



# THE SYNODAL PROCESS IN THE DOCK: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF GREY LITERATURE

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*This article aimed to describe the contours of the current discourse on the synodal process from the perspectives of journalists. To achieve this goal, we collected a large sample of grey literature (N= 235) from six online Catholic newspapers. The common ground unraveled by this study can lead to a fusion of horizons between the opposing sides on how and why the synodal process may allow the church to initiate needed structural reforms and create a synodal culture.*

**Keywords:** Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, Reception, Synodal Process, Thematic Analysis

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Roman Catholic Church (hereafter church for brevity) is at a historic crossroads!

On October 10, 2021, Pope Francis *launched an unprecedented call to gather its estimated 1.36 billion members in what he called a synod on synodality— never before has the entire church been asked to participate in consultation and listening meetings at this scale.* Synodality is a *style, a culture, a way of thinking and being that reflects the belief that the church is led by the Holy Spirit, who enables everyone to contribute to its life and mission in and for the world.*<sup>1</sup> The launching marked the beginning of a two-year process to engage with the present and future of Catholicism in the context of an increasingly secularized post-Christian and sometimes anti-Christian culture. The most fundamental question guiding the entire process is:

How does this ‘journeying together’ on various levels – from the local to the universal one – allow the church to proclaim the Gospel following the mission entrusted to her, and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take to grow as a synodal church?<sup>2</sup>

*The call to a synod on synodality is Francis’s clear strategic step to reform the Church’s clericalized organizational culture and where the lay faithful may have a louder voice and a more-than-usual share in the responsibility for its life and mission.*<sup>3</sup> Francis teaches that it is only in a synodal way can the church indeed renew its pastoral ministry and adapt it to the church’s mission in today’s world and address the complexity of this time. Nevertheless, its reception has been

quite surprisingly mixed.<sup>4</sup> It has prompted a debate within the Church. On the one hand, a substantial majority seemed to have received it as beneficial for the church of the future. They readily responded to the call and organized consultative meetings at the diocesan and parish levels. On the other hand, a small but significant minority have been sharply critical of Francis and of his silence in resolving the emerging issues and challenges of the process.<sup>5</sup>

The German Church’s version of *Der Synodale Weg* is a case in point. Struggling to regain its credibility and trust after a decade in which sexual abuse scandals shook it and saw Catholics in large numbers leaving, its bishops and laypeople launched its synodal path to discuss ways to lead the church out of its crisis. They called for far-reaching reforms, such as a change in sexual morality, more rights for women and laypeople, and greater power control. However, it ignited heavy criticism from bishops inside and outside Germany. The German Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki said the worst outcome would be if the process leads to a split and, outside of the Church, out of communion with the universal Church. In an interview, the Australian Cardinal George Pell, known as a staunch conservative, alleged seven severe criticisms of how it has approached the synodal process, the most serious of which is the charge that “there is no evidence that the bishops are paying attention to the Holy Spirit and the Gospel itself.”<sup>6</sup> Some observers also believed that the debates over the German’s Synodal Path had become a proxy battle over the

<sup>1</sup> International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life of the Church,” 2018. Holy See. Accessed 04.01.2022. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sino\\_dalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sino_dalita_en.html).

<sup>2</sup> Preparatory Document for the 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, July 7, 2021, Accessed March 2023 <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/09/07/210907a.html>

<sup>3</sup> Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope*, (Henry Holt and Company: 2014).

<sup>4</sup> In this study, reception is the process through which a church(body) takes over as its own, a resolution that did not originate regarding itself. It recognizes a rule appropriate for its life and mission in the promulgated measure. See Yves-Marie Congar, “Reception as an Ecclesiological Reality,” *Concilium*, 77 (1972): 43–68.

<sup>5</sup> Sean Macdonald, “Communication Vital for Synod Trust-Building,” *The Tablet*, March 8, 2022. Accessed November 23, 2022, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/15103/communication-vital-for-synod-trust-building>

<sup>6</sup> Gavin Ashenden. 2021. The direction of the synodal pathway is wrong, but Christ will triumph in the end. *The Catholic Herald* 4.22.2021. Accessed November 12, 2022, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/ch/the-direction-of-synodal-pathway-is-wrong-but-christ-will-triumph-in-the-end/>





Francis papacy, magnifying its issues and threats to unity.<sup>7</sup> Pell's criticism supports a Vatican-published report prepared by two cardinals who condemned its direction.<sup>8</sup> Amid the controversy, Cardinal Kurt Koch, the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, called for a dialogue about "what the Holy Father and the German bishops each understand by the Synodal Way," adding that these were two distinct but related meanings.<sup>9</sup> All this suggests how far and fast the controversy has progressed and how polarizing the process may have become.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In a seeming attempt to address and diffuse the growing tension, several church officials, biblical scholars, historians, and ecclesiologists have tried to articulate the synodal process further.<sup>10</sup> Thus, we decided to turn to the fourth state, assuming it could provide a real-time perspective of its emerging, multilayered, complex dynamics.<sup>11</sup> The media attention it has received has been quite comprehensive. When applied to this study, they represented the journalist's core values of fairness and objectivity through a strict system of dogged reporting and informed commentaries about the synodal process. As one of the publishers, Robert Hoyt of the National Catholic Reporter, put

it: they bring the rigor of secular journalism to the Catholic world.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, we hoped the study could contribute toward finding common ground among all stakeholders on harnessing its potential and transcending its limitations. Finding that common ground may be a crucial step towards its broader and deeper reception. It will revolve around three main questions:

- What are the concerns of people about the synodal process?
- What reasons do people have for either receiving or rejecting the synodal process?
- What do people propose to make it more acceptable to all the stakeholders?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 DESIGN

We based this study on a thematic analysis of news accounts and commentaries on the synodal process published by five online Catholic media outlets between October 1, 2021, and October 31, 2022. They are- the Union of Catholic Asia News, The Catholic World Report, The Tablet, The Catholic Herald, La Croix, and The Crux. Thematic analysis is a systematic, replicable method for identifying and analyzing narrative materials of life stories by breaking the texts into and reporting patterns within data. It also assumes data to be more or less accurate and truthful indexes of reality.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Lamb, "The German's Synodal Path Had Become a Proxy Battle over Francis' Papacy," *The Tablet*, April 22, 2022. Accessed December 27, 2022, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/author/15/christopher-lamb>

<sup>8</sup> Mark Lambert, "Cardinals Condemn German 'Synodal Path' in Vatican Report," *Catholic Herald*, November 25, 2022. Accessed December 27, 2022, @ <https://catholicherald.co.uk/posts-by-date/?date=2022/11/25>

<sup>9</sup> Catholic News Agency, "Top Vatican Cardinal: Legitimate Concerns about Germany's Synodal Path," *Catholic News Agency*, April 15, 2022. Accessed December 27, 2022, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/author/21/cna-staff>

<sup>10</sup> See Bernard E. Hinze, "Synodality in the Catholic Church." *Theologische Quartalschrift* 192, no.2 (2012): 121-130; Faggioli, M. (2021). "Whose synodality?" *La Croix* May 17, 2022. Accessed May 27, 2022, <https://international.la-croix.com/news/signs-of-the-times/whose-synodality-social-alliances-and-institutional-models-in-global-catholicism/14281>; Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward Hahnenberg, eds., "A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium." *Liturgical Press*, (2015).

<sup>11</sup> Teun A. Van Dijk, "Opinions and Ideologies in Editorials." In *4th International Symposium of Critical Discourse Analysis, Language, Social Life, and Critical Thought* (Athens, December 1995), 14-16.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Steinfels, and Robert G. Hoyt, 81; Founder of the National Catholic Reporter. *New York Times*, April 12, 2003. Accessed January 12, 2023 <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/12/nyregion/robert-g-hoyt-81-founder-of-national-catholic-reporter.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Sandelowski, "What is in a Name? Qualitative Description Revisited." *Research in Nursing and Health* 33, no.1 (2010): 77-84.



## 2.2 THE OBJECT OF STUDY

We selected the reportages and commentaries via purposive sampling based on a single inclusion criterion: published from October 1, 2021, to October 31, 2022. Table 1 shows the news accounts and commentaries distribution from the selected online Catholic newspapers.

*Table 1. Distribution of Selected Newspapers*

Newspapers	Website	Frequency	Percentage
The Union of Catholic Asia News	<a href="https://www.ucanews.com/">https://www.ucanews.com/</a>	50	21.4
The Catholic World Report	<a href="https://www.catholicworldreport.com/">https://www.catholicworldreport.com/</a>	45	19.0
The Tablet	<a href="https://www.thetablet.co.uk/">https://www.thetablet.co.uk/</a>	45	19.0
The Catholic Herald	<a href="https://catholicherald.co.uk/">https://catholicherald.co.uk/</a>	18	8.0
La Croix	<a href="https://international.la-croix.com/">https://international.la-croix.com/</a>	20	9.0
The Crux	<a href="https://cruxnow.com/">https://cruxnow.com/</a>	57	24.0
Total		235	100

## 2.3 PROCEDURE

We searched the archives of six online Catholic newspapers to collect relevant data. Next, we retrieved their news accounts and commentaries on the synodal process using a combination of four sets of keywords in English, namely, “synodality,” “synodal process,” “synodal path,” and “synodal church.” Our three-month archival search initially produced a total number of 256 news accounts and 83 commentaries. However, via purposive sampling, we selected 235 and discarded the rest.

## 2.4 DATA ANALYSIS

We conducted a thematic analysis of qualitative data according to the six steps proposed by

Braun and Clarke.<sup>14</sup> First, adopting a resonance perspective, we immersed ourselves in the data transcripts, read and reread them, and took notes of our initial impressions. Second, we identified the initial codes using a software tool and collated the anchors relevant to each code. Third, we collated the codes into potential themes and gathered all relevant phenomenal referents. Fourth, we reviewed the themes, checking if they resonated with the extracts and the entire data set. In turn, we named the themes and refined their specifics and the comprehensive narrative report that the analysis reveals, yielding clear definitions and names for each theme. Fifth, we wrote the initial narrative report as the last step for fine tuning the analysis. Sixth, we selected and reviewed the selected vivid, compelling extracts, relating the analysis to the three research questions and current literature, and produced a final narrative report. Finally, and for good measure, we conducted a member-checking procedure to arrive at a consensus on the validity and trustworthiness of the thematic analysis of the data.

## 3. FINDINGS

This study explored the selected journalists’ news accounts and commentaries on the synodal process moving between describing and understanding the concerns raised on its potentials and limits, the arguments for or against its reception, and the proposals on how to harness its pastoral style of listening and discernment at all levels of the church organization. Table 2 quantitatively describes the codes relevant to the three themes.

<sup>14</sup> Victoria Clarke, Virginia Braun, and Nikki Hayfield, “Thematic Analysis.” *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods* 3 (2015): 222–248.



Table 2. Distributions of the Codes per Identified Themes

Newspapers	Concerns about the process	Arguments for the process	Arguments against the process	Proposals moving forward	Frequency	Percentage
Union of Catholic News	36	47	4	39	126	0.08
Catholic World Report	82	89	13	55	239	0.17
The Tablet	326	180	7	146	659	0.46
The Catholic Herald	166	60	29	42	297	0.21
La Croix	26	23	8	29	86	0.059
The Crux	17	11	12	5	45	0.03
Total	653	410	73	316	1452	1.0

### 3.1 SYNODALITY IN THE DOCK

The synodal path revolves around the three themes of communion, participation, and mission. More specifically, Francis intends to use it as a vehicle to implement his perceived neglected reforms of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) and the cornerstone of more vital participation from all of the members of the Church. Moreover, it also seeks to address the fault lines in modern Catholicism on the issues of women, celibacy, sexuality, marriage, clericalism, and hierarchism. However, powerful tensions are inherent in the process, and Pope Francis himself faces opposition to promoting a synodal model of the church shaken by history and post-modernity.<sup>15</sup> In this study, it is interesting to note that, given the inherent diversity in the churches, “one but many,” it is not surprising that Francis’s *call for synodality has been received differently by enquiring minds*. It has been met with skepticism, enthusiasm, disappointment,

<sup>15</sup> Sean Macdonald. (2022). “Synodal Journey Must Not Descend into ‘Them and Us’ Process Warns Archbishop,” *The Tablet*, July 26, 2022. Accessed October 30, 2022, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/15695/synodal-journey-must-not-descend-into-them-and-us-process-warns-archbishop>

excitement, and hope.<sup>16</sup> More specifically, on the one side of the fray are those *reform-minded Catholics* who support the synodal path as the way forward. Those who opposed the process are *Catholics who want constancy and continuity with the past and are concerned about its alleged dire consequences. They say it threatens the Church’s apostolicity and unity and could result in heresies and schisms*.

### COMMUNION

Francis teaches that the synodal process is an essential dimension of the church based on its self-understanding as the Pilgrim People of God. However, there are not a few of those who, on the contrary, wondered whether it could damage rather than create communion in the Church. The newspapers reported the questions in Rome and other ecclesial capitals worldwide, whether the synodal process would do more harm than good in a church already shaken by internal and external challenges.

Will the synodal process work? Will it help heal divisions in the church and foster a community that can spread the Gospel, care for the marginalized, and heals the Earth? Or will it blow up and show the world how divided we Catholics are?<sup>17</sup>

### PARTICIPATION

Since the start of his papacy, Francis, in words and gestures, has pushed for changes that would expand the participation in the decision-making and leadership roles of women and lay people in the Church. The synodal path would be its

<sup>16</sup> Rene Darline Roden. (2022). “The Struggle-Synodality in the US,” *The Tablet*, July 13, 2022. Accessed October 29, 2022, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/22074/the-struggle-synodality-in-the-united-states>

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Reese, “Synod on Synodality Had Its Doubters, but It Is Proving to be a Balm for ‘Enduring Wounds,’” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 3, 2022. Accessed October 12, 2022, <https://www.ncronline.org/authors/thomas-reese>





primary vehicle but may be the most contentious among the three themes. There is considerable observation that the desired level of participation in quantity and quality has left much to be desired. Not a few said that it was disappointing for most of the members of the Church, who were oblivious to the whole synodal process.

Some dioceses have yet to make much effort at listening.<sup>18</sup>

Some find their dioceses to be lukewarm about the process; others experience a church locked into habits of bureaucratic communication.<sup>19</sup>

However, the details of the process could be more problematic. There were persistent questions about how it will be collated and synthesized from the diocesan to the regional and continental phases in one final report representing the 1.3 billion Catholics worldwide. There is a concern about the disproportionate power of those who will collate the participants' responses and interpret and express the findings.

Many saw the process as farcical. Questions arose early on about the transparency of the synodal process. Who is in charge of collating the answers in the diocese? What sort of document will they produce? Can we read it? Moreover, can we complain if we disagree with the final statement? No answers were given.<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, there were doubts about whether anything concrete would come from the consultation process collected through some critics called useless, unscientific questionnaires. There is the danger of raising false expectations.

Still, others felt the process would be futile, that no matter what was said in the meetings, the bishops would do what they wanted; nothing would change.<sup>21</sup>

As Francis acknowledges, "Walking together - Laity, Pastors, the Bishop of Rome - is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice."<sup>22</sup>

## MISSION

Another element of the process is mission. Although the church's mission seems clear to everyone as its reason for being, the synodal process triggered concerns about how the process might impact its evangelizing task in a secular and pluralist world.

Their "binding synodal path" is a program for capitulation to the Spirit of the Age. They have claimed they want their model of synodality to become a template for the global practice of synodality.<sup>23</sup>

Summarily, the study labels the concerns raised about the synodal process as, *in the dock*, a tidy summation of its state of affairs in a church at a crossroads, implying that it figuratively stands on trial before the court of public opinion. Trying cases in the court of public opinion refers to using the media to influence public support for one side or the other in a court of law. Considering all this, we now turn to the arguments for and against the synodal process.

### 3.2 A BLESSING IN DISGUISE?

For the believers in the synodal process, communion would refer to "the conversation that could lead to a conversion to Christ and commitment to active participation in the

<sup>18</sup> Frank Callus, "The Bishops Must Hear the Laity If the Synodal Process Is to Succeed." *The Tablet*, August 9, 2021. Accessed November 22, 2022, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/1838/the-bishops-must-hear-the-laity-if-the-synodal-process-is-to-succeed>

<sup>19</sup> Roden, *The Struggle-Synodality in the US*.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Gustel Wörnberg, "What is the Point of the Synod?" *The Catholic Herald*, April 5, 2022. Accessed November 22, 2022, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/ch/what-is-the-point-of-the-synod/>

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Reese, "Pope Francis' Big Gamble: The Synod on Synodality." NCR, September 8, 2022. Accessed November 10, 2022, @ <https://www.ncronline.org/sections/opinion>.

<sup>22</sup> Justin Stanwix, "Growing the Synodal Parish -- the Cornerstone of a Synodal Church," *La Croix*, January 27, 2022. Accessed October 15, 2022 <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/growing-the-synodal-parish-the-cornerstone-of-a-synodal-church/15545>.

<sup>23</sup> Charles R. Altieri, "The 'New' Synodal 'Process' Is Under-thought and Oversold," *The Catholic Herald*, 2021. <https://catholicherald.co.uk/the-new-synodal-process-is-under-thought-and-oversold/>.





mission given by Christ.<sup>24</sup> It quickly gained traction among those who wanted change and saw the church as one body with many members. They defended its continuity with ecclesial tradition, particularly Vatican II, a reminder that history cannot be disregarded.

What is the origin of synods? From the church's earliest days, people gathered to discern when they faced a crisis or a turning point. The Acts of the Apostles tell that when the early Christian communities needed to resolve some practical issues or pastoral questions, they held an assembly of believers, called on the Holy Spirit, and discussed with those in authority.<sup>25</sup>

The believers have taken the cudgels for Francis and his synodal path. In response to the concerns about its perceived blind spots, they pinpointed its purpose and expected a positive impact on how the church can better carry out its mission worldwide.

Its objective is the synodal conversion of the church through a process that engages the people of God in all the local Churches. It is a great prayer and search for God's will on how to be Church, exist best, and pursue its mission in the world.<sup>26</sup>

The calls are the hallmark of the Pope's efforts to change the church's life.<sup>27</sup>

It is worth noting that the process claims to engage the participation of the church members and listen to their concerns. Indeed, there is nothing new to the idea that members talking and listening to one another is familiar. However, it now seems different because the clergy, who usually do all the talking, are asked to listen,

<sup>24</sup> Justin Stanwix, "Synodality with 'Full, Conscious and Active Participation,'" *La Croix*, December 20, 2020. Accessed November 20, 2022, <https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/news-2020>

<sup>25</sup> Honorine Gasset, A Brief History of Synodality Synodal Process, from the Early Church to the Pontificate of Pope Francis," *La Croix International*, October 9, 2021. Accessed October 24, 2022, <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/a-short-history-of-synodality/15016>.

<sup>26</sup> Anne Beatrice Faye, "Religious Life and the Path Towards a Synodal Church," *La Croix International*, April 13, 2022. Accessed October 9, 2022, <https://international.la-croix.com/country/senegal/153>

<sup>27</sup> Dennis Sadowski, "Pope's Desire for Synodality Will Reshape the Church," UCAN, May 6, 2021. Accessed November 20, 2022, <https://www.ucanews.com/author/dennis-sadowski>

and the laity, who do all the listening, are given a chance to talk. Thus, heeding Francis' call, most, if not all, regional and national bishops' conferences organized synodal encounters and consultative meetings at the diocesan and parish levels.

Synod has been the most significant consultation effort in human history and an extraordinary attempt to listen to the voices of the world's 1.36 billion Catholics.<sup>28</sup>

In the United States, 700,000 Catholics participated in the local synod listening exercises; in Spain, it was around 200,000; in France, 150,000; in England and Wales, 30,000. The numbers are without any obvious precedent in a Catholic context.<sup>29</sup>

Arguing that the church can no longer rely solely on old discredited ecclesiastical structures and clerical culture, its promoters expected it to create an environment conducive to greater lay participation in the Church's decision-making process. All this attracts those who alleged that the church tends to be overly juridical and bureaucratic.

The only way is synodal because the Church cannot be autocratic anymore.<sup>30</sup>

They envision synodality as a contemporary corrective to an understanding of the church that was overly concerned with legal restrictions and the exercise of power. More specifically, they offer it as an antidote to a culture of clericalism.

One of the barriers to a more synodal church is clericalism, a phenomenon that sees power concentrated in the hands of an elite group – lay or ordained. The synod document says Catholics "signal

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Lamb, "Synodality and the Listening Church," *The Tablet*, October 13, 2022. Accessed November 2, 2022. <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/author/15/christopher-lamb>

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Lamb, "Role of Women Must Be Tackled 'Urgently' in Catholic Church," *The Tablet*, October 27, 2022. Accessed November 2, 2022, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/>

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Lamb, "Unprecedented Synod Process Moves into Next Phase," *The Tablet*, August 27, 2022, Accessed October 16, 2022, [Unprecedented' synod process moves into next phase \(thetablet.co.uk\)](https://www.thetablet.co.uk/)





the importance of ridding the church of clericalism so that all its members, including priests and laity, can fulfill a joint mission.<sup>31</sup>

The promoters of synodality also presented the process as a way to reshape the church to stay relevant and effective in its evangelizing mission in what was often described as a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world. They claimed it could be the key to unlocking the correct response to today's church's many controversial issues and challenges.

The call of Pope Francis to synodality is significant as much for its timing as for its intent. As the world emerges from a pandemic, we should address the critical questions of what the church is for, how it should engage, and how these changes might transform its sense of being a church.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, the synodal process is offered as a form of witnessing in the public sphere, where discourse has become toxic and rude. Political debates and social media have increased concerns around polarization, labeling, and an attempt to silence people.

If we learn and practice these skills in the church, the synodal process can be seen as having something to offer wider society.<sup>33</sup>

In summary, the news accounts and commentaries called the synodal process in the following words: "the greatest gamble of Francis' papacy," "a Holy Spirit-listening exercise that urges the People of God – lay people, clergy, and bishops – to continue 'walking together' along the synodal path despite the pitfalls," "a hit and miss affair," "a great innovation," "is not a bad idea," "a magic

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Lamb, "Tensions Flare in Australia Council over the Role of Women in Catholic Church," *The Tablet*, July 6, 2022. Accessed November 2, 2022, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/>

<sup>32</sup> Frank Callus, "Synodality and the Role of the Church in a Post-Covid World," *The Tablet*, January 25, 2022, Accessed November 2, 2022, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/1976/synodality-and-the-role-of-the-church-in-a-post-covid-world>

<sup>33</sup> Sean Macdonald, "Bishops Want Synodality to Work," *The Tablet*, April 1, 2022, Accessed October 30, 2022, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/22074/the-struggle-synodality-in-the-united-states>

formula that can solve the profound problems afflicts us in the church today," and "the largest consultation process in the history of the church."

### 3.3 A POISONED CHALICE?

Nonetheless, those who always wanted constancy and continuity with the past would beg to differ. Insisting that its nature and purpose must be explained, they are skeptical and openly disagree with the direction Francis would want to take the church of the future. The common thread we hear from them about the process is that it needs to be more specific for their comfort.

What exactly is a synodal church? The problem was that everyone felt that the actual aim of the synod needed to be clarified.<sup>34</sup>

It has yet to be determined precisely what it means.<sup>35</sup>

Interestingly, a well-organized group also aimed at Francis and questioned his pastoral mode and motives—something unthinkable during the papacy of his two immediate predecessors. Questioning its legitimacy, they doubled down on their claim that the process is a covert attempt to overturn certain church teachings.

At times, synodality is perceived to only be like a Francis-que initiative. It is an open-ended enterprise in the church, a form of lexical idiosyncrasy from Pope Francis.<sup>36</sup>

It stretches credulity, therefore, to think that a "synodal" church will be formed via a papacy that often lacks transparency.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ken Craycraft, "Traveling Together?" *The Catholic Herald*, October 22, 2021, Accessed Nov. 22, 2022, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/travelling-together/>

<sup>35</sup> Thomas O'Loughlin, "Getting a Feel for Synodality," *La Croix*, November 10, 2021, Accessed Nov. 22, 2022, <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/getting-the-feel-for-what-synodality-means/15188>

<sup>36</sup> Charles R. Altieri, "Synodality Means Whatever Pope Francis Wants It to Mean," *The Catholic World Report*, June 16, 2022, Accessed November 5, 2022, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2022/06/16/synodality-means-whatever-pope-francis-wants-it-to-mean/>

<sup>37</sup> Larry Chapp, "The Quintessentially Modern Approach to 'Synodality' Is Empty and Artificial," *The Catholic World Report*, April 28, 2022, Accessed November 11, 2022, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/author/chapp-larry/>







They also alleged that it undermined the unity and apostolicity of the church and warned of schism and heresy if the ambiguities of the process were not addressed. At the very least, they contend that it will be another misguided attempt at solving a problem without knowing how the problem came to be in the first place. They also raised concerns that the proposed synodal process would be a worse cure than the illness and could do more harm than good to a church already shaken by sexual and financial abuse scandals.

Doing it would represent a wound to ecclesial communion and threaten the church's unity.<sup>38</sup>

Given its unrepresentative participation and most probably flawed sampling selection, the critics countered that the time and resources spent on the consultations would have been better elsewhere. Its perceived faulty use of social scientific methods is not something its supporters can wrap their arms around even if they want to.

Only a few ordinary Catholics participated.<sup>39</sup>

Stop the charade about a "listening church" with its thoroughly unsystematic and unscientific questionnaires designed to give their creators precisely what they wanted to hear in the first place.<sup>40</sup>

They contend that the decision-making style of the process is based on something other than tradition and degrades the role of the bishops and priests as leaders. For them, it is synonymous with liberalization and baptizing the plausibility structures of secular modernity. More surprisingly, critics also pointed out that some

<sup>38</sup> Phillip Pullella and Thomas Escrib, "Vatican Puts Brakes on Progressive German Catholic Movement," *Reuters*, July 22, 2022, Accessed November 2, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/pope-warns-progressive-german-catholic-movement-not-threaten-church-unity-2022-07-21/>

<sup>39</sup> Charles Lamb, "The Outsider Pope: Where Is Francis Leading Our Church?" *Catholic Outlook*, July 13, 2022, Accessed October 16, 2022, <https://catholicoutlook.org/where-is-the-outsider-pope-leading-our-church/>

<sup>40</sup> Chapp, 2.

clergy and laity members did not participate in consultative meetings at the diocesan and parish levels.

The report also suggests that the synod faces a significant hurdle in getting members of the church hierarchy to engage in the process.<sup>41</sup>

Clerics and parishioners are more preoccupied with their local parochial activities and celebrations, fund-raising, and feeding programs.<sup>42</sup>

Concerns about the process seemed to have spiked when some leading theologians began questioning its potential impact on how the church's mission would be carried out. In addition, they argued that it would not contribute to a more effective proclamation of the Gospel but could inflame disputes within the church or provoke an inward-looking, navel-gazing Church.

The world does not need the church to embark on yet another round of agonized introspection; it needs us to be confident in our proclamation of God's love, forgiveness, and mercy.<sup>43</sup>

Synodal dialogue may be a fixation on the process, implicit in calls to make the synodal process permanent, and risks the creation of a dominantly inward-looking, evangelically sterile church.<sup>44</sup>

In summary, the doubters minced no words in criticizing and decrying the synodal process—none of which painted Francis and his synodal path in a positive light. It is an "ambitious, propaganda and masquerade with a hidden agenda," "a machination, farcical, disavowing so much Catholic doctrine," "prefers sociology

<sup>41</sup> Lamb, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Adam A. J. DeVille, "The Dispatch from "Synodality" to "Congregationalism" and Back Again," *The Catholic World Report*, Accessed October 24, 2022, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2022/05/17/opinion-from-synodality-to-congregationalism-and-back-again/>.

<sup>43</sup> Niall Gooch, "Can the "Synod on Synodality" Help the Church?" *The Catholic Herald*, October 27, 2021, Accessed November 8, 2022, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/ch/will-the-synod-on-synodality-help-the-church/>

<sup>44</sup> Francis X. Maier, "Synodality and Its Issues," *Catholic World Report*, September 9, 2022, Accessed Oct. 2, 2022, [https://eppc.org/author/francis\\_maier/](https://eppc.org/author/francis_maier/).





to theology, and power to vulnerable love,” “an ill-defined journey, a complex and sometimes even complicated procedure, which in our parts runs the risk of becoming ideological,” “a synod on synodality may seem like an oxymoron,” “is under-thought and oversold,” “has ordered all the faithful everywhere in the world to spend the next two years gazing at their navels,” “basically, a program for capitulation to the Spirit of the Age,” “a kind of ecclesiastical parliament in which church discipline (and even doctrine) must change according to the will of the majority,” “a journeying together but toward no defined terminus,” “more Marx than Jesus, more zeitgeist than Holy Spirit,” “an overused word that admits a certain and dangerous ambiguity,” “a petty thing and the height of absurdity, and can become a tool for negative ends,” and “an essentially modern enterprise of bureaucratic legerdemain and a toxic nightmare.” We now turn to the third theme.

### 3.4 FINDING COMMON GROUND

The word synodality is invoked as both a boon and bane within the contemporary church, a strange institution where it seems that talking about something sometimes means achieving it. To some, it is a boon of the church, a blessing in disguise, a fresh wind of the Spirit Francis conjured to revitalize its aging bones. This is particularly true of an emerging ecclesiological school that picked up where Francis and his team of advisers left off last year. They helped decipher the noise of the synodal narratives, and anyone still needs to be convinced about its intent and dynamics. They acknowledged the elephant in the room, for all its relevant context, without crumbling under its weight. Others see synodality as a bane of the Catholic Church, the poisoned cup that, like an unseen pathogen, is creeping up on the church but unnoticed by many: schisms and heresies. They helped

identify its challenges and issues and asked genuine questions about how much it could work. Moreover, the Vatican must show more understanding of addressing its structural and standard limitations to achieve its goals. So far, it seems to have achieved the exact opposite of what it was supposed to: Francis’ goals to foster communion and participation have encouraged his critics and doubters to question his papacy and agenda for the church.

In both cases, however, synodality remains a complicated and ambivalent concept— a slippery slope eluding a shared understanding. Alternatively, a chameleon takes on whatever characteristics the protagonists would want it to. If it is seen as a blessing, synodality will be defined as a transformative and inverted pyramid, just what the doctor would prescribe for an ailing church. If it is seen as a poisoned chalice, it will be defined as a terrible mistake and departure from cherished traditions, giving stability and continuity in a rapidly changing world. This study was conducted to help all the shareholders - clergy, laity, and religious- find common ground that could alter the course of church life and mission today.

However, even after a moderately successful launch of its process at the national and regional levels, more critical questions linger as the church prepares for the continental stage in October 2023. The big question surrounding the synodal process right now is whether or not it is just for show. Here are the five questions on our minds before it hits the ground running, so to speak, in October 2023; plenty of time for many doubters to hop on board. They would pinpoint the old ecclesiastical paradigms which seemed to stand in the way of the synodal process. It is clear and present dangers that include the clericalist mindset and tendency of the clergy to control and monopolize the dialogue, the centralized





structure of the church's administration, the ideological struggle between the opposing sides, the lack of balance between what can change and cannot change in the church and the insufficient appreciation of the contribution of the social sciences in making the process more credible and trustworthy.

#### CAN THE CLERGY FIND THE TIME TO LISTEN MORE AND TALK LESS?

The first and most urgent step is clear: the clergy must find the time to meet at the table and listen actively and without judgment to the laity. Experience shows that a top-to-bottom approach to doing and being church would require much less time and be less messy. However, in a paper that engages synodality in the Church, associate professor of practical theology at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa, Amanda Osheim, asserts that "the people must find the time to be with one another in prayer and dialogue to attend to the Spirit's prompting to speak and listen, to seek truth and reconciliation, and to build mutuality and trust."<sup>45</sup> Beyond the initial synodal consultations, the laity must be allowed to voice their opinions and be given respect and attention by the clergy, something easier said than done by the would-be dialogue partners. An honest sharing of the sense of faith lived within diverse and intersecting contexts can help all members better understand the different viewpoints and identify areas of agreement. Some clerics and laity may need to be more comfortable with open and honest communication. That is why there is a need to create more welcoming structures in the parishes, to create a sense of belonging and ownership. This can prevent misunderstandings and promote a more consultative and productive exchange

<sup>45</sup> Amanda C. Osheim, "Stepping toward a Synodal Church," *Theological Studies* 80, no.2 (2019): 370-392.

of narratives and perspectives from emergent postmodern congregations drawing on the postmodern world's anti-institutional mentality.<sup>46</sup>

#### WOULD THE CLERGY EXPAND THE DECISION-MAKING AND LEADERSHIP ROLES OF THE LAITY?

Second, given that the relationship between the center and the peripheries has always been critical in the Church's life and history. Faggioli contends that constructive dialogue must be a central consideration that the power has been concentrated so that nothing significant seems to happen without clerical intervention.<sup>47</sup> Some clerics think the entire church revolves around them. Clericalism contributes to the gap between expected and actual behavior and creates an environment and culture where problem behavior and struggles are too often ignored.<sup>48</sup> A strong feeling of insecurity in the clergy leads to distrust of lay talents and charisms. It also leads to blocking the Lord's gifts and limiting the laity's participation to "paying, praying, obeying," and, if we may add, "going around the neighborhood asking for donations." As Pereira asked, "Is there a future for a more democratic church?" Alternatively, does the synodal church have a future?<sup>49</sup> Another way in which clericalism finds expression is by clericalizing the laity. The temptation is to try to continue as if nothing has changed and often to ask lay people to fill roles previously carried out by clergy in a way that suggests they are the ones who are

<sup>46</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Who Is Afraid of Postmodernism? (The Church and Postmodern Culture): Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Baker Academic, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Massimo Faggioli, "Synodus Locuta," *La Croix*, June 10, 2022, Accessed April 6, 2022, <https://international.la-croix.com/author/authorname?authorname=Massimo%20Faggioli> Religious Life and the Path towards a Synodal Church

<sup>48</sup> Thomas G. Plante, "Clericalism Contributes to Religious, Spiritual, and Behavioral Struggles among Catholic Priests," *Religions* 11, no.5 (2020): 217.

<sup>49</sup> Myron J. Pereira, "Is There a Future for a More Democratic Church?" *Union of Catholic Asian News*, April 18, 2023, Accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/is-there-a-future-for-a-more-democratic-church/101015>





genuinely living out their baptismal calling as opposed to those who live out their Christianity in the course of their ordinary daily lives.<sup>50</sup>

As Maier pointed out, there is an urgent call these days ‘to unload power’ or clericalist burdens so that the lay stop being their vassals and start assuming their shared rights and duties by baptism.<sup>51</sup> One extreme measure proposed to abolish clericalism is to abolish the clergy.<sup>52</sup> It may be true that the clergy, by their office and academic formation, are more equipped to lead than the ordinary laypeople. Moreover, it is also true that clerics who lord it over are exceptionally few because an overwhelming majority are, like Francis, humble and smell like their sheep. However, the potentially injurious abuse and misuse of clerical powers, even by a handful, could be attributed to a failure of the entire ecclesiastical organization, as in the case of clerical financial and sexual abuses. The result could be the need for lay people’s leadership development and, on the other hand, the growing feeling that organized religion rarely serves a purpose in people’s lives nowadays. Along with these considerations, those who control power must learn new ways of relating to those at the peripheries by addressing clericalism’s attitudinal and structural roots.<sup>53</sup> The laity should be given more organized and structured responsibility, and given the steady decline in vocations to priestly and religious life in most parts of the Catholic world, the church will need the laity now more than ever.

As a result, the lay ministry has become too dependent on the clergy; nothing significant

seems to happen around the church without them. Thus, dismantling clericalism in the church would require a radical shift in their habitual ecclesiological mindset that could demand equally dramatic attitudinal and structural change at all levels of the Eparchy’s life. Where once the clergy had a monopoly of truth, now following the synodal process, it is faced with the evangelical imperative to receive the laity as co-equal and sources of the *sensus fidelium*, and that, although they have distinct roles or functions in the church, are co-responsible disciples of Jesus Christ. Based on this understanding, it has become imperative for the church to create or build new structures and cultures of communion, participation, and missionary spirit at every level of its ecclesial life.<sup>54</sup>

The sociologist-priest John J. Carroll contends that power is exercised in a consensus-driven relationship system to promote and protect its core values in the community’s name.<sup>55</sup> In contrast to the coercion theory, Carroll argues that people should agree on their goals and establish societal institutions to realize these values and achieve critical goals. To reduce these inequalities in power and resources, Carroll saw a viable strategy in what he called “the Interest Group Model.” In this model, various local organizations at the lowest strata of society are linked with each other and connected with broader organizations at the provincial and national levels. It is no different from the dioceses and parishes in the church—e.g., the parishes and basic ecclesial communities. The essential thing is that they organize and come together to advance their common concerns and interests via policies and programs, and not personal connections or favors.

<sup>50</sup> Eamonn Fitzgibbon, “Clericalization of the Laity: A Prescient Warning of Pope Francis for the Catholic Church in Ireland,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85, no.1 (2020): 16–34.

<sup>51</sup> Maier, 2.

<sup>52</sup> Luke Coppen, “Call to Abolish the Clergy Ignites Controversy in Belgium.” *The Pillar*, March 8, 2023, Accessed, <https://muckrack.com/media-outlet/pillar-catholic>.

<sup>53</sup> Judith Gruber, “Consensus or Dissensus? Exploring the Theological Role of Conflict in a Synodal Church.” *Louvain Studies* 43, no.3 (2020): 239–259.

<sup>54</sup> Kristin Colberg, “Expanding Horizons 150 Years after Vatican I: Toward a Renewed Relationship between Synodality and Primacy,” *Theological Studies* 83, no.1 (2022): 70–83.

<sup>55</sup> John J. Carroll, *Engaging Society: The Sociologist in a War Zone*. (Ateneo University Press, 2006).





## CAN THE OPPOSING SIDES FOCUS ON SHARED VALUES?

Third, dividing the opposing sides may require them to recover and focus on a standard set of shared values. The synodal process created tension between contemporary values of Western culture (such as equality and freedom of expression) and more conservative values traditionally held by the Church (such as obedience to authority). There is a positive relationship between values congruence between church members and their churches and organizational commitment.<sup>56</sup> (Dunaetz et al., 2020). Focusing and conversing on shared values can help shift the debates and discussions away from disagreements and towards standard directions or goals. For instance, recovering such vital value as the *sensus fidelium* opened the door to a much more dialogical conception of revelation than that which limits it to the *ecclesia docens* of the magisterium. Maier argued that synodality significantly considers the 'sensus fidei,' where the power to listen and the courage to speak dialogically bring about the betterment of others.<sup>57</sup>

As opposed to strategic communication, Jürgen Habermas calls this communicative action - that which seeks mutual understanding and possesses no strategic goal other than achieving an authentic consensus.<sup>58</sup> Built on the principles of a universal secular ethic of responsibility, it can provide the marginalized members the courage to speak and, without abdicating their

autonomy, rediscover their sense of belonging and co-responsibility. Habermas thus holds that a decision-making process based on verbal

exchange brings people together, not only because it obliges them to seek rational solutions acceptable to everyone but also because it leads them to see each other as possessed of equal dignity.<sup>59</sup>

## CAN THE CHURCH FOCUS ON THE PROCESS OF HANDING OVER THE FAITH?

Fourth, given that the church does not exist for itself alone but is called to live out its apostolic call to encounter others and share the Gospel. The synodal process is one way Francis thinks that the Church's customs, way of doing things, times and schedules, language, and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.<sup>60</sup> The church could be more effective in its mission when it focuses more on handling the faith (*trader*) than what can and cannot change (*trade*).<sup>61</sup> It is a synodal church that communicates the faith for today rooted in tradition yet open to the currents of experience probably not discernible within that same tradition. The synodal process could also be a form of witnessing in the public sphere, where discourse has often become emotional and subjective. It mirrors the church as an organized community where all members are considered equal in dignity and thus afforded the rare opportunity to speak about their concerns and be heard without fear or favor.

Francis holds that to complete the church building project, it needs to become a community of holy discernment where members exhibit the courage to set aside their personal preferences in a humbling and disciplined exercise of listening

<sup>56</sup> David R. Dunaetz, D. R., Smyly, C., Fairley, C. M., and Heykoop, C., "Values Congruence and Organizational Commitment in Churches: When Do Shared Values Matter?" *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (2020).

<sup>57</sup> Maier, 4.

<sup>58</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Vol. 2. (Beacon Press, 1985).

<sup>59</sup> Philippe Portier, "Religion and Democracy in the Thought of Jürgen Habermas," *Society* 48, no.5 (2011): 426.

<sup>60</sup> Richard R. Gaillardetz, "Building on Vatican II: Setting the Agenda for the Church of the 21st Century," *The Forum* 44, no.1 (2013): 67-90.

<sup>61</sup> T. Howland Sanks, "A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Dynamics of Tradition," *Theological Studies* 76, no.2 (2015): 298-310.





to the echoes of the word reverberating in the life of the church through the power of the Spirit.<sup>62</sup> However, aside from its strategic reason, there is a need to make it a normatively regulated action that arises from norms and is regulated and normalized by them. The Indian theologian Felix Wilfred asserts that “if no structural changes are effected, all efforts of the two years of preparations, the colossal exercises and rhetoric would be wasted. The talks should result in fundamental structural changes.”<sup>63</sup>

It is safe to assume that Francis did not intend the synodal process to be a panacea for nearly everything that ails the church of today. However, it can at least provide the catalyst that the church needs to reshape its future by conducting business through consultation and consensus-building in adherence to its purpose. A one-size-fits-all is no longer acceptable in an organization as “glocal” as the Church. For him and his supporters, it could be the work of the Holy Spirit when done in conditions of freedom and charity for all, something easier said than done. However, it requires them to be conciliatory and to work for compromise statements that do not settle legitimately controverted questions but rather express what they can accept as statements of the common faith.<sup>64</sup>

#### WOULD THE CHURCH ENGAGE SCIENCE AS A DIALOGUE PARTNER TO SERVE ITS ECCLESIAL PRACTICE?

Fifth, the sensitivity and complexity of the process are such that it also demands the assistance and guidance of neutral third parties who can provide a more objective perspective

and help to facilitate the discussions. Besides, one of the concerns about the synodal process is that groups may hijack its collated data to serve their interests. Another is the alleged unscientific gathering of data. It is also a fact that the Church rarely uses the specific and qualified contribution of the lay faithful, including women, in their areas of expertise. The charism of practical and empirical theologians can also offer a specific service. Reality is “out there,” always more complex than a single theological interpretation. The social scientific method could be a tool that could more clearly illuminate the synodal reality and light a path to its effective and sustained implementation. Thus, it would be appropriate to use empirical research as a reference point for discussions about synodality and as a dialogue partner to better respond to the needs and concerns of the people of our times.

Religious and theological have been trustworthy sources of knowledge and truth in the religious square. Faith-based reasons are sufficient to explain and defend the church’s truth claims. It is also true that faith and science can stand on common ground and that it is incumbent on religious leaders to pay attention to what the sciences are saying about reality and to seek appropriate ecclesial frameworks and structures to accommodate them. The healthy and mutually beneficial partnership between religion and science is a proven historical fact that the recent COVID-19 pandemic has once again made people realize.<sup>65</sup> In his encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis used science to describe environmental degradation with great accuracy and, in the process, has helped to bridge the gap between faith and the views that dominate the religious anti-science movement.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Gaillardetz and Hahnenberg, eds. *A Church with Open Doors*.

<sup>63</sup> Felix Wilfred, “Synodal Talks Meaningless without Fundamental Changes,” *UCA News*, April 26, 2022, Accessed July 25, 2022, <https://www.ucanews.com/author/rock-ronald-rozario>.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph A. Komonchak, “Ecclesiology of Vatican II,” *Origins* 28 (1999): 763–768.

<sup>65</sup> Wesley J. Wildman, J. Bulbulia, R. Sosis, and U. Schjoedt, “Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Religion, Brain and Behavior* 10, no.2 (2020): 115–117.

<sup>66</sup> David M. Lodge, “Faith and Science Can Find Common Ground,” *Nature* 523, no.7562 (2015): 503–503.





Without empirical research, theology would ignore lived religion or, in technical terms, the *sensus fidei* and *consensus fidelium*, which since the Vatican II have functioned as a criterion and source of the authenticity of the Christian faith and the church.<sup>67</sup>

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although the thematic analysis adopted in this study revealed themes and insights into the correspondents' accounts and commentators' perspectives on the synodal process, the study has three limitations that must be considered in appreciating its findings. First, we discarded several equally relevant and insightful articles because they needed to meet the inclusion criteria based on the publication dates. They would have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the said interventions in their ways. Second, the Pope, the primary "person of interest" for this paper, was not heard to explain his side of the story. Although much has been written about him and his synodal process, his direct testimony in reply to the arguments raised would have resonated more than ever. Third, we needed more time and resources to get into the articles' latent content, which could have enhanced the reliability and validity of the analysis. Despite these limitations, this thematic analysis of how correspondents and commentators perceived the synodal process of Francis can enhance a better-shared understanding among all stakeholders of how and why the synodal process may work and the extent to which its successful and sustainable implementation may be improved and sustained at all levels of church's life. Its findings also contribute to an alternative perspective of the dynamic relationship among the church

members based on their equal dignity and co-responsibilities for its life and mission.

In this vein, the vigorous debates sparked by the synodal process may hamstring Francis' effort to revitalize and reform the church. However, they could also be seen as a sign of ecclesial vitality. One cliché says, "It is all part of the process." Although they tend to make it more complex than it should be, the debates also make the process more exciting and interesting than usual. In the long run, they might prove beneficial as they help decipher its hidden strengths and limitations. The issues the skeptics and doubters raised are also concerning and must be adequately addressed. The charges they made against it of lacking theological clarity and pastoral feasibility, among others, should have merited the setting aside of possible bias against them that believers cannot and must not dismiss.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Using thematic content analysis, this study aimed to contribute to the discourses on the synodal process of Francis from the perspectives of the selected news reports and commentaries published online in five Catholic newspapers. A warm and cool analysis of the data set yielded three themes- concerns about its theological and practical aspects, the arguments for and against it, and suggestions on how to make it work more effectively and sustainably. How the church addresses these three areas will shape the effective and sustainable practice of the synodal process in the church of the future.

The promise and potential of the synodal path were handed a reality check of the challenging work ahead for Francis as the debate between two opposing sides rages. To his credit, Francis has taken all the controversies in strides. Like his

<sup>67</sup> Johannes A. Van Der Ven, "An Empirical or a Normative Approach to Practical-Theological Research? A False Dilemma," In *Normativity and Empirical Research in Theology* (Brill, 2004), 101-135.





namesake Francis of Assisi, he considered it his mission to rebuild the church of today to prepare it for the future. For better or worse, Francis has committed to doing it through the synodal process. Between the two sides, he had to tiptoe a tightrope between continuity and change. There is undoubtedly a risk that synodality might backfire and further polarizes the church.

In his first few years at the helm, Francis steadily steered the church away from its clericalist structures and culture by retrieving the neglected and forgotten Spirit of Vatican II. Francis is a man on a mission to shake things up. That is why, regardless of the outside noise, he has, to his credit, stayed focused on delivering his vision to go to the peripheries of the church and his belief in the culture of encounter. As long as he is at the helm, synodality remains a credible and attractive ecclesial path. The resolve with which he kept this quest against the dissenters, somehow resisting the remorselessness of the church structures he wants to reform, has offered an abject lesson in giving the outsider pope time to steer the Barque of Peter towards the church of the future. His unconventional pastoral leadership has ramped up the expectation in a way some church members were not yet ready for, so it seems. He is seemingly a couple of years ahead of his time yet still willing to go the extra mile with a remarkable blend of humility and daring.

If the intention is to expand the leadership and decision-making role of the laity or the church's resolve to reform within or to make ordinary Catholics feel a sense of belonging and importance. The synodal path of Francis may have had some marginal effect, but it has not changed anything fundamental. A sedimented clerical and patriarchal culture has induced in many Catholics a form of passive acceptance and obedience that serve the clergy

and hierarchy well. As the contours of a much-touted synodal process begin to be drawn or take shape, albeit slowly, Francis can still count on support from most of the laity convinced by his pastoral and dialogical style of the papacy. Despite an aggressive and organized resistance from the conservatives, Francis' resolved to invert the pyramidal structures of the church seems undiminished. As expected, there are dissenting voices and some stirrings of discontent and skepticism in Germany, Ireland, and other wealthy countries. Nevertheless, the clear majority have, for the most part, supported Francis.

However, as with any idea whose time has come, the truth about the synodal process may be between the opposing sides. Over the next few months before the synod on synodality, an estimated 1.6 billion Catholics worldwide are expected to have participated in an unprecedented process of discernment and listening. However, if his supporters and critics only put their acts together, the synodal process might eventually work for the good of the whole church body. The church needs the synodal process to succeed, regardless of its potential and limitations. At some point, the stakeholders must find a common fertile ground to meet and fuse their horizons while there is still time. It is now time to stop talking about synodality as a tool for church reform and actively start to create its scaffoldings and let the change begin.

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