

## **From the Synod on Synodality to the Synodalization of the whole Church *Towards a new ecclesial reconfigura- tion in the light of Synodality***

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The Church has been convoked to a Synod with the motto: For a Synodal Church: communion, participation and mission. It is perhaps the most important event since the Second Vatican Council, because it represents the beginning of a process of rearticulation of the conciliar hermeneutics in the light of a new reception of the Ecclesiology of the People of God. The aim is to situate Chapter II [People of God] of Lumen Gentium as the normative criterion that redefines the identity and mission of all ecclesial subjects, and consequently the relationships, the communicative dynamics and the structures for a synodal Church whose challenge is to achieve a new theological institutional model for the third millennium.

### **RESUMEN:**

La Iglesia ha sido convocada a un Sínodo cuyo lema es: Por una Iglesia sinodal: comunión, participación y misión. Quizás sea el evento más importante luego del Concilio Vaticano II, porque representa el inicio de un proceso de rearticulación de la hermenéutica conciliar a la luz de una nueva recepción de la Eclesiología del Pueblo de Dios. Se busca situar el Capítulo II [Pueblo de Dios] de Lumen Gentium como el criterio normativo que resignifique la identidad y misión de todos los sujetos eclesiales, y en consecuencia las relaciones, las dinámicas comunicativas y las estructuras para una Iglesia sinodal cuyo reto es el de lograr un nuevo modelo teológico institucional para el tercer milenio.

## 1. The Church has been summoned to a *Synod on Synodality*

### 1.1 A *Synod on the Church in a context of institutional fracture*

The Church has been summoned to a Synod whose motto is *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*. The event was inaugurated on 9 October 2021 in Rome and on 16 October in each particular Church. The novelty of this event should be highlighted here. It begins a two-year synodal process that will culminate with the celebration of the 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the *Synod of Bishops* in October 2023, which will gather all the fruit of the process, in various phases (diocesan, national, continental, universal) as Cardinal Grech has explained,

...the Synod of Bishops is the point of convergence of the dynamism of reciprocal listening in the Holy Spirit (...). It is not just an event but a process that involves the Episcopal College and the Bishop of Rome in synergy with the People of God, each according to its function<sup>1</sup>.

With this call, Pope Francis is engaging the entire Church in discerning a new ecclesial model for the *third millennium*, a model that deepens the *aggiornamento* process initiated by Vatican II and that responds to the epochal ecclesial changes we are experiencing. This context explains the importance of this Synod for discerning the needed reforms in the light of *synodality*. This will possibly be the most important ecclesial event in the current phase of the reception of the Second Vatican Council under the pontificate of Francis. Involved in the process are approximately 114 Episcopal Conferences of the Latin rite, the Council of Eastern Catholic Patriarchs, 6 patriarchal synods of Eastern Churches, 4 major archiepiscopal synods, and 5 International Episcopal Councils. Thus, the institutional form of the current Synod responds to the ecclesiology of the People of God according to the model of a *Church of Churches*.

In what has been his most important ecclesiological discourse, Francis maintains that "the path of synodality is the path that God expects of the Church of the third millennium. What the Lord asks of us is, in a certain sense, already completely contained in the word 'Synod': Walking together—laity, *pastors, Bishop of Rome*."<sup>2</sup> Such a vision goes beyond any reflection that the Church can make on a particular subject. It entails an examination of the Church's very essence, which requires rethinking the identity, the mission, and the reconfiguration of the whole Church and not just some of its operational elements. Francis explained this well in a speech to the Diocese of Rome:

1 Cf. Address by Cardinal Mario Grech to the Holy Father in the Consistory for the creation of new cardinals, on 28 November 2020.

2 Francis, *Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17 October 2015) [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversary-synod.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversary-synod.html)

The theme of synodality is not just a chapter in a treatise on ecclesiology; even less is it a passing fashion, a slogan, or a new term to be used and exploited in our meetings. No! Synodality expresses the nature of the Church, its form, its style, and its mission. Thus, when we speak of a synodal Church, we should not consider that title to be one among others or a way of conceiving the Church with a view to alternatives. I am not saying this on the basis of theological opinion or as a personal reflection. I am following what we may consider the first and most important manual of ecclesiology, the book of the Acts of the Apostles<sup>3</sup>.

This call for the Church to think about itself is what motivates the calling of this Synod. Its coming to pass cannot be understood apart from the loss of confidence in the theological-cultural model that currently defines the ecclesial institution. This model characterized by clericalism needs to be radically surpassed because it reveals the asymmetric relationships in the exercise of power in all spheres of ecclesial life. The signs of the present ecclesial era point towards "a watershed or turning point"<sup>4</sup> in the system. Some studies indicate a "possible institutional failure"<sup>5</sup> that will require, not just revision and renewal of what already exists, but the creation of something new. It is worth remembering here the wise words of Congar:

We must ask ourselves whether *aggiornamento* will be sufficient or whether something else is not necessary. The question is pressing insofar as the institutions of the Church are rooted in a cultural world that is out of sync with the new cultural world. *Our epoch requires a revision of 'traditional' forms that goes beyond plans of adaptation or aggiornamento; rather, it requires a new creation.* It is not enough to maintain what has existed until now, with some adaptations; it is necessary to build anew. Christianity is essentially transmission, '*traditio*,' of what has been received. Only the forms by which the tradition is expressed can be reinvented. In order for the *paradosis*, the transmission, to be effective and authentic, it is necessary to revise and renew one of another form that served for transmission in another time, but that today constitutes an obstacle to genuine transmission<sup>6</sup>.

3 Francis, *Discorso ai fedeli della diocesi di Roma*, 18 September 2021 <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html>

4 Letter of Cardinal Marx to Pope Francis (21 May 2021). <https://www.vaticannews.va/es/vaticano/news/2021-06/el-cardenal-marx-publica-una-carta-de-resignacion-enviada-al-papa.html>

5 Cf. Rafael Luciani, "La renovación en la jerarquía eclesial por sí misma no genera la transformación. Situar la colegialidad al interno de la sinodalidad," in Daniel Portillo (ed.), *Teología y prevención. Estudio sobre los abusos sexuales en la Iglesia*, Prologue by Pope Francis, Sal Terrae, Santander 2020, 37-64.

6 Cf. Yves Congar, "Renovación del espíritu y reforma de la institución," *Concilium* 73 (1972) 326-337.

Faced with such an undertaking, it is more urgent than ever to renew ecclesial life through a way of proceeding that is inspired by *consultation* and *consensus-building* according to the old principle of medieval canon law that states: "what affects everyone must be discussed and approved by all." This practice is not new in the Church, nor should it not rouse any fears. It is worth remembering the golden rule of Bishop Saint Cyprian that shaped the synodal form of the first millennium and offers the most appropriate interpretive framework for thinking about current ecclesial challenges: "*Nihil sine consilio vestro et sine consensu plebis mea privatim sententia gerere.*"<sup>7</sup> Throughout the episcopal service of this bishop of Carthage, consulting with the presbytery and building consensus with the people were fundamental practices for preserving communion in the Church. He promoted open dialogue and shared discernment that welcomed the participation of all, not just priests, in deliberation and decision-making. The first millennium offers examples of a *forma ecclesiae* in which the exercise of power was understood as shared responsibility. This is what the Synod's *Preparatory Document* means when it states:

In the first millennium 'walking together,' that is, practicing synodality, was the habitual way of proceeding of the Church, which was understood as 'a people gathered by virtue of the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.' By asserting the communion of the Churches spread throughout the world, the Church Fathers opposed those who would divide the ecclesial body. Saint Augustine described this communion as a *concordissima fidei conspiratio*, that is, as a most fitting conspiracy of faith of all the baptized. Here we find the roots of the broad development of synodal praxis at all levels of the life of the Church—local, provincial, universal—a praxis that has found its supreme manifestation in the Ecumenical Council. It is against this ecclesial horizon, inspired by the principle of the participation of all in ecclesial life, that Saint John Chrysostom could affirm, 'Church and Synod are synonymous'.<sup>8</sup>

A path has opened up for the Church to reconfigure itself in a synodal key, but it will require a process of conversion and reform, and this will take time, perhaps generations.

## 1.2 The call to reform an exhausted theological-cultural model

Today more than ever, society is asking the Church to effect concrete changes in its institutional practice. Inspired by this call for change, the Synod seeks to respond to it in a period of two years, creating a path for renewal

<sup>7</sup> "Quando a primordio episcopatus mei statuerim, nihil sine consilio vestro, et sine consensu plebis, mea privatim, sententia gerere." Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologiae Latina*, Tomis 4 (S. Cypriani), 234.

<sup>8</sup> Preparatory Document for the 2021-23 Synod: *For a Synodal Church. Communion, Participation, and Mission*, 11.

according to what is proposed in *Evangelii Gaudium*. The goal is a reform that is "capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation" (EG 27).

This arduous task of *reforming the current theological-cultural institutional model*, which is permeated by systemic clericalism, and of discerning a new model for the *third millennium* must be seen as a response to the following of Jesus in our age. This is how the Council understood the challenge. Its document *Unitatis Redintegratio* encourages "all to examine their fidelity to the will of Christ in relation to the Church and, as is right and proper, to undertake courageously the work of renewal and reform" (UR 4). The document also affirms that "Christ calls the pilgrim Church towards a perennial reform, which the Church herself, as a human and earthly institution, always needs" (UR 6). In both cases the Church is reformed in response to the Jesus of the Gospels.

This was the intention of Pope Francis when he declared, during the Eucharist at Santa Marta on 9 November 2013, that the Church is always in need of reform: *Ecclesia semper reformanda*. "The Church must always renew itself because its members are sinners and need conversion<sup>9</sup>. Church reform, he insisted, was not a one-time task of revision or an updating of certain outdated structures; it was rather a constant and permanent process of "ecclesial conversion" of "the whole Church." This was confirmed on 24 November 2013 when he issued the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, which would be his roadmap. That document states:

Paul VI invited us to deepen the call to renewal and to make it clear that renewal concerns not only individuals but the entire Church. (...) The Second Vatican Council presented ecclesial conversion as openness to constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ. (...) Christ summons the Church as she goes her pilgrim way... to that continual reformation of which she always has need (EG 26).

A year later, in 2014, he stated that certain unhealthy elements of the current ecclesial culture needed to be reformed because they adversely affect the relational and communicational dynamics in ecclesial structures. Such elements include neglect of controls, excessive planning and functionalism, diminished communion among members of the ecclesial body, careerism, opportunism, cliquishness, and undue pursuit of honors<sup>10</sup>. During the Council,

<sup>9</sup> Francis, *Meditazione mattutina nella cappella della Domus Sanctae Marthae. L'acqua che scorre nella chiesa* (9 November 2013) [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/cotidie/2013/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie\\_20131109\\_acqua-della-grazia.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/cotidie/2013/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20131109_acqua-della-grazia.html)

<sup>10</sup> Francis, *Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia* (22 December 2014) [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/december/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141222\\_curia-romana.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/december/documents/papa-francesco_20141222_curia-romana.html)

the Dominican theologian Yves Congar had explained that some ecclesial forms create "a halo of fictions," that is, a type of bubble that distances clergy from the reality of people:

There is today a type of respectability around us, a form of aura or mystery that produces a result contrary to what is intended. These forms not only distance people from us, but also separate us from them, making the real world of their lives morally inaccessible to us. This is extremely serious. The consequence is that we are not in touch with where they are most human, with where they express themselves freely, with where they suffer their real problems. We run the risk of living in the midst of them, but separated from them by a halo of fictions<sup>11</sup>.

These deficient ways of relating create a whole system. They cannot be seen as isolated attitudes, but rather are part of an ecclesial culture that ends up becoming an obstacle to the proclamation and the realization of the Gospel, as Ronaldo Muñoz warned in 1972<sup>12</sup>. Clericalization of the institution is therefore a systemic problem, and overcoming it involves "reforming the Church's internal relations and institutions"<sup>13</sup>. We must not fall into the false antagonism of opposing the conversion of mentalities to the reform of structures<sup>14</sup>. As Francis said in 2016, "It should be noted that the reform will be effective if and only if it is carried out with 'renewed' men and women and not simply with 'new' men and women. It is not enough just to change personnel; people must be (...) renewed spiritually, personally, and professionally"<sup>15</sup>. Thus he insisted:

The effort that is needed should bring us to a certain level of mental habits or representations that depend at a deeper level, on the ecclesiology we profess, at least practically. *We are still far from realizing the consequences of the rediscovery—achieved globally in principle—of the fact that the whole church is a single People of God, made up of the faithful with the clerics.* We still maintain the implicit idea that the Church is made up of clerics, and that the faithful are only the beneficiaries or clientele. This frightful conception has been inscribed in so many structures and customs

11 Yves Congar, *Por una Iglesia servidora y pobre*, 116-117.

12 The "clerical institutional model [is] one of the great structural obstacles to the discovery of the gospel." Ronaldo Muñoz, *Nueva conciencia de la Iglesia en América Latina*, Sigueme, Salamanca 1974, 361.

13 Ronaldo Muñoz, *Nueva conciencia de la Iglesia en América Latina*, Sigueme, Salamanca 1974, 353.

14 "The work of reforming mentalities and clerical structures continues to be a complex and profound task that needs to be carried out. It requires a renewal, at its core, of the millennial theological-cultural model of the inherited Church." Cf. Carlos Schickendantz, "A la búsqueda de una completa definición de sí misma. Identidad eclesial y reforma de la Iglesia en el Vaticano II," *Teología y Vida* 61 (2020) 99-130.

15 Francis, *Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia* (22 December 2016) [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/december/documents/papa-francesco\\_20161222\\_curia-romana.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/december/documents/papa-francesco_20161222_curia-romana.html)

that it seems completely natural and unchangeable. This is a betrayal of the truth. Much remains to be done to declericalize our conception of the church<sup>16</sup>.

Advancing on this path certainly leads us to consider the ecclesiology that is needed in order for the Church to be reformed in a synodal key, but we also recognize that we are working in an ecclesial context dominated still by an clerical institutional model that resists any change. The great challenge, therefore, will be not only listening to the just claims made against the ecclesial institution, but also knowing how to accept and welcome them with humility and *parrhesia*. We cannot remain anchored in a scheme of self-preservation that continually frustrates the expectations of the faithful and ultimately obstructs the voice of the Spirit. The reason is clear:

The oligarchic church structures and the resulting ecclesiastical rigidity and authoritarianism are as distant from the gospel as they are from the legitimate demands for equality and participation that are surging in humanity today. The lack of a custom of allowing divergent opinions within the church and the lack of organic channels for communicating them reveal the defects of the church that weigh most heavily today on its internal relations, often aggravating the divisive nature of tensions and conflicts<sup>17</sup>.

We have to be completely honest in determining whether we have really understood the implications of *Lumen Gentium*'s teaching about the model the Church as the People of God. This model is the source of the hermeneutics for a reform in a synodal key.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, we have to wonder whether we realized that with Francis a new phase has been inaugurated in the reception of the Council, a phase inspired by the widespread recognition of the normative character of the category *People of God*.<sup>19</sup> A Synod on synodality sets in motion a process of deepening this new ecclesiological hermeneutics<sup>20</sup> that emerged at the beginning of this pontificate.

16 Yves Congar, *Por una Iglesia servidora y pobre*, 116-117.

17 Ronaldo Muñoz, *Nueva conciencia de la Iglesia en América Latina*, Sígueme, Salamanca 1974, 363.

18 Noceti expresses it similarly in asserting that "the central question in the rich vein opened up in the reception of Vatican II is this: what are the dynamics, institutions and, structures that allow for the full realization of the form of the *People* illustrated in chapter II of *Lumen Gentium*? Reformist thought and action must therefore be oriented along three vectors that will determine any real change in the form of ecclesial relations: modifying models of communication, rethinking power(s) and authority, and recognizing forgotten members, such as the laity and women." Serena Noceti, "Estructuras para una Iglesia en reforma," *Concilium* 377 (2018) 546-547.

19 Cf. Serena Noceti, "Popolo di Dio: un incompiuto riconoscimento di identità," *Concilium* 54 (2018) 397-412; Giovanni Mazzillo, "L'ecclissi della categoria popolo di Dio," *Rassegna di Teologia* 36 (1995) 553-587; Dario Vitali, *Popolo di Dio*, Cittadella, Assisi 2013; Rafael Luciani, "La centralidad del pueblo en la teología sociocultural del Papa Francisco," *Concilium* 376 (2018) 387-400.

20 Cf. Preparatory Document for the Synod 2021-23: *For a Synodal Church. Communion, Participation, and Mission*, 10,12,13.

### 1.3 A new reception of the ecclesiology of the People of God

As he began his pontificate, Francis spoke of "the Church as the people of God, pastors and people together. The Church is the totality of God's people"<sup>21</sup>. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he explained that "the Church, as the agent of evangelization, is more than an organic, hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God (...), transcending any institutional expression, however necessary" (EG 111). Accordingly, "to be the Church is to be the People of God" (EG 114, 115). As Bishop Joseph De Smedt explained in the conciliar debates, this teaching means that "when speaking about the Church, we must be careful not to fall into a certain *hierarchicalism, clericalism, bishopopatry, or papopatry*. What comes first is the People of God"<sup>22</sup>. De Smedt proposed breaking completely with the pyramidal model that privileged the parts before the whole because it conceived the hierarchy as a different subject, separate from the rest of the People of God<sup>23</sup>. Nor was the novelty to be found in repositioning the subjects in a new, inverted pyramid; it was not a question of changing places, putting the People of God above and the hierarchy below. That would simply change the order between them, but they would still be considered as separate ecclesial subjects.

The path towards novelty has been paved by the new logic of the relational and communicational dynamics operating among all the members of the ecclesial body. It is a logic that gives new meaning to ecclesial identities and to the ways they participate in the Church's mission. A new ecclesiological hermeneutics has emerged, one that seeks to replace the existing paradigm of three separate and distinct ecclesial subjects (Pope, bishops, and People of God) with a more evangelical sequence: first the People of God (all), then the bishops (some), and finally the bishop of Rome (one). The intention of the Council fathers was to integrate the bishops and the Pope into the totality of the People of God, not to separate them from the rest of the faithful. Laity, hierarchs, and pope are all *Christifideles*, characterized by an ecclesiality in a synodal key<sup>24</sup>.

The *mens* of the conciliar texts is inspired by this collaborative hermeneutic that incorporates and includes all ecclesial subjects within that *totality* of faithful. Their ongoing reciprocal interaction constitutes them as the Peo-

21 At [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130921\\_intervista-spadaro.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html)

22 Cf. *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, 32 volumes, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, Vatican City, 1970-99, 1/4, 143.

23 "You are familiar with the pyramid: pope, bishops, priests, each with a specific responsibility; they teach, they sanctify, and they govern with due authority. Then, at the base are the Christian people, more than anything passive, according to the place they seem to occupy in the Church." Cf. *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, 32 volumes, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, Vatican City, 1970-99, 1/4, 142.

24 A more complete development is found in Rafael Luciani, "Hacia una eclesialidad sinodal ¿Una nueva comprensión de la Iglesia Pueblo de Dios?" *Revista Horizontes* (Belo Horizonte) 59 (2021).

ple of God, which also encompasses the episcopal college and the successor of Peter. Insofar as the People of God embraces the totality of the faithful in their permanent relational and communicational dynamics, it is the only essential agent of the entire mission and activity of the Church.

Employing such a hermeneutic, Francis has significantly deepened this ecclesiology. The Synod on synodality will thus draw on the context that is emerging from a new understanding of the ecclesiological architecture proposed in *Lumen Gentium*.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, the Church as People of God is understood as the *totality of the faithful* (*LG 12*), whose members are defined according to the *logic of reciprocity of their respective identities and their essential co-responsibility in pursuit of the fulfillment of the mission*. This new understanding makes possible the reconfiguration of identities and relationships among the different ecclesial subjects: all subjectivities are conceived in an angle of circularity so that the Church becomes a collective organic subject: the *ecclesial we*.

We can argue that efforts are being made in the present ecclesial period to carry out the task proposed by Paul VI at the opening of the Council's second session, when he asked the ecclesial institution to give "a more complete definition of itself."<sup>26</sup> This request is concretized today in Francis's urging us to build a *Church in a synodal key* because synodality is the operative principle that sets in motion a process of ecclesiogenesis. This process entails an integral, organic transformation of the whole Church, that is, a reconfiguration of relational and communicational dynamics as these are expressed in the Church's structures and modes of operation. The process is therefore not only constitutive but constituent since it involves an *ecclesial reconfiguration* that is founded on a commitment to the *essential—not auxiliary—co-responsibility* proper to the model of Church as People of God,<sup>27</sup> according to which "pastors and the other faithful are bound to each other by a *mutual need*" (*LG 32*).

The path traced thus far allows us to delineate clearly an emerging hermeneutic based on a model of the Church as "People of God" (*LG 9*). According to this model, "the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are interrelated" (*LG 10*), and each is called "to holiness" (*LG 11*) and to "integral" living (*LG 12*). The ecclesial subjects are active insofar as they are the *faithful*, but they are so within the framework of their belonging to the People of God as a *whole*, in light of the relational and

25 Yves Congar, "La Iglesia como Pueblo de Dios," *Concilium* 1 (1965) 10.

26 Paul VI, *Opening Speech of the Second Session of the Second Vatican Council*, 29 September 1963, at [http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1963/documents/hf\\_p\\_vii\\_spe\\_19630929\\_vatican-council-ii.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1963/documents/hf_p_vii_spe_19630929_vatican-council-ii.html)

27 "If I were asked what is the 'seed of life' coming from the Council that is richest in pastoral consequences, I would answer without hesitation: the rediscovery of the People of God as a *whole*, as a *totality*, and consequently the resulting co-responsibility for each of the members." Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens, *La corresponsabilidad en la Iglesia de hoy*, Desclée de Brouwer, Bilbao 1969, 27.

communicational dynamics through which ecclesial subjects "mutually complete one another (AA 6).

Recognizing the centrality of chapter II of *Lumen Gentium* opens up still another dimension of the ecclesial reconfiguration that is the fruit of the Church as the "People of God incarnated in the peoples of the earth, each of which has its own culture" (EG 115). This means that each local Church must experience its own process of *ecclesiogenesis* that generates a unique way of being Church, a Christian lifestyle with local flavor and form. This may be the most complex task before us today because it means fully receiving *Ad Gentes*, which urges us to achieve in each local Church

a more profound adaptation in the whole area of Christian life. By this manner of acting, (...) Christian life will be accommodated to the genius and the dispositions of each culture. Particular traditions, together with the peculiar patrimony of each family of nations, illuminated by the light of the Gospel, can then be taken up into Catholic unity (AG 22).

The recovery of the ecclesiology of the People of God thus draws us closer to the ecclesial practice of the first millennium, in which "local Churches are communitarian subjects that make the one People of God real in a novel way in different cultural contexts, sharing their gifts in a reciprocal exchange in order to promote bonds of close communion" (ITC, *Syn* 61). In other words, the People of God exists only in and through each local Church with its own cultural characteristics (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 62). It was this way of proceeding that characterized the diocesan and provincial synods from the third century onwards when they were dealing with issues of discipline, liturgy, and doctrine (ITC, *Syn* 28). "The variety of local Churches—with their own ecclesiastical disciplines, liturgical rites, theological heritage, spiritual gifts and canonical norms—is splendid evidence of the Catholicity of the undivided Church" (ITC, *Syn* 61). Consequently, defining the People of God as a totality of the faithful does not mean that it can exist in a way that is abstract or generic, much less universalizable; rather, the People of God exists under the sociocultural form of each local Church. This reception of the Council is what Cardinal Grech describes when speaking of the ecclesiology inspiring the new synodal process:

Where is the People of God? The classical answer was expressed in a formula we all know: if the Church is *toto orbe diffusa*, then the People of God manifests this characteristic. The council states that 'all the faithful, scattered though they be throughout the world, are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit, so that he who dwells in Rome knows that the people of India are his members' (LG 13). But this people is not some inarticulate, shapeless mass. This people exists 'in and through the particular Churches.' The clearest term of reference is found in *Christus Dominus*, which states that 'A diocese is a portion of the people of God which is entrusted to a bishop to be shepherded by him with the cooperation of the

presbytery. Thus by adhering to its pastor and gathered together by him through the Gospel and the Eucharist in the Holy Spirit, it constitutes a particular church in which the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative' (CD 11). There is no People of God other than the one that lives in each *portio Populi Dei* (...). The principle that grounds and regulates this understanding of the People of God was established by the Council: this People exists in and through the particular Churches, because the Church exists "in and through the particular Churches" (LG 23)!!! There is no Church outside of this principle<sup>28</sup>.

The ecclesiological novelty of a Synod on synodality lies in conceiving the Church as a *Church of Churches* and implementing the first level of synodality. That is why it is important to understand that synodality is the most appropriate way for the Church to generate the processes of identity and theological-cultural reconfiguration that the times and cultures require. This can be done under the model of the Church as a *Church of Churches* presided over by the Bishop of the *Church of Rome* and in communion with all the Churches.

## 2. A Synod reconfigured in the light of the ecclesiology of the local Churches

### 2.1 A problematic and unfinished reception

The Second Vatican Council recovered the sense of the local Church and its relation with the catholicity of the whole Church, but the reception of this ecclesiology has been problematic and incomplete. *Lumen Gentium* recognizes that "it is in and from the particular churches that the one and only Catholic Church comes into being" (LG 23).<sup>29</sup> To speak of catholicity is to refer to the *fullness* that takes place in the local Churches and in the communion among them, presided over by the Church of Rome and its bishop, the Pope. This is the best way to understand the famous *subsistit in* in LG 8: the Church of Christ—not the Universal Church—subsists in the Roman Catholic Church.

28 *La consultazione del Popolo di Dio nelle Chiese particolari.* Intervento del Card. Mario Grech, Segretario Generale del Sinodo dei Vescovi, all'incontro del Gruppo Ibero-americano sulla sinodalità in collaborazione con la Conferenza Episcopale Venezuelana (CEV), il Consiglio Episcopale Latinoamericano (CELAM) e la Confederazione Latinoamericana dei religiosi (CLAR) <https://prensacelam.org/2021/09/07/redescubrir-el-pueblo-de-dios-es-una-metá-del-sinodo-asegura-cardenal-mario-grech/>

29 "The universal Church that is realized *in* the local churches is the same church that is constituted *from* the local churches. The formula '*in quibus et ex quibus*' therefore captures the mystery of the Church and its institutional essence according to the logic of the reciprocal immanence of the local-particular dimension in the universal-Catholic dimension and vice versa." Salvador Pié-Ninot, "*Ecclesia in et Ecclesiis* (LG 23): la catolicidad de la *Communio Ecclesiarum*," *RCat* 22/1 (1997) 78.

Gérard Philips, the principal redactor of *Lumen Gentium*, recognized the centrality of this ecclesiology<sup>30</sup> and the many theological and ecclesial repercussions of this important principle, that the local Church, while it is not the whole Church, is a complete Church.<sup>31</sup> Legrand recognizes this as "what is most new in Vatican II. Besides affirming that the catholicity of the entire Church is nourished by the wealth of the various local churches, Vatican II affirmed the catholicity of the diocesan Church itself."<sup>32</sup> The great challenge still pending for the post-Council Church is truly becoming a *world Church*, which means, according to Rahner, that *cultural differences will shape*<sup>33</sup> the catholicity of the local Churches. That is why the Universal Church *really exists* only in concrete, incarnate communities that are visible in their own socio-cultural forms. Or as Paul VI said, "the Church spread throughout the world would become an abstraction if it did not take on body and life precisely through the particular Churches" (*EN* 62) with all their: theological, liturgical, spiritual, pastoral, and canonical particularities (*LG* 23, *UR* 4, *AG* 19).

However, we must recognize that the reception of this conciliar ecclesiology has not been completely achieved, and this incomplete reception makes it difficult to appreciate the novelty of a Synod on synodality. The praxis and the synodal consciousness of the diocesan Churches has been gradually lost. Specifically, from the 1980s on, centralism prevailed in matters of governance and development of doctrine. Changes in ecclesiological orientation were promoted through new documents of the magisterium, such as the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* and the motu proprio *Apostolos Suos*, among others. The former document accorded greater power to the primacy, and the curia began to produce its own theology, relativizing the authority of the Episcopal Conferences. The second document limited the teaching function of the bishops to official interpretation of the universal magisterium as given by the Holy See (*AS* 21). Still another document, the *Instructio de Synodis diocesani agendis*, dealt a severe blow to the ecclesiology of the local Churches when it prohibited diocesan synods from pronouncing on any subject "that does not agree with the perpetual doctrine of the Church or the papal magisterium" (IV, 4).

This model of the Church as a *hierarchical communion* reconfigures the way we relate to one another in the Church. The interactions of laity, priests,

30 Cf. Gérard Philips. *La Iglesia y su misterio en el Concilio Vaticano II. Historia y comentario de la Constitución "Lumen Gentium"*, Herder, Barcelona 1968, Volume I, 383.

31 J. J. Von Allmen, "L'Église locale parmi les autres Églises locales," *Irénikon* 43 (1970) 512.

32 Hervé Legrand, "Iglesia(s) local(es), Iglesias regionales o particulares, Iglesia católica," in J. C. Scannone et al., *Iglesia universal. Iglesias particulares*, Argentina 2000, 133.

33 "Unless the Church sees and recognizes these essential differences of other cultures, within which it must become a *world Church*, and draws from that recognition the necessary consequences with Pauline boldness, it will remain in the end a Western Church, thus betraying the meaning of Vatican II." Karl Rahner, "Theologische Grundinterpretation des II. Vatikanischen Konzils," *Schriften zur Theologie*. Band 14, Benzinger Verlag, Einsiedeln 1980, 298.

and religious with the episcopate are defined in terms of vertical, auxiliary relationships. Theology loses its autonomy and is subordinated to the magisterium; formation in faith is limited to the catechism. Thus is consolidated the curia's project of homogenizing the teaching and transmission of the faith.

With the publication of *Communionis notio*<sup>34</sup> in 1992, the universal Church was affirmed to be a pre-existing ontological reality, a teaching far removed from the conciliar spirit and text. By universalizing the identity of ecclesial life, the document reinforced institutional homogenization in accord with the Roman theological-cultural pattern. Responding to this position of Joseph Ratzinger, Walter Kasper warned that the ecclesiology of communion among local Churches was being lost, the centralism of the Roman curia was being reinforced, and the value of the Episcopal Conferences as intermediate instances was being eroded. Although it could be said that the aim of the document was to safeguard the element of the *communio ecclesiae*, it ended up privileging the *communio hierarchica* and relativizing the *communio ecclesiatarum*, along with all the novelty that the ecclesiology of Vatican II proposed with respect to Vatican I.

To resolve this dilemma, authors such as Salvador Pié-Ninot use the term *catholicity* to refer to "what is whole or entire rather than to the totality"<sup>35</sup>, which would describe what is universal. As Rahner says, "the entire Church becomes tangible in the local Church"<sup>36</sup>. The *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Synod for the Amazon explained this clearly:

To be Church is to be the People of God, incarnated in the peoples of the earth and in their cultures. The universality or catholicity of the Church is thus enriched with the beauty of this multifaceted face of the different manifestations of the particular Churches and their cultures (*IL* 12).

And all of which make up the *communio ecclesiatarum*. Accordingly, "the concept of the particular Church is better adapted to the various regional realizations of the Church that express its cultural pluralism"<sup>37</sup>.

34 Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Communionis Notio. Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Certain Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion," 28 May 1992, no. 9; Walter Kasper. "Das Verhältnis von Universalkirche und Ortskirche. Freundschaftliche Auseinandersetzung mit der Kritik von Joseph Kardinal Ratzinger" *Stimmen der Zeit* 218 (2000), 795-804; Joseph Ratzinger" L'Ecclesiologia della Costituzione *Lumen Gentium*," Vatican II *Recezione e alla luce attualità of the Giubileo*. Rino Fisichella (ed.), San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2000, 66-81.

35 Salvador Pié-Ninot, "Ecclesia in et Ecclesiis (LG 23): la catolicidad de la *Communio Ecclesiarum*," *RCat* 22/1 (1997) 87.

36 Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Episcopado y primado*, Herder, Barcelona 2005, 28 (Orig. 1961).

37 We can therefore affirm that "the diocese is a portion of the People of God, fully endowed on the theological plane with all its goods (...). In it and from it (that is, the diocesan Churches) exists the one and only Catholic Church (LG 23). For this reason, along with many other theologians, it seems necessary to preserve in theology the traditional expression of the *diocesan, or even the local, Church*." Hervé Legrand, "L'articolazione tra le Chiese locali, Chiese regionali e Chiesa universale,"

An ecclesiology in a synodal key begins with the recognition that *catholicity* comes about through the model of a *Church of Churches* because "the synodal dimension of the Church implies communion in the living faith of the various *local Churches with each other and with the Church of Rome*" (ITC, *Syn* 52). It is from this ecclesiological perspective that the *International Theological Commission* recognizes that "the first level of exercise of synodality takes place in the particular Church" because "the historical, linguistic, and cultural links that shape interpersonal communications and symbolic expressions in the Church give it its peculiar character and favor the exercise of a *synodal style* in its concrete life"<sup>38</sup>. Thus, all the local Churches are called "to enjoy their own discipline, their own liturgical usage, and their own theological and spiritual heritage" (LG 23).

For all these reasons, synodality constitutes the most suitable way to generate the identity processes and the theological-cultural reconfiguration of the Church according to the times and the cultures, all this being done according the model of the Church as a *Church of Churches* presided over by the Bishop of the *Church of Rome* and in communion with all of the Churches<sup>39</sup>. This is not just a functional aspect of the Church's being; rather, it is the very way in which the Church becomes Church in each place, reconfigured in each age according to the signs of the times. It is not some new form of ecclesial activity, as Brighenti explains clearly:

In the ecclesial model of the New Testament, the Churches being born do not exist as 'Churches of,' that is, as specific instances of a universal Church that supposedly precedes them. Rather they are 'Churches in' the same unique Church, which is whole (entire) in each local Church. The local Church is configured not as a branch or a copy of a supposed *mother Church*, but as a *different Church*, universal in its particularities, with its own culturally unique features<sup>40</sup>.

Jerusalem, Corinth, Antioch, Macedonia were all born as local Catholic Churches in a socio-cultural place that gave them identity and physiognomy. In other words, the local Church becomes *real* in every cultural form in which it exists.

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*Ad gentes: teologia e antropologia della missione* 3/1 (1999) 19.

38 International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2018, 77. Henceforth cited as ITC, *Syn*. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_sp.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_sp.html)

39 Cf. Rafael Luciani, Serena Noceti, "Colegialidad, sinodalidad y eclesialidad. Un camino para profundizar en la recepción del Vaticano II," *New Life* 3220 (2021) 24-30.

40 Agenor Brighenti, "Sinodalidad eclesial y colegialidad episcopal. El referente del estatuto teológico de las conferencias episcopales," in Rafael Luciani, María del Pilar Silveira (eds.), *La sinodalidad en la vida de la Iglesia. Reflexiones para contribuir a la reforma eclesial*, San Pablo, Madrid 2020, 100.

### 3. Communicational dynamics that configure the Church as the People of God

#### 3.1 Listening as a communicational dynamic of ecclesial life

Inspired by the search for new ways of proceeding in the light of this ecclesiology, Francis describes the new ecclesial model as follows:

A Synodal Church is a Church of listening (...). It is a reciprocal listening in which each one has something to learn (...). It is listening to God, and listening with God to the cry of the people. It is listening to the people, and hearing in the people the will of God to which we are called<sup>41</sup>.

The exercise of listening is indispensable in a synodal ecclesiology because its essential element is recognition of the identity of ecclesial subjects—*laity, priests, religious, bishops, Pope*—all bound together in horizontal relationships founded on the radicality of their baptismal dignity and participation in the common priesthood of all the faithful (LG 10). The Church as a whole is characterized by listening processes in which each ecclesial subject contributes something that completes the identity and mission of the others (AA 6) and does so from what is proper to each subject (LG 31). Such a model means overcoming unequal relations of superiority and subordination, and embracing the logic of “reciprocal need” (LG 32). As Routhier explains:

Not only does synodality offer a model of exchange and consultation, but it above all allows everyone to participate in a common work, according to their rank. Thus this concept ensures an orderly and organic participation that takes into account the diversity of functions. Synodality has the merit of allowing everyone to participate in the diversity and originality of gifts and services. More specifically, synodality expresses the state of each person, a state resulting from the sacraments: baptism-confirmation and orders<sup>42</sup>.

It is in this spirit that the International Theological Commission, because we can say that being *listened to* is everyone's right, but *taking counsel* based on listening is also a duty of those who exercise authority.

(...) a synodal Church is a Church of participation and co-responsibility. In exercising synodality she is called to give expression to the participation of all, according to each one's calling, with the authority conferred by Christ on the College of Bishops headed by the Pope. Participation is based on

41 Francis, *Speech at the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-synod.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-synod.html)

42 Gilles Routhier, “Évangile et modèle de sociabilité,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 51/1 (1995) 69.

the fact that all the faithful are qualified and are called to serve each other through the gifts they have all received from the Holy Spirit<sup>43</sup>.

But listening has still another dimension. Listening produces a process of reconfiguration of the theological-cultural models of the ecclesial organization. Francis explains that a people must be listened to in a particular time and place in order to "know what the Spirit is saying to the Churches" (Rev 2,7) and to find ways of proceeding suitable to each epoch. The Synod for the Amazon echoed this when it said that the local Church "reconfigures its own identity by listening to and dialoguing with the persons, the realities, and the histories of its territory" (QA 66). And as the Council maintains, it does so by discerning "the ways in which the customs, the meaning of life, and the social order can be reconciled with the customs manifested by divine revelation" (AG 22). Inspired by this vision, a Synod on synodality, like the current one, can be seen as the beginning of a process that collaborates with "a more profound adaptation in the whole area of Christian life" (AG 22).

Adhering to this ecclesiology of the local Churches, and anxious to discern the sentiment of the entire Universal Church, the current Synod ceases to be an event and becomes a process: by beginning with a diocesan phase, it could represent the emergence of the synodalization of the whole Church in light of the recovered ecclesiology of the local Churches. Thus, the process starts out from the first level in the exercise of synodality, as Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops has stated:

Considering that the particular Churches, in which and from which the one and only Catholic Church exists, contribute effectively to the good of the whole mystical body, which is also the body of the Churches (LG 23), the full synodal process will truly exist only if the particular Churches are involved in it<sup>44</sup>.

The repercussions of this option are significant. One of them involves renewal of the identity and mission of the ministry of the hierarchs "by seeing their reason for being and their exercise of authority in function of the People of God and by understanding their identity as part of the faithful within an ecclesial we. This makes the service of the hierarchical ministry something that is transitory, temporal, and historical rather than ontological; it is not eschatological or self-referential<sup>45</sup>. We recall the words of Bishop De Smedt,

43 International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018) 67, at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.htm).

44 Letter of Presentation of the Synodal Itinerary Approved by Pope Francis at the Audience Granted to Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, on 24 April 2021. <http://secretariat.synod.va/content/synod/it/attualita/documento-sul-processo-sinodale.html>

45 Rafael Luciani and Serena Noceti, "Colegialidad, sinodalidad y eclesialidad. Un camino para profundizar en la recepción del Vaticano II," *New Life* 3220 (2021) 26.

one of the most important voices of the Council: "The teaching body [the bishops] does not rest exclusively on the Holy Spirit's action on the bishops; it [must] also heed the action of the same Spirit on the people of God. Therefore, the teaching body not only speaks to the People of God; it also *listens to this People in whom Christ continues his teaching*"<sup>46</sup>.

This Synod's new ecclesial way of proceeding, starting from a first diocesan phase, implies that the bishops must listen not only to but also *in* the people of God, that is, as an integral part of the people so that pastoral decisions are discerned and elaborated together with the people. According to *Lumen Gentium* 12, cited in *Episcopalis Communio* 5, it is the *totality of the faithful*, "from the bishops to the last of the lay faithful, [who] show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals." What is at stake is not the opinion of each bishop, but the sentiment of the whole Church, which is properly called the *sensus ecclesiae totius populi*. For this reason, each particular Church must proceed "by making use of the means of participation that the law provides, without excluding other modalities it may deem appropriate" (EC, canonical disposition 6). Those institutional mediations should therefore be favored that not only allow the listening to be received and discerned but ensure that the results are binding on the processes of change needed for renewal of the ecclesiastical institution.

For this reason, the mere act of listening does not of itself characterize the ecclesial processes. The listening must also happen within a representative framework by which all the faithful participate in processes of joint discernment that build ecclesial decisions and thus express the *consensus of all the faithful*. This is how the Synod's *Preparatory Document* expresses it: "In the synodal style, decisions are made by discernment on the basis of a consensus born of common obedience to the Spirit"<sup>47</sup>. As Cardinal Grech has explained, this vision typifies the rediscovery of the *People of God* as an active subject of the whole life and mission of the Church in light of a deepened understanding of what the Council proposed.

The rediscovery of the *People of God* as an active subject in the life and mission of the Church, as proposed by Vatican II, is accompanied by the same Council's rediscovery of the pneumatological dimension of the Church. Listening to the *People of God* is truly to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Church. The option to 'consult the *People of God*' depends on this rediscovery: if we were not certain that the Spirit speaks to the Church, and does so by virtue of the anointing given at baptism, then the consultation would be reduced to a survey, with all the risks of manipulation of public opinion that are typical of political systems based on repre-

46 Emile-Joseph De Smedt, *The Priesthood of the Faithful*, Paulist Press, NY 1962, 89-90.

47 Preparatory Document for the Synod 2021-23: *For a Synodal Church. Communion, Participation, and Mission*, 30.

sentation. On the Spirit depends the '*conspiratio*', that is, the accord in the faith of the entire People of God that we wanted to highlight in the *Preparatory Document*. This is the consensus that nourishes and sustains not only the *believing together*, according to the meaning always given it by the Church, but also the *walking together*<sup>48</sup>.

### 3.2 Listening in order to discern together and make shared decisions

In the light of all the above we can argue that, if the way of proceeding of a synodal Church "has its point of departure and also its point of arrival in the People of God" (*Episcopalis Communio* 7), and if "that synodality is an essential dimension of the Church, such that the Church, through synodality, reveals and configures herself as the pilgrim People of God" (ITC, Syn 42), then listening cannot be considered as an end in itself or as an improved way of sounding opinions; it is rather a communicational dynamic that sets in motion the process of ecclesial reconfiguration. For this reason, listening must be inserted into the larger framework of ecclesial life, where it finds its reason for being. In other words, when "the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called together to pray, *listen, analyze, dialogue, and consult* so that pastoral decisions are made that correspond as closely as possible to God's will" (ITC, Syn 68). This complex of relational and communicational dynamics engenders an environment that is conducive to *taking counsel* and *building consensus* that later get translated into *decisions*.

When undertaking a listening process, it is important to take into account all these actions—"pray, listen, analyze, dialogue, and consult"—because the aim of this process is not simply to meet together and get to know one another better. The objective is to work together "*so that pastoral decisions are made*." This is a key aspect that defines the meaning and the goal of the synodal process. The Synod on synodality is setting in motion a way of proceeding that facilitates communal discernment of a more complete definition of the Church.

A key task of the Synod is to discern the Church's decision-making models. It may be possible to articulate a model in which the decision-making process is binding on the pastors who re *taking decision* because the pastors themselves have participated in the processes of listening, discerning, consulting, and building consensus. Any model of decision making should take

48 *La consultazione del Popolo di Dio nelle Chiese particolari*. Intervento del Card. Mario Grech, Segretario Generale del Sinodo dei Vescovi, all'incontro del Gruppo Ibero-americano sulla sinodalità in collaborazione con la Conferenza Episcopale Venezuelana (CEV), il Consiglio Episcopale Latinoamericano (CELAM) e la Confederazione Latinoamericana dei religiosi (CLAR) <https://prensacelam.org/2021/09/07/redescubrir-el-pueblo-de-dios-es-una-meta-del-sinodo-asegura-cardenal-mario-grech/>

into account that “the synodal dimension of the Church involves enacting and directing discernment processes which bear witness to the dynamism of communion that inspires all ecclesial decisions” (ITC Syn 76). This will mean delving into the theology of the source and the exercise of Church’s potestas and its relationship with governance<sup>49</sup>. In this regard, the most important challenges for the hierarchy at this time are the creation of *mediations* and *procedures* for involving all the faithful and the establishment of *modalities of participation and shared decision making*. Severino Dianich states it well:

The current normativity, which bestows on all the faithful the task of evangelization (...) and calls them to active participation in the Eucharistic liturgy (...), does not confer on the lay faithful any specific role capable of determining the life of the community (...). The faithful [laity] do not have any instance in which they can be decide collegially by expressing their own deliberative vote<sup>50</sup>.

At the Aparecida Conference in 2007, this sentiment existed among the Latin American bishops, who proposed that “the laity participate in the *discernment, the decision making, the planning and the execution*” (Aparecida 371) of all ecclesial life. This desire has not yet been fully realized. To achieve this ideal, it will be necessary to develop new ecclesial ways of proceeding and create new power structures of shared decision making in the Church<sup>51</sup>.

One solution might be the development of a *differentiated voting system* that would allow all the faithful to work toward decisions at different levels, with the bishops being involved throughout the process and not simply exercising a deliberative vote at the end of the event. This system was used in the Venezuelan Plenary Council, and it achieved an excellent representative linking of all the participants. The process was based on the logic of consensus and did not undermine the authority of the hierarchical ministry; rather, this ministry was involved in the elaboration process so that the final decision simply assumed or ratified what had already been prepared and approved after communal discernment and consensus building among all<sup>52</sup>.

In this way, rather than asking ourselves who can vote on an already elaborated decision—which would pose the problem from the perspective of individual power, whether that of orders or of jurisdiction—we should ask

49 Although this is not the subject of our essay, it is necessary to mention one of the best contributions on the exercise of power in the Church and on the participation of the laity in instances of governance: Laurent Villemin, *Pouvoir d’ordre et pouvoir de juridiction. Histoire théologique de leur distinction*, Cerf, Paris 2003.

50 Severino Dianich, *Riforma della Chiesa e ordinamento canonico*, EDB, Bologna 2018, 69-70.

51 Cf. Rafael Luciani, “Lo que afecta a todos debe ser tratado y aprobado por todos. Hacia estructuras de participación y poder de decisión compartido,” *CLAR Magazine LVIII / 1* (2020) 59-66.

52 Cf. Raúl Biord Castillo, “El Concilio Plenario 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 eclesial*, San Pablo, Madrid 2020, 293-328.

ourselves how a decision us arrived at. We should ask who should participate in the process, and how to ensure that the entire process involves the person who must make or ratify the final decision. It is important that all the faithful be included in a dynamic of *communal discernment* that aims to *build the ecclesial consensus* through which *decisions are made*. This is a new communicational dynamic in the Church because it assumes a new *culture of consensus*. As Borras states:

Discernment is not only done in the Church; it makes the Church, to the extent that it happens within the whole diversity of vocations, charisms, and ministries whereby the baptized hear the Word of God, examine the signs of the times, and participate in history under the action of the Holy Spirit. Discernment is an ecclesial process that requires the participation of all, each in their own way according to their level of interest and involvement<sup>53</sup>.

In effect, discernment in its *communal mode* is the way in which *shared decisions can be made*.

The experience of base ecclesial communities has shown that communal discernment from below<sup>54</sup> is an effective way to link the processes of *decision making* and *decision taking* because, while synodality occurs in the walking, the listening, and the meeting together, it is completed only by the discerning of decisions together. Synodality "requires institutional translation; that is, it needs places, instances, and agencies in which it can be practiced."<sup>55</sup> Synodality expresses "the circularity between the ministry of the pastors, the participation and co-responsibility of the laity, and the impulses coming from the charismatic gifts according to the dynamic circularity among 'one,' 'some,' and 'all'" (ITC Syn 106).

Saint Cyprian promoted "collaborative councils of bishops, priests, deacons, confessors, and also a substantial number of laity (...), because no decree can be established that is not ratified by the consent of the plurality."<sup>56</sup> In effect, if all the faithful participate in the elaboration of decisions, then the decision making will express the community's contribution in accord with the community's essential pastoral co-responsibility, and the bishop will welcome and ratify that contribution.

53 Alphonse Borras, "Votum tantum consultivum. Les limites ecclesiologiques d'une formule canonique," *Didaskalia* 45 (2015) 161.

54 John P. Beal provides a good analysis in "Consultation in Church Governance: Taking Care of Business by Taking after Business," *Canon Law Society of America. Proceedings* 68 (2006) 25-54.

55 Alphonse Borras, "Votum tantum consultivum. Les limites ecclesiologiques d'une formule canonique," *Didaskalia* 45 (2015) 161.

56 "Sic collatione consiliorum cum episcopis, presbyteris, diaconis, confessoribus pariter ac stantibus laicis facta, lapsorum tractare rationem (...), quoniam nec firmum decretum potest esse quod non plurimorum videbitur habuisse consensum". Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologiae Latina*, Tomus 4 (S. Cypriani), 312.

A useful model can be that of *Medellín*, which sought convergences and proposed an ecclesiology of small communities<sup>57</sup>. Noceti proposes "developing a management of complex processes of community discernment that involve parishes, priests, the faithful, and theologians"<sup>58</sup>. In this way "the consultative bodies elaborate the decision, but the final responsibility for it falls on the pastoral authority that assumes it"<sup>59</sup>, thus excluding authorities that have not participated in the processes.<sup>60</sup> In short, as Dianich states, "the consensus is prior to the papal definition (...), and no valid and authentic form of authority can be conceived that is outside the ecclesial consensus"<sup>61</sup>.

If we fail to create an ecclesial culture of communal discernment and consensus, then we will be left once again with an ecclesial model in which there is "insufficient consideration of the *sensus fidelium*, concentration of power, isolated exercise of authority, a centralized and discretionary style of government, and opacity of regulatory procedures"<sup>62</sup>. As the Synod's Preparatory Document states,

the ability to imagine a different future for the Church and for institutions that seek to fulfill the mission we have received depends largely on the decision to begin practicing processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment in which each and every person can participate and contribute<sup>63</sup>.

Hence the question posed by the same document: "How do we integrate the consultative phase with the deliberative phase, and the process of decision making with the moment of decision taking"<sup>64</sup>?

The reconfiguration of the current institutional model faces great challenges that require new styles and procedures, structures that allow for the

57 Cf. Rafael Luciani, "Medellín como acontecimiento sinodal. Una eclesialidad colegiada fecundada y completada," *Revista Horizontes* 50 (2018) 482-516.

58 Serena Noceti, "Elaborare decisioni nella chiesa. Una riflessione ecclesiologica," in Riccardo Battocchio and Livio Tonello (eds.), *Sinodalità. Dimensione della Chiesa, pratiche nella chiesa*, EMP, Padova 2020, 253.

59 Alphonse Borras, "Sinodalità ecclesiale, processi partecipati e modalità decisionali," in Carlos María Galli and Antonio Spadaro (eds.), *La riforma e le riforme nella Chiesa*, Queriniana, Brescia 2016, 231-232.

60 "The problem is compounded when the editorial board doing the filtering is not composed of members of the synod itself, but of conservative advisors appointed by the Vatican." Bradford Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church. Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments*, Continuum, New York 2006, 177.

61 Severino Dianich, *Diritto e teologia. Ecclesiologia e canonistica per una riforma della Chiesa*, EDB, Bologna 2015, 165.

62 Alphonse Borras, "Sinodalità ecclesiale, processi partecipati e modalità decisionali," Carlos María Galli - Antonio Spadaro (eds.), *La riforma e le riforme nella Chiesa*, Queriniana, Brescia 2016, 208.

63 Preparatory Document for the Synod 2021-23: *For a Synodal Church. Communion, Participation, and Mission*, 9.

64 Preparatory Document for the Synod 2021-23: *For a Synodal Church. Communion, Participation, and Mission*, 30.

involvement and representation of all the faithful in the diverse levels and processes of ecclesial life.

A synodal ecclesiality must integrate all the faithful, from the lowest level possible, so that the process of elaborating decisions becomes binding on the whole People of God to such an extent that the subsequent process, corresponding to those who take decisions (the one/the some), will ratify what has been prepared by all, for this is the fruit of an interaction, from below and from within, that includes the totality of the faithful<sup>65</sup>.

### Open conclusion

#### *Expand the exercise of collegiality or synodalize the Church?*

In the vision of Francis, synodality appears as the way to combine two great subjects. On the one hand, there is a collective subject that becomes concrete in "the exercise of the *sensus fidei* of the *universitas fidelium* (all)," which brings together all those who are heard prior to the holding of a Synod. On the other hand, there are "the ministry of leadership of the college of Bishops, each one with his presbyterium (some)" and "the ministry of unity of the Bishop of Rome (one)"<sup>66</sup>. This schema seeks to achieve a better articulation between the People of God (all) and the hierarchy (collegiality) by taking into account three elements: "the communitarian aspect which includes the whole People of God, the collegial dimension that is part of the exercise of episcopal ministry, and the primatial ministry of the Bishop of Rome"<sup>67</sup>. We can speak of synodal collegiality in terms of expanding the exercise of listening and discerning, but it still remains an episcopal model: it concerns only "bishops," and it has only a "consultative" character with respect to the primacy. The question remains whether the Synod will really allow the exercise of collegiality as such, since the bishops advise the Pope, but the Pope can act without regard to the college. This problem stems from the explanatory note that Paul VI added to *Lumen Gentium*, stating that

As Supreme Pastor of the Church, the Supreme Pontiff can always exercise his power at will, as his very office demands. Though the College is always in existence, it is not thereby permanently engaged in strictly collegial activity. (...) Rather, it acts as a college in the strict sense only from time to time and only with the consent of its head" (*LG*, explanatory note, 4).

<sup>65</sup> Rafael Luciani and Serena Noceti, "Colegialidad, sinodalidad y eclesialidad. Un camino para profundizar en la recepción del Vaticano II," *Vida Nueva* 3220 (2021) 28.

<sup>66</sup> ITC, Syn 64.

<sup>67</sup> ITC, Syn 64.

*Episcopalis Communio* tries to resolve this quandary by expanding the exercise of collegiality through consulting with and listening to the People of God. As a consequence, a still unresolved juxtaposition was created (*LG* 22) between the notions of People of God and hierarchy. According to Vitali, though, “nothing prevents the Synod from going beyond its consultative status and being given the capacity to exercise the (effective) collegiality that should belong to it by nature and that would grant it the ability to act as its own subject in the synodal process”<sup>68</sup>.

But if synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church as the People of God (*ITC*, *Syn* 42), it is more than a method and more than a Synod. Synodality invites us to recognize that the binding character of the *sensus fidei* with the *consensus omnium fidelium* traverses the entire institution. It is not the People of God that has to be integrated into the hierarchy by participating in episcopal structures such as synods or episcopal conferences; rather, it is the hierarchy that must take its place among the faithful within the People of God. The hierarchy must listen to the voice of all the faithful<sup>69</sup> because the bishop, as the one responsible for communion, has the duty to gather and express the *sensus ecclesiae totius populi* and not only the opinions of his peers. We must begin to speak of the synodalization of the whole Church and not limit synodality simply to extending the exercise of collegiality.

A more complete vision of synodality therefore assumes that the exercise of the *co-responsibility* of all the faithful is binding and *essential* for achieving a model of ecclesiastical institutionality that functions organically through the construction of consensus, in accord with the practice of Saint Cyprian and so many others in the first millennium. It is therefore essential to reflect on the actors that sustain the ecclesial structures. The type of people—as regards diversity, gender, experience, training, origin, culture—is decisive because it shapes the relational and communicational practices in which listening, discernment, and consensus building take place<sup>70</sup>. With respect to this challenge, Pope Francis stated in his video message of 10 October 2020<sup>71</sup> that women should participate in making decisions in the Church and not only in executing them.

The Council was clear in its recognition that “everything that has been said above concerning the People of God is intended for the laity, religious,

68 Dario Vitali, “Sinodalità della Chiesa e collegialità episcopale,” in *Sinodalità. Dimensione della Chiesa, pratiche nella Chiesa*, Edizioni Messaggero, Padova 2020, 312.

69 Émile-Joseph De Smedt, *The Priesthood of the Faithful*, Paulist Press, NY 1962, 89-90.

70 “Non dipende semplicemente e prima di tutto da un buon funzionamento dei vari organismi né da semplici criteri della partecipazione democratica, come il criterio della maggioranza, ma esige da parte dei suoi membri una coscienza ecclesiale, uno stile di comunicazione fraterna, che traduca la comunione e la comune convergenza su un progetto di Chiesa.” Antonio Lanfranchi, “Prassi spirituale del discernimento comunitaria,” in Riccardo Battocchio and Serena Noceti, *Chiesa e sinodalità, Glossa*, Milano 2007, 194.

71 Video of Pope Francis at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5v9i9IDz3w>

and clergy alike" (*LG* 30)<sup>72</sup>. A more robust reception of *LG* 30 would allow progress in synodalization processes based on the practice of communal discernment and the construction of a culture of ecclesial consensus. Such progress, however, requires that we take on the still pending task of fully recognizing and incorporating the identity and mission of lay persons as *true subjects* in the Church. They are true subjects by virtue of the radical nature of baptism, which grants not only duties but rights to everyone as *christifideles*, the faithful in Christ. Otherwise, the interactions between lay persons and ordained ministers will continue to respond to the institutional ecclesial model of an unequal society. This is perhaps the most important change in mentality that needs to be carried out today in order to generate relational and communicational dynamics that favor a synodal functioning of the structures. In this sense, we do well to follow the *mens* of the Council, which recognizes the participation of all equally in the common priesthood; this is the most appropriate hermeneutical framework for thinking about these dynamics from the perspective of the essential *co-responsibility* that arises from baptism.

This change in mentality is essential for moving forward because we are not talking about a relationship of collaboration between the laity and the hierarchical ministry, such as was proposed in the Extraordinary Synod of 1985.<sup>73</sup> Such a relationship assumes an auxiliary, functional co-responsibility, not a substantive co-responsibility based on baptismal radicalism. Nor are we talking simply about cooperation between laity and hierarchy, as established in canon 129 no. 2 of the current Code of Canon Law. These contributions have made it possible to advance in the recognition of the laity, but they have not fully achieved it. By making Christocentrism its foundational basis, the ordained ministry has devalued the value of baptism, emphasizing the ministerial priesthood as an *Alter Christus* whose identity requires no permanent and binding tie to the Christian community. Canonist Myriam Wijlens, a consultant for the Synod of Bishops, wonders whether we are asking ourselves the right question<sup>74</sup>: while Canon 129 represents an important step, we cannot let it limit the reception of the Council in working out the ways, the processes,

72 Cf. Gaudenzio Zamnon, "Riconoscimento reciproco di soggettività tra laici e ministri ordinati in ordine ad una forma sinodale di chiesa," in Riccardo Battocchio and Serena Noceti, *Chiesa e sinodalità*, Glossa, Milano 2007, 194.

73 Cf. *El Vaticano II, don de Dios. Los documentos del Sínodo Extraordinario de 1985*, PPC, Madrid 1986, especially section 6, "La Iglesia como comunión."

74 "The current law, in particular the issues expressed in canon 129, deals with questions concerning cooperation or participation. However, understanding lay and ordained ministry as being complementary to each other might lead to a new and fresh approach to understanding the cooperation between them. This presentation focused around the question: are we raising the right issues in relation to professional laity, clergy and complementarity? Must we reconsider or reformulate the issues?" Myriam Wijlens, "Ecclesial Lay Ministry, Clergy and Complementarity," CLSA Proceedings 64 (2002) 39-40.

and the instances by which the laity participate in the life and mission of the Church.

In summary, this new perspective is the fruit of a fresh understanding of the ecclesiology of the People of God that we have presented here. It is a perspective that fully recognizes the principle of the *essential co-responsibility* of all the faithful, the *christifideles*,<sup>75</sup> thus bringing about a process of effective *synodalization* of the Church in light of an ecclesial reconfiguration. Moreover, if the Synod of Bishops, as an episcopal institution in which only bishops can vote according to the canonical provision, has introduced certain exceptions that allow lay men and women to vote, then it follows that the right to vote is not founded on the power of orders, but on baptism. Perhaps this new practice, though not yet institutionalized, is a sign of the emergence of a new ecclesial consciousness that will open new paths for the synodalization of the whole Church.

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<sup>75</sup> This logic of identities is developed further in Rafael Luciani, "Hacia una eclesialidad sinodal. ¿Una nueva comprensión de la Iglesia Pueblo de Dios?" *Horizonte* 59 (2021).