



The Ecclesiological and Missiological Perspectives of Synodality

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to appreciate more deeply the ecclesiological and missiological perspectives of synodality and thus to suggest that synodality is not something new or created as the whim of Pope Francis but that it is rooted in the Church's ecclesiology from its earliest times and as such finds an expression in the Church's life and mission. In this paper I will demonstrate that the Church has always been a synodal Church and what we are witnessing now is a valid theological development which takes us into the third millennium. I wish to set my examination of synodality in its ecclesiological and missiological perspectives and thereby posit that these two branches or routes lead into the one synodal pathway. I will show that as we examine the ecclesiological perspective of synodality we shall see that it is set in a renewed sense of mission. For this, we will need to co-operate with God and each other, as Pope Francis hinted at in 2015.

Keywords

synodality, ecclesiology, missiology, Pope Francis, Life of the Church, mission

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to appreciate more deeply the ecclesiological and missiological perspectives of synodality and thus to suggest that synodality is not something new or created as the whim of Pope Francis but that it is rooted in the Church's ecclesiology from its earliest times and as such finds an expression in the Church's life and mission.

I want to begin by acknowledging that we have heard more about synodality and what it potentially means in the current pontificate, for it is Pope Francis who brought synodality to the fore. He did this most notably in 2015 when on 17 October he commemorated the anniversary of Pope Paul VI setting up the Synod of Bishops in 1965 in the time immediately at the end of the Second Vatican Council. I would like

to suggest that Pope Francis's speech linked to the institution of the Synod of Bishops is a *kairos* or pivotal moment for embarking on the ecclesiology of a synodal Church. In 2015 Pope Francis said,

We must continue along this path (the setting up of the synod). The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and 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 in the third millennium.¹

Therefore, in this paper I will demonstrate that the Church has always been a synodal Church and what we are witnessing now is a valid theological development which takes us into the third millennium. I wish to set my examination of synodality in its ecclesiological and missiological perspectives and thereby posit that these two branches or routes lead into the one synodal pathway. I will show that as we examine the ecclesiological perspective of synodality we shall see that it is set in a renewed sense of mission. For this, we will need to co-operate with God and each other, as Pope Francis hinted at in 2015.

The Roots of a Synodal Church

Let us begin our examination of the ecclesiological perspectives with the Scriptures and particularly with the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 which outlines what we could quite rightly call the first manifestation of synodality in the Church, or at least it can open the door as a truly considered synodal expression. The Council of Jerusalem centres on whether non-Jewish converts to Christianity must be circumcised and so Paul and Barnabas who are first challenged by this, take the questions to the apostles gathered in the Church at Jerusalem, for at this point the Church in Jerusalem was the focal point for the Christian communities.

The Acts of the Apostles recounts that 'the apostles and elders met to look into the matter, and after the discussion had gone on a long time, Peter stood up and addressed them'.² This is an important moment, remembering that the Lord had given to Peter the commission to confirm the faith of the other apostles. (Luke 22:32) The others, in this context are eager to hear what he has to say, not just the synopsis of the discussion, but more importantly the decision, which as we know is that circumcision is not necessary in these cases.

¹ Pope Francis, Ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2105.

² Acts 15:7.

After Peter, we hear from James who speaks in his capacity as the leader of the local Church in Jerusalem. This is significant for understanding the synodal Church. It is important that the head of the local Church gives his assent to this too, so that the unity displayed by the group of the apostles can be passed on to the other churches. The Church at Jerusalem sends a letter with the delegates, Paul, and Barnabas, to make the decision known to all the churches. Here, we have in synthesis the seeds of the synodal or conciliar Church.

This practice flows through the conciliar life of the Church. We witness it in the ecumenical councils of the early Church where the fathers came together to clarify the faith and the practices of the Church. To put it somewhat crudely, this is a manifestation of theology in action. The fruits of their labours are contained in the Creed which we recite Sunday by Sunday. We believe that the elders of the Church came to their decisions about the life of faith with the assistance of the Holy Spirit. In this way, we can claim that synodality is not something new.

Let us for a moment open metaphorical parentheses to allow ourselves a moment to look briefly at the etymology of synod. It comes from the two Greek words; *syn- hodos* which can be translated as ‘walking together’, or ‘being on the road together’. I want to examine this sense of being together on a journey in the light of another passage of Scripture.

Let us examine another well-known passage of Scripture that assists us in the notion of ‘journeying together’; the story on the road to Emmaus.³ The whole context of this passage is rooted in a sense of journey as we encounter the two disciples walking away from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. The sense that they are walking away from Jerusalem gets clearer as we move through the passage, even if we hadn’t initially noticed this as we began to read the passage. As they discuss all that has been happening, Jesus appears and walks with them, they are ‘downcast’ and so are prevented from recognising him. As we know Jesus starts to speak to them about the recent events and then takes them through the history of salvation. They are so captivated by him that they ask him to stay with them, and we know the rest; they recognise him at the Breaking of the Bread. This encounter gives them the courage to return to Jerusalem and relate to the other apostles all that has happened to them. Notice here two things; the first that they witness to the other apostles, this is the way with synodality and secondly that they are now ready to get on with the Church’s mission...the other hallmark of the synodal way.

I will not attempt to offer a forensic exegesis of this passage but offer five marker points which I hope to help us to see the roots of synodality and offer a hint to what the Church is engaged with at the present time:

³ Luke 24:13-35.

- *The disciples are walking and discussing what has happened.* We are called to speak to each other about the context of our current faith journey.
- *Jesus came and walked by their side.* Our discernment must always take place recognising that Jesus walks at our side.
- *Then starting with Moses and going through the prophets.* Our lives are rooted in our practice of prayer based in the Scriptures.
- *They recognised him at the Breaking of the Bread.* The source and summit of our prayer and what gives life to our faith is the Eucharist.
- *They set out that instant and returned to Jerusalem.* The prayerful encounter with the Lord sets us on the road to mission.

I believe that the Emmaus text gives a blueprint for the synodal journey with its sense of movement, the assistance of the Holy Spirit, the accompaniment of the Lord and the disciples for each other. It presents a plan of what discernment looks like and, as a post-resurrection text, sets this sense of journeying at the heart of the Paschal mystery.

The Seeds of a Synodal Church in Vatican II

Having set the Scriptural scene I want to bring us forward to Vatican II which I want to posit is the time where the theme of synodality took hold in ecclesiology, if only in implicit ways. Let me state clearly that I believe fully in a development of doctrine, I am not someone who says that the theology began at Vatican II, but what I do state is that what we witness now in the Church is a definite reception of the Council (it takes time for councils to be received in the Church's life.) I posit that synodality must be seen in relationship to the 'People of God' ecclesiology presented in *Lumen Gentium* and the dialogical nature of the Church that was so evident during the Second Vatican Council.

Ecclesiam Suam

Paul VI's first encyclical of 6th August 1964 is a significant text; published a year before *LG* it helps to frame Vatican II ecclesiology. Paul VI stated that 'The aim of this encyclical will be to demonstrate with increasing clarity how vital it is for the world, and how greatly desired by the Catholic Church, that the two should meet together, and get to know and love one another'.⁴ This reinforces the aims of the Council; the Church is called to enter into a dialogue with itself and the world so

⁴ Paul VI, Encyclical letter on the Church *Ecclesiam Suam*, [hereafter ES] 6 August 1964: AAS 56 (1964), 609-659. 3.

that the message of Christ is central to the Church's mission. Perhaps we can see here the seeds of synodality, which necessarily involves a dialogue.

ES is full of synodal overtures; in chapter two Paul VI suggested that the Church must come to grips with an 'intense and unfailing desire to learn the ways of the Lord'.⁵ He believed that this would help the Church to become more perfectly the Body of Christ and reflect more purposefully the Trinitarian life. The model of unity and love in the Trinity is how Paul introduces the theme of dialogue which is at the heart of what Paul commends to the Church in *ES*.

Paul VI articulates the four main attributes of dialogue; which must be clear and accompanied by meekness; it is to be confident and a prudent teacher that both listens and engages with the interlocutor and so can adapt to new situations whilst at the same time remaining faithful to the Truth.⁶ Paul uses the analogy of concentric circles to describe the dialogical nature of the Church; these circles paint a picture of the Church integrating into the world. They describe the levels of relationship that the Church has beginning with humankind, where the Church is open to society and engages in a dialogue with the created world. The second moves from this to the worshippers of the one God, the third into the ambit of those who profess their faith in Christ and the fourth is the way the members of the Catholic Church relate to each other.

I suggest that this dialogical dimension that Paul offers is both a novelty for Vatican II ecclesiology and moves the Church more closely into a dialogue with the world which sets the context for what we are seeing now. Pope Francis is clear that the synodal dialogue we have now moved beyond the comfortable boundaries of the visible Church to encapsulate other Christians and those of other faiths and extends to all people of goodwill.

ES highlights three areas where Paul VI believes that the Church can enter into dialogue; a deeper self-knowledge, renewal, and dialogue itself. It strikes me that we could also suggest that these are three themes that Francis sees as key for the Church too, thus confirming that we are most definitely in a moment of conciliar reception. This is a good way for the Church to be synodal at the start of the third millennium. Paul VI puts it like this in *ES* hoping that his encyclical will give 'unhesitating support to anything which can help to spread the teaching of the truths of which the Church is guardian and minister'.⁷ Surely, this is what Francis hopes for the synodal Church, that it will give a fresh expression to the eternal truth to minister to people and offer them that very Truth which comes from God.

⁵ ES 41.

⁶ ES 81.

⁷ ES 116.

Lumen Gentium and People of God

We now come to examine *LG* chapter 2 on the ‘People of God’ which I would suggest is one of the other important entry points for us in our reception of a synodal Church. One could say that using the image of the ‘People of God’ became the new ecclesiological prism at Vatican II. Yves Congar advocated the importance of speaking of the ‘People of God’, and in his journal of the Council, he enunciates much of the debate that took place in the drafting of *LG*. An Italian ecclesiologist, Dario Vitali, follows this line of thought suggesting that this a revolutionary moment for the Church setting her in a new path of self-understanding from which there can be no turning back. It also signals, he says, the end of the pyramidal understanding of the Church and a top-down hierarchical approach,⁸ moving away from the ‘us-them’ approach and instead starts from the point of view of all the baptised. *LG* radically underlines the equality between all the members of the People of God, between those who are ordained and those who are not. It radicalises the relationship of the people to God, and they truly are viewed as children of a loving Father.

Joseph Ratzinger speaks of this relationship between the ‘people of God’ also rooting it in the vocation of all the baptised. Ratzinger adds a clarifying tone to an over eagerness to promote that emphasising the role of the people of God, or of the laity, is not to merely restrict an understanding of the hierarchy, but that it ‘declares the essential spiritual unity of all the baptised in the order of grace and thus underlines the ministerial character of the Church’. The Church is alive when the whole People of God respond to the Lord’s call.⁹

Lumen Gentium and The Synodal Way

LG’s chapter on the ‘People of God’, according to Dario Vitali, offers a new perspective.¹⁰ *LG* reasserts the equality of the ‘People of God’ ending the model of the second millennium of the history of the Church and the distinction between an *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discerns*, for ‘though they differ essentially and not only in degree, the common priesthood of all the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are none the less ordered to each other; each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ’.¹¹ This stops the exaltation

⁸ Dario Vitali, *Popolo di Dio*. (Assisi, Cittadella Editrice, 2018), p.119ff.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰ Dario Vitali, *Lumen Gentium: storia, commento, ricezione*, (Roma: Edizioni Studium, 2012), p.58ff.

¹¹ *LG* 10.

of one vocation over the other, so that the clergy are not placed above the lay faithful or *vice-versa*, but instead the document speaks of them as ‘being ordered to each other’ and so recaptures the importance of all the People of God who are equal by virtue of baptism and not divided by the function that they have. Vitali thus suggests that the offices or functions in the Church only make sense in so far as they are exercised in favour of the people.

I believe that describing the People of God in these ways shapes the development of the post-conciliar Church and brings us to the point we are now considering; the synodal pathway. The *gift* of baptism calls the baptised to *service* in the Church which leads to *holiness*, which is what baptism offers to all the members of the Church regardless of their function. Synodality affirms the nature of the People of God affirming the gift of baptism, the call to service which leads the Church to be holy and sanctify the world. These three strands continue the link with the renewal that Paul VI spoke of in *ES*.

The Institution of the Synod of bishops

There is much that can be said about a Vatican II ecclesiology and all we can do now is touch the surface, but what I hope to show is that what we see in the Church now is firmly rooted in what we were starting to see at the time of the Council. The council itself was synodal! It brought together the bishops of the Church, with theologians to pray and discern what God was asking for the Church at that time, the documents offer us the fruits of the reflection.

What happened at the end of the Council is also significant and flows from what we read in the council documents. In some way Paul VI wanted to find a way to continue the fruits of the Council and so he set up the Synod of Bishops as a way of continuing the work and the spirit of the Council. I would like to suggest that it is significant for our understanding of synodality that Pope Francis announces the synodal pathway in a speech to commemorate the institution of the Synod of Bishops.

Firstly, we have to ask why Paul VI set up the Synod of Bishops. Peter Hebblethwaithe posits that Paul VI had been influenced by the Patriarch of Antioch, Maximos IV Saigh, who had suggested that there could be a small group of bishops who could represent the others and advise the Pope and guide the government of the Church.¹² Notwithstanding this Paul VI himself mused that ‘we feel the time has come to put this decision, long since made, into effect’ and relying on the

¹² Ibid.

support and goodwill of the bishops who also expressed their agreement to the Synod of Bishops being instituted.¹³

The *motu proprio AS* of 15 September 1965 states that; ‘It was also the Ecumenical Council that gave Us the idea of permanently establishing a special Council of bishops, with the aim of providing for a continuance after the Council of the great abundance of benefits that We have been so happy to see flow to the Christian people during the time of the Council as a result of Our close collaboration with the bishops’.¹⁴

The setting up of the structure of the Synod of Bishops had a real impact for the local Churches, representing a shift in the Council whereby real space and time could be given to discuss the issues that are important for the local Churches and so in this regard the Synod has become a useful tool to help the Pope to both discern the needs of the Universal Church and have solicitude for it. In essence, this is the result of the Pope being able to understand the experience of the bishop in the local Church who through collegiality shares in the universality of the Church. Increasingly this means that the Roman Curia must be at the service of the local Church in a way that is open to promote dialogue between the local Churches and itself. Paul VI was aware that like ‘all human institutions, can be improved upon with the passing of time...’¹⁵

Paul VI’s reasons for setting up the Synod of Bishops can be summarised in three ways. Firstly, it was set up to encourage the close *union* between the Pope and the bishops of the whole Church. Secondly to ensure that there is a good flow of communication and information between the Pope and the bishops particularly in regard to the experience of the local Church, and thirdly to facilitate *agreement* on the essential points of doctrine, once again with a specific regard to the experience of the local Church.¹⁶ Both the *motu proprio* and the *Code of Canon Law* in 1983 which was revised to take in the Synod of Bishops are clear that ‘it is the role of the synod of bishops to discuss the questions on their agenda and to express their desires about them but not to resolve them or to issue decrees about them’.¹⁷ This sets out clearly the consultative nature of the Synod which does not have the power to make decisions, as this prerogative is left to the Pope and those to whom he delegates the responsibility. The only way in which the operation of the Synod can change is through the explicit mandate of the Pope. This has been a

¹³ Paul VI, *Motu Proprio* establishing the Synod of Bishops for the Universal Church *Apostolica Sollicitudo* [hereafter AAS] 15 September 1965: AAS 57 (1965), 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Speaking of the setting up of the document.

¹⁶ Peter Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII Pope of the Council*. Here I follow the three basic strands of Hebblethwaite which are found on page 13 where he offers a concise guide to the setting up and furtherance of the Synod of Bishops.

¹⁷ CIC 343.

constant even when the *modus operandi* has changed, as it is important that the Synod of Bishops remains the instrument by which the *sensus fidelium* is lived out and guaranteed by the bishops of the Church.¹⁸

The Synod of Bishops clearly did respond to a need that was felt in the embryonic days of the Conciliar period. Sean O’Riordan in an article published in October 1967 offers an analysis of the incipient Synod of Bishops where his insights lend weight to the precise need for the invoking and continuance of the spirit of the Council in a synodal arrangement.¹⁹ O’Riordan makes the case that several groups of bishops wanted the Synod to be a theological event, a true expression of communion and collegiality which dealt with the direct concerns of how the church related to the contemporary world. Thus, transforming it from being neither a juridical nor theological event but makes of it a truly ecclesial event underlining the importance of the local Church. O’Riordan sees a shift in the Synod of Bishops and its *raison d’être* hoping that it would aid the gradual implementation of Vatican II and bring a necessary balance between the ultra-traditional and liberal wings of the conciliar fathers. The Synod of Bishops contributes to this as it becomes the continuation of the wealth of debate that occurred at Vatican II from which there could be no turning back. It would be fair to conclude that for O’Riordan the Synod of Bishops is both the consequential outcome and the expression of collegiality.

A eucharistic ecclesiology that uses the model of a local Church presided over by the bishop who knows the needs of the diocese is the foundation upon which Vatican II builds up the notion of collegiality. This ties in well with how Paul VI envisaged the work of the synod of bishops as he commented during his discourse at the first meeting of the Synod on 29 September 1967 suggesting that the synod itself should in some way relive the *momentum* of the Council and this should be captured in the context of its further development. Paul VI hoped that the synod would add to the ‘preservation and strengthening of the Catholic faith, its integrity, its strength, its development, its doctrinal and historical coherence and an acknowledgment of the faith as the indispensable foundation of the Christian life which is the cause and *raison d’être* of the Church’.

In 1967 when speaking to the Synod of Bishops Paul VI encouraged them to let the Synod of Bishops be at the service of the entire Catholic episcopacy, which in turn aids the Pope in his exercise of the Petrine ministry. This must take place in a collaborative and consultative way

¹⁸ Dario Vitali, *Verso la Sinodalità*. (Magnano: Edizioni Qiqajon, 2014), p. 88ff. Vitali suggests that it is only the bishop in his Church who can represent the ‘*sensus fidelium*’ of the people under his care to the other bishops acting in a collegial way, whether that be in ecumenical council or in other manifestations of synodality.

¹⁹ Sean O’Riordan, ‘The Synod of Bishops: A Theological Event’, *The Furrow* 18 no 10 (October 1967), 565-572. Accessed 15 October 2019.

which although has no deliberative authority is an important instrument whereby the Pope can listen with a certain amount of frankness to the concerns of the local Churches and their lived experience in such a way that all the constituent members may grow in understanding of how the Church acts as a whole and so to grow in love with all the parts of the Church.

Conclusion: A New Way of Being Synodal

I believe that the Synod of Bishops gives the context for what we are experiencing currently in the Church. The Synod of Bishops is predicated upon collegiality and the strengthening of the relationship between the bishops in the Church. Synodality, introduces the notion that the whole People of God are called to be a part of this and progressively we have seen a change in the operation of the Synod of Bishops and especially in the current pontificate.

It is helpful to end where we started: in 2015 and with Pope Francis. He gives us the threads of how he imagines a synodal Church which I believe we have evidenced in our ecclesiological and missiological perspectives.

‘From the beginning of my ministry as Bishop of Rome, I sought to enhance the synod, which is one of the most precious legacies of the Second Vatican Council’.²⁰ Francis sets this synodal pathway firmly in the light of the Second Vatican Council and the ecclesiology of *LG* about which I have already spoken. Francis extends the collegial action of the bishops to include the listening to the whole People of God and so speaks of a Church ‘which listens, which realises that listening is more than simply hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faith people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Truth, in order to know what he says to the Churches’.²¹

In this we have the paradigm for a synodal Church which is based in what the conciliar nature of the Church which we saw in Acts, the Emmaus journey emphasises the nature of the movement and the journey and how we are to listen and *LG* and Vatican II offer a new prism through which we can see that this is the action of the whole People of God who with the bishops and clergy assume an important role in the Church’s mission. Synodality strengthens the unity of the people with their bishops, and the bishops with the bishop of Rome: ‘the synod always acts *cum Petro et sub Petro*’ which ‘is not a limitation of freedom,

²⁰ 2015 speech.

²¹ Ibid.

but a guarantee of unity'.²² This shows that synodality is not a whim or something new but is the work of the Holy Spirit and is set in the context of the Church and her mission.

The final consideration is one that also flows from *LG* and Vatican II: service. The synodal pathway teaches us how to be servants of the Lord and each other and how to truly be a disciple...the one who listens and learns from the example of the master. This service leads us to be at the service of the communion of the Church, the true point of synodality that it strengthens the ties of communion that we have with the Lord and with each other for the building up of the Kingdom in the life and mission of the Church.

I will end with the words of Francis in 2015 which I hope convince us that synodality is rooted in ecclesiological and missiological perspectives: 'As a Church which journeys together with men and women sharing the travails of history, let us cherish the dream that 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, and thus bring about a more beautiful and humane world for the coming generations'.²³

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²² Ibid

²³ Ibid.