

# Introduction

In the chapter I wrote for *Looking to the Laity*, recently published by Novalis, I ended with these words about the laity's role in shaping the future Church: "A diocesan, regional or local synod could be a reasonable strategy for lay people to have a place in the Church, for their voice to be heard in dialogue with official Church leaders.... What a way forward that would be for our future Church!"<sup>1</sup>

Not only would this be a "reasonable" way, but Pope Francis sees synodality as necessary for Church leaders and laity to "walk together" in a different way that allows the contributions of both, as befits their common baptism as members of the People of God in shaping the future Church. This vision reflects the spirit and intent of the Second Vatican Council, which, in *Lumen Gentium* in particular, emphasized our common baptism as the essential qualification for membership in the Body of Christ, in which each one of us has a specific vocation and purpose. This radical equality conferred by baptism needs to be recalled and revitalized in every aspect of Church life until it is more adequately realized by all, especially among the laity. This primer suggests that one way to do so is to become familiar with and to embrace the emerging development of synodality – walking together – on a local and global basis.

## What is synodality?

The word "synodality" is beginning to appear everywhere, and to some people it seems to be coming out of the blue. The fact that

the Synod of Bishops taking place in 2023 is *about* synodality tells us that here is something that the whole Church is being asked to address.

Although it may sound like a strange word to Catholic ears, it is not a new concept. The word itself needs some explanation. The Second Vatican Council used the terms “council” and “synod” somewhat interchangeably to describe its own proceedings, although “council” was used more often and is more familiar to us. The two words, however, have the same meaning: one title deriving from Latin (*con*) and the other from Greek (*syn*) meaning “together with,” and the Greek *hodos*, meaning “way.” *Lumen Gentium*, the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, established the concept of Church as the whole “People of God” before moving into considerations of hierarchy and laity.

**W**alking together is a way for lay people to further their baptismal mission through joining the ordained in the discernment gifted by the Spirit to all the baptized, with the difference that now, working together, there is the intention that their voice will be heard more proportionately in the Church as it continues on the Way.

## Vatican II and synodality

A major thrust of the Second Vatican Council is that the *whole* People of God is now the emphasis: a communion, a joint membership of every individual by virtue of the sacrament of baptism. Although the fledgling Church of Jesus Christ had been more of a communion at its beginning – they all shared in common what they owned, although there was leadership – there is no doubt that the gap between hierarchy and laity became quite wide very early on. The Council Fathers recognized that and sought to restore the concept of the “whole” Church – the Body of Christ of which we are all members, equal in personal dignity albeit with varieties of gifts and vocations as the Spirit wills.

Another major result of the Council's vision of the whole People of God walking together on the Way was Pope Paul VI's re-establishment of the Synod of Bishops. This terminology was used to distinguish it from the word "council" itself, which includes all the bishops, whereas the synod was to be a representative body, with a certain number of bishops representing their countries. It was to meet regularly, providing an opportunity to meet more frequently to discuss various topics. There had been a gap of almost a century between the First and Second Vatican Councils, for example, and the world had changed in multiple ways in that period. Pope Paul, in response to the Council, reintroduced synodal practice into the Catholic world, although other denominations, notably the Anglican and Orthodox communions, had maintained this way of consulting their members over the centuries.

The Council's emphasis on the whole Church as the People of God lessens the perceived distinction between clerics and lay, hierarchy and "lower-archy," pastors and their "flock." Informed by *Lumen Gentium*, the theological and pastoral aspects of walking together gradually developed.

The purpose of this primer is to

- \* describe those aspects,
- \* situate them in their current expression and
- \* describe how they are being revitalized and applied at the Vatican itself and in the Catholic world.

Many Catholics are aware that there have been several synods since Vatican II (1962–65), and several well-publicized synods have been held during Francis's papacy. The Synod on the Amazon garnered worldwide attention, as had his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, but previous popes also recognized synods as a means to implement more fully the Council's vision that the whole People is needed for the Church's mission of evangelization. Not only that, but within their respective vocational roles, each of the baptized has a part to

play in the discernment needed to envision the path for the whole Church, meaning clergy and laity should walk and work *together*.

## Synodality: Pope Francis's focus

Pope Francis has consolidated Church teaching on synodality, added to it and given it a much sharper focus. It is not just *a* way for the People of God: he calls it *the* way. He has emphasized that synodality is “an essential dimension of the Church.” If that is true, we should be able to see that there is something already present in the Church signified by the term “synodality,” something important that has been there since the beginning.

This is a foundational point in the writing of this primer: that this is not truly a new concept, but an old one with new elements. The idea of everyone in the Church walking together has been there since the beginning, although now the *way* of walking is different.

Pope Francis means to make the process of being a synodal Church more systematic, and so he has instituted a Secretariat of the Synod to implement his vision and make it a reality by helping dioceses and conferences of bishops to see how this can be done. His teaching invites us to understand that synodality is essential in the way we experience membership in the Church today and is the way for shaping its direction in the future. At the same time, he invites us to understand that this is the way intended for the Church from its beginning.

Several modern developments highlight the existence of a sort of synodality from a more secular viewpoint: that is, “Nothing about us without us!” They appeal to those who want to participate in politics, in policies and in governance, demanding to have their voices heard. This desire finds expression in all sorts of social and political movements and, while we are sometimes reminded that the Church is not a democracy, neither need it be seen as *only* hierarchical. Another result of the Second Vatican Council that is still gradually developing is increased lay participation in the

higher echelons of the Church. The acceptance of the importance of synodality encourages further steps in that direction: for example, the promotion of women to several Vatican offices, which had been unthinkable before.

## What lies ahead?

Will there be resistance? More than likely. Some people might perceive this way of proceeding as a threat to the clerical “establishment” and to the usual way of doing business, even spiritual business. For those with a different vision, this conversation is happening at an opportune time, since, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the laity were looking for deeper layers of involvement and responsibility. In that light, it seems equally essential that both clergy and lay people become knowledgeable about walking together as a way forward in determining what is best for the Church.

This primer will present the view that synodality, walking together, is a way for lay people to further their baptismal mission through joining the ordained in the discernment gifted by the Spirit to all the baptized, with the difference that now, working together, there is the intention that their voice will be heard more proportionately in the Church as it continues on the Way.

“It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”—Spoken at a ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 2015

To walk together is the constitutive way of the Church; the figure that enables us to interpret reality with the eyes and heart of God; the condition for following the Lord Jesus and being servants of life in this wounded time. The breath and pace of the Synod show what we are, and the dynamism of communion that animates our decisions; only in this way can we truly renew our pastoral ministry and adapt it to the mission of the Church in today's world; only in this way can we address the complexity of this time, thankful for the journey accomplished thus far, and determined to continue it with *parrhesia*.—Pope Francis, at the opening of the 70th General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference, 2017

### ***Reflection questions***

1. Are you familiar with the term “synodality”? What does it mean to you?
2. Have you heard much locally about Synods of Bishops over the years? What do you remember about these events?
3. Can you think of ways in which clergy and laity can walk together for the good of the Church?

# Pope Francis and Synodality

Around 20 Synods of Bishops had taken place from the time of the Second Vatican Council until the election of Pope Francis in 2013. They were mainly of two kinds: “ordinary” assemblies to consider matters of importance to the whole Church, and “special” gatherings dealing with more localized topics.

## **Pope Francis and synodality as a reality in Church practice at every level**

In this chapter, Pope Francis’s own words will be quoted several times, since from the beginning of his pontificate it was clear that he meant to develop more fully the structure of the Synod of Bishops and encourage synodality as a reality in Church practice at every level. There were early mentions of “walking together” in his speeches and writings; his interest in collaboration and consultation with the laity became evident. For example, in 2013, just a few months after he became Pope, statements such as the following started to appear in the Catholic press:

[Francis] wants to change the way the universal Church is governed, in such a way that the local Church – dioceses, bishops’ conferences – plays a much larger part in the decisions that affect it, while ensuring that Rome (the

Vatican, including his own Petrine ministry) better serves the Church worldwide. In short, Francis wishes to shorten the distance between Rome and the local Church, to ensure that they act better together.<sup>10</sup>

Although this was not about the laity specifically, the phrase “act better together” is another way of saying “act synodally,” where the accent falls on *syn/*together, between Rome (the Curia) and the dioceses and, by extension, between dioceses and their members and/or between priests and parishioners.

Even before Francis became pope, Church leaders recognized that the structure and outcomes of synods were far from perfect. In 2004, Cardinal Schönborn of Vienna said that synods needed “more plenary discussion, more consultation on issues developing an atmosphere of a real debate, a real exchange, and to be liberated a little bit from that narrow framework that has developed in the last decades.”<sup>11</sup> From his remarks, it is clear that the organization of synods left a lot to be desired, and it became increasingly clear that Pope Francis agreed with him.

During the Synod on Marriage and the Family in 2015, Pope Francis gave an outstanding address showing the seriousness of his conviction about the need for the synodal way throughout the Church. He said that from the beginning of his papacy, he wanted to bring the idea of synods to more prominence, as had been envisioned at Vatican II. After acknowledging the progress that had been made since the Council, he insisted:

We must continue along this path. 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.<sup>12</sup>



The last sentence is interesting, even visionary: the Pope did not say that this is simply what *he* hoped for, but that *God* expects it of the current Church! In his first Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, in 2013, Pope Francis noted that all the baptized can do the work of evangelization. This work should not be “carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients.”<sup>13</sup>

He re-emphasized the important and somewhat overlooked concept of the *sensus fidei*, defined at the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium*:

The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples’ supernatural discernment in matters of faith when “from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful” they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the people of God accepts that which is not just the word of men but truly the word of God. (no. 12)

*Lumen Gentium*’s teaching wanted to avoid the complete separation of the “teaching Church” (the Pope and the bishops) from the “learning Church” (the laity). In light of this principle, the laity has not only a “voice” but a voice that counts in matters of faith and morals.

## Synodality and the *sensus fidei*

Being accountable to this *sensus fidei* is a hallmark of Pope Francis’s pontificate. It was in consideration of this teaching that in 2014, before the Synod on Marriage and the Family, he requested that members of every diocese be consulted and asked to reply to a

provided set of questions. This may not sound unusual in an era when surveys are commonplace, but it was the first time such a global consultation had taken place in the Catholic Church. The Pope's rationale was that, while the usual way of ascertaining the mind of the various dioceses on certain matters is still necessary,

a consultation of this sort would never be sufficient to perceive the *sensus fidei*. But how could we speak about the family without engaging families themselves, listening to their joys and their hopes, their sorrows and their anguish?<sup>14</sup>

While such listening may sound obvious, it had never been done on such a scale. What took place in 2014 marked a major change in both theological and pastoral practice. Pope Francis underscored this, adding, "A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening 'is more than simply hearing'. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn."<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, the Pope quoted a maxim from the early Church: *Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet* (What touches all must be discussed and approved by all), showing that there is rarely anything new under the sun in these matters. Today we might hear some groups call for "Nothing about us, without us!" but it's really the same pithy observation. Only after listening to the voice of the people should the synodal process continue through the work of the bishops, who "act as guardians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church, which they need to discern carefully from the changing currents of public opinion."<sup>16</sup>

## The "listening" Church

*Listening* is the key, according to the Pope. He prayed to the Holy Spirit that the Synod Fathers be given the gift of listening, "to listen to God, so that with him we may hear the cry of his people; to listen to his people until we are in harmony with the will to which God

calls us.”<sup>17</sup> The synod process means first listening to the Bishop of Rome, but the Pope emphasized that this is not to be done “on the basis of his personal convictions but as the supreme witness to the *fides totius Ecclesiae* [the faith of the whole Church], ‘the guarantor of the obedience and the conformity of the Church to the will of God, to the Gospel.’”<sup>18</sup>

Centuries earlier, Saint John Chrysostom said that “Church and Synod are synonymous”; the Pope pointed out that Jesus set Peter at the head of this new Church as the foundational “rock,” responsible for converting people to this new Way.<sup>19</sup> Referring to the concept of Church as “People of God,” the term found in *Lumen Gentium*, Pope Francis reminded his listeners that the structure of the Church is an inverted pyramid, where the base is at the top. As a result, he told the Assembly in 2015, “those who exercise authority are called ‘ministers,’ because, in the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all.” Underlining this concept even more strongly, he added, “the Successor of Peter is nothing else if not the *servus servorum Dei*” (the servant of the servers of God).<sup>20</sup> The whole People of God is addressed here, with the roles of laity, bishop and Pope clearly demarcated, but with a different emphasis. This is a Church that is to include the laity in a more definitive fashion and where those in authority are to remember they are called to serve, as must the Pope himself. Further, the Pope stated:

For the disciples of Jesus, yesterday, today and always, the only authority is the authority of service, the only power is the power of the cross. As the Master tells us: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave” (*Mt 20:25-27*).<sup>21</sup>

Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Australia wrote that this was a truly remarkable speech and concluded by saying, “But ensuring

the synodality of the whole church will be impossible, [the Pope] said, if people misunderstand the church's hierarchy and see it as a structure in which some people are placed above others."<sup>22</sup>

## Synodality as key to the Church's future

In November 2019, Pope Francis told the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's International Theological Commission that synodality will be "key" for the Church in the future. He repeated one of his powerful earlier statements: "it is what the Lord expects from the Church of the third millennium." In forming the Council of Cardinals to inform and consult with him, he told them that one of their tasks would be to "find a path for coordination between synodality and the bishop of Rome."<sup>23</sup> Walking together is the key to Church structure and is here to stay, as far as the Pope is concerned, and the Cardinals are asked to help make it work!

*Synodalization has been introduced gradually but quite rapidly, with measures that encourage every diocese to participate. It is not just a new way enabling different groups in the Church to meet and discuss matters: it is to be THE way of Church structure for the foreseeable future, in principle and in practice.*

A synod on the implications and process of synodality itself had been planned for October 2022, but the plans were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic; it was rescheduled for October 2023. It is meant to serve as a model of synodality for the whole Church, down to the diocesan level, which therefore involves parishes. It will be interesting to watch the ongoing process of "synodalization" in the Catholic Church. Synodalization has been introduced gradually but quite rapidly, with measures that encourage every diocese to participate. It is not just a new way enabling different groups in the Church to meet and discuss matters: it is to be THE way of Church structure for the foreseeable future, in principle and in practice.

## The Secretariat of the Synod

One outcome of the Second Vatican Council's decision to form the Synod of Bishops was the setting up of a specific Secretariat for that purpose. On the Vatican website, there is a full and informative description of the Council's decisions and how they have been implemented.<sup>24</sup> It gives the history of the Secretariat after it was initiated at Vatican II, as well as a list of General Secretaries, lists of synods and surrounding events, news about upcoming synods, and more.

In his teaching *Episcopalis Communio* (Episcopal Communion) in September 2018, Pope Francis strengthened the Synod of Bishops and emphasized yet again the principle of synodality as “a constitutive dimension of the Church” at all levels of her existence.<sup>25</sup> He stated that a synod is to be understood

as a process composed of three parts: the preparatory phase, in which the consultation of the People of God on the themes indicated by the Roman Pontiff takes place; the celebratory phase, characterized by the meeting of the assembly of Bishops; and the implementation phase, in which the conclusions of the Synod, once approved by the Roman Pontiff, are accepted by the local churches.<sup>26</sup>

The Constitution provides for a General Secretariat that is to be a permanent institution at the service of the Synod of Bishops, directly subject to the Pope. There will be the General Secretary, the Under-Secretary assisting the General Secretary, the Ordinary Council, and possibly other established Councils. The General Secretary and the Undersecretary are appointed by the Pope and are members of the Synod Assembly.<sup>27</sup>

A note of great interest and cause for celebration for many of the laity, religious sisters and women in general is that, for the first time, an Under-Secretary at the Secretariat is a woman: Nathalie Becquart, a Xavieran religious sister and a highly qualified and

experienced ecclesialogist, was appointed to this role, becoming the highest-ranking woman at the Vatican. This appointment shows Pope Francis's pledge to involve more women at the most senior levels at the Vatican and serves as a model and inspiration to other women, as well as to lay men.

Not only that, but in 2023, Sister Nathalie will become the first woman ever to be able to vote at the Synod of Bishops. This is noteworthy! Until this point, despite the progress in the numbers of laity attending synods, only Bishops could vote. Sister Nathalie's appointment can certainly be interpreted as reflecting the intention of Pope Francis to have the *whole* Church represented at synods, while her capacity to vote may raise the possibility of extending that capacity to other participating members of the laity in the future.

### ***Reflection questions***

1. Why do you think Pope Francis refers so often to the concept of the *whole* Church?
2. Pope Francis reminds the bishops that they are called to serve. What does he mean by that?
3. Reflect on the role lay people have in the Church in terms of "walking together." How do you walk with others? How would you like to walk together?
4. Do you think the appointment of a woman to an important position in the Church will make a difference to Church life? If so, how? If not, why not?