



# BEYOND BORDERS: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF 'SYNODALITY'

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*Pope Francis' call to pave the way for a synodal Church is revolutionary. While 'synodality' has long been a promising Church trajectory, it disrupts and challenges the current status quo in local churches. Moreover, the process of 'synodality' is transformative and enriching as it fosters greater engagement of the people at the peripheries of the Church's life and mission.*

*People in the margins are often perceived as passive participants in the life of the Church and, as it were, on the receiving end. However, the Church's plans, thrusts, and decisions, whether on a personal level or socio-political and economic affairs, have always involved active and influential parish members and organizations. The 'influential' constitutes the majority's voice in church ministries, activities, and projects. On the other hand, the voices of the underprivileged carry, if any, little weight in the discussion.*

*This paper critically examined avenues for dialogue initiated by the local churches for the synod, allowing the marginalized to sit at the discussion table. It scrutinized a 'synodal' Church as it unveiled the mental structures that create categories of marginalization. In the hope of appropriating 'synodality' into authentic forms of encounter, solidarity, and dialogue, Koselleck's 'space of experience' and 'horizon of expectation' brought into light female narratives in the 'synodal' discourse, enabling the process of becoming a 'synodal' Church, a desired horizon of the future.*

Keywords: synodality, Emmaus, space of experience, future's horizon

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## INTRODUCTION

The synodal process began in the 9<sup>th</sup> Quinquennium<sup>2</sup>, where the International Theological Commission set the trajectory of synodality for the next five years. Hence, Pope Francis' call to pave the way for a Synodal Church is revolutionary as it disrupts and challenges the current status quo in the local churches. Moreover, 'synodality' promotes greater engagement of the people at the peripheries to bolster the commitment and flourishing of the Church's life and mission. However, the marginalized sectors are deemed passive participants and, as it were, on the receiving end. The Church's plans, thrusts, and decisions, whether on a personal level or socio-political and economic affairs, have always involved active and influential parish leaders and organizations. The 'influential' constitutes the majority's voice in church ministries, activities, and projects. On the other hand, the voices of the underprivileged carry, if any, little weight in the discussion.

This paper critically examines avenues for dialogue initiated by the local churches for the synodal process in the Philippines. It seeks to scrutinize how 'synodal' the Church is as it unveils the mental structures that create categories of marginalization. It hopes to appropriate 'synodality' into authentic forms of encounter, solidarity, and dialogue. Employing

Koselleck's 'space of experience' and 'horizon of expectation,' this paper will also bring into light female narratives in the 'synodal' discourse, enabling the process of becoming a 'synodal' Church, a desired horizon of the future.

## THE LAITY AS COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

The place of the laity in the Church is clearly expressed in *Lumen Gentium*.<sup>3</sup> The laity is not a passive participant nor a spectator but is actively involved in the life of the entire Church. Therefore, when the call for a synodal process was convoked in Rome,<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis invited all the baptized to participate in the Synodal process that begins at the diocesan level. The main subjects of this synodal experience are all the baptized because all are the subject of the *sensus fidelium*,<sup>5</sup> the living voice of the People of God. The synodal process is laid out in the *Vademecum*,<sup>6</sup> designed as a handbook accompanying the Preparatory Document at the service of the synodal journey. The two documents are complementary and should be read together. In particular, the *Vademecum* offers practical support to the Diocesan Contact Person(s) (or team) designated by the diocesan Bishop to prepare and gather the People of God so they can give voice to their experience in their local Church. This worldwide invitation

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<sup>2</sup> During its 9<sup>th</sup> Quinquennium, the *International Theological Commission* undertook a study of synodality in the life and mission of the Church. The work was carried out by a specific sub-committee, whose president was Mgr. Mario Angel Flores Ramos and whose members were Sr. Prudence Allen RSM, Sr. Alenka Arko of the Loyola Community, Mgr. Antonio Luiz Catelan Ferreira, Mgr. Piero Coda, Rev. Carlos María Galli, Rev. Gaby Alfred Hachem, Prof. Héctor Gustavo Sánchez Rojas SCV, Rev. Nicholaus Segeja M'hela and Fr. Gerard Francisco Timoner III OP. General discussions on this theme occurred during the sub-committee meetings and the Plenary Sessions of the Commission between 2014 and 2017.

<sup>3</sup> *CBCP Salubong: The Philippine Catholic Synodal Report*, August 15, 2022. Resources - SYNOD 2021 - 2023 Philippines ([synodphilippines.com](http://synodphilippines.com/))/retrieved February 25, 2023. Excerpts from this document state, "Their pastors know how much the laity contributes to the welfare of the entire Church. They also know that Christ did not ordain them to take upon themselves alone the entire salvific mission of the Church toward the world. On the contrary, they understand that it is their noble duty to shepherd the faithful and to recognize their ministries and charisms so that all, according to their proper roles, may cooperate in this common undertaking with one mind. We must all "practice the truth in love, and so grow up in all things in Him who is head, Christ. For from Him the whole body, being closely joined and knit together through every joint of the system, according to the functioning in due measure of every single part, derives its increase to the building up of itself in love."

<sup>4</sup> SYNOD 2021 - 2023 Philippines ([synodphilippines.com](http://synodphilippines.com/)); Who is the Synod for/retrieved March 2, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> *Sensus fidei in the life of the Church* (2014) ([vatican.va](http://vatican.va))/retrieved March 3, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Vademecum - SYNOD 2021 - 2023 Philippines* ([synodphilippines.com](http://synodphilippines.com/))/retrieved February 25, 2023.





to all the faithful is the first phase of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, whose theme is “For a Synodal Church: communion, participation, and Mission.”<sup>7</sup>

To participate fully in the act of discerning, all the baptized are urged to hear the voices of other people in their local context, including people who have left the practice of the faith, people of other faith traditions, and people of no religious belief. Special care should involve those persons who may risk being excluded: women, the disabled, refugees, migrants, the elderly, people who live in poverty, Catholics who rarely or never practice their faith, etc. This synodal process aims not to provide a temporary or one-time experience of synodality but, instead, an opportunity for the entire People of God to discern how to move forward on the path towards being a more synodal Church.

“Synod” is not a novel concept in the Church. Etymologically, the term ‘synod’ is derived from the preposition *συν* (with) and the noun *ὁδός* (path), signifying the way along which the People of God walk together. In ecclesiastical Greek, it expresses how the disciples of Jesus were called together as an assembly; in some cases, it is a synonym for the ecclesial community.<sup>8</sup> The Greek *σύννοδος* is translated into Latin as *synodus* or *Concilium*. *Concilium* refers to an assembly convened by some legitimate authority. Although the roots of “synod” and “council” differ, their meanings converge. In fact, “council” enriches the semantic content of “synod” by its reference to the Hebrew *קָהָל* (*qahal*), the assembly convened by the Lord, and its translation into Greek as *ἐκκλησία*, which, in the New Testament, refers to the eschatological convocation of the People of God in Christ

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops ([vatican.va](http://vatican.va))/retrieved February 2, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. G. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford (Clarendon Press) 1968, 1334-1335.

Jesus. In the advent of Vatican II, ‘synod’ and the spirit of Vatican II are deemed synonymous. Several commentators opine that there’s a correlation between “synodal” and the Church as it points to an ongoing journey of becoming a “synodal Church.” This linguistic novelty, which needs careful theological clarification, is a sign of something new maturing in the ecclesial consciousness starting from the Magisterium of Vatican II and from the lived experience of local Churches and the universal Church since the last Council until now. Looking at the context of synodality, we can view it as a unidirectional aspiration or a *Kairos* in its most profound sense. Intimately connected with a timely challenge to walk together is to see the future of the Church alongside the most vulnerable sectors of society.

*Gaudium et Spes* point to the crucial process of enlightenment as it acknowledges that the synodal journey unfolds within a historical context marked by epochal societal changes and a critical transition for the life of the Church. As a result, there are emerging unity challenges that require profound scrutiny. Within the folds of the complexity of this context, in its tensions and contradictions, we are called to “scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel.”<sup>9</sup>

### KOSELLECK’S CONCEPTUAL HISTORY

Employing Koselleck’s method, the study attempts to situate synodality using the theory of “conceptual history.” Its basic assumption is that vital socio-political-cultural concepts are historical and tied to socio-political fields, processes, apparatuses, and practices. Even if such concepts gain some momentary stability, their meaning (with their use to describe, define, shape, determine, or direct social, political, and cultural

<sup>9</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4.





elements, institutions, practices, processes, and orientations) become, through time, multivocal. Their usages are no longer uniform nor refer to homogenous contexts and interests. Concepts that have become historical are thereby tools for various users and could thus be altered to suit competing interests.<sup>10</sup> The practice of conceptual history is applied as a method of gathering, ordering, and reconstructing varied contexts, fields, processes, critical scenarios, key players, cultural types and codes, significant events, and the like, as these would indirectly reveal or unearth the (historical and political) career and history of concepts.<sup>11</sup> Thus, concepts are viewed like magnets that 'attract' various elements relevant to the historical formation or transformation. A hypothesis (a provisional model of explanation with its key concepts) is integral to any historical analysis of an object or subject of study such that the ideas formed presuppose a description of historical periods within which any object of study finds significance or value. While retaining the meaning of many words, the entire linguistic space of sociopolitical terms changes only over the long term to a conceptuality whose purpose can be inferred from a future to be newly experienced.<sup>12</sup> In other words, synodality is hoped to trigger the development of heuristic anticipation in the reader, who can order, organize, and orient sources to enrich the term's meaning. The critical concept that has been 'magnetized' transforms the history of any given period. The concept enters a historical space—one that includes the past, present, and future—since the present is part of the 'former past'; the future forms part of the present 'horizon of expectations', and; all significant events are either grazed, or moved, or refracted, or fragmented by

enduring historical elements that leave marks, traces, dents, impact or intense expectations to every 'space of experience' in its temporal and spatial dimensions. Koselleck's 'space of experience' and 'horizon of expectation'<sup>13</sup> would assist in bringing into a broader viewing deck or organizing platform the spaces created in the Philippine Synodal Report vis-à-vis the survey.

The phrase 'space of experience' refers to memorable, significant natural or cultural events that a person remembers or by which a person is influenced in the present. Since the synodal process has existed for some decades, the study opines that it is most likely *vergangene Zukunft*, 'former future(s)'.<sup>14</sup> The space of experience and expectation horizon correlate—one conditioning the other. Past stories that inspire could generate decisions that open projects or paths, which are expected to produce results; expectations also open up the mind to summon powerful narratives that further fuel experience and expectations. However, the 'spaces of experience' must be seen in conjunction with the future. Hence, this study is crucial to the horizon of the future as we identify critical spaces of experience we must carve in the Church.

## A SURVEY ON SYNODALITY IN THREE LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The researcher conducted a qualitative survey of three local communities in Manila and Laguna to gather data on the perceptions of the synodal process alongside the *CBCP's Philippine Synodal Catholic Report* issued last

<sup>10</sup> For some examples, see, Reinhart Koselleck, "The Temporalisation of Concepts." November 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Palonen, Kari. "The History of Concepts as a Style of Political Theorizing: Quentin Skinner's and Reinhart Koselleck's Subversion of Normative Political Theory." *European Journal of Political Theory* 2002 1: 91. DOI: 10.1177/1474885102001001007.

<sup>12</sup> Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> The phrase "horizon of expectations," which Koselleck used here, is possibly lifted from a memorable Soviet-era joke, which Jausss introduced in his work entitled, *Untersuchungen zur mittelalterlichen Tierdichtung*. The idea evolved in sociological literature or literary circles cf. Karl Mannheim's *Man and Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1940) pp. 179ff. See H. R. Jausss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in Ralph Cohen (ed.) *New Directions in Literary History*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974) p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).





August 2022. The participants in the study<sup>15</sup> answered three questions that were hoped to extrapolate possibilities in the Philippine Synodal Report. The survey questions are presented in a comparative report vis-à-vis the CBCP's Philippine Synodal Catholic Report. The responses and the PSCR provide the space of experience and unveil the emerging concept of synodality.

Firstly, **“How has synodality disturbed/disrupted the status quo in your parish/school/ diocese?”**

Sixty-seven percent of the participants did not see changes as they prepared for the synod, 17% were oblivious to the ongoing synodal process and activities, and 17% were aware that the process is meaningful and democratic participation in the Church's life.

On the other hand, the *Philippine Synodal Report* affirms that the avenues for dialogue provide them with a “meeting” or an encounter employing the term “pagsalubong.” However, it also reports that **out of 41 parishes, 26** did not attend the orientation sessions. Those who participated ranged from **one to fifteen percent of the total Catholic population of the parish and diocese**, while a few required thirty to fifty percent participation.<sup>16</sup> Table 1 corroborates the report.

<sup>15</sup> Respondents include 3 priests, 3 nuns, 3 parish workers, and 3 administrators.

<sup>16</sup> **PAGSALUBONG (Welcoming)** explains that reaching out to those in the peripheries mimicked the *Salubong* ritual of the women and men meeting each other. The Report highlights the process of ‘pagsalubong’ to celebrate the coming together of the participants. It recounts the experiences of different dioceses in mobilizing the teams to gather as many participants as possible. “In one diocese, the bishop personally wrote a letter of invitation to the sectoral groups. Many organized sessions per sector, while others preferred multi-sectoral gatherings giving due attention to different voices in the community. Some conducted the consultations alongside the preparations for baptisms, marriages, and other sacraments. Although most dioceses reported that the majority of the parishes succeeded in conducting orientation sessions, there were some that mentioned the disinterest of a few. In one diocese, twenty-six of the forty-one parishes did not attend the orientation sessions, expressing that it would just be another activity from above and that nothing concrete would emerge from it anyway.”

Table 1: “How has synodality disturbed/disrupted the status quo in your parish/school/ diocese?”

Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Somehow synodality disturbs the status quo when priests in their congregation have personal misunderstandings that affect the school management and how they deal with some concerns.	No, it did not disturb the status quo	No, because only some representatives were invited to attend.	The synodality somewhat affects the status quo in our school. The Augustinian friars run our school, and the communitarian spirit is part of their Augustinian ideals.	First, I am not a catholic member of the Church, I belong to the Philippine Catholic and, in short, Aglipayan, but the collaboration in terms of the synodal doesn't disturb the school; for me, the fraternal cooperation can help the school understand the connection of the catholic values from the usual way of managing the school and the students, beliefs in religion can help students and employee reminding what to be practiced and keep as one.	No. Most things have stayed the same.
Participant 7	Participant 8	Participant 9	Participant 10	Participant 11	Participant 12
Synodality did not disturb nor disrupt the status quo of our parish and school.	<i>Somehow synodality disturbed the status quo by challenging the members of organizations to do their part seriously.</i>	My parish and school may be disturbed if there are no ongoing available programs to reach the synodality level of people. every day, their spirituality must be nourished to maintain being the people of God because there will always be factors or forces to persuade them to do the opposite.	“Synodality” refers to a way of being and acting in the Church, emphasizing collaboration, listening, and decision-making as a community. In practice, this can involve more active engagement of the laity in the governance of the Church and can challenge traditional hierarchies and power structures. The introduction of synodality in a parish or school may result in disruptions to the status quo. It could lead to resistance from those who are used to traditional forms of governance, but it may also lead to more meaningful and democratic participation in the Church's life.	<i>No. I don't think it can change the community immediately.</i>	Most things have stayed the same. The meetings were initiated. But, other than that, we're back to our routine.





Table 2: Who were the key players in engaging the marginalized?

Key players	Percentage
Priests/Clergy	75%
Laity	17%
Pope	8%

Table 2 presents the key players that engaged the marginalized in the synodal process. First, 75% affirmed the role of the priests or ordained ministers in initiating dialogue and activities that would be beneficial for the poor and marginalized. Second, 17% considered the part of the lay members of the Church, especially the community leaders, in engaging the poorest or unchurched members. Finally, 8% recognized the crucial role of Pope Francis.

The CBCP Philippine Synodal Report states, “Some dioceses relied on the members of their ministries and regular Sunday Mass-attending faithful as respondents.” Moreover, it explains, “The collaborative process was characterized by listening and discerning at every step — from tabulating to collecting data to categorizing, writing, and validating them with the people they interviewed. Some parishes convened separate assemblies with sectoral representatives; these consultations included other stakeholders whose task was to present the initial results and engage them in a deeper reflection on the data,” the involvement or non-involvement of some members may have made the Report more congruent. The Report further explains that:

**Some involved only the parish synodal teams.** In other dioceses, only the diocesan synodal team unpacked the results for deeper reflection with writers tasked to develop their ten-page synthesis reports. Some collected the stories and included them as an appendix, while others integrated the stories into the main body of their Report. Finally, there were a few dioceses that made use of quantitative

research designs. Some included the tabulation of the responses in the attachments.<sup>17</sup>

The people who were called to the task were the same synodal teams. I surmise that it was intended to meet the deadline of a ten-page synthesis report for every diocese. It is elaborated in the following sections of the CBCP Report:

Most of those consulted were the **usual Church leaders** – clergy, religious, lay leaders, members of church organizations, ministries and commissions, and the BECs (basic ecclesial communities). In addition, the synodal teams (diocese/parish) made efforts to reach out to those in the ‘existential peripheries’ – those we do not see or engage in the usual church activities. Representatives from the sectors were consulted.<sup>3</sup> One diocese called all those consulted ‘*kamanlalakbay*’ (companions in the journey).<sup>18</sup>

If only *one to fifteen percent* have been reached by the dioceses’ efforts to build communion through the synodal journey, the data yielded from the participants point to what must be “disturbed” by the synodal process: *representation*. Involving the marginalized is a taxing step. But, without adequate representation, the synodal process is only relevant to the minority. Without targeting at least fifty percent of the population, the synodal journey would be deemed appropriate only to the church workers or organizations. A cursory reading of the report sheds light on the lament of several *excluded* communities.

Table 3 is a tabulation of emergent themes of the CBCP Report. These are *inclusion and exclusion*.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> The sectors include the following: LGBTQ+ (lesbians, gay, bisexual, trans-gender, queer), farmers, fisherfolks, PWDs (persons with disabilities, including deaf mute), PDLs (persons deprived of liberty), government officials, *barangay* (village) leaders, politicians, single parents, unwed mothers, cohabiting couples, people recovering from substance abuse and other forms of addiction, youth, students, teachers, school staff, public transport drivers, laborers (miners, construction workers, carpenters, ranch workers), daily wage earners (vendors, laundry women, candlemakers, etc.), media people, medical frontliners, members of other Christian denominations, IPs (indigenous peoples), OFWs (overseas Filipino workers) and their families, inactive Catholics, those who have left the Catholic church, women, street children, street families, those afflicted with HIV-AIDS, other religions (especially Muslims), migrants, elderly, broken families, atheists, CICL (children in conflict with the law), children with special needs...





Table 3: Themes Emerging from the Responses and CBCP Report

Inclusion	Exclusion
<i>"Kasali pala kami!"</i> ("We belong!")	<i>"Marami ang nakikilakbay, ngunit mas marami ang naiiwan"</i> ("Many are journeying together, but many more are left behind."). Many dioceses acknowledged the Church's failure in general and the priests' journey with their flock. They reached out to many people, especially <i>mga nasa laylayan</i> (existential peripheries), the poor, and the marginalized. <sup>19</sup>
	<i>"Hindi kami kagayak!"</i> ("We are not of their kind!") Many underprivileged and marginalized felt they were also left out of the Church. As the Church is seen to be for the rich, the economically poor and those deprived of social acceptance are left out. Dioceses with Catholics as minorities felt that they could identify more closely with the marginalized and persecuted. For this reason, they embodied a Church of the poor and those suffering from bombings, intimidations, and persecutions.
	<i>"Ayawan na!"</i> ("We quit!") Those who were demoralized or felt excluded have left the Church and no longer find the need to be part of it. <sup>20</sup>
	However, many also regard <b>"poverty as a major obstacle"</b> and "distance as a hindrance" to listening to one another. They perceive the 'Church' as <i>malayo</i> (distant from the faithful, especially those in the existential peripheries).
	Lukewarm acceptance of those who are stigmatized in society, such as the LGBTQ+, single parents, separated families, etc., as well as negative attitudes like pride, greed, domination, indolence and unreasonableness, selfishness, intolerance, sloth, self-righteousness, lack of interest, self-pity, and close-mindedness.
	Unfelt presence – indifference toward the marginalized
	Divided in political views <sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> It has also been noted how the lifestyle of the priests either inspires or turns people off. In the words of one of the participants, *"Bigyan nyo naman kami ng pari na handang bumababid sa aming kalagayan!"* ("Please give us priests who are willing to immerse in our situation!"). Some have pointed out that their priests are becoming too secular, hooked to vices, engaged in business, owning vast properties, and using parish funds for every personal need. Such priests, they say, are offensive to people and drive them away from the church. On the other hand, priests who live a rich pastoral ministry, are not in love with money or properties, have no vices, celebrate Mass with dignity, deliver good homilies, inspire people, and draw them to the Church. The same comment is noted about lay leaders.

<sup>20</sup> CBCP Report, "Another painful reality that makes people leave the church is that some priests have committed sexual abuse and those who have sired children. They have wounded the Church's reputation and their fellow priests' credibility. Some male parishioners have tried prohibiting their children or wives from actively participating in church ministries and activities, presumably to protect them from abusive priests. But sometimes, it can also be a mere assertion of patriarchal authority. Many found the pastoral statements and programs of the church irrelevant to their own concerns; they responded with indifference.

<sup>21</sup> Also cited were situations when Church leaders do "not represent the voice of the people, such as in issues that have to do with corruption, political dynasties, gambling, illegal fishing, etc." These indicate their unwillingness to listen fully.

Dialogue and Discernment	<b>No proper channel or structure</b> for the people, especially the sectors, to be listened to.
	<b>"Consultations that are devoid of real conversations"</b>
	<b>When low-income people speak out or try to voice an opinion, they are ignored or considered unimportant.</b> Many people feel that only the donors and benefactors (dubbed the "owners of the church") have a voice or are entitled to speak out.
	Gross lack of dialogue

Among the factors considered a hurdle in the Church from fully listening to one another are language, cultural diversity, and lukewarm acceptance of those stigmatized in society. In addition, the Report mentioned the "unfelt presence" of those in the peripheries and the lack of "visible signs of concern." This underlines the perceived indifference of some church members and clergy to recognize the poor as valued members. Even political alliances cause misunderstandings or rifts among the church communities.

It further explains that even listening becomes selective or leaning towards the rich. Someone asked, "If we do not listen to the excluded, are we even listening to God?"<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, there is a need to evaluate existing spaces of dialogue and discernment in the Church. Some lament over "consultations that are devoid of real conversations" and meetings as mere venues for "information dissemination whereby the lay are heard under the guise of consultation. It is only a means for ratification and immediate execution. Communal discernment is not a common practice in many dioceses and parishes. Some dioceses reported that there is a gross lack of dialogue. They said that they only listened to Church leaders, especially the priests. When low-income people speak out or try to voice an opinion, they are ignored or considered unimportant. Many people feel that only the

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.





donors and benefactors (dubbed the “owners of the church”) have a voice or are entitled to speak out. Many references about the Church focus only on collections and contributions but fail to initiate and implement pastoral programs that include meaningful encounters and dialogues.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, some identified personal hurdles, fear of being judged unworthy, and low self-esteem rooted in the lack of understanding of the Christian faith, *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) and connivance, and bribery as blind obedience to authority. Moreover, the report admits that politics and gossiping severely divide families. There is apparent fear that stops them from speaking out (“no talk, no mistake”), while others, the persuasive ones or the ‘oppressors’ among Church leaders, tend to dictate what others have to do.<sup>24</sup>

The report also critiques the structures and mechanisms lacking in most dioceses. Emphasis on the role modeling of the Church leaders and members is encapsulated in the phrase, “Walk the talk.” Thereby, the lament grounds itself on some problematic situations experienced by the laity that surfaced in the report.

### DIALOGUE: A SYNODAL AND HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

Below is an exposition of three (3) themes that emanate from the last section of the Report:

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Certain sectors expressed their concrete needs and grievances and challenged the Church to fight with them and for them. A farmer questioned why the Church is not doing anything to address the increasing price of fertilizers and farm implements. A fisherman lamented that the seashores and beaches were desecrated because of ongoing coastal road construction. The perceived politicking of the clergy, especially in the recent elections, gave rise to contrary feelings and opinions among those involved. IPs (indigenous peoples) see themselves as “objects of missionary help are neglected in evangelization. The church’s inattention to the environment also indicates its lack of understanding of the plight of the indigenous peoples and their needs. In one diocese, they have appealed for the church to “oppose destructive activities like open pit mining and coal-powered plants.” Church and *barangay* (village) should also speak out about conflicts among tribes between the military and NPA (the New People’s Army, an insurgent group) caused by drunkenness and gambling.

1. *Dialogue as a Synodal Epiphany and Historical Experience*; 2. *Discernment as a Communal Act*; and 3. *Pagsalubong: A Horizon of the Future*. The third theme is expounded in the last section of this study.

### DIALOGUE IS A SYNODAL EPIPHANY

If there’s one theme that consistently recurs in the CBCP Report, it is ‘dialogue.’ It affirms that dialogue exists within the structures of the Church. But it is generally limited to those active in the various Church organizations. This reflects the prevalent perception of exclusion in the Church, and dialogue is the only concrete solution. While it is true that varied activities and networks with NGOs and local government have already been initiated, opportunities for genuine dialogue must be made available.<sup>25</sup>

Koselleck pointed out that the space of experience emerges from historical reality, and a repeatedly experienced concept ties the space of experience to its former past. The idea of dialogue enters another dimension, the present, that bridges the present to the future. Therefore, the collective clamor for dialogue is a synodal epiphany. The recurring term ‘dialogue’ indicates a genuine desire to transform it. It brings to life a collective desire that entails actualization. The process of dialogue, which is replicated beginning

<sup>25</sup> There are partnerships with government agencies, both national and local, such as the UBAS *Ugnayan ng Barangay at Simbahan* (Barangay and Church relations), including networking with NGOs to promote community welfare. Collaboration with the various sectors is happening in the many institutions and ministries that serve the poor and the marginalized. Despite this, effective collaboration mechanisms for poverty reduction, ministry to dysfunctional families, caring for our common home, and addressing moral disintegration are lacking. Likewise, no comprehensive programs address materialism, secularism, and consumerism. There was an admission that the opportunities for dialogue with LGBTQ+, the poor, the abandoned, those suffering from substance abuse, the youths, PDLs (people deprived of liberty), laborers, and other marginalized sectors are also inadequate. Some members of the LGBTQ+ feel that they are not only abandoned but also highly misunderstood and condemned by the Church. Moreover, there is also a confusing position of the Church on politics since some bishops and priests have remained non-partisan, while others have taken a more partisan political stance.







from the synodal meetings, has the potential to usher it to the horizon where every person can freely engage in conversation about issues and concerns they want to bring to the table. This is a direction that every diocese is called to achieve. However, the synodal teams seldom provide avenues for dialogue. Establishing meaningful conversations can start in BECs and church organizations. The synodal process has unveiled the tendency to exclude the marginalized and favor the most influential in the Church. BECs can make a massive difference by involving all Church organizations in conversations about equity, compassion, and respect for diversity. The synodal epiphany is worth exploring if all the clergy will consider the commitment to creating avenues for dialogue, a new mission of the Synodal Church.

### DISCERNMENT IS A COMMUNAL ACT

The Church should facilitate dialogue on existential realities and socio-political issues.<sup>26</sup> The success stories in Mindanao<sup>27</sup> and BECs in various dioceses are models of good leadership and empowerment. The laity expects the clergy to be role models of authentic dialogue and transparency. They also expect a stricter implementation of policies and guidelines and express the need to eliminate ecclesiastical red tape (unnecessary bureaucracy in the Church).

<sup>26</sup> Political issues include election fraud and vote buying, human rights violations, corruption in government, environmental issues, and social issues such as broken marriages, gender identity, same-sex unions, relativism, sex scandals, gambling (e.g. *jueteng*), discrimination, cultural bias, and stereotyping. The Church has to address the common perception that it is the Church of the rich, the influential, and the powerful, as well as the perception of the young that the Church has become outdated or irrelevant.

<sup>27</sup> The MSPC (Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference) and the Bishops-Ulama Conference diocesan desks in Mindanao are avenues of active dialogue with Muslims and the Indigenous peoples. However, more space for dialogue must happen with and among indigenous peoples throughout the country. Some note that although IPs are already part of the BECs, there needs to be more attention given to recognizing their unique culture and identity. In some areas, the IPs are caught in the crossfire between rebels and the military, and they have no one to turn to for help except the Church. In other instances, the Church turns to the IPs to concretely address the urgency of caring for our common home.

The BEC, being the flagship program of most dioceses, is a critical factor in building up the faith and mission at the local level. It remains an avenue for building communities through various programs and projects such as financial aid to the needy, construction of houses for the homeless poor, relief work for victims of natural disasters, and a source of refuge for mutual assistance, especially during and after the pandemic. It fosters communion and empowers its members as they seek ways to reach out to the people in the peripheries. However, some concerns raised in the Report identify the struggles of the IPs, the influence of partisan political leanings, and the ideological distortions of some groups. Discernment is crucial as a church called to participation and communion. Women groups and church organizations have been forefront of church projects and activities. Legionaries, Mother Butlers, commentators, Knights of the Altar, and BEC women leaders have served as the arm of the local churches. They also call upon the Church to help ‘unbox the structures of society’ that are not gender sensitive and hinder peoples’ growth.

Notable is the recognition that decisions are rarely made based on collective discernment. The final decisions come from the church leaders, particularly the bishops and priests. In most instances, decision-making processes tend to favor the opinions and preferences of the affluent and influential. They also broached the need for more transparency on issues and decisions. Although the Parish Pastoral Councils are involved in pastoral goal setting, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, all matters that have to do with the life of the Church are characterized by top-down structures. Admittedly, there is a common impression that church administration does not give as much importance to prayer and communal discernment.





## TOWARDS A HORIZON OF THE FUTURE

The Holy Spirit is at work in the Church as the synodal process challenges the key players to create a vibrant horizon of the future. This section of the paper delves into the third challenge: *Pagsalubong*. The survey asked the respondents to answer the question, **“Can you say you have achieved ‘synodality’ as the way of the Church?”**

These answers offer the gist of both the response and critique of the synodal process.

Can you say you have achieved ‘synodality’ as the way of the Church?	Yes	No
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Still, the priests are working to achieve it.</li> <li>✦ Yes, we have achieved synodality.</li> <li>✦ Yes, with reservations. This would be effective if the people were honest, and the real needs of the Church would not be censored.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ <i>Not yet, but it is slowly happening.</i></li> <li>✦ <i>I am still on my journey to be a good person of God. Trying to do good even if things are not that good at times. Even if things are trying to derail you from your earthly purpose, keep moving forward, and eventually, you will achieve synodality.</i></li> <li>✦ <i>Partly yes. Synodality refers to a way of being and acting together in the Church that emphasizes community collaboration, listening, and decision-making. It is a dynamic and ongoing process requiring effort and commitment from those involved. I am still in the process of achieving synodality.</i></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Yes, partly because in our school, we build a good rapport with one another and involve the stakeholders in planning and organizing things for the welfare of everyone.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ <i>It may have begun, but it needs to continue.</i></li> <li>✦ <i>It’s a long shot. We have started through dialogue. But it needs to continue.</i></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Yes, as an employee, I need to understand the value of oneness and collaboration as one Augustinian, even though sometimes I experience bad treatment from others.</li> <li>✦ With my role as the Worship Ministry Coordinator, I can say that <i>I have achieved synodality in my simple ways, such as doing my tasks as a leader and encouraging my members in the planning and implementing the activities in the Church.</i></li> <li>✦ Regarding fraternal collaboration, I can say that <i>the Church and the school achieved synodality.</i></li> </ul>	

The Yes column represents a positive view of the Church’s efforts to build a synodal Church. However, the red texts show the disparity in perceptions of synodality, pointing to doubt, misunderstanding, and a vague notion. The synodal process achieved its goal of gathering people for a ritual of exchange and dialogue. But what happens after listening to the cries and lament of the people is left to the discretion of the local committee members—the data point to a desired horizon for the future through a clamor for discernment. The intent to meet despite differences echoes that the “Pagsalubong” is a space of experience whereby the concept can transpose the yearning to an injunction to bring





the fruits of dialogue to the discernment that can bring about crucial changes in the existing structures and mechanisms in the Church.

### ***THE KAIROS OF PAGSALUBONG AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN LEADERS***

The CBCP Report ends with the message of “Pagsalubong,” or a meeting with the Risen Jesus, in the familiar and unfamiliar roads of their dioceses and with hearts burning ... ready to break new grounds and blaze new trails.<sup>28</sup> This message captures the hopes of the synodal process—to enter into dialogue and take the path of renewal. The dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* expresses that the way forward is through a renewed vision of synodality. It urges the whole Church to see itself as the subject or protagonist of the Church’s life and mission. It belabors the point that “the faithful are *σύνδοδοι*, companions on the journey. They are called to play an active role since they share in the one priesthood of Christ and are meant to receive the various charisms the Holy Spirit gives given the common good.<sup>29</sup>

Koselleck’s depiction of the future’s past is that the future is intimately intertwined with the past. Three salient features are underscored in this paper to extrapolate “pagsalubong” and how it can transition from a concept to a desired horizon.

First, “pagsalubong” is a free and conscious act of journeying together. *Lumen Gentium*<sup>30</sup> posits that the synodal life can only be revealed by a Church that celebrates free and different subjects, united in communion, which is

dynamically shown to be a single communitarian subject built on Christ, the corner-stone, and on the Apostles, who are like pillars, built like so many living stones into “a spiritual house” (*cf. 1 Peter 2,5*), «a dwelling-place of God in the Spirit» (*Ephesians 2,22*). The synodal process began imbuing in the Church’s consciousness that it is a pilgrim Church that is “co-responsible, transparent, and accountable” to the “communion of communities.” The ‘pilgrim Church’ concept remains intangible or not feasible unless a relevant encounter is achieved. If a profound encounter has happened in the synodal process, it builds on and on as it occupies the space of experience. The Synodal Church occupies the subconscious and creates the building blocks that permeate the spaces of experience. Thus, dialogue must be continued in the local churches to develop patterns of thought and action gradually.

Furthermore, women have also dominated the BEC spaces, which provided new areas for planning and livelihood programs. They can be the Church’s arm for transformation if the diocesan clergy empowers them to turn the ‘Kapihan’ session into synodal spaces where women engage in conversations that foster the exchange of narratives and opinions that have formative roots in their experiences as women. Carving spaces for genuine listening and dialogue can make the deliberation, discussion, action, and interaction a collective historical experience of acceptance and belonging. Regular sessions can become formative spaces that create interest in social and cultural issues and church life. Opportunities for safe dialogue can enhance or alter previously narrow perspectives. Women are now occupying leadership positions that can be utilized for good. *Philippine Information Agency Report* reveals that women are capacitated in public service. Civil Service Commission (CSC) reported that as of 2022, 55% of the country’s civil servants are women, with 140,133 female

<sup>28</sup> CBCP Synodal Report, p.8.

<sup>29</sup> Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* 21 November 1964, 1.





employees occupying first-level positions and 659,687 women handling second-level positions.<sup>31</sup> If the *Kairos* of synodality is meant to be the Church's trajectory of the future, women leaders can usher in a new era for the Church.

Secondly, the experience of inclusion and exclusion suggests attention to two polarities. Inclusion is a valued concept, while exclusion negates belonging. The space of knowledge calls for repeated behavior patterns to instill in the human psyche the value of inclusion. Considering the challenges and struggles mentioned in the *Philippine Synodal Report*, the subjects, the leaders, and members of the Church must be mindful of the call to build a *Synodal Church*. The synodal process that the church leaders initiated is a vital step. The journey to synodality will require a long and tedious process. Hence, the hurdles to inclusion need to change the perception of the marginalized. To promote inclusion, we must remove the margins that separate people by welcoming and listening to the unchurched, those who left the Church, and the poorest. Unless the Church consciously dismantles the structures that bolster exclusion, the horizon of the future recedes to oblivion, unable to bridge a synodal Church. The creation of structures helps form the habitus. Promoting inclusion remains theoretical unless specific systems are in place. Bourdieu similarly points out this concept:

Systematicity is found in the opus operatum because it is in the modus operandi. It is located in all the properties – and property – with which individuals and groups surround themselves, houses, furniture, paintings, books, cars, spirits, cigarettes, perfume, clothes, and in the practices in which they manifest their distinction, sports, games, entertainments, only because it is in the synthetic unity of the habitus, the unifying, generative principle of all practices.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> April Grace Padilla, *Forum for Women in the Public Sector Backs Gender Equality Advocacy*, PIA - Forum for women in public sector supports gender equality advocacy/retrieved 3-23-23.

<sup>32</sup> PDF) *Understanding Bourdieu - Cultural Capital and Habitu*, 2010, p.169. Accessed 5-18-23. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335024564\\_Understanding\\_Bourdieu\\_-\\_Cultural\\_Capital\\_and\\_Habitu](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335024564_Understanding_Bourdieu_-_Cultural_Capital_and_Habitu)

Furthermore, our collective efforts and decisions to create the present and future spaces of encounter will be futile if the church leaders fail to model authentic listening.

Thirdly, the vision of the *Second Plenary Council of the Philippine Church* as the “Church of the Poor” is a concept of the distant past. It remains a vision waiting to happen and would not be able to transport the past into the future without systematic structures that bring about genuine dialogue. Dialogue entails listening to the voices of all. This means creating systems and mechanisms for reciprocity. Dismantling the hierarchical paradigm that has long occupied our mental space is a *sine qua non*. The clergy and the laity are called to remove barriers of prejudice and stereotypes. Women serving the Church through their varied involvements in organizations can initiate a dialogue that fosters unbiased listening and acceptance of diversity.<sup>33</sup>

Lastly, “pagsalubong” can be fostered in normal and spontaneous channels through the BECs and Church organizations. Encounter needs to fill the space of experience in which *a culture of encounter can thrive*. The desire to meet (salubong) is the starting point of an encounter. It enters the realm of the present and pushes it into the future's horizon. If barriers are broken down and commitments are collectively honored, “magsasalubong muli tayo.” (Our paths would cross again.)

The synodal meetings have created pathways for the renewal of local churches. A Synodal Church is no longer farfetched when commitments permeate people's psyches. The space of the present bridges the future as it creates pathways of communion.<sup>34</sup> The CBCP Report concluded

<sup>33</sup> Ferdinand Dagmang, *Women in the Diocese of Boac's Basic Ecclesial Communities: Pastoral Work and Organizing*. MST Review 23/2 (2021): 1-22.

<sup>34</sup> Synodality can also be mirrored by transforming church activities





with a positive note, “At the conclusion of the national synodal consultation, after sharing the fruits of the synodal journey and discerning the Holy Spirit, speaking to the local churches in the Philippines, the bishops, priests, and lay delegates representing eighty-six dioceses in the country expressed their firm resolve to be a Synodal Church.”<sup>35</sup>

### THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AT THE WELL: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF SYNODALITY

The story of the nameless Samaritan woman at the well is one of the most powerful narratives in the Gospel of John. It follows on the heels of the account of Jesus’ interaction with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and prominent member of the Jewish Sanhedrin.<sup>36</sup> In John 4:4–42, we read about Jesus’ conversation with a lone Samaritan woman who had come to get water from Jacob’s well, about a half mile from Sychar in Samaria.<sup>37</sup>

She was no ordinary woman. Being a Samaritan, she was an outcast, as she belonged to a race of people that the Jews utterly despised. But, unlike many Jewish women, she drew water from the community well alone. During biblical times, drawing water and chatting at the well was the social highpoint of a woman’s day. However, this woman was ostracized and marked as immoral, an unmarried woman living openly with the sixth in a series of men.<sup>38</sup>

as spaces of dialogue, inspiring communion and participation. The participants recommend that regular meetings of ministries and groups should become opportunities for people to listen to business concerns and personal stories and discern societal issues in the light of the Word of God. In this way, they develop practices of communal discernment and communal decision-making. One suggests the need to pay particular attention to front liners and equip them with skills to inspire dialogue and establish friendships with those they are in touch with. Parishes can also create spaces for healing and reconciliation, especially in instances of conflict and misunderstanding and where some sectors have experienced discrimination, elitism, and divisiveness.

<sup>35</sup> See Attachment 5 for the *Opening New Doors (JOHN 20:19–31) National Synodal Consultation Statement* July 4–7, 2022, Tagaytay City.

<sup>36</sup> John 3:1–21.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Samaritan Woman at the Well - Lessons From Her Interaction with Jesus* (bible study tools. com)/accessed March 10, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *What can we learn from the woman at the well?* | GotQuestions.org

The story of the woman at the well presents the *kairos* of conversation. Jesus took notice of her and started conversing with her. His whole attention was on her, whose shame must have merited Jesus’ attention. The Samaritan woman, an outcast from her own people, understood what a genuine encounter meant. To be wanted and cared for when no one, not herself, could see anything of value in her—at the well, she received Jesus’ acceptance and forgiveness.

Some valuable truths could be deduced from this story. First, only through Jesus can we obtain and find eternal life: “He is the life-giving water. Jesus answered, ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’”<sup>39</sup> The Samaritan woman listened to Jesus, and this chance encounter altered her life. Second, Jesus’ ministering to those outcasts of the Jewish society (the Samaritans) reveals that all people are valuable in God’s eyes and that Jesus’ love for the marginalized is an example of love for all . . . even our enemies.<sup>40</sup>

Third, our testimony about Jesus is a powerful tool in leading others to believe in Him: “Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I ever did.’ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words, many more became believers. They told the woman, ‘We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man is the world’s Savior.’”<sup>41</sup> Additionally, the story cements the value of conversation or dialogue. The Living Water

<sup>39</sup> John 4:13–14; cf. John 14:6

<sup>40</sup> John 4:7–9; Matthew 5:44.

<sup>41</sup> John 4:39–42.





that Jesus offers can be obtained only by those who recognize that they are spiritually thirsty. The desire for communion with Christ begins with a listening disposition. The Samaritan woman listened attentively to Jesus, hanging on every word he uttered. Her eagerness to hear Jesus' message opened her eyes to her reality. Her active listening enabled her to realize her sinfulness. She received salvation because she repented her sin and desired forgiveness. Before embracing the Savior, she entrusted to Jesus the entire burden of her sins.

Lastly, her encounter became a catalyst for change. She led others to look for the one that gives 'the Living Water,' and their desire to meet Jesus led to a meaningful encounter. They recognized that God alone could fill the void within. Thus, a conversation was forged in a genuine encounter, bringing about transformation. One who indeed encounters Jesus can never be the same again.

## CONCLUSION

The Synodal process has paved the way for *kairos* to become the seed for deeper communion, more authentic participation, and a border-crossing mission. The CBCP Report vis-à-vis the survey yielded the emergent themes and lament for spaces of inclusion. This critical process of identifying the marks of synodality can transform conceptual history that addresses the lack/inadequacy of participation and communion by fostering listening in dialogue and genuine concern for the people in the peripheries. With the clamor for open dialogue, the local churches can dismantle structures of exclusion and prejudice to create democratic spaces for dialogue with the marginalized and divergent. Unless the space of experience of "pagsalubong" is transposed and the mental borders that separate and exclude the weak,

marginalized, and unchurched shift, the Church can only await the desired horizon of the future. But, it will usher in a new era in the life of the Church if inclusion becomes a daily historical reality. Thereby, it is a collective mandate from the *Philippine Church Synod* to foster and promote synodality as the way of the Church without ignoring the complexity and diversity present in the Church.

To transpose synodality into the horizons of the future, it is imperative to carve safe spaces for dialogue, reciprocity, and compassion until synodality thrives in the local churches and beyond.





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