COMMUNION, SACRAMENTAL AUTHORITY, AND THE LIMITS OF SYNODALITY

Nicholas J. Healy Jr.

"Hierarchical ministry is not delegated or authorized by members of the Church; it is a gift of grace."

Twenty years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, John Paul II convoked an extraordinary synod to commemorate the council and reflect on the nature and missionary task of the Church. The "Final Report" of the 1985 synod begins by gratefully acknowledging the documents of Vatican II as "a legitimate and valid expression and interpretation of the deposit of faith."[1] At the same time, the bishops note that the period after the council has been characterized by both "light and shadows." One cause of the difficulties is "a unilateral presentation of the Church as a purely institutional structure devoid of her Mystery."[2] Undertaking a sort of examination of conscience,

1. Second Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (1985), "The Final Report," available at https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/final-report-of-the-1985-extraordinary-synod-2561.

2. Ibid.

Communio 48 (Winter 2021).

the synod bishops accept some responsibility for the postconciliar situation:

> We are probably not immune from all responsibility for the fact that especially the young critically consider the Church a pure institution. *Have we not perhaps favored this opinion in them by speaking too much of the renewal of the Church's external structures and too little of God and of Christ?* From time to time there has also been a lack of the discernment of spirits, with the failure to correctly distinguish between a legitimate openness of the Council to the world and the acceptance of a secularize world's mentality and order of values.[3]

To address this shortcoming, the "Final Report" offers a theological interpretation of the Second Vatican Council's ecclesiology in continuity with the great tradition. The first and most essential point is that "the whole importance of the Church derives from her connection with Christ."[4]

> Because Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the new Adam he at once manifests the mystery of God and the mystery of man and his exalted vocation (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 22). The Son of God became man in order to make men children of God. Through this familiarity with God, man is raised to a most high dignity. Therefore, when the Church preaches Christ she announces salvation to mankind.[5]

This christocentric vision is the key to a renewed understanding of the Church's true nature and missionary vocation as the sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men. The "Final Report" summarizes this teaching under the heading of an "ecclesiology of communion," which it describes as "the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents."[6]

> What does the complex word "communion" mean? Fundamentally it is a matter of communion with God through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit. This communion is had in the Word of God and in the sacraments. Baptism is the

3. Ibid. (emphasis added).

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

> door and the foundation of communion in the Church. The Eucharist is the source and the culmination of the whole Christian life (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 11) The communion of the eucharistic Body of Christ signifies and produces, that is, builds up, the intimate communion of all the faithful in the Body of Christ which is the Church (1 Cor 10:16).[7]

This teaching on the fundamental importance of an "ecclesiology of communion" was confirmed and further developed in a document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1992, *Communionis notio*:

> The concept of communion (*koinonia*), which appears with a certain prominence in the texts of the Second Vatican Council, is very suitable for expressing the core of the mystery of the Church, and can certainly be a key for the renewal of Catholic ecclesiology. A deeper appreciation of the fact that the Church is a communion is, indeed, a task of special importance.[8]

Recent years have seen something of a shift toward the idea of "synodality" or "synodal ecclesiology." For example, a recent document of the International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church," presents synodality as "the heart of the work of renewal the Council was encouraging."[9]

> In the theological, canonical and pastoral literature of recent decades, a neologism has appeared, the noun "synodality," a correlate of the adjective "synodal," with both of these deriving from the word "synod." Thus people speak of synodality as a "constitutive dimension" of the Church or *tout court* of the "synodal Church." . . . Although synodality is

7. Ibid.

8. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Communionis notio*, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion (28 May 1992), 1, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communionis-notio_en.html.

9. International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church" (2 March 2018), 6, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

> not explicitly found as a term or a concept in the teaching of Vatican II, it is fair to say that synodality is at the heart of the work of renewal the Council was encouraging. . . . Synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the people of God.[10]

In the well-known words of Pope Francis, "It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium."[11]

What are the reasons for this shift or development from an "ecclesiology of communion" to a "synodal ecclesiology"? What exactly is meant by "synodality" or a "synodal Church"? What are the specific proposals for implementing synodality at every level of the Church? Finally, what are some of the limitations of synodal ecclesiology?

In what follows, we will explore these questions in three steps. The first part will trace the recent history of the concept of "synodality" from the decision of Paul VI in 1965 to establish the Synod of Bishops through the preparatory documents for the 2023 "Synod on Synodality."[12] One of the distinguishing features of synodality is an emphasis on processes, structures, and meetings or assemblies designed to promote reciprocal listening. Accordingly, part two will examine some of the recent proposals for the implementation of synodality at various levels of the Church's life—parish, diocese, national episcopal conference, and the universal Church. Part three will raise some critical questions in light of the sacra-

10. Ibid., 5–6.

11. Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (Vatican City, 17 October 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

12. Cf. General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission," Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (9 July 2021) (hereafter cited as "Preparatory Document"), available at https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/09/07/210907a.html; and "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality," Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches: First Phase (9 July 2021), available at https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2021/09/07/0541/01166.html.

mental nature of ecclesial authority and the specific vocation of the laity.

1. THE RECENT HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT OF SYNODALITY (1965–2023)

The word "synod," derived from the preposition "συν" (with) and the noun "ὁδός" (path), suggests the notion of the "common journey" of Christians or the assembly of those who have been called together by God. More specifically, the word "synod" refers to "ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels (diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal or universal) to discern, by the light of the Word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by."[13]

The contemporary emphasis on synodality can be traced to Pope Paul VI's decision in September of 1965 to reintroduce the practice of regular meetings of bishops to address issues of concern for the universal Church. Since that time there have been eighteen General Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops.

Paul VI's motu proprio *Apostolica sollicitudo* formally established the Synod of Bishops "with the aim of providing the bishops of the Church with abundant means for greater and more effective participation in Our concern for the universal Church."[14] The inspiration and theological foundation for the institution of the Synod of Bishops was *Lumen gentium*'s teaching on "collegiality." All the bishops of the Church, with the pope at their head, form a single college. The college of bishops (with the Roman pontiff) is also the subject of supreme and full authority over the universal Church.

> The Lord Jesus, after praying to the Father, calling to Himself those whom He desired, appointed twelve to be with Him, and whom He would send to preach the Kingdom of God; and these apostles He formed after the manner of a college or a stable group, over which He placed Peter chosen from among them. . . . That divine mission,

13. ITC, "Synodality in the Life of the Church," 4.

14. *Apostolica sollicitudo*.

> entrusted by Christ to the apostles, will last until the end of the world, since the Gospel they are to teach is for all time the source of all life for the Church. And for this reason the apostles, appointed as rulers in this society, took care to appoint successors. . . . The order of bishops, which succeeds to the college of apostles and gives this apostolic body continued existence, is also the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church, provided we understand this body together with its head the Roman Pontiff and never without this head.[15]

It is not the case that Christ bestows all authority on the successor of Peter, who then delegates some of his authority to other bishops. By virtue of the sacrament of episcopal ordination, each bishop is entrusted by Christ with authority to teach and govern the Church, and each bishop is coresponsible for the universal Church. In order to allow the bishops and the pope to exercise better their shared responsibility for the universal Church in hierarchical communion, it is fitting for there to be regular meetings of bishops to deliberate on the major issues facing the universal Church. As John Paul II noted, the Synod of Bishops, "representing the entire Catholic episcopate, demonstrates the fact that all the bishops are in hierarchical communion in solicitude for the universal Church."[16]

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has indicated his strong support for the institution of the Synod of Bishops.[17] At the same time, a number of contemporary theologians have proposed a significant shift or development within ecclesiology centered on the concept of "synodality."[18] From the establishment of the Synod of Bishops in 1965 through the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the terms "synod"

15. *Lumen gentium*, 19, 20, 22.

16. *Pastores gregis*, 58.

17. For an overview of the place of "synodality" in the ecclesiology of Pope Francis, see Massimo Faggioli, "From Collegiality to Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis's 'Listening Primacy,'" *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85 (2020): 352–69.

18. Cf. Jean-François Chiron, "Synodalité et ecclésiologie de l'Église universelle," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 106 (2018): 383–401; Giuseppe Ruggieri, *Chiesa sinodale* (Rome: Laterza, 2017).

and "synodality" referred principally to the collegial exercise of episcopal authority. The new idea that has gained currency in recent years is that "synodality" pertains to the essence of the Church and every aspect of the Church's life and mission. In the words of Pope Francis, "Synodality is a constitutive element of the Church."[19] The inauguration of a multiyear "synodal process" involving the whole Church and culminating in an Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the theme of synodality in 2023 is the most visible expression of this "synodal ecclesiology."

What are the theological foundations and motivation for this development of synodal ecclesiology? The first and most basic concern of synodal ecclesiology is an awareness of the common dignity and vocation of all the members of the Church. By virtue of the sacrament of baptism, all of the faithful participate in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly offices of Christ. Synodal ecclesiology seeks to confirm and deepen the participation and shared responsibility of all for the life and mission of the Church. The diversity of charisms and ministries in the Church is meant to serve and enrich the "common journey" of the Church, allowing each member to play an active role in the Church's mission.

Undergirding the participation and coresponsibility of all the faithful is the doctrine of the *sensus fidei fidelium*. In an important address on the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis developed the connection between synodality and the *sensus fidei*:

> After stating that the people of God is comprised of all the baptized who are called to "be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood," the Second Vatican Council went on to say that "the whole body of the faithful, who have an anointing which comes from the holy one (cf. 1 *Jn* 2:20,27), cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people of God, when 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful' it manifests a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals." These are the famous words infallible "*in credendo*."

19. Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.

> In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, I emphasized that "the people of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*," and added that "all the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients." The *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and an *Ecclesia discens*, since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church.[20]

The *sensus fidei* establishes the whole Church, anointed by the Holy Spirit, as the bearer of apostolic tradition. In order to discern the voice of the Spirit, it is necessary for the Church's pastors to consult the faithful and listen to their voice. Reciprocally, synodality encourages the faithful to become protagonists or active participants in the Church's missionary journey. Both the method and the goal of synodality is "a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth' (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he 'says to the Churches' (Rev 2:7)."[21]

A second, and related, aim of synodal ecclesiology is to overcome an exclusionary or one-sided "clericalism" that would preclude "the participation of all, according to each one's calling, with the authority conferred by Christ on the College of Bishops headed by the Pope."[22] In the words of Pope Francis, "synodality, as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself."[23] If every member of the Church is coresponsible for the Church, then every member should participate in the Church's governance. While acknowledging the distinction of gifts or charisms in the Church, including the

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. ITC, "Synodality in the Life of the Church," 67.

23. Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.

charism of hierarchical ministry, the program of synodality seeks to develop new forms of collaboration and "mutual listening" as well as new structures that will allow the laity to participate in decision-making within the Church.

In summary, the recent history of the concept of synodality begins with a concern to implement the teaching of *Lumen gentium* on collegiality. The institution of the Synod of Bishops was meant to express the collaboration and shared responsibility of the pope and the bishops for the universal Church. The past few years have witnessed a development or analogical extension of the meaning of "synodality"; if the term initially referred to episcopal collegiality, the new idea is that the whole Church is constitutively and essentially synodal. In the words of the International Theological Commission, "Synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church."[24] The fundamental aim of synodal ecclesiology is to confirm and deepen the participation and shared responsibility of all the faithful for the life and mission of the Church.

Before considering possible limitations of synodal ecclesiology, it is necessary to present some specific proposals for the implementation of synodality in the life of the Church. "Synodality" is essentially a programmatic concept in the sense that it authorizes and requires new processes, structures, and events in order to realize the goal of "building a synodal Church."[25]

2. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SYNODALITY

The International Theological Commission offers a description of synodality as an essential and constitutive dimension of the Church:

> **a.** First and foremost, synodality denotes the particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church's ordinary

24. ITC, "Synodality in the Life of the Church," 6.

25. "Preparatory Document," 16.

> way of living and working. This *modus vivendi et operandi* works through the community listening to the Word and celebrating the Eucharist, the brotherhood of communion and the co-responsibility and participation of the whole People of God in its life and mission, on all levels and distinguishing between various ministries and roles.
>
> **b.** In a more specific sense, which is determined from a theological and canonical point of view, synodality denotes those *structures* and *ecclesial processes* in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed at an institutional level, but analogously on various levels: local, regional and universal. These structures and processes are officially at the service of the Church, which must discover the way to move forward by listening to the Holy Spirit.
>
> **c.** Finally, synodality designates the program of those *synodal event*s in which the Church is called together by the competent authority in accordance with the specific procedures laid down by ecclesiastical discipline, involving the whole People of God in various ways on local, regional and universal levels, presided over by the Bishops in collegial communion with the Bishop of Rome, to discern the way forward and other particular questions, and to take particular decisions and directions with the aim of fulfilling its evangelizing mission.[26]

There are several things to observe regarding this summary account of the three levels or dimensions of synodality. The first point to note is the logical connection between the three levels. The first level refers to synodality as a "style" that can and should be expressed in the ordinary life of the Church, especially in her liturgical life. However, the content and meaning of this "synodal style" is vague and generic. The real test of whether a synodal style is adequately present in the life of the Church is the attention given to the processes, structures, and synodal assemblies described as the second and third levels. In a reflection on these three levels in which synodality is expressed, the preparatory document for the 2023 synod affirms that, "if it is not embodied in structures and processes, the style of synodality easily degrades from the level of intentions and desires to that of rhetoric."[27]

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26. ITC, "Synodality in the Life of the Church," 70 (emphasis original).

27. "Preparatory Document," 27.

The second point to note is that synodality is a project or plan that requires new initiatives and new processes. By journeying together in a synodal way, "the Church will be able to learn through Her experience which processes can help Her to live communion, to achieve participation."[28] This requires "the ability to imagine a different future for the Church and her institutions" with the goal of "building a synodal Church."[29]

What are some of the processes and structures in which and by which the synodal nature of the Church can be expressed? The answer to this question is complex insofar as different processes and structures are called for at the level of a parish, a diocese, a region, a nation, and the universal Church. For most members of the Church, the parish is the concrete place where the Church is encountered and experienced. Thus, it is helpful to focus on synodality at the level of the parish. Referring to the importance of synodality in the life of the parish, the ITC notes:

> In the parish there are two structures which have a synodal character: the parish pastoral council and the financial council, with lay participation in consultation and pastoral planning. In this sense it seems necessary to review the canonical norm which at present only suggests that there should be a parish pastoral council and to make it obligatory, as the last Synod of the Diocese of Rome did. Bringing about an effective synodal dynamic in a local Church also requires that the Diocesan Pastoral Council and parish pastoral councils should work in a coordinated way and be appropriately upgraded.[30]

The idea here seems to be that synodality involves participating in representative institutions or structures that allow the laity to share in the governance of the parish. Earlier in the text, the ITC explains that "the advanced demands of modern consciousness concerning the participation of every citizen in running society, call for a new and deeper experience and presentation of the mystery of the Church as intrinsically synodal."[31] The dynamic of

28. "Preparatory Document," 1.

29. "Preparatory Document," 9, 16.

30. ITC, "Synodality in the Life of the Church," 84.

31. Ibid., 38.

"mutual listening" and shared responsibility within the Church, therefore, should find expression in structures that allow the laity to participate in decisions that affect the life of the parish.

The second way for the laity to implement and realize the synodal nature of the Church is by means of their participation in "synodal events" convoked by a competent ecclesial authority. The current synodal process, which will culminate in the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, is a key example of such an event. In its inception and planning, the current synodal process has been specifically designed to allow for the participation of the whole Church. How exactly can the laity participate in this event? The first phase of the current synodal process involves "listening to and consulting the people of God in the particular Churches (October 2021–April 2022)."[32] To facilitate this consultation of the laity, many dioceses have designed interactive websites dedicated to the synodal process. In addition to providing links to various documents from the Synod of Bishops, these websites encourage the laity to submit written responses to questions on the theme of synodality. For example, the Archdiocese of Washington, DC, has posted what it calls "synodal surveys" where "individuals are invited to share their feedback for the 2021–2023 Synod"[33] by answering a series of questions. Each answer is limited to eight hundred characters. The questions, which form the basis for the consultation phase of the synodal process, include the following:

> *How is [the synodal] "journeying together" happening today in the Church?*
>
> *What space is there in your life to listen to the voices on the peripheries of the Church, especially cultural groups, women, the disabled, those who experience poverty, marginalization, or social exclusion?*
>
> *What space is there in our parishes for the voice of people, including active and inactive members of our faith?*

32. "Preparatory Document," 3.

33. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, "2021–2023 Synod Survey for Individuals," https://adw.org/2021-2023-synod-survey-for-individuals/.

How is authority or governance exercised in your local parish and in the Church?

How does your parish promote participation in decision-making within the hierarchical structures of the Church?[34]

This synodal survey, let us stress, is designed to enact a consultation or listening to the voice of the laity as a way of hearing the voice of God. In the words of the general secretary of the Synod of Bishops, Cardinal Mario Grech, "By listening to the people of God—this is what consultation in the particular Churches is for—we know that we can hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church."[35] One can be forgiven for feeling a certain dismay at the notion that the laity's role in "building a synodal Church" involves joining a parish council (pastoral or financial) and completing internet surveys about synodality and about new ways to include the laity in "decision-making within the hierarchical structures of the Church." Apart from the obvious limitations of a self-selecting "internet survey," and the near-impossibility of collating and interpreting thousands of brief answers in a meaningful way, it is perhaps worth noting the self-referential and doctrinally impoverished framework for these questions. In place of the whole Church bearing witness to the central mysteries of the faith—the triune God as revealed in the life-giving death and Resurrection of Christ, the Eucharist as the pledge and hope for eternal life with God—the principal concern of these questions is the organization or governance of the hierarchical Church.

3. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

The method and goal of synodality consist in a deeper appreciation of the shared dignity and "common journey" of all the members

34. Ibid.

35. Cardinal Mario Grech, interview by Andrea Tornielli, "Transformation of Synod to Create Space for People of God," *Vatican News*, May 21, 2021, available at https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-/cardinalgrech-interview-synod-secretariat-changes.html.

of the Church. A synodal Church promotes participation, shared responsibility, and mutual listening for the sake of reform and a renewal that will reinvigorate the mission of the Church. Stated in these general terms, the notion of "synodality" is unobjectionable. Indeed, it can be read as an attempt to take seriously the teaching of *Dei Verbum* 2 that the deposit of faith is a common good uniting pastors and faithful in what the Council Fathers call a *singularis conspiratio.* It is arguably an implication of this teaching that the faithful, no less than their shepherds, have a role in receiving and transmitting the Word of God.

The question requiring more discernment, however, comes from the fact that this "momentous and new teaching"[36] on synodality or synodal ecclesiology is concretized and expressed in specific processes, structures, and events. The claim that needs to be tested is whether these synodal processes and synodal structures adequately reflect the diversity, and not just the unity, of gifts and charisms in the Church founded by Christ. In particular, are they adequate to the hierarchical dimension rooted in the sacramental nature of the Church and the understanding of ecclesial communion as "above all a gift from God, as a fruit of God's initiative carried out in the paschal mystery"?[37]

3.1. The sacramental ground of authority

One of the stated goals of the synodal process is to reflect anew on the exercise of authority in the Church. "Synodality," writes Pope Francis, "as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself."[38] The preparatory document for the 2023 "Synod on Synodality" calls for an examination of "how responsibility and power are lived in the Church as well as the structures by which they are managed."[39] The preparatory

36. ITC, "Synodality in the Life of the Church," 1.

37. *Communionis notio*, 3.

38. Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.

39. "Preparatory Document," 2.

document returns to the theme of authority in a concluding section listing key themes that should be considered during the first phase of consultation. Under the headings "Authority and Participation" and "Discerning and Deciding," the following questions are posed:

> *A synodal Church is a participatory and co-responsible Church*. . . . How is authority exercised within our particular Church? . . . How are lay ministries and the assumption of responsibility by the Faithful promoted? How do we promote participation in decision-making within hierarchically structured communities?[40]

The guiding thread for these questions on the exercise of authority in the Church is a concern to correct a perceived imbalance or injustice that would exclude the lay faithful from participation in governance or "decision-making" in the Church. The remedy for this imbalance is presented as a "synodal conversion" that will inspire and generate new processes and structures that involve the laity in decision-making within the hierarchical Church.

What is arguably missing from the various documents on synodality or the synodal process is an adequate reflection on the source and meaning of hierarchical authority in the Church. This is a significant *lacuna*, given the modern tendency to reject as unjust any form of authority that has not been delegated or authorized by the individuals concerned. As noted above, the ITC mentions "the advanced demands of modern consciousness concerning the participation of every citizen in running society."[41] If one assumes a modern conception of authority as essentially arbitrary power, then the path of ecclesial reform is to create processes and structures that distribute authority/power more widely. An authority ratified "from below" would appear to be the most just and participatory kind of governance.

Let me be clear that this difficulty does not concern the idea of "promoting participation" in the transmission of the faith. There is certainly room for something like a "collegiality of all believers" in the Church. The difficulty, then, concerns

40. "Preparatory Document," 30 (emphasis original).

41. ITC, "Synodality in the Life of the Church," 38.

the precise nature of lay participation in the specific tasks of hierarchical ministry in the Church. That such a difficulty arises has to do with the fact that the relevant documents (pending further official clarification) convey the impression of a theologically impermissible democratization of governance and magisterial judgment in the Church—one that undermines, rather than exalts, the proper role and charism of the lay faithful, if only because it adopts the modern faith in bureaucratic procedures (which are, on closer inspection, mechanisms of unaccountable top-down control).

In this context, it is necessary to recall the sacramental nature of ecclesial authority. Hierarchical ministry is not delegated or authorized by members of the Church; it is a gift of grace. A text from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* unfolds the essential ground of ecclesial authority:

> "Faith comes from what is heard" (Rom 10:17). No one can give himself the mandate and the mission to proclaim the Gospel. The one sent by the Lord does not speak and act on his own authority, but by virtue of Christ's authority; not as a member of the community, but speaking to it in the name of Christ. No one can bestow grace on himself; it must be given and offered. This fact presupposes ministers of grace, authorized and empowered by Christ. From him, they receive the mission and faculty ("the sacred power") to act *in persona Christi Capitis*. The ministry in which Christ's emissaries do and give by God's grace what they cannot do and give by their own powers, is called a "sacrament" by the Church's tradition. Indeed, the ministry of the Church is conferred by a special sacrament.[42]

The implications of this teaching are endlessly rich. The authority to teach and govern the Church is a sacramental gift. *Not all members of the Church receive this sacramental gift*. Furthermore, the grace of authority entails speaking and governing in the name of Christ. This requires fidelity to Christ, partaking of his life and mission, being configured by grace to the one who offered his life as a sacrifice for the redemption of all. This is the opposite of despotism: to speak and govern in Christ's name is to participate in Christ's own way of personally uniting authority and love in

42. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §875.

representation of God the Father; by the same token, it is to display an icon of true authority as understood in its root meaning. For *auctoritas* (authority) is derived from *augere*, meaning "to increase or cause to grow." Genuine authority is distinct from the modern idea of arbitrary power. The nature and purpose of authority is to augment the life of the members of the community. This is the viewpoint of the Letter to the Ephesians, which explains how the distinction of charisms or ministries in the Church is for the sake of "building up the body of Christ. . . . Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. . . . Each part working properly makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love" (Eph 4:12–16).

The sacramental nature of ecclesial authority arguably suggests a path of reform somewhat different from the idea of "promoting participation in decision-making" proposed by the synodal process. True reform, then, demands a return to the life-giving source of authority, Christ himself. This is more than a moral appeal for the Church's hierarchical ministers to act like servants. A return to the source of authority entails faithfully preserving the priceless gift of Christ that is the deposit of faith. This can and does require clear magisterial teaching in the form of a precise confession of doctrine: Jesus Christ is *homoousios* with the Father (Council of Nicaea); "if anyone says that the sacrifice of the Mass is one only of praise and thanksgiving; or that it is a mere commemoration of the sacrifice consummated on the Cross but not a propitiatory one, . . . let him be anathema" (Council of Trent). What doctrinal statements like these reveal is the Church's bimillennial confidence, founded in the promise and command of Christ, that the Magisterium is entrusted with authentically interpreting the deposit of faith and identifying its binding contents.

To be sure, the *sensus fidei* is an essential witness to the deposit of faith. Even more, all believers have a stake in receiving and transmitting this deposit. Their share in this task occurs *in persona Sponsae ecclesiae*: they are to receive and transmit in the spirit and attitude of the immaculate Bride of the Lamb. But because no one is immaculate apart from Mary, we as believers need an authoritative office, other than ourselves, empowered to speak to us in the name of the Bridegroom and so to keep his word ever before us in all its life-giving, binding authority.

For this reason, there is a dimension of apostolic authority that cannot be delegated or shared. Of course, this authority was bestowed for the sake of "building up" all the members of the body of Christ in love (cf. Eph 4:11–16). Nevertheless, the sacramental grace of apostolic office is not simply a matter of listening to the voice of the people of God. There is also an obedient listening to apostolic tradition—everything "gathered into the Symbols of the faith" and "everything contained in the word of God, whether written or handed down in Tradition, which the Church either by a solemn judgment or by the ordinary and universal Magisterium sets forth to be believed as divinely revealed."[43]

3.2. The clericalization of the lay vocation

A primary aim of the synodal process is to involve the lay faithful in the life and mission of the Church: "Synodality means that the whole Church is a subject and that everyone in the Church is a subject. The faithful are σύνοδοι, companions on the journey. They are called to play an active role."[44] As noted above, the ITC document on synodality and the preparatory document for the 2023 synod elaborate two ways for the laity to participate in the synodal process. First, the laity can join either the pastoral council or the financial council of their parish. Second, the laity can allow their voice to be heard by engaging the various means of synodal consultation, including answering internet "synodal surveys."

The various documents on synodality or the synodal process are surprisingly silent on the specific vocation of the laity. According to the Second Vatican Council, the essential or specifying feature of the lay faithful is their "secular character." In the words of *Lumen gentium*, the lay faithful "live in the world, that is, in every one of the secular professions and occupations, . . . in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life" (31). The crucial point is that it is precisely from within this "secular setting" that the laity contribute to the life and mission of the Church by ordering the world from within

43. *Ad tuendam fidem*, 2.

44. ITC, "Synodality in the Life of the Church," 55.

to the Kingdom of God. The laity "are called . . . by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven."[45] An adequate appreciation of what is proper and specific to the lay vocation is essential for avoiding a self-referential ecclesiology. The Church is essentially missionary, and the laity are called to embody and extend the mystery of ecclesial communion into the ordinary realms of family, work, and the social order in all of its dimensions.

Looked at in this light, the synodal process, as described in the relevant documents, seems liable to a subtle "clericalization" of the laity, in the sense that their contribution to the life and mission of the Church is measured by the extent of their involvement with tasks that are specific to the hierarchical ministry of the Church. In place of the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the unique contribution of the laity to the Church's mission in the world, there is a turning inward to try to convince the laity that what really matters is their participation in "decision-making within the hierarchical structures of the Church." Once again, this is not to deny the coresponsibility of the entire body of believers for receiving and transmitting the deposit of faith. The point is rather that the coresponsibility proper to the laity unfolds in and through configuration to the ecclesial Bride—a configuration essentially requiring an obedience to the Word of God, which the Magisterium exists to foster and protect. Far from being a form of slavery to clerical overlordship, however, this obedience is an implication of the freedom of God's children—just as the Magisterium is not the private good of clerics but a service of the deposit of faith that demands the most radical expropriation for the sake of the *bonum commune* on their part.

3.3. Self-referential synodality

In his handwritten notes that formed the basis of his intervention during the general congregations prior to the conclave of 2013, then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio wrote,

45. Ibid.

> When the Church does not go out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referential; she grows ill (like the stooped woman in the Gospel). The evils which appear throughout history in Church institutions are rooted in this self-referentiality—a kind of theological narcissism.[46]

These reflections accord with a fundamental and oft-repeated concern of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI:

> The first word of the Church is Christ, and not herself. The Church is healthy to the extent that all her attention is focused on Him. The Second Vatican Council placed this concept masterfully at the pinnacle of its deliberations; the fundamental text on the Church begins with the words: *Lumen gentium cum sit Christus*. . . . If one wishes to understand the Second Vatican Council correctly, one must begin with this first sentence again and again.[47]

The shared insight of Jorge Bergoglio and Joseph Ratzinger is that the center of the Church is outside of herself; she exists in order to bear witness faithfully to the mystery of Christ. A bishops' synod on synodality, however, is quintessentially a self-referential exercise. Of course there are times when a look inward or a reform of structures is appropriate. The difficulty arises when this exercise of looking inward (and reforming structures) is presented as the most essential thing. The risk is that synodality be exhausted in the mere process of organizing synods. The impression that current thinking about synodality comes alarmingly close to such an adoption of modern bureaucratic faith in procedures (which turn out to be mechanisms of unaccountable top-down control) is unfortunately hard to dismiss in light of statements such as these: "Our 'journeying together' is, in fact, what most effectively enacts and manifests the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God."[48] Consider the ITC's claim that "exercising synodality makes real the human person's call to live communion,

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46. Jorge Bergoglio, "Evangelizing the Peripheries," March 9, 2013, text and commentary by Sandro Magister available at http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1350484bdc4.html?eng=y.

47. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 239–52, at 240.

48. "Preparatory Document," 1.

which comes about through sincere self-giving, union with God and unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ."[49]

The synodal process entails years of planning, an allocation of considerable financial resources, meetings, surveys, documents, and more meetings at every level of the Church. What is the goal or purpose? . . . *To build a synodal Church*. How is "synodality" concretely expressed in the life of the Church? . . . *In having meetings, mutual listening, surveys, documents, and more meetings*.

CONCLUSION

In a difficult moment of his life, when he was under suspicion by his Jesuit superiors and was removed from his teaching position, Henri de Lubac wrote a series of meditations on the mystery of the Church. In a chapter titled "Ecclesia Mater," he writes,

> "For myself," said Origen, "I desire to be truly ecclesial." He thought—and rightly—that there was no other way of being a Christian in the full sense. And anyone who is possessed by a similar desire will not find it enough to be loyal and obedient, to perform exactly everything demanded by his profession of the Catholic faith. Such a man will have fallen in love with the beauty of the House of God; the Church will have stolen his heart. She is his spiritual native country, his "mother and his brethren," and nothing that concerns her will leave him indifferent or detached; he will root himself in her soil, form himself in her likeness; . . . he will be aware that it is through her and her alone that he participates in the unshakeableness of God. It will be from her that he learns how to live and die. Far from passing judgment on her, he will allow her to judge him, and he will agree gladly to all the sacrifices demanded by her unity.[50]

A much-needed reform of the Church will draw inspiration from these words and from the example of countless saints who have embodied this spirit of *sentire cum ecclesia*. The Church is our moth-

49. ITC, "Synodality in the Life of the Church," 43.

50. Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 241.

er and home; she teaches us how to live and how to die in communion with God and with one another in hope for eternal life.

What about a decision on the part of the Church's pastors to focus the attention of the whole Church on a process involving "mutual listening," synodal documents, and synodal meetings about the importance of synodality? While remaining obedient to the Church's shepherds, the lay faithful can perhaps remember a form of participation and shared responsibility within the life and mission of the Church that is less visible to synodal processes.

At the heart of the Church is the immaculate faith of Mary. Everything in the Church is ordered to the holiness of Christ's members, and "Mary goes before us all in the holiness that is the Church's mystery as the 'bride without spot or wrinkle' (Eph 5:27)."[51] In his seminal essay on the priority of the Marian dimension of the Church, Hans Urs von Balthasar recalls our attention to this deeper form of participation while uncovering the essentially Marian form of our "journeying together":

> The Church since the Council has to a large extent put off its mystical characteristics; it has become a Church of permanent conversations, organizations, advisory commissions, congresses, synods, commissions, academies, parties, pressure groups, functions, structures and restructurings, sociological experiments, statistics: that is to say, more than ever a male Church. . . . May not the reason for the domination of such typically male and abstract notions be because of the abandonment of the deep femininity of the Marian character of the Church? . . . From the cross the Son hands his mother over into the Church of the apostles, from now on her place is there. In a hidden manner her virginal motherhood holds sway throughout the whole sphere of the Church, gives it light, warmth, protection; her cloak makes the Church into a protective cloak. It requires no special gesture from her to show that we should look at the Son and not at her. Her very nature as handmaid reveals him. So, too, she can show the apostles and their successors how one can be both wholly effective presence and wholly extinguished service. For the Church was already present in her before men were set in office.[52]

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51. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §773.

52. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Marian Principle," in *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (London: SPCK, 1975), 70–72.

With discretion, mercy, and the sense of humor that is natural to a mother, her protective cloak can embrace and heal even the pretentious plans to build a new Church by organizing synods on synodality. □

Nicholas J. Healy Jr. *is associate professor of philosophy and culture at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America.*