fruit of a co-shared vision and exercise of governance, and the binding nature of the decision-making and decision-taking processes where all *people* participate, “from Bishops to the last of the lay faithful” (*Episcopalis Communio* 5). This *ecclesial way of proceeding* can be found, as an emerging element, in what *Aparecida* — the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American Bishops — mandated in 2007 and has inspired Francis since *Evangelii Gaudium* : “the laity participate in *the discernment, the decision making, the planning, and the execution*” (*Aparecida* 371). In order for *synodal ecclesiality* to work, it is essential to articulate the Synod of Bishops to the listening of the Local Churches. As an example, realization of local diocesan synods or ecclesial assemblies can be convoked previous to the Synod of Bishops. This will contribute, from bottom to top, to the listening of the faithful

⁹ Cf. Rafael Luciani, "From Collegiality to Synodality in Latin America", *Asian Horizons: Dharmaram Journal of Theology* 14 (2020) 151-166.

¹⁰ Raúl Biord Castillo, "El Concilio Plenarío de Venezuela. Una buena experiencia sinodal (2000-2006)", in Rafael Luciani (ed.), *La sinodalidad en la vida de la Iglesia. Reflexiones para contribuir a la reforma ecclesial*, San Pablo, Madrid 2020, 293-328.

in each local Church. But it also needs to develop and give form to deliberative processes in a more complex form, including, for example, discernment of reality, evaluation of options, valuing the ways in which decisions are taken, and following up the implementation and the evaluation processes¹¹. This will need to incorporate the essential contribution of professionals in politics, economy and life experiences, which comes from the laity.

As seen throughout this brief reflection, being a new *mark* of the Church, synodality expresses an ecclesial *form* and a *new way of proceeding* that “has its point of departure but also its point of arrival in the *People of God*” (*Episcopalis Communio* 7), because, “as a constitutive dimension of the Church, precisely *through synodality*, the Church *manifests and configures as the pilgrim People of God* and as the assembly convoked by the risen Lord.”¹² As Francis said, in his most important ecclesiological discourse while commemorating the *50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*: “it is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium”¹³.

The challenge of aligning *episcopal collegiality*, *collegial synodality* and *synodal ecclesiality* needs a vital coordination and requires a reform of the praxis, the procedures, and the current synodal structures, so that it is possible to maintain the specific contribution of the episcopal and papal magisterium and the equally peculiar and unique contribution of laity, men and women, who offer charisms, cultures and the specificity of gender. New steps are needed to concretize this new ecclesial *mark* and *way of proceeding* for the next millennium, or we will continue to have an insufficient theological and pastoral consideration of the *sensus fidelium*, an isolated exercise of authority and a centralized style of governance in the Church. Let us remember that “in the synodal Church the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called together to pray, listen, analyze, dialogue, discern and offer advice on taking pastoral decisions which correspond as closely as possible to God's will. So, in coming to formulate their own decisions, Pastors must listen carefully to the wishes (*vota*) of the faithful.”¹⁴

¹¹ Cf. Serena Noceti, "Elaborare decisioni nella chiesa. Una riflessione ecclesiologica", in R. Battocchio – L. Tonello (edd.), *Sinodalità. Dimensione della Chiesa, pratiche nella chiesa*, EMP, Padova 2020, 237-254.

¹² International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018) 42.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_sp.html

¹³ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html

¹⁴ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html

Rafael Luciani is a Venezuelan lay theologian, Full Professor at Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Caracas, and Professor Extraordinarius at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry. He is a Theology Expert of CELAM (Latin American Bishop's Council) and CLAR (Latin American Confederation of Religious). He was Adviser to the Ecclesial Network for the Pan-Amazonian Region during the Synod for the Pan-Amazonian. Co-founder of the Ibero-American Theology Group for the Reform of the Church, and member of the Peter and Paul Seminar.

Serena Noceti is an Italian lay theologian, Full Professor at the Religious Sciences Institute in Florence, also she teaches at the Theological Faculty of Central Italy. She is a founding member of the Association of Italian Women Theologians and former Vice-President of the Italian Theological Association. She is co-Editor of the International Work: *Commentario ai Documenti del Vaticano II*. She was Theology Adviser to the Ecclesial Network for the Pan-Amazonian Region during the Synod for the Pan-Amazonian, and is currently a member of the Ibero-American Theology Group for the Reform of the Church.