

POPE FRANCIS

Walking Together

*The Way of Synodality*

ORBIS  BOOKS  
Maryknoll, New York 10545

## Introduction

*Sister Nathalie Becquart*

### **Synodality According to Pope Francis: A Call from God, an Open Path, a Moving Thought**

This book is a kind of compendium of Pope Francis's reflections on synodality. It contains all his main texts and statements on synodality since the beginning of his pontificate. These documents, of different styles, include letters or speeches addressed to all or, more specifically, to local churches (Germany, Chile . . .) or particular groups (bishops, theologians . . .) as well as excerpts from documents of the magisterium (encyclicals). It also includes speeches delivered during the various synods of bishops (Synod on the Family in 2014 and 2015, Synod on Youth in 2018, Synod on the Amazon in 2019, current Synod on Synodality) with excerpts of postsynodal exhortations (*Christus Vivit*, *Querida Amazonia*), homilies or words delivered during various meetings, general or private audiences, and interviews. All of this corpus allows us to delve into Pope Francis's rich thought on synodality, of which he has made a central plank of his pontificate, beginning with his election and his appearance on the balcony, with his way of relating immediately to the people there in St. Peter's Square. The choice to organize these texts in chronological order rather than by theme allows us to grasp how the harmonies of synodality unfold over time and circumstances through the events—particularly the Synods of Bishops—and the many meetings, audiences, and trips that dot the life of the Supreme Pontiff.

A careful reading of all these passages on synodality, which this book has the merit of bringing together, makes us perceive that Pope Francis's thought is a thought in motion that unfolds and

deepens over time through successive synodal experiences. In the image of synodality, which is a dynamic vision of the church as the People of God on a journey through history, the pope's thought is an open thought, anchored in reality and experience, a dynamic thought that is never closed because it is a thought of discernment, an embodied thought that takes reality into account. The four basic principles that underlie the approach to synodality, as stated by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, are (1) "Time is greater than space"; (2) "Unity prevails over conflict"; (3) "Realities are more important than ideas"; (4) "The whole is greater than the part."<sup>1</sup>

### The Pope of Synodality

The recurrence of the theme of synodality in the official speeches and writings of Pope Francis reflects the importance of this synodal dynamic for Pope Francis, who could be described as the pope of synodality, so much so that he highlights this constitutive dimension of the church by emphasizing its roots and implications for the concrete life of the church today. For him, synodality is first of all a call from God; it is the vocation of the church of the third millennium because it has been identified as the way to transmit the faith in today's world. This is how he makes it explicit in what can be considered one of the key texts of his pontificate, the Address for the 50th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Synod of Bishops of October 17, 2015: "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 of the third millennium." Synodality can thus be seen as an important key to his pontificate, which brings the church to a new stage in its reception of the Second Vatican Council. His conviction is that the church is fundamentally a people on the move, the People of God allowing themselves to be guided by the

---

<sup>1</sup>Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 217–37.

Holy Spirit, and so must pursue a path that leads to the “synodalization” of all ecclesial realities. In short, Pope Francis invites us to understand that it is not just a matter of *having a synod*, as we are currently experiencing it, but of *becoming a synod*. In the synodal church, which is a church of listening and dialogue, a relational and inclusive church of brothers and sisters in Christ, all the baptized are called to be protagonists, mission actors, missionary disciples to proclaim the Gospel in today’s world—that is, to propose a personal encounter with Christ and to build human fraternity.

### **The Challenge of Putting Synodality into Practice**

“Synodality is the dynamic dimension, the historical dimension of ecclesial communion founded on the Trinitarian communion, which by simultaneously appreciating the *sensus fidei* of the whole holy faithful people of God, apostolic collegiality, and unity with the Successor of Peter, must animate the conversion and reform of the Church at every level.”<sup>2</sup> As well expressed in this quote, synodality—the realization of the church in history as communion in mission—is a journey of conversion, both personal and communal. We are in the process of relearning synodality, so the thought that arises and shapes synodality cannot but be a thought in motion, a sign of a Christian identity understood as a dynamic identity. It is, in a sense, a pilgrim thought that never ceases to be challenged and reinterrogated, a learning thought that progresses through the experience of synodality.

Thus, in a sense, these texts constitute a small manual of synodality, or rather a practical guide to synodality in action. We are not dealing here with a well-organized theological treatise, but rather with a collection of “road maps” that help us orient ourselves along the paths of synodality, which are not all mapped out

---

<sup>2</sup>Pope Francis, *Video Message on the Occasion of the Plenary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America* (May 26, 2022).

in advance. Pope Francis's initial conviction, expressed in his first official speeches, is that "we must go down this road of synodality, growing in harmony with the service of primacy."<sup>3</sup> To do this "we must walk together: the people, the bishops and the Pope."<sup>4</sup> The church today is therefore relearning synodality, which is in fact an apprenticeship through experience. It is not enough to have the theoretical vision; the challenge is to put it into practice: "What the Lord is asking of us, in a sense, is already all contained in the word 'Synod.' Walking together—laity, pastors, Bishop of Rome—is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice."<sup>5</sup> As can be seen from the texts and speeches related to this institution, the Synods of Bishops under this pontificate have become true schools of synodality, concrete experiences of learning synodality through experience. Francis makes it the heart of his teaching on synodality by insisting on the spiritual attitudes necessary to live synodality: faith and trust in God, humility in listening and the courage to speak, prayer, dialogue and sharing, trust in others, and inner freedom.

### **The Key Elements Underlying Pope Francis's Synodal Vision**

Through this path of synodality that Pope Francis offers us here, we can see the key elements that form the basis of his vision of the synodal church, received as a fruit of Vatican II and at the same time deeply rooted in the early church.

First, the image of the church as the people of God on a journey. Synodality is a "walking together" that invites us to see and

---

<sup>3</sup>Pope Francis, *Homily at the Holy Mass and Imposition of the Pallium to the New Metropolitan* (June 29, 2013).

<sup>4</sup>Pope Francis, *Interview with Father Antonio Spadaro, S.J.*, from *L'Osservatore Romano*, daily ed., Year CLIII, 216, Sat. 21/09/2013. See also "A Big Heart Open to God, an Interview with Pope Francis," *America*, September 30, 2013.

<sup>5</sup>Pope Francis, *Address for the 50th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Synod of Bishops* (October 17, 2015).

experience the church as a people of missionary pilgrims. Through synodality, the church “manifests and configures itself as the People of God on a journey and an assembly summoned by the risen Lord.”<sup>6</sup> The current pontificate inaugurates a new reception of the Second Vatican Council by giving a central place to Chapter II of *Evangelii Gaudium*. Francis recalls that “to be Church is to be the People of God” (EG, 114). This is an opportunity to deepen what it means to be church. The notion of the People of God has led to understanding the church as a totality (EG, 17) living in “pluriform harmony” (EG, 220). All its members, or *christifideles*, women and men, are empowered by the Spirit to be subjects of right and action. One of the great fruits of this way of being church as the People of God is that it emphasizes the participation and coresponsibility of all equally; all the faithful are coresponsible in a differentiated way according to their gifts, ministries, and charisms.

The second key element is the theology of baptism as the foundation of missionary coresponsibility. Through baptism, all are priests, prophets, and kings. Synodality is a way to rediscover and put into practice the primacy of the baptismal vocation as a call to holiness and the common priesthood as a call to coresponsibility. The challenge is to promote dialogue and interaction among the People of God, especially between priests and laity.

Third, one must take into account the *sensus fidei* as described in *Lumen Gentium* 12, that is, the “sense of faith” of the whole People of God, what Pope Francis calls the faithful’s “sense of smell.”<sup>7</sup> This notion reflects the fact that it is to the church of God as a whole that the faith is revealed; she is its depository—hence, the challenge to listen to the *sensus fidei* that cannot “err in faith.” This dimension, which was brought to light in the Second Vatican

---

<sup>6</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (March 2, 2018), 42.

<sup>7</sup>“The people have ‘flair!’ They have flair for finding new ways forward, they have the ‘*sensus fidei*,’ theologians say. What could be better than that? And in the Synod there must also be what the Holy Spirit says to the laity, to the People of God, to everyone.” Pope Francis, *Meeting with Clergy, Persons of Consecrated Life and Members of Pastoral Councils during His Pastoral Visit to Assisi* (October 4, 2013).

Council, underlies the synodal dynamic of discernment, which involves consultation with all the faithful. The sense of faith of all the faithful (i.e., the *sensus*) is as much a vital part of the church's teaching authority (i.e., the magisterium) as that of the hierarchy. Synodality is a means to recover the authority of the *sensus fidei* alongside the authority of the hierarchical magisterium and the magisterium of theologians. It is about living the primacy of the Successor of Peter and the collegiality of the bishops within the synodality of the entire People of God.

This brings us to the fourth key element—and perhaps the most central to understanding Pope Francis's vision of synodality—which is the action of the Holy Spirit. The synodal process is a spiritual process. A synodal church is a church listening to the Holy Spirit through hearing the Word of God and listening to one another. “The action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God is the principle of synodality,”<sup>8</sup> and Pope Francis in his speeches keeps insisting that synodality is not a parliament but a process of discernment that presupposes a deep listening to the action of the Spirit in oneself and in the community. It is based on the act of faith that the Spirit works in all the baptized, regardless of their vocation, age, condition, or responsibility.

A fifth constitutive element of the synodal approach highlighted by Pope Francis is the recognition and consideration of the diversity of charisms. Synodality, the principle of the participation of all in the life of the church, reflects the fact that all the baptized are called to be active subjects, protagonists in the mission of the church, because the Holy Spirit confers different charisms on all members of the People of God, a charism being a particular gift received for the good of all. This synodal vision implies the recognition of the coessentiality of these two dimensions of the church, the hierarchical and the charismatic. On many occasions, Pope Francis stresses the importance of the participation of all and in particular

---

<sup>8</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (March 2, 2018), 46.

the role of young people and women, the place of consecrated life and movements, and the commitment of the various groups and organizations in the church that arise from this diversity of charisms. Thus, in *Christus Vivit*, this definition of youth ministry: “Youth ministry cannot but be synodal, that is, capable of shaping a ‘walking together’ that implies an appreciation of the charisms that the Spirit bestows according to the vocation and role of each of the members [of the Church], through a dynamism of co-responsibility. [ . . . ] Animated by this spirit, we will be able to move toward a Church that is participatory and co-responsible, capable of valuing the richness of the variety of which it is composed, also gratefully welcoming the contribution of the lay faithful, including young people and women, that of consecrated female and male life, and that of groups, associations and movements. No one should be put or be allowed to stand aside.”<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the sixth and final element that can be identified through these texts as the foundation of this vision of synodality is the integration of a relational anthropology that underlies the conception of a relational church. Throughout his pontificate, Pope Francis has constantly called for building a “culture of encounter.” In his manner of ministry, we see how much he places encounter at the center and unfolds the horizon of human fraternity as the axis of the church’s mission. Indeed, *Laudato Si’* and *Fratelli Tutti*, which are, in a sense, GPSs for synodality, contain what is at the heart of synodality, a relational way of looking at the world and looking at the church: “everything is connected.” Throughout these texts, delivered at various meetings, the call to synodality unfolds, which is the call to become more and more a relational church, living in fraternity and friendship in the Lord, a church of brothers and sisters in Christ, opening up to new communicative and relational dynamics in the church to serve the goal of living together in our common home. Thus, synodality makes us rediscover and reintegrate the primacy of the ecclesial “we” in the service of the

---

<sup>9</sup>Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* (March 25, 2019), 206.



common good, our vocation to form an “us” because we belong to each other, we are interdependent. The relational anthropology on which synodal ecclesiology is based has reciprocity and circularity as key words.

Beyond the words and content developed in this book, it is interesting to see the diversity of groups and ecclesial actors Pope Francis addresses in these texts on synodality, which more often than not take the form of a conversation. One notices his attention to the diversity of local churches and the diversity of ecclesial actors with whom he shares his vision of synodality, but he does not fail to highlight the seeds of synodality that his interlocutors already carry within themselves. Ultimately, this “living magisterium” of Pope Francis on synodality at this stage of his pontificate, as presented here, invites us to pursue the path of synodality, that is, a creative and dynamic path, an open process, a “walking together” in the breath of the Holy Spirit and the breath of the Second Vatican Council—hence, the invitation to enter into the reading of this book as one enters into a pilgrimage with a large and generous heart, a heart that is humble and willing to receive the lights and graces that the Lord wants to bestow. Pope Francis invited us to experience the synod as “a time of grace”<sup>10</sup> and a journey of conversion. May the reading of these pages help us to enter into the spiritual experience of synodality that is an experience of the Trinitarian mystery and the mystery of the church.

---

<sup>10</sup>Pope Francis, *Moment of Reflection for the Beginning of the Synodal Path* (October 9, 2021).