

## Synod on Synodality: A New Pentecost in the Church?

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### Abstract

*The article affirms that Synod is a familiar concept in Codex Iuris Canonici of 1983 as can be seen principally in Chapter II of Book II specifically in canons 342-348 on the Synod of Bishops who are convoked to assist the Pope in matters of faith and morals and in the preservation and strengthening of ecclesiastical discipline. So too is Diocesan Synod (cann. 460-468) at the level of the particular church. It has however thrown its weight on Synod on Synodality the kind of synod proposed by Pope Francis for the entire church considering it as extra-canonical since it does not fit into any of these categories mentioned above. This theme is explored in the context of a new Pentecost in the Church. The theme invites the entire church to journey together in fraternal collaboration and discernment placing the Holy Spirit who is capable of strengthening, renewing, empowering each christian to become coresponsible for the church's mission at the centre of this journey thus equating the Synod on Synodality with the Pentecost experience in the early Church (Acts 2:14-41; 3:11-26; 4:1-21).*

**Key Words:** *Synod, Synodality, Pentecost, collaboration, discernment and co-responsibility.*

### Preliminary Considerations

The *Codex Iuris Canonici* of 1983 has treated the topic of Synod principally in Chapter II of Book II. Specifically, canons 342-348 focus mainly on the Synod of Bishops. This is a group of bishops selected from different parts of the world convoked and presided over by the Roman Pontiff to promote close relationship between the Pontiff and the bishops all over the world. Through their counsel, they assist the Pope in matters of faith and morals and in the preservation and strengthening of ecclesiastical discipline (Pulickal 373). These canons define the synod and specify its function. They consider some papal prerogatives *vis-a-vis* the synod not failing also to indicate the three forms [Character]; (Ordinary [can. 346 §1], extraordinary [can. 346 §2] and special [can. 346 §3]) of celebrations of a synod. Not left out is the discussion on membership of each form. Last but not the least, the canons consider the ordinary and extraordinary way in which a synod might cease not leaving out also officials necessary for the operation of the synod (Johnson 454). Canons 460-468 treats Diocesan Synod which is a gathering

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of selected priests and other Christian faithful of the local church in order to give assistance to the diocesan bishop for the welfare of the entire diocese. The above cited canons stipulate that the bishop must first consult with the presbyteral council before convoking such an assembly. The canons also indicate those who must attend the synod to include the coadjutor and auxiliary bishops, vicars (General, Episcopal and Judicial), vicar (s) forane amongst others (Mckenna 88). The theme of synod therefore is not alien to the Church's Code. The code considers a synod to be an occasional (not permanent) consultative structure which the diocesan bishop can convoke when the circumstance suggest, in order to confer on various questions and projects that are to be carried out in the diocese (Martín De Agar 124). Many synods have been celebrated in the church at the universal and at the particular levels (Milano 641). The kind of synod proposed by the Roman Pontiff Pope Francis for the entire church with the theme Synod on Synodality is extra-canonical, meaning that it does not fit into any of those categories mentioned above. This is not to say that the Roman Pontiff has brought a theme which is entirely new. The novelty consists in the fact that this synod does not fall within the ambit of the above typologies of synods listed above but rather it is a synod on Synodality involving the entire Church and not just a selected few. This piece explores the concept of synod on Synodality in the context of a new Pentecost in the Church. The theme of this article then is Synod on Synodality: a new Pentecost in the Church? The topic is interrogative in fashion. It seeks to establish common elements of the proposed Synod on Synodality and the Pentecost experience of the early church. Put differently the piece aim is to establish if the proposed theme of Synod on Synodality can be considered a relieving, re-enactment of the Pentecost experience in the Church or not.

### **Understanding Synodality**

Synodality as a concept is from a combination of two Greek words synod (συν) which means 'together' and ὁδός which can be translated as 'way' or 'journey.' This understanding of Synodality as a way fits the description of Jesus Christ as 'the way, the truth and the life' (Jn 14,6). 'Followers of the Way' (cf. Acts 9,2; 19,9.23; 22,4; 24,14.22) was the original name of the early Christians. The Catholic Church uses this term often to describe the process of fraternal collaboration and discernment that bodies like the (Synod of Bishops, Diocesan Synods) were created to express as already noted above. The proposed synod on synodality has a focal point; that of journeying together as a universal Church. According to the 2023 Synod Preparatory document (Synod Prep. Doc),

This journey, which follows in the wake of the Church's "renewal" proposed by the Second Vatican Council, is both a gift and a task: by journeying together and reflecting together on the journey that has been made, the Church will be able to learn through Her experience which processes can help Her to live communion, to achieve

participation, to open Herself to mission. Our “journeying together” is, in fact, what most effectively enacts and manifests the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God (1).

This journeying together in turn embodies two key concepts; collaboration and discernment which in turn fosters participation (active) in the Church’s mission of evangelization thereby engendering the concept of coresponsibility which is imposed on every Christian by virtue of baptism. This subsequently brings to the focal point the path entitled “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission” (Synod Prep. Doc. 1)

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration is understood as:

Joining together in an appropriate, non-competitive, non-controlling way, so that all who have dedicated themselves to the Gospel may do the truth together in love, without blocking or frustrating one another, without suppressing diverse talents and skills, without being bound by false notions of traditions or status (Sheerin 5).

The above definition has all the elements of genuine collaboration. It is important to note that the call for collaboration in the Church started being heard loud and clear towards the eve of the Second Vatican Council. The Second Vatican Council sees collaboration as means of Christ’s faithful fulfilling their baptismal commitment as best as they could base on their individual conditions of life. This idea is corroborated by *CIC’83* which translated the teachings of the council (John Paul II; *Sacrae Disciplinae leges*) into juridical language summarizing the new thinking in can. 208 thus:

Flowing from their rebirth in Christ, there is a genuine equality of dignity and action among all of Christ’s faithful. Because of this equality they all contribute, each according to his or her own condition and office, to the building up of the Body of Christ.

The aim of both the Second Vatican Council teaching and the legislation of *CIC’83* was the involvement of the laity in the affairs and activities (mission) of the Church. This idea is also echoed in the collective Pastoral Letter of the Dutch Bishops:

“Collaborative ministry” is a new phraseology based on the fact that at the dawn of the new millennium, collaboration has moved from mere call or appeal to a ministry. This ministry focuses on harnessing and maximizing the use of the rich and abundant human resources within the Church—collaboration between priests (diocesan and religious), between priests and female religious, between priests and lay members of Christ’s faithful, between religious and the other lay faithful and collaboration among the

different organs and organizations in the Church both at the universal as well as at the diocesan levels. Collaboration fosters communion and participation in carrying out effectively the missionary mandate.

### **Discernment**

Discernment of spirits is considered necessary to discern the cause of a given impulse. Although some people are regarded as having a special gift to discern the causes of an impulse intuitively, most people are held to require study and reflection, and possibly the direction of others, in the discernment of spirits. Synod on Synodality emphasizes and encourages discerning together as a family.

Judgment of discernment can be made in two ways. The first is by a *charism* or spiritual gift, held as divinely granted to certain individuals for the discerning of spirits by intuition (1 Corinthians 12:10). The second way to discern spirits is by reflection and theological study. This second method is by acquired human knowledge; however, it is always gained “with the assistance of grace, by the reading of the Holy Bible, of works on theology and asceticism, of autobiographies, and the correspondence of the most distinguished ascetics”. Discerning together as a family of God is an element that cannot be discounted on in this Synodal journey just as it was in the early church. It is vital to discern together what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church in the current happenings in the world where she lives and is expected to witness to the gospel message.

### **The Aim of Synodality**

Synodality aims at facilitating the process of ‘journeying together,’ of living out the Christian (Catholic) faith – that calls for speaking and listening to one another and the Holy Spirit in order to find a path forward in addressing the issues facing the Church in contemporary society as she carries out her mission of making known the Good News of salvation in Jesus (Synod Prep. Doc. 2).

Fundamentally, Synodality is about journeying together. This happens through listening to one another in order to hear what God is saying to all of us. It is realizing that the Holy Spirit can speak through anyone to help us walk forward together on our journey as the People of God. The process of listening to one another speak engenders the Pentecost experience. When the apostles spoke in various tongues on Pentecost day, a day on which the Church publicly manifested itself, everyone who listened, understood in their different languages as recorded in Acts 2:1-11. Those who heard the apostles marveled, an indication that they were not expecting such a message from a group that was considered not learned an elitist group in the class of the priestly office (Pharisees, Sadducees of that time). The synod on Synodality espouses this experience where all are expected to talk and at the same time listen (not just hearing) to each other. The spirit of God is still active in the Church, but unless there is an active listening, we cannot understand each other.

## **The Mind of Pope Francis on Synod of Synodality**

According to Pope Francis, in order to have a more relaxed period of discernment, it is necessary not to be in a rush. Based on this he avers that:

The Church of God is convoked in Synod. The path entitled “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission” will solemnly open on the 9th – 10th of October 2021 in Rome and on the following 17th of October in each particular Church. One fundamental stage will be the celebration of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, in October 2023 (Synod Prep. Doc. 1).

A good period of seven (7) months is assigned to the diocesan Phase to speak and listen to each other in a spirit of discernment. Pope Francis anticipates fruitful deliberation if proper discernment of spirit is done. From the above expression it is clear what Pope Francis has in mind. He is certain that the synod of Synodality will bear plentiful fruits considering that ample time and opportunity has been given for reflection and discernment in a relaxed atmosphere of brothers and sisters (family setting).

## **Synod on Synodality and the Pentecost Experience any Common Ground?**

When we think of the Spirit's unifying and reconciling presence, we are hard pressed to find parallels in human *experience*. So rather than search out 'parallels' we shall consider the common grounds. Hence, we are certain that there are common indices between the Pentecost and the Synodal experience. We have considered but a few.

When we mention the Spirit work in the creation, we think of his bringing unity, drawing together, and reconciliation: the Spirit is unifying. The just concluded diocesan phase of the synod has indeed relived this experience. In some particular churches, the synod gave opportunity to the lay faithful to have round table discussion with their bishops and priests, a very rare opportunity as many testified (Echoes of synodal experiences from some dioceses). This singular experience gave the opportunity of bonding (unity) together as a church, the family of God. Participants aired out their views concerning church policies and pastoral plans and actions embarked upon by the church.

The Synod preparatory documents pose a pertinent question and at the same time offers a solution thus: How does this ‘journeying together,’ which takes place today on different levels allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church? (Synod Prep. Doc. 1). She responds to the question posed in the following:

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Addressing this question together requires listening to the Holy Spirit, who like the wind “blows where it wills; you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (*Jn* 3:8), remaining open to the surprises that the Spirit will certainly prepare for us along the way. Thus, a dynamism is activated that allows us to begin to reap some of the fruits of a synodal conversion, which will progressively mature. These are objectives of great importance for the quality of ecclesial life and for accomplishing the mission of evangelization, in which we all participate by virtue of our Baptism and Confirmation. Here, we will indicate the main objectives, which decline synodality as the form, the style, and the structure of the Church:

- recalling how the Spirit has guided the Church’s journey through history and, today, calls us to be, together, witnesses of God’s love;
- living a participative and inclusive ecclesial process that offers everyone—especially those who for various reasons find themselves on the margins—the opportunity to express themselves and to be heard in order to contribute to the edification of the People of God;
- recognizing and appreciating the wealth and the variety of the gifts and charisms that the Spirit liberally bestows for the good of the community and the benefit of the entire human family (Synod Prep. Doc. 2).

The above places the Holy Spirit at the centre of the Synodal journey. This recalls the role of the third person of the Blessed Trinity at the beginning of the Church. The experience of the active place and role of the Holy Spirit in the Synodal Church today is same as at the beginning of the Church. The Pentecost is a very important feast in the Catholic Church and indeed all of Christendom. This is because it marks the descent of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Blessed Trinity, on the Apostles. This happened fifty days after Easter. The church was strengthened and empowered to go out for the mission entrusted to her; the mission of evangelizing the whole nation. Same experience was felt at the Synod of Synodality. A fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit was experienced (Echoes of Synodal experiences from some dioceses), the church was reenergized and empowered to venture once more in the task of announcing the gospel message especially in difficult terrain. On Pentecost Sunday, the Spirit of God descended on the Apostles and empowered them to bear witness to him to the ends of the earth (Acts 2:1-11). The Spirit was poured forth on Pentecost day, from the heart of Christ; releasing through his death and resurrection to all believers through Baptism and given as the “first fruits” of Christ’s redemptive work, as a pledge of the inestimable blessings that await the faithful in the kingdom. The Holy Spirit, given to the first disciples on Pentecost day and received by all Christians at baptism, is the foundation of our Christian hope. It wets the appetite of Christians for ultimate fulfillment.

Other indices include the reaffirmation of the distinctive characteristics of the true Church which are fidelity to the teaching of the Apostles and the celebration of the Eucharist under the guidance of a Bishop, the successor of the Apostles; the ordered exercise of ministries; the primacy of communion in mutual service to the praise and glory of God the Father. The Pentecost and the synodal experience share these same perspectives where the Church is reorganized (restructuring of certain aspects). This becomes more evident in the recent restructuring of the Roman Curia.

Pope Francis making use of some criteria (particularly under the criteria of 'sobriety') has realized this by reorganizing the Roman Curia. Notable is the combination or merging of dicasteries based on their areas of competence; simplification within individual dicasteries; the suppression of offices no longer responding to contingent needs; the integration into dicasteries or the reduction of Commissions, Academies, Committees, etc., all in view of the essential sobriety needed for a proper and authentic witness. The twelve criteria for the reform include the following: Individual responsibility, pastoral concern, missionary spirit, organizational clarity, improved functioning, modernization, sobriety, subsidiarity, synodality, catholicity, professionalism and gradual call for both personal and institutional conversion. Of these criteria the most characteristic of Pope Francis include subsidiarity, synodality and catholicity. By Subsidiarity it means the reordering of areas of competence specific to the various dicasteries, transferring them, if necessary, from one dicastery to another, in order to achieve autonomy, coordination and Subsidiarity in areas of competence and effective interaction in service (Nwagu 46).

By Synodality the Pontiff means a listening Church as such the criteria must be evident in the work of the each dicastery, with particular attention being given to the congress to hold at least more frequent Ordinary Sessions. Under the criteria of 'Catholicity', Pope Francis signals a need for a greater effort at internalization and the inclusion of the lay faithful in the work of the various dicasteries of the Roman Curia: Among the Officials, in addition to priests and consecrated persons, the catholicity of the church must be reflected in the hiring of personnel from throughout the world, and of permanent deacons and lay faithful carefully selected on the basis of their unexceptional spiritual and moral life and their professional competence (PC). It is fitting to provide for the hiring of greater numbers of the lay faithful, especially in those dicasteries where they can be more competent than clerics or consecrated persons. Also of great importance is an enhanced role for women and lay people in the life of the church and their integration into roles of leadership in the dicasteries, with particular attention to multiculturalism (PC). *Predicate evangelium* of Pope Francis as seen above, comes up with some modifications to the administration of the Church, all aimed at arriving at a synodal Church, in which everyone is brought to the affairs of the Church, irrespective of one's status or juridical state thus bringing to the fore the

inclusive nature of the Church intended by her founder; a church in which no one is excluded.

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this article, we set out to respond to the question of whether the Synod on Synodality was, the re-living/re-enactment of the Pentecost experience? Our discussion above is affirming this. Before the event of Pentecost day, the followers of Jesus were too hurt, too wounded, too frightened and too confused to give prophetic witness to Christ's resurrection. That explains why they locked themselves up in the upper room (John 20:19) and would not dare come out to profess Jesus. As the early followers of Jesus many Christians today are intensely hurt, deeply wounded, totally confused, and completely frightened given the kind of situation in the world. In some places (countries) there is outright persecution, and many Christians encounter hostilities in such environments. To witness to the message of Christ in such places demands nothing less than heroism this might lead to paying the ultimate price (martyrdom) with one's life.

In the case of the early followers of Jesus, the Pentecost event broke through their closed doors and sealed windows. The paschal resurgence the Spirit of God broke through their vulnerability, their suffering, their danger. It came upon them powerfully and transformed their lives. They were graced with new life, granted new strength, endowed with new courage and armed with new zeal. They were equipped to confront the world of darkness and carry on the mission of Jesus without fear. They got out of their hiding place and took on the Jews as well as the Pagans. This same experience is anticipated with the Synod on Synodality. Hence, we have attempted to equate the Synod on Synodality with the Pentecost experience as a period of conversion, renewal, reaffirming, reenergizing, strengthening of faith and empowering to relaunch and witness to the gospel message with conviction and without fear as did the early apostles (Acts 2:14-41; 3:11-26; 4:1-21). The following pages do not claim to offer a complete teaching on Synod on Synodality it is rather a modest contribution to the ongoing reflections on Synod on Synodality.

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