

**The Implementation of Synodality in the Catholic Church  
and the Expected Impact on Women's Issues**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master's degree in Theology

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Saint Paul University

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Legend .....	iv
Abstract .....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: The Theological Framework .....	4
1.1    Some Basic Concepts and Dynamics .....	5
The Church in History .....	5
Sensus Fidelium .....	6
Hierarchy in the Church .....	9
1.2    The Historical Context .....	12
1.3    Addressing Clericalism: A Synodal Path for the Church.....	15
1.4    The Local Church and the Universal Church.....	21
1.5    A Church for the Future .....	23
Chapter Two: Practical Implementation of a Synodal Model .....	24
2.1    A Brief Overview .....	24
2.2    Consultation in the Local Churches .....	25
2.3    Regional and National Consultation .....	32
2.4    Working Document for the Continental Stage.....	34
2.5    Discussions of the Seven Continental Assemblies.....	37
Method of Spiritual Conversation .....	42
2.6 <i>Instrumentum Laboris</i> for the First Session of the Synod of Bishops .....	44
2.7    First Session of the XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops .....	45
2.8    Action Following the First Session of the Synod of Bishops .....	48
2.9 <i>Instrumentum Laboris</i> for the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops.....	50
Chapter Three: The Winds of Change .....	52
3.1    Cultural and Political Issues.....	52
3.2    Social Resistance to Change .....	53
Changes Motivated from the Grassroots.....	54
When Changes Affect the Decision-Makers .....	56
3.3    Outlook for the Synodal Process .....	59

Chapter Four: The Synodal Process and Women’s Issues.....	60
4.1 Resistance to Addressing Women’s Issues .....	60
Doctrinal Challenges .....	60
High Level Attitudes .....	63
4.2 The Importance of Feminist Theologians .....	66
Phyllis Zagano.....	67
Elizabeth Johnson.....	69
Serena Noceti .....	71
4.3 Women’s Allies.....	74
Conclusion .....	75
Bibliography .....	81

## **Legend**

ACBO	Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario
CCCB	Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
CDF	Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith
DCS	“‘Enlarge the Space of Your Tent’ – Working Document for the Continental Stage” (report of the Synod Secretariat)
ITC	International Theological Commission
LG	<i>Lumen Gentium</i> (conciliar document of the Second Vatican Council)
SF	<i>Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church</i> (document of the ITC)
UISG	International Union of Superiors General
WUCWO	World Union of Catholic Women’s Organizations

## **Abstract**

The XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops opened up the possibility of a Church more responsive to the voices of all the faithful through the practical implementation of a continuing synodal process. To investigate the impact of this approach, an evaluation is accomplished through the lens of women's issues to determine whether the current process is viable and its likely impact on addressing women's issues. Using the synthesis data generated at every level of the Church, analysis is carried out based on theological expectations and problematic sociological issues. Other sociological pressures are also considered which could impede the synodal process as well as suppress the Church hierarchy's willingness to address women's issues. Based on this analysis, the synodal process is expected to be implemented as a permanent part of Church life. However, the full resolution of women's issues will likely take some time, even generations, to occur.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am greatly indebted to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Catherine Clifford, whose knowledge, wisdom and experience have helped me come to a much deeper and richer understanding of the Church and its ecclesial processes. As a participant in both the First and the Second Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, her insights and faith in a better future have been infectious and I have come away from all my meetings with her a better person for it. She truly has been a beacon of hope in my life.

I would also like to thank my husband for his patience during all my graduate course work and my research. I am grateful for his encouragement, support, love and believing in me.

## Introduction

On March 7, 2020, Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops (at that time), announced that Pope Francis had convoked the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.<sup>1</sup> Popularly known as the Synod on Synodality, this marked the beginning of a journey of ecclesial reform and renewal, a process of becoming a “Church which ‘journeys together’ with men and women, sharing the travails of history.”<sup>2</sup> In short, a synodal Church.

This process of becoming a synodal Church (the synodal process) is a natural progression to becoming a Church inspired by the Holy Spirit and shepherded by leaders truly at the service of its people. Although the main focus of the Synod on Synodality has been on how the Church must transform to become more synodal, the initiative has raised new hopes. In particular, there is the hope that the Church will become a place where the voices of the marginalized are valued and clerical, sexual, financial and other abuses will become a thing of the past.

Given the boldness of the synodal initiative, can this hope in for a synodal Church be realized? The broad scope and sheer number of issues encompassed by this question make a full assessment beyond the scope of this thesis. Women, however, make up approximately one half of the Catholic faithful, making their contributions essential to the life of the Church. They also represent the largest marginalized group in the Church. Assessing the synodal process in terms of how likely it will be able to address and satisfy women’s needs can provide important insights into the overall success of this initiative. This is the subject being studied in this thesis. To keep

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<sup>1</sup> Holy See Press Office, “Press Release of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” Summary of Bulletin, July 3, 2020,

<https://www.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/07/200306b.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops: Address of His Holiness Pope Francis* (Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015),

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html).

things manageable, women's needs or issues are limited to the possibilities for (1) enhancing women's leadership roles in the Church, (2) ordaining women as deacons, and (3) ordaining women as priests. As a woman who has always felt that we have been unnecessarily restrained in the way we are allowed to participate in the Church, I have a vested interest in the answers.

Evaluating how well the synodal process will address women's issues invites a twofold analysis since this evaluation is premised on the overall success of the synodal process. If the synodal process appears likely to fail, then talking about women's issues is irrelevant. The twofold analysis is reflected in the structure of this thesis where the first part of the analysis carried out in Chapters One to Three examines the viability of the synodal process. Chapter Four examines the synodal impact on women's issues.

Providing a more detailed description of this twofold analysis, Chapter One discusses the theological framework that underlies the current synodal process. This is based on a literature review of Vatican documents that have been released since the Second Vatican Council (primarily during the pontificate of Pope Francis) and the works of Catholic theologians. Sociological works are also considered since the synodal process will introduce fundamental changes in the way the Church community adapts and operates within its ecclesial structures. Sociology is a particularly useful tool for understanding human tendencies within organizational structures as well as the human response to organizational change.

Chapter Two analyzes the practical implementation of the synodal process up until the summer of 2024. This is based mainly on the views of the Catholic faithful collected as part of the synodal process and the subsequent collation of these views documented by parishes, dioceses, ecclesial assemblies, and the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops (Synod Secretariat). Significant issues which affect the implementation of the synodal process are also

evaluated in terms of the theological consequences as well as the sociological implications. Given the broad diversity of issues that could be examined, the main focus is on women's issues. This is done mainly for the purposes of evaluating the overall synodal process. From this analysis, the practical implementation of the synodal process appears to have been a success.

In view of this positive assessment, Chapter Three considers some of the sociological currents moving in the Church that could prevent the synodal process from being adopted as an ongoing process. Despite this resistance and given the direction that the synodal process has taken the Church, the outlook for the future is positive.

The analysis in Chapter Four is very similar to the sociological analysis of the previous chapter except focusing specifically on how effectively women's issues will be addressed and the timeline for the resolution of these issues. This includes identifying relevant Church doctrine that entrench the status quo, assessing high-level attitudes in the Church hierarchy that resist change, and considering support for women from women theologians and women's organizations. In general, it appears that most women's issues will be addressed through the synodal process but that it will likely take many years (or decades) for the more controversial topics, such as women's ordination, to be properly dealt with.

The final chapter summarizes the main results of the twofold analysis carried out in this thesis concluding that the synodal process has been positively received and will enliven the Church of the future. The synodal responses to women's issues, however, suggest a timeline for resolution ranging from near term for women's leadership to long term for a women's priesthood.

## Chapter One: The Theological Framework

So, what is synodality? At his address to the bishops at the opening of the 70th General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference, Pope Francis provided key insights into synodality when he counselled the bishops saying:

Live episcopal collegiality, enriched by the experience each person bears, and which draws upon the tears and joys of your particular Churches. To walk together is the *constitutive way* of the Church; the *figure* that enables us to interpret reality with the eyes and heart of God; the *condition* for following the Lord Jesus and being servants of life in this wounded time.<sup>3</sup>

Walking together means being immersed in the joys, the sorrows and everyday experiences of the people who form the body of Christ. It is not as a detached observer nor one who has all the answers, but as someone who is an integral part of and in communion with the community of the faithful. It is in this sense of walking together that the community is able to collectively discern the true path towards Christ guided by the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

Although this advice was given to the Italian bishops, it is a vision of synodality which applies to every level of the Church. In a more traditional vision, the pope and the bishops are the shepherds who look after their sheep and guide them towards Christ. The faithful, though, are so much more than simple sheep and are called to collaborate together in a way that respects the gifts, talents and roles of everyone on this journey.

Synodality is not a destination. It is a dynamic process which recognizes human reality as always changing: cultures will transform, politics will create new world orders, arts and sciences will lead us towards deeper understandings of human reality. This changing reality will lead to new questions that go beyond Church teaching and need answers. Synodality is about being a

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<sup>3</sup> Francis, *Opening of the 70th General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference (22 May 2017)* | Francis (Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2017), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170522\\_70assemblea-cei.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/may/documents/papa-francesco_20170522_70assemblea-cei.html).

<sup>4</sup> Second Vatican Council, “*Dei Verbum*,” in *Vatican Council II - The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, vol. 1 (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1998), para. 8.

Church that is more authentic to the present reality and able to deal with ongoing change.

Dynamic engagement of the whole Church as a people that walks together means becoming a Church that communicates with all the baptized faithful in an inclusive and effective way. Developing better ways of speaking, listening, and building consensus among all the faithful are major challenges faced in the implementation of synodality.

Clearly, synodality requires a new theological framework which goes beyond what the Church has done in the past and brings it into a new future. This is the focus of the rest of this chapter which discusses the theological concepts which underpin synodality and the challenges that synodality is meant to overcome as well as the benefits.

### **1.1 Some Basic Concepts and Dynamics**

Before continuing into the main theological discussion, there are three key concepts which are essential for understanding the theology and dynamics of synodality which follows. The first two, the Church in history and the *sensus fidelium*, are critical to enabling the synodal process. The third concept, Church hierarchy, reflects a source of major challenges which the synodal process must help overcome and deserves special attention.

#### ***The Church in History***

The synodal process, by its nature, is a catalyst for change and reform. This is not simply about moving the Church closer to an idealized image of the Church of Christ that is static in nature. It is about understanding the Church as a dynamic, learning and growing institution rooted in Christ and which needs to adapt as conditions change over history and across cultures. This dynamic reality was affirmed by the Second Vatican Council when it stated:

Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission. ... The present-day conditions of the world add greater

urgency to this work of the Church so that all men, joined more closely today by various social, technical and cultural ties, might also attain fuller unity in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

In light of the urgency expressed in this statement (an urgency which is as great as or greater now than it was at the time of the council), becoming a synodal Church is a natural path towards the council's vision. Holding on to the conditions of the past is not an option. Instead, the Church must respond to the conditions of the present, opening it up to the kind of change that will allow the Church to be more fully realized in Christ.

### ***Sensus Fidelium***

*Sensus fidelium*, is an essential key to the synodal process. It is also a Latin phrase meaning “the sense of the faithful,” a concept that has its roots in early Church teachings going back to the patristic period.<sup>6</sup> It became widely discussed after it was affirmed at the Second Vatican Council which said, “The holy people of God share also in Christ's prophetic office ... The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief” (LG 12). This notion of the contribution of the whole community of the faithful, including the laity, as part of the teaching authority of the Church was further illuminated in the following council explanation:

Christ, the great Prophet ... continually fulfills His prophetic office until the complete manifestation of glory. He does this not only through the hierarchy who teach in His name and with His authority, but also through the laity whom He made His witnesses and to whom He gave understanding of the faith (*sensu fidei*) and an attractiveness in speech so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life (LG 35).

Although this is a tangible manifestation of the prophetic office of all the faithful, further theological discussion was needed to bring greater clarity. One question that resulted in debate

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<sup>5</sup> Second Vatican Council, “Lumen Gentium,” in *Vatican Council II - The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, vol. 1 (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1998), para. 1 (hereafter cited in text as LG).

<sup>6</sup> Daniel J. Finucane, *Sensus Fidelium: The Use of a Concept in the Post-Vatican Era* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2016), 5.

was the relationship between *sensus fidelium* and the magisterium. Specifically, whether the sense of the faithful could overrule the magisterium or, conversely, were teachings based on *sensus fidelium* constrained to be consistent with magisterial teachings, or somewhere in between? The Second Vatican Council suggested consistency with magisterial teachings saying the *sensus fidelium* “is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority” (LG 12).

A second point was how the sense of the faithful was to be determined. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger warned that “the opinions of the faithful cannot be purely and simply applied with the ‘*sensus fidei*’”<sup>7</sup> where “*sensus fidei*” refers to sense of faith. Most theologians would agree although new insights initiated by the faithful could be considered.<sup>8</sup> Some proposed sociological tools such as surveys could be used to probe the opinions of the faithful on doctrinal matters.

The most recent comprehensive Church study of the *sensus fidei* was carried out by the International Theological Commission (ITC) from 2009-2014 to provide greater clarity to the questions that had arisen.<sup>9</sup> The commission defined two distinct but closely related realities:

On the one hand, the *sensus fidei* refers to the personal capacity of the believer, within the communion of the Church, to discern the truth of faith. On the other hand, the *sensus fidei* refers to a communal and ecclesial reality: the instinct of faith of the Church herself, by which she recognises her Lord and proclaims his word (SF 3).

The first definition is then called “*sensus fidei fidelis*” and the second called “*sensus fidei fidelium*.” The *sensus fidei fidelis* addresses the faith of a believer. Although authentic faith is rooted in the truth, the believer may still hold erroneous opinions due to the influence of erroneous sources such as secular opinions (SF 55). However, “the more the virtue of faith takes

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<sup>7</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Veritatis*, 1990, para. 35, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19900524\\_theologian-vocation\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html).

<sup>8</sup> Daniel J. Finucane, *Sensus Fidelium: The Use of a Concept*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, 2014, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html) (hereafter cited in text as SF).

root in the heart and spirit of believers and informs their daily life, the more the *sensus fidei fidelis* develops and strengthens in them” (SF 57).

Of more relevance to the synodal process is the *sensus fidei fidelium*, the sense of faith of the whole Church. In addressing the relationship between the *sensus fidei fidelium* and the magisterium, the ITC emphasizes the importance of the *sensus fidei fidelium* by stating that “the magisterium has to be attentive to the *sensus fidelium*, the living voice of the people of God” (SF 74). In addition, the magisterium is “responsible for nurturing and educating the *sensus fidelium*” (SF 76) so that the faithful more authentically discern the inspirations of the Holy Spirit.

By themselves, these statements place no limitations on the teaching authority of *sensus fidei fidelium*. However, the ITC also writes that “the magisterium also judges with authority whether opinions, which are present among the people of God and which may seem to be the *sensus fidelium*, actually correspond to the truth of the Tradition received from the Apostles” (SF 77). In other words, the magisterium retains the authority over *sensus fidelium* in matters of faith.

Despite the magisterium’s authority, the commission does warn that the magisterium must “reflect on the teaching that has been given and consider whether it needs clarification or reformulation in order to communicate more effectively the essential message” (SF 80). This will be particularly true when the lived experiences of the laity are in dissonance with official Church teachings. Clarification or reformulation of these teachings by the magisterium may be needed to create a better resonance with lived experiences and a more authentic expression of the Gospel.

Superficially, there might appear to be a static hierarchy of authority where the voice of Apostolic Tradition reigns supreme, followed by the magisterium and then the *sensus fidelium*. In reality, it is a dynamic arrangement in which the Apostolic Tradition and the magisterium reflect the work of the Holy Spirit in the past while the *sensus fidelium* involves listening to the

Holy Spirit in the present.<sup>10</sup> The confirmation of the promptings of the Holy Spirit then involves the consensus of the Apostolic Tradition, magisterium and *sensus fidelium* rather than simply appealing to the most authoritative voice.

On the part of the faithful, there are certain attitudes identified by the ITC that must be present in order to authentically discern the movement of the Holy Spirit including (SF 89-105):

- a. Participation in the life of the Church;
- b. Listening to the word of God;
- c. Openness to reason;
- d. Adherence to the magisterium;
- e. Holiness: humility, freedom and joy;
- f. Seeking the edification of the Church.

The ITC also considered the *sensus fidelium* to be closely related to popular religiosity and distinct from public or majority opinion.

In assessing the practical means by which the *sensus fidelium* could be gauged, the commission concluded that the public exchange of opinions is an important way of doing this. It also considered more formal mechanisms such as councils where both priests and lay members participate including parish and diocesan pastoral councils, and diocesan synods. This is important because it means formal mechanisms already exist which could be utilized to listen to all the faithful and better discern the *sensus fidelium*.

### ***Hierarchy in the Church***

The term “hierarchy” appears to have been introduced by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in the late fifth or early sixth century although hierarchical structures already existed in the forms of monarchy, for example, long before this.<sup>11</sup> Based on its Greek etymology, hierarchy literally means “sacred order.” In theology, it is used “to refer to the divinely willed

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<sup>10</sup> Ormond Rush, “Dei Verbum and the Roots of Synodality,” *Theological Studies* 84, no. 4 (2023): 590.

<sup>11</sup> Denise Pumain, ed., *Hierarchy in Natural and Social Sciences* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 13.

distribution of orders and ministries in the church.”<sup>12</sup> Over time, the idea of hierarchy has been expanded to also describe the organizational structures of the majority of secular organizations. In the modern literature of organization theory, for example, hierarchy has been defined as “any system in which the distributions of power, privilege and authority are both systematic and unequal.”<sup>13</sup> Although this is a helpful start, the focus on unequal power, privilege, and authority implies an inherent unfairness.

Since there will always be a need for some form of organizing structure in a community or society to maintain social order, a non-evaluative description is adopted here. Specifically, hierarchical groups are stratified into organizational levels often arranged in a pyramidal structure where, beginning at the top, each level has authority over the level below it.<sup>14</sup> Generally, supervision is limited to the immediate level below and communication occurs between adjacent levels. The primary goal of a hierarchical control structure is to coordinate the activities of the members to carry out the mission of the organization while maintaining its long-term viability. In practice, the upper levels tend to focus more on supporting the goals of mission and continuing viability of an organization whereas the lower levels tend to focus more on immediate mission-oriented tasks.

Within this description of hierarchy, there is considerable variability on how it is actually implemented. The most significant characteristic is the assignment of authority. In a very top-down driven organization, such as a monarchy or autocracy, maximum authority is assigned to the highest levels with the lowest levels having little or no real decision-making authority. A

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane, eds., “Hierarchy,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 464.

<sup>13</sup> Roger Scruton, *A Dictionary of Political Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 202.

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Iannello, *Decisions Without Hierarchy: Feminist Interventions in Organization Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 1992), 26, Kindle.

grassroots organization (or bottom-up), on the other hand, is at the other end of the spectrum.

Authority is pushed down to the lowest level possible so that the people at the lower levels have a great deal more autonomy than in a top-down organization.<sup>15</sup>

The Church is a hierarchically organized structure both in terms of the sacred orders (where Christ is the head) and its administrative structure (where the pope is the head). In terms of the sacred orders, the Pope and the Bishops have the responsibility as shepherds of the Church, a role that was originally given to Peter and the rest of the apostles by Jesus (LG 18-29). Individual bishops are also placed in charge of their own communities or local Churches. Within these local Churches, authority is hierarchically organized through the threefold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon, with the bishop occupying the highest leadership level in the community. Lay people occupy the lowest level of the Church where they are served and shepherded by the ordained.

The administrative governance model of the Church embeds this leadership model but is considerably more complicated. The Vatican represents the universal Church and the pope is the head. The pope is assisted by the Curia which is arranged into sixteen dicasteries, four institutions of justice, six institutions of finance, and other offices.<sup>16</sup> The dicasteries are concerned with the evangelical programs of the universal Church while the other institutions and offices focus on more administrative issues.

At the local Church level, communities are divided (typically along geographical lines) into dioceses or larger archdioceses (or eparchies in the Eastern Churches) governed by bishops or archbishops, respectively, and each is supported by an administrative office (the diocesan

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<sup>15</sup> Kathleen Iannello, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Francis, *Praedicate Evangelium* (Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022), Index, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/20220319-costituzione-ap-praedicate-evangelium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/20220319-costituzione-ap-praedicate-evangelium.html).

curia). Parishes within the diocese or archdiocese are run by priests assisted by parish councils populated by volunteer lay people.

Within each country, there may also be various levels of conferences of bishops serving at intermediate levels with regional or provincial level oversight and national level oversight. Complicating the picture even further, there are also sacred congregations, religious orders and societies, seminaries and colleges, confraternities, etc.

For the purpose of later hierarchical analysis, there are three significant tendencies of the administrative governance model of the Church which are addressed by synodality. One is the divide between the ordained and lay people. Recognizing that the Church is a patriarchy (a hierarchy where men hold leadership positions while women are generally excluded from these positions), a second critical tendency is the divide between men and women. A third critical tendency is the divide between the universal Church and the local Church. How well synodality addresses these divisions is a strong indicator of the successfulness of any synodal approach.

## **1.2 The Historical Context**

One of the great challenges of the modern Church is to deal with previously hidden or suppressed issues that have come to light in the last few decades. In particular, the problems of abuse which include (but are by no means limited to) clericalism, sexual scandals, and the marginalization of distinct groups such as Indigenous, the LGBTQ+ community, Blacks, women, the homeless, etc. The many stories in the Canadian press and online about the abuse of women and children by priests as well as the Church's contribution to the mistreatment of Indigenous children in the residential school system have seriously damaged the Church's reputation as the authentic Body of Christ and as a safe haven for the faithful. In its effort to be a moral, religious, and spiritual witness to the secular world, the Church needs to get its own house in order before

it can offer a better alternative to a secular lifestyle.

It is instructive to consider these problems in relation to hierarchical control. The Church in the time of the apostles was a grassroots hierarchy. In Acts 15:6-29, for example, evangelizers Paul and Barnabus brought the issue of circumcision of non-Jewish Christians to Peter, the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem. After consultation with the whole church, the community made the doctrinal decision articulated by James to drop the requirement for Gentile Christians to be circumcised. Of this passage, the ITC wrote, “For Luke, these events demonstrated proper ecclesial action, involving both the pastoral service of the apostles and elders and also the participation of the community, qualified to participate by their faith” (SF 17). In this grassroots decision-making process, the community’s choices were made to support the mission activities of the Church and these choices were inspired by the Holy Spirit.

For his part, Paul placed a high priority on the communities he served. For example, in the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians he wrote, “we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves” (1 Th 2:7-8). His strong focus on the needs of the community identifies him as a servant leader (Mt 20:26-28).

Paul’s servant leadership mentality and Peter’s desire to consult with the Church clearly reflect a grassroots hierarchy, a hierarchy which sharply contrasts with the patriarchal Church of today with its strong centralized authority. Although the Church has retained its hierarchical nature reflected in the sacred orders, the interaction of the Church hierarchy with the faithful has radically changed, leading to some unfortunate consequences. This change is not unexpected given the growth in the number of the faithful since the beginning of the Church and the challenges of trying to manage an increasingly larger population. Some of the major negative

consequences can be understood from the sociological perspective. In the early twentieth century, German sociologist Robert Michels proposed what is now known as the “iron law of oligarchy” which describes the unfortunate tendency of hierarchical organizations to succumb to “the internal development of a self-interested ruling class.”<sup>17</sup> This is true even for organizations which begin with a commitment to democratic ideals and practices. In effect, a grassroots organization will ultimately transition into a top-down hierarchy. With the emergence of a ruling class (or layers of ruling classes), maintaining the existence of an organization and one’s position in the ruling class becomes a goal of great personal importance resulting in the problems of elitism.<sup>18</sup> In the Church, ordained ministries and clerical institutions have become sacralized; priestly service has been exchanged for priestly power, giving rise to clericalism.<sup>19</sup>

Various international studies and the analysis of respected theologians have agreed on the seriousness of clericalism in the Church.<sup>20</sup> The Final Report of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Abuse, for example, concludes that sexual abuse of children is a systemic problem affecting the entire Church and clericalism plays a major role.<sup>21</sup> Survivor advocate Dr. Thomas P. Doyle OP, an American Dominican priest and canon lawyer, remarked that “if one has to isolate one single factor that has contributed to the toxic response of Catholic Church leaders to victims of sexual abuse it would be clericalism.”<sup>22</sup>

This association between clericalism and abuse has not been lost on Pope Francis. In his opening address at the Synod of Bishops on Young People in 2018, the pope clearly connected

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<sup>17</sup> Kathleen Iannello, *Decisions Without Hierarchy*, 4; Robert Michels, *Political Parties* (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Kathleen Iannello, *Decisions Without Hierarchy*, 4–5.

<sup>19</sup> Rafael Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2022), 11.

<sup>20</sup> Rafael Luciani, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Australian Royal Commission, “Religious Institutions,” in *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuses: Final Report*, vol. 16, 2 (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), 586–88, <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report>.

<sup>22</sup> Australian Royal Commission, 613.

clericalism with elitism by saying: “Clericalism arises from an elitist and exclusivist vision of vocation, that interprets the ministry received as a *power* to be exercised rather than as a free and generous *service* to be given ... *Clericalism is a perversion and is the root of many evils in the Church.*”<sup>23</sup> Soon after, the pope identified clericalism as a root cause of abuse by writing:

“Abuse exists in various forms: the abuse of power, the abuse of conscience, sexual and financial abuse. Clearly, the ways of exercising authority that make all this possible have to be eradicated, and the irresponsibility and lack of transparency with which so many cases have been handled have to be challenged. The desire to dominate, lack of dialogue and transparency, forms of double life, spiritual emptiness, as well as psychological weaknesses, are the terrain on which corruption thrives.”<sup>24</sup> Clericalism is a constant temptation on the part of priests who see “the ministry they have received as a power to be exercised, rather than a free and generous service to be offered. It makes us think that we belong to a group that has all the answers and no longer needs to listen or has anything to learn.”<sup>25</sup>

Addressing clericalism means recapturing the grassroots spirit of the early Church communities and becoming a more authentic reflection of the Gospel that is relevant in the modern world.

### **1.3 Addressing Clericalism: A Synodal Path for the Church**

Having identified clericalism as a serious and fundamental problem in the Church, an impasse appears to have been reached. On the one hand, elitism manifested as clericalism, is an inherent structural tendency of a hierarchical governance model, a natural evolutionary consequence of the iron law of oligarchy. On the other hand, the hierarchical structure of the Church is rooted in the Apostolic Tradition which has brought order to the Church for two millennia. Additionally, given the large size of the Church today, it is difficult to envisage any

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<sup>23</sup> Francis, *Address by His Holiness Pope Francis at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment* (Dicastery for the Communication - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20181003\\_apertura-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html).

<sup>24</sup> Synod of Bishops, *XV Ordinary General Assembly: Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment* (General Secretariat of the Synod, 2018), para. 30, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20181027\\_doc-final-instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20181027_doc-final-instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani_en.html).

<sup>25</sup> Francis, *Christus Vivit* (Holy See Press Office, 2019), para. 98, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20190325\\_christus-vivit.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html); Francis, *Address by His Holiness Pope Francis*.

effective governance control structure that does not involve some form of hierarchy.

The solution which addresses this dilemma and has been endorsed at the highest levels of the Church is the implementation of synodality. During the pontificate of Pope Francis, the genesis of the synodal initiative began in 2013 when the pope appointed an advisory group of eight cardinals to consider the reform of the Roman Curia. They advised the pope there was a need to “find a path for coordination between synodality and the Bishop of Rome.”<sup>26</sup>

The release of the report, “*Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*” by the ITC in 2014, highlighted the role and authority of the *sensus fidelium*. In doing so, it emphasized the participation of the faithful in the governance of the Church and the possible mechanisms of consultation, including synodality.

In his address to the Ceremony Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops in 2015, Pope Francis articulated the direction of the synodal journey when he said:

From the beginning of my ministry as Bishop of Rome, I sought to enhance the Synod, which is one of the most precious legacies of the Second Vatican Council... We must continue along this path. The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.<sup>27</sup>

In 2017, the pope convened a Special Synodal Assembly on the Pan-Amazon to take place in October, 2019. As part of the preparation, a questionnaire for pastors was included to “listen to the Church of God” where “the Spirit speaks through the entire People of God.”<sup>28</sup> The

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<sup>26</sup> “Pope Says Structures for Collaboration, Collegiality Need Strengthening,” *National Catholic Reporter*, June 13, 2013, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-says-structures-collaboration-collegiality-need-strengthening>.

<sup>27</sup> Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary*.

<sup>28</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, “Preparatory Document for the Synod on the Pan Amazon Region,” Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology, 2020, sec. Questionnaire, <http://secretariat.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/preparatory-document-for-the-synod-for-the-amazon.html>.

intent of the questionnaire was to encourage pastors to consult with the laity in their regions.

In 2018, Pope Francis promulgated *Episcopalis Communio*, an apostolic constitution on the Synod of Bishops. In it he wrote:

During every Synodal Assembly, consultation of the faithful must be followed by discernment on the part of the Bishops chosen for the task, united in the search for a consensus that springs not from worldly logic, but from common obedience to the Spirit of Christ. Attentive to the *sensus fidei* of the People of God – “which they need to distinguish carefully from the changing currents of public opinion.”<sup>29</sup>

In this constitutional requirement, synodal assemblies are clearly linked to the *sensus fidelium*, and, coupled with the questionnaire used in the Pan-Amazon Synod, there is an emerging vision of what a synodal Church should look like.

After the Pan-Amazon Synod in 2019, a survey was carried out among all the world’s bishops to choose the theme for the upcoming XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.<sup>30</sup> The second choice was the theme of synodality (the first choice was priests). With this strong support, Pope Francis convoked the synod in March 2020 to begin in October 2021 with the theme, “For a synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.”<sup>31</sup> This marked the beginning of a synodal journey involving the whole Church.

What is evident is that this path towards synodality was not meant to emphasize the kinds of ecclesial assemblies of predominantly ordained ministers convoked at different levels of the Church throughout its history. Nor was it meant to be the simple continuation of the Synod of Bishops as had taken place since the Second Vatican Council. Since this “last Council until today, the awareness of the Church as communion has grown in broad sectors of the People of

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<sup>29</sup> Francis, *Episcopalis Communio* (Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), para. 7, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco\\_costituzione-ap\\_20180915\\_episcopalis-communicio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communicio.html).

<sup>30</sup> Holy See Press Office, “Synod23 – 1st General Congregation: Address of the Holy Father Francis at the Opening Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” Summary of Bulletin, April 10, 2023, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/10/04/231004f.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Holy See Press Office, “Press Release of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.”

God and there have been positive experiences of synodality at diocesan, regional and universal levels” (SF 41). In other words, synodality was meant to build on and go beyond the developments of the past.

An important part of synodality is the roles of the bishops. Pope Francis considers these roles in the Apostolic Constitution, *Episcopalis Communio*, by emphasizing the roles of bishops as teachers of divine and Catholic truth, a role that has been passed onto them from the original apostles.<sup>32</sup> However, the pope then goes on to add that the reason for exercising this teaching authority is for the Church and the life of the faithful, a theological position held by Pope John Paul II in *Pastores Gregis* which he sees as reflective of the teachings of St. Augustine.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the bishop does not stand above the faithful in a privileged position, their teaching authority is completely driven by the needs of the faithful. Consequently, a bishop is both “teacher and disciple.”<sup>34</sup> Essentially, the pope has restated the need for a balance between a top-down hierarchy and a grassroots hierarchy in theological terms.

Complementing this twofold role of the bishop is the theological understanding of the teaching authority of the *sensus fidelium* and its relationship with the magisterium. In the bishop’s teaching role, the bishop contributes to the oversight of the magisterium together with all the bishops and the pope. In the discipleship role, the bishop contributes to the *sensus fidelium* both as one of the faithful and as the head of a local Church who brings the authentic concerns of the faithful to the magisterium. This twofold role gives a greater voice to the Holy Spirit moving through all the faithful especially voices at the grassroots previously suppressed by clericalism.

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<sup>32</sup> Francis, *Episcopalis Communio*, para. 5.

<sup>33</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Gregis* (Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003), para. 28, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_20031016\\_pastores-gregis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20031016_pastores-gregis.html).

<sup>34</sup> Francis, *Episcopalis Communio*, 5.

The primary importance of this theological framework is that, as well as highlighting the innate sense of the Holy Spirit in all the faithful, it places a special responsibility on the bishops to ensure that all voices are heard at the highest levels of the Church, not simply their own. This includes the voices of the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, the excluded; voices that would otherwise have been unheard if Church oversight depended solely on the opinions and experiences of the bishops as it has done in the past.

Although this theological framework provides a clear direction for moving forward and an antidote for clericalism, it says nothing about practical implementation nor the most appropriate balance between the bishop's two roles. Rather than attempt to force this balance through papal edicts, changes in canon law, etc., the pope is advocating a more pastoral approach. Expanding synodal assemblies beyond participation of the ordained to include all the faithful helps achieve balance because it directly exposes bishops and priests to all the voices of the faithful. This also impacts the teaching ministry of the magisterium as listening to these voices is essential for discerning the *sensus fidelium* moving throughout the whole Church.

In the secular world, the idea of gathering all the people in as an engagement exercise is familiar. Secular organizations will sometimes embark on strategic planning exercises in an attempt to address new needs or increase their impact.<sup>35</sup> When developing a practical strategic plan, it is essential to solicit the collective knowledge, insights and diversity of opinions of all the stakeholders from the staff level up to and including senior leadership.<sup>36</sup> Ideally, the understanding gained in this way, whether it is related to the work culture, morale, communications, resources, etc., will help steer the organization toward a more productive way

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<sup>35</sup> Michael J. Allison and Jude Kaye, *Strategic Planning for Nonprofit Organizations: A Practical Guide for Dynamic Times*, 3rd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 3.

<sup>36</sup> Michael J. Allison and Jude Kaye, 59.

of doing things.

Although, a strategic planning exercise is not a consensus process, greater collective commitment is achieved when it is an inclusive exercise and when the concerns of everyone are being heard.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, implementing the changes that are proposed through the planning exercise requires commitment from all levels of an organization. Unfortunately, taking the iron law of oligarchy into account, unless senior leadership can resist the temptations of elitism, changes which affect the roles of staff or lower management are far more likely to be implemented than changes which affect the higher management levels. In an organization where the problems are rooted in the business practices of senior management, elitism is a stumbling block which can circumvent the benefits of strategic planning. At its worst, the cynicism and poor morale this unfairness creates among the staff can degrade organizational performance.

The synodal process goes far beyond a secular strategic planning exercise. The synodal approach attempts to mitigate elitist tendencies by initiating a process in which a gathering of all the faithful is not done just once but continues on an ongoing basis. Even if the Church doesn't get things right the first time around (such as ignoring the hard issues), the insistence of the Holy Spirit moving in the people will cause these issues to continually resurface in the consultation process until the Church properly addresses them. Issues that emerge from a changing world and a dynamic, evolving Church will arguably be dealt with in a timelier manner rather than having to wait decades or even centuries for an Ecumenical Council to bring in new reforms.

From both the theological and sociological perspectives, synodality is a way to balance the benefits of a grassroots organization with the benefits of a top-down hierarchy while minimizing the elitist tendencies. In particular, a synodal approach offers the potential to deal

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<sup>37</sup> Michael J. Allison and Jude Kaye, 59.

effectively with clericalism as well as the associated patterns of systematic abuse and its coverup while, at the same time, opening the Church to new growth inspired by the Holy Spirit.

#### **1.4 The Local Church and the Universal Church**

In the preceding discussion, the main focus was on the divide between the ordained and the laity as reflected in clericalism which, in turn, is a consequence of hierarchy and the iron law of oligarchy. Although the divide between women and men has not been specifically addressed to this point, it is intractably linked to the problem of the division between lay people and the ordained and the prejudice this has created, since women cannot be ordained.

The other important division is the divide between the universal Church and the local Churches. Since the 1980s there has been less focus on the culture of local Church as being normative for “reinterpreting tradition, doing theology, and transmitting faith.”<sup>38</sup> Instead, the local Church has come to be understood in terms of more universalizing theological concepts which understand the individual bishops as “the visible principle and foundation of unity in their particular churches” (LG 23), and the Eucharist “which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life” (LG 11). The result has been a trend towards centralization of Church governance emphasized in the authority of the universal Church over the local Churches.

This theological viewpoint was reflected in the Final Report from the Second Extraordinary Synod in 1985 which stated that “the unique and universal Church is truly present in all the particular Churches, and these are formed in the image of the universal Church in such a way that the one and unique Catholic Church exists in and through the particular Churches.”<sup>39</sup> This relationship was later reinforced in May 28, 1992 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of

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<sup>38</sup> Rafael Luciani, *Synodality*, 107.

<sup>39</sup> “The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod,” December 1985, para. 2, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/%20final-report-of-the-1985-extraordinary-synod-2561>.

the Faith (CDF) in the “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion.” Signed by the prefect Cardinal Ratzinger, the letter argued that although the universal Church could be understood as a communion of local Churches, “it is not the result of the communion of the Churches, but, in its essential mystery, it is a reality *ontologically and temporally* prior to every *individual* particular Church.”<sup>40</sup> As a pre-existent reality, the universal Church is given primacy.

Responding to this letter, Cardinal Walter Kasper generally agreed with the dogmatic formulations in the letter but felt that defining the universal Church as pre-existent contradicted the collegial spirit of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, in terms of praxis, he was concerned that there was an implicit identification of the pope and the curia with the universal Church which would drive the administrative structure of the Church towards greater centralism.

In the face of these objections, Cardinal Ratzinger continued to support the notion of a pre-existent universal Church but did acknowledge the Church would need to be vigilant in resisting centralist tendencies.<sup>42</sup> In light of the iron law of oligarchy, resisting these centralist tendencies over the long term without significant changes is unlikely to be successful.

Attributing personal motivations to centralist tendencies would, however, be out of place.

Instead, another important motive is rooted in the perceived viability of an organization. In assessing viability, there are two main operating logics which can be identified as the “logic of mission” and “the logic of maintenance.”<sup>43</sup> In the Church, the logic of mission is concerned with

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<sup>40</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion,” May 28, 1992, para. 8, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_28051992\\_communionis-notio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communionis-notio_en.html).

<sup>41</sup> Kilian McDonnell, “The Ratzinger/Kasper Debate: The Universal Church and Local Churches,” *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 231.

<sup>42</sup> Kilian McDonnell, 234–35.

<sup>43</sup> Gregory Baum, *Compassion and Solidarity: The Church for Others* (Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press, 2006), 41–43.

short term goals and is exercised through evangelization and pastoral works, the domain of the local Churches. The logic of maintenance is concerned with the long-term viability of the Church, the mandate of the universal Church. Objectively, a proper balance between these two operating logics is needed for a healthy Church. However, since the higher levels in the hierarchy carry more authority, decisions will be naturally biased towards maintenance concerns, i.e., maintaining an authentically Christian Church as defined by the doctrine of faith, canon law, world ecumenical and interfaith relations, etc. It means mission objectives will tend to be addressed at a lower priority and only if they do not contradict maintenance concerns.

In light of the imbalance between mission and maintenance concerns, a synodal Church provides a way to rebalance these concerns by giving expression to the voices of the whole Church. The ITC recognizes this expression in the context of collegiality or ecclesial synodality which “is manifested and made real through the ministry of Bishops on the level of communion of the local Churches in a region, and on the level of communion of all the Churches in the universal Church” (SF 7). In other words, through synodality, the bishop becomes a more authentic conduit of the missionary needs of the local Church which can then be properly balanced against the maintenance needs of the universal Church.

## **1.5 A Church for the Future**

The synodal approach has been presented, so far, as a way to address serious problems in the Church but it is much more. When Pope Francis said, “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium,”<sup>44</sup> he was not speaking about a Church that would become stagnant and locked in dogmatic ways to avoid making the mistakes of the past. He was talking about a listening Church, a place where the faithful are willing “to

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<sup>44</sup> Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary*.

accept and to welcome, to give and to receive” and to be in “relationships steeped in respect and charity, humility and poverty.”<sup>45</sup> This is accomplished by gathering together all the faithful in ways where they are able to connect and interact so they recognize each other in friendship. In this synodal realization, the voices of women and men, the young and the old, those who dissent, the poor, the marginalized and all those who throughout history have been excluded from the Church become an integral part of the faith community.<sup>46</sup> It is about becoming a Church that embraces all of its diversity.

This vision of synodality reflects a Church in which people, as well as feeling safe from abuse, are uplifted in their experiences of walking together, discerning together and consensus building. This is a process promoting “pastoral conversion grounded in relations of horizontal communion that spiral upwards toward the hierarchy but are always driven by processes of convergence that link all subjects.”<sup>47</sup> Supported by a new ecclesial vision, the Church is able to act as an organic entity no longer constrained by its own ecclesial structures but willing to redefine them in new ways that are relational, communicative and participative.<sup>48</sup> It is a transformative effect which also progressively reshapes the ministries in the Church, ecclesial processes, norms of behaviour, rites and symbols, and communications at all levels.

## **Chapter Two: Practical Implementation of a Synodal Model**

### **2.1 A Brief Overview**

The significant theological advantages of embracing synodality make it a powerful option for the future. In terms of actual implementation, being fully attuned to the *sensus fidelium* is an essential aspect. The ITC report did not provide much detail on how the *sensus fidelium* can be

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<sup>45</sup> Rafael Luciani, *Synodality*, 28.

<sup>46</sup> Serena Noceti, *Reforming the Church: A Synodal Way of Proceeding* (New York: Paulist Press, 2023), ix.

<sup>47</sup> Rafael Luciani, *Synodality*, 30.

<sup>48</sup> Serena Noceti, *Reforming the Church: A Synodal Way of Proceeding*, 89.

discerned among the Church faithful in practice. For a small community such as the early Church, engaging the *sensus fidelium* is as straightforward as gathering everyone in the same place, listening to each other and developing a consensus together. For a Church of 1.4 billion people, to say that the logistical problems are daunting is an understatement!<sup>49</sup>

At the Pan-Amazon Synod in 2019, bishops were tasked with consulting with their dioceses, a step which is recognizable as a preliminary attempt to engage the *sensus fidelium*. An obvious difficulty with this approach is that it was dependent on the enthusiasm and energy of the bishop to actually go out and meet the people in their community.

The Synod on Synodality beginning in October 2021 adopted a more comprehensive and intentional process for engaging the *sensus fidelium* in an ongoing synodal process. This process can be divided into a number of steps beginning with consultation with the local Churches and ending with the discernment and proposals of the general assemblies. In the following subsections, each of these steps is discussed in sequence and then analyzed in terms of the evidence on how well the synodal process actually appears to be engaging the *sensus fidelium*.

## **2.2 Consultation in the Local Churches**

The first step of the synodal process began with the collection of the raw opinions and viewpoints of Catholic faithful throughout all the dioceses and eparchies of the Catholic Church. Although the Synod Secretariat provided resources for guidance, the exact manner in which inputs from the faithful were collected was subject to the oversight of each diocese and eparchy. The pattern was generally the same with gatherings held in parishes and local religious organizations in order to collect responses. Using the Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall as an

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<sup>49</sup> L'Osservatore Romano, "New Church Statistics Reveal More Catholics, Fewer Vocations - Vatican News," Vatican News, April 4, 2024, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2024-04/vatican-central-statistical-office-church-pontifical-yearbook.html>.

example, six different pathways were developed for inviting people to become involved. This included all 129 parishes comprised of 66 English-speaking parishes, 55 French-speaking or bilingual parishes and 8 parishes serving ethnic communities.<sup>50</sup> It also included more than 150 social justice, ecumenical, and religious organizations, 4 school boards, and all the local clergy. There was also provision for individual inputs via an online survey. Finally, invitations to participate were extended through newsletters and websites.

Excluding the individual inputs sent directly to the diocesan offices, small group sessions, ideally consisting of five to eight people, were fundamental to gathering responses from the faithful.<sup>51</sup> Led by a facilitator, each small group addressed the following two questions suggested by the official preparatory document released by the Vatican:

1. A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together:” How is this “journeying together” happening today in your particular Church?
2. What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”?<sup>52</sup>

These questions were also adapted at both the diocesan and parish levels to be more sensitive to the local context while still capturing the essence of the original questions. In the Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall, it was suggested that the questions be addressed in two separate sessions.<sup>53</sup>

Along with these questions, there were also certain ground rules to help guide small groups in their discussions which are listed here as:

1. This consultation is a safe place to talk – we will treat each other and what anyone says with reverence and respect.
2. One person speaks at a time.

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<sup>50</sup> “Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall Synodal Synthesis” (Ottawa: Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall, June 2022), 1, <https://ottawacornwall.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Synodal-Sythesis-Archdiocese-of-Ottawa-Cornwall.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission - Process for Facilitating Synodal Consultations* (Washington, DC: leadershiproundtable.org, n.d.), 9, <https://www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/EN-Vademecum-with-Appendices-A-B-CD.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> *Preparatory Document* (Synod of Bishops, 2021), 30, [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-21x21/en\\_prepa\\_book.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-21x21/en_prepa_book.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> *Experience Walking Together as Church Synod 2021-2023: Facilitator’s Guide* (Ottawa: Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall, 2021), 9.

3. We all will listen with an open mind.
4. We will be stopping the conversation at certain intervals to reflect and pray.
5. Our primary mode is dialogue: When we speak our purpose is to advance the conversation. Please avoid arguing or comments that seek to advance a personal agenda.
6. We limit how long we speak so that everyone has time to share.
7. We only speak once until everyone has had an opportunity to share.
8. We will be reporting the themes and experiences to the (arch)diocese and bishop's conference as they emerge from the consultation discussions without indicating the names of individual participants.
9. As participants, when we tell others of our experience of the consultation, we will not attribute anything we share to particular people or groups.<sup>54</sup>

The purpose of these ground rules was to encourage maximum engagement of the participants by allowing everyone an uninterrupted opportunity to express their particular viewpoints without feeling judged or being challenged. From the practical perspective, this facilitated approach was meant to counter the tendency of a few dominant or opinionated voices monopolizing a group conversation and so be more faithful to the objective of listening to the Holy Spirit moving among all the faithful.

The responses from each participant in the small group were also summarized by someone assigned to take notes. According to the guidelines for small group facilitation provided by the Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall, the following advice was provided for people taking notes in terms of the things they should be recording:

- A note-taker is not a scribe writing down every word. Ideally, the note-taker can identify a theme, feeling, complaint, or an idea and jot a few of these details for each speaker.
- Note-takers should try to capture what participants specifically say about areas where the Church needs healing and conversion.<sup>55</sup>

Although this guidance is limited, it does imply the importance of choosing someone who is able to identify the essence of the small group discussion in the context of healing and conversion.

Since this represents a preliminary level of discernment, how well this discernment takes place

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<sup>54</sup> *Experience Walking Together as Church Synod 2021-2023: Facilitator's Guide*, Appendix F.

<sup>55</sup> "Small Group Guidelines" (Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall, December 2021).

affects the quality of the notes and their relevance for later steps in the synodal process. Given the importance of the note-taker in this context, it is surprising that none of the guidance published by the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops considered the role of the note-taker in any detail.

It is readily apparent that sending all collected opinions and viewpoints to the Synod Secretariat would be overwhelming. Even restricted to the Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall, dealing with the responses of 7,000 people would have been challenging.<sup>56</sup> To cope with this potential information overload, the inputs from each small group were collated into a parish report for the parish's own use and then further collated into a synthesis report sent to the diocese.

In the Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall, the synthesis reports from the parishes or local organizations were expected to focus on the following questions:

1. In your group's discussion, which points of view seem to be held in common on the experiences of Church? Include other points of view that were mentioned less but are noteworthy.
2. What did participants have to say about areas where the Church is in need of healing and conversion?
3. Through listening to the dreams, desires, and aspirations for the Church expressed by participants and through discernment, in what ways is the Holy Spirit guiding the Church to grow in synodality?<sup>57</sup>

Limited to a maximum of 250 words per question, a significant reduction in the amount of information generated by the small groups was required. Although this is extremely helpful when trying to deal with large amounts of information, it raises the question of what is being excluded. The diocesan questions provide guidance in this respect because it limits the collation to specific topics (e.g., healing, conversion, a synodal future, etc.) while highlighting common viewpoints

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<sup>56</sup> "Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall Synodal Synthesis," 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Experience Walking Together as Church Synod 2021-2023: Facilitator's Guide*, 11.

or viewpoints that were noteworthy. Most of this guidance could be considered objective except what it means to be noteworthy which is highly dependent on the experiences and worldviews of the person or persons doing the collating. In other words, it is subjective and yet it is in these “noteworthy” viewpoints that the voice of the Holy Spirit may also be heard.

In the summary of the small group sessions held at The Good Shepherd Parish in Ottawa, for example, the three issues of women’s leadership roles in the Church, women in the diaconate, and women in the priesthood were all raised.<sup>58</sup> This summary was based on five small group sessions of four to six people, the responses to a parish wide questionnaire, and individual emailed responses. In all, thirty adults and ten children contributed. The three women’s issues (women’s leadership, women as deacons, and women as priests) were specifically identified in two of the small groups as well as the questionnaire. Arguably, this is significant enough to be considered notable. However, in the The Good Shepherd Parish synthesis report sent to the diocese, the responses concerning all three women’s issues were conflated into a single concern suggesting the need to reassess “the role of women in the church.”<sup>59</sup> This conflated concern is so vague and the topic of women’s issues so broad it would be difficult to know how to start addressing women’s concerns in a reasonable way.

This example illustrates the problem of subjectivity where issues that have been raised in small groups, or the nuances of these issues, are ignored. This is only one example and is not meant to be representative of the process in the Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall or worldwide. Other parishes in Ottawa, such as Saint Basil and Canadian Martyrs, raised the issues of women in leadership and women’s ordination in their collated synthesis reports, meaning women’s

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<sup>58</sup> “Synod 2021-2023 – Experience Walking Together as a Church Good Shepherd Parish (GSP) Synodal Process Final Report” (Ottawa: Good Shepherd Parish, n.d.), <https://files.ecatholic.com/20724/documents/2022/10/Synodal%20Report%20Final.pdf?t=1666965286000>.

<sup>59</sup> “Synod 2021-2023 – Experience Walking Together” ann. J.

issues were still reported to the archdiocese.<sup>60</sup>

Still other parishes in Ottawa did not mention any issues related to women at all in their synthesis reports. This probably reflects the diversity in the concerns of the various parish congregations, how each of the questions were interpreted, and what was considered important. Additionally, the actual percentage of people who involved themselves in the parish level synodal discussions appears to have been small. The number of Catholics in the Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall is estimated to be 525,387 with only 7,000 people participating (1.4 percent).<sup>61</sup> The participation rates for various other dioceses around the world indicate that this level of participation was normal.<sup>62</sup> This low participation rate combined with the examples of issues being filtered out in the collation process raise questions about how much the voice of the Holy Spirit reflected in the *sensus fidelium* will be authentically heard at the higher levels.

Worldwide, this initial collection of responses from the faithful took place up until the spring of 2022 after which parish and religious organization synthesis reports were sent to their respective dioceses or eparchies. The dioceses and eparchies, in turn, produced their own synthesis reports from the received inputs further collating and restricting the responses to ten pages.<sup>63</sup> The suggested format of the diocesan reports was to have an introduction describing the synodal experience (one or two pages), a main section providing a discernment of the received contributions (six or seven pages), and a conclusion discussing next steps (one or two pages).

Given the large number of inputs and the ten-page restriction, the requirement for further

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<sup>60</sup> “For a Synodal Church Parish Report” (Ottawa: St. Basil’s Parish, June 2022), [https://files.ecatholic.com/12425/documents/2022/6/Synodal\\_Document\\_D20220619\\_Share.pdf?t=1655855803000](https://files.ecatholic.com/12425/documents/2022/6/Synodal_Document_D20220619_Share.pdf?t=1655855803000); “Summary Report to the Parish - Synod on Synodality” (Ottawa: Holy Canadian Martyrs Parish, May 2022), <https://canadianmartyrs.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Synodality-CMP-Final-Report.pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> “Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall Synodal Synthesis,” 1.

<sup>62</sup> Luke Coppen, “How Many People Took Part in the Synod’s Diocesan Phase?” The Pillar, July 29, 2022, <https://www.pillaratholic.com/p/how-many-people-took-part-in-the>.

<sup>63</sup> “Suggestions for Dioceses and Episcopal Conferences on the Preparation of the Synthesis,” News, March 1, 2022, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/suggestions-for-dioceses-and-episcopal-conferences.html>.

collation to facilitate higher-level discernment is again necessary as well as the potential for filtering out significant issues. In the case of the Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall, women's issues were highlighted as a notable synodal theme and the synthesis document stated that: "The profound call for more respect and equality for women within the Church is loud and clear, with varying notions of what specifically that means."<sup>64</sup> The three women's issues were conflated.

On the other hand, two of the three women's issues were addressed in each of the synthesis reports of the geographically neighbouring dioceses of Kingston (leadership and priesthood), Pembroke (diaconate and priesthood) and Peterborough (leadership and diaconate). Collectively these dioceses addressed all three issues.<sup>65</sup> By way of comparison, the Ottawa-Cornwall response suggests a reluctance to discuss the ordination of women. Despite human subjectivity, it appears that the sheer number of synthesis reports and the diversity of the people doing the collation ensured that notable issues were not filtered out of the process, at least in the collective responses from the local Churches.

Despite these challenges, one of the very important aspects of local consultation was that it allowed bishops to be better informed about the needs of the local Church before gathering for synodal assemblies.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, the pastoral insights provided through listening to the experiences of lay people were invaluable.<sup>67</sup> It was also an opportunity for the bishops to become more integral members of the communities they served and to be better representatives at the

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<sup>64</sup> "Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall Synodal Synthesis."

<sup>65</sup> "Synod on Synodality Synthesis Report" (Kingston: Archdiocese of Kingston, July 14, 2022), <https://files.ecatholic.com/22344/documents/2022/7/July%2014%20Synod%20on%20Synodality%20Report%2023.pdf?t=1658015123000>; "Synod 2021-2023: Summary Report of the Diocese of Pembroke" (Pembroke: Diocese of Pembroke, June 15, 2022), <https://pembrokedioocese.com/wp-content/uploads/PEMBROKE-Synthesis-Report-ENG.pdf>; "Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission Diocesan Synthesis" (Peterborough: Diocese of Peterborough, June 17, 2022), <https://www.peterboroughdiocese.org/en/resourcesGeneral/Pastoral-Planning/Synthesis-RC-Diocese-of-Peterborough-06-17-2022.pdf>.

<sup>66</sup> Moira McQueen, *Walking Together* (Toronto, ON: Novalis, 2022), 40.

<sup>67</sup> Moira McQueen, 57.

higher levels.

### **2.3 Regional and National Consultation**

From the diocesan or eparchy level, synthesis reports were passed upwards through the intermediate assemblies of bishops and then on to the national assemblies or episcopal conferences. From this level, the synthesis reports were sent to the Synod Secretariat by August 2022. At each level in this process, the received synthesis reports were collated into a single synthesis report, subject to the same ten-page restriction and formatting suggestions as the diocesan reports, before being sent on to the next level. The obvious challenge was to capture the essence of the increasingly diverse inputs at each successfully higher level in ten pages.

In Canada, the national synthesis report of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB) did address the three women's issues. In terms of women's leadership, the report noted that "laypeople, including women, can have an effective role in the administration and governance of local Churches."<sup>68</sup> The report also stated that, "for many, the status quo is increasingly difficult to justify with respect to allowing space for women in leadership positions."<sup>69</sup> With respect to women's ordination, the report observed that "all regional reports acknowledged receiving requests that women be granted access to ordained ecclesial ministries."<sup>70</sup> There was no differentiation made between the role of women in the diaconate and the role of women in the priesthood.

The CCCB report again demonstrated the value of having inputs from numerous diverse sources ensuring that particular issues were not intentionally or unintentionally filtered out.

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<sup>68</sup> "Synod on Synodality - National Synthesis for Canada (2022)" (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, August 31, 2022), para. 20, <https://www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Synod-on-Synodality-EN-2022-08-31.pdf>.

<sup>69</sup> "Synod on Synodality - National Synthesis for Canada (2022)," para. 32.

<sup>70</sup> "Synod on Synodality - National Synthesis for Canada (2022)," para. 20.

Despite this diversity of inputs, discussion on women’s issues was still limited, occupying just a few lines out of the ten-page synthesis report. Outside the usage of “men and women,” the term “women” only appeared five times in the report, three of which have already been quoted. The other two instances include a single listing under the issues taken up by contemporary society (i.e., women’s rights) and a concern expressed with respect to clericalism.<sup>71</sup> By way of comparison, the synthesis report from the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario (ACBO), one of the inputs to the CCCB report, contained fourteen references to women. These references covered leadership, ordination, sexual abuse, inclusion, and fear of judgment. They also added more meaningful contextual information including the need for more inclusive language, the disrespect aimed at women, and the significant role women have played in the Church.

Despite the CCCB filtering of women’s issues, Canadian women’s concerns were raised by other organizations in Canada who sent their contributions directly to the Synod Secretariat. As one of these contributors, for example, the Catholic Network for Women’s Equality specifically addressed the issues of women’s exclusion from ordained ministries and leadership stating:

If the baseless prohibition against women’s ordination were to be lifted, the whole Church would benefit from the gifts and service of qualified women called by God to serve their communities with love. Catholic women would also see themselves reflected in ordained women ministers in their parishes and throughout the leadership of the Church.<sup>72</sup>

Another contributor, the Roman Catholic Women’s Priests of Canada, submitted a synthesis report which also addressed women’s leadership and ordination as deacons and as priests.<sup>73</sup> One

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<sup>71</sup> “Synod on Synodality - National Synthesis for Canada (2022),” paras. 12, 19.

<sup>72</sup> “Summary Report of the Catholic Network for Women’s Equality, Canada - Synod on Synodality Consultation Process” (Catholic Network for Women’s Equality, August 2022), 3, <https://cnwe.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Synod-CNWE-Document-August-2022.pdf>.

<sup>73</sup> “Synod Conversations – RCWP Canada,” Roman Catholic Women Priests Canada, 2022, <https://rcwpcanada.altervista.org/2022-docs/SynodDocEn.html>.

other example was Concerned Lay Catholics in Canada who discussed women’s issues including leadership in the Church but not the ordination of women.<sup>74</sup>

## **2.4 Working Document for the Continental Stage**

The synthesis report from the CCCB and the synthesis reports from all the other national assemblies worldwide were sent to the Synod Secretariat. These inputs were used to generate, “‘Enlarge the Space of Your Tent’ – Working Document for the Continental Stage” (DCS), a report that was written over a period of two weeks by a group of experts with diverse disciplinary backgrounds gathered from all over the world.<sup>75</sup> These experts included bishops, priests, consecrated men and women, lay men and lay women. The report was approved and released to all the bishops worldwide by the end of October 2022.

Reflecting on the inputs received by the Synod Secretariat, participation was higher than expected with contributions from 112 out of 114 Episcopal Conferences and contributions from all fifteen Oriental Catholic Churches.<sup>76</sup> Despite the importance of this Vatican initiative, the participation from the Roman Curia was proportionally lower with contributions from seventeen out of a total of twenty-three dicasteries. These contributions were augmented by over a thousand submissions from individuals and groups sent directly to the Synod Secretariat as well as responses gathered through social media.

Based on projecting the results from the CCCB report, the expectation for the discussion of women’s issues would have been limited. However, at the start of the writing process, Austen Ivereigh (an author, journalist and commentator who was one of the experts involved in helping

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<sup>74</sup> “Concerned Lay Catholic in Canada - Listening Sessions” (Concerned Lay Catholic in Canada, June 2022), [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f7f5769ad155a40ed4db62f/t/6317501ea69ff749ab37286c/166247222885/Concerned+Lay+Catholics+in+Canada+Synodal+Report+Final\\_2022\\_06\\_27.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f7f5769ad155a40ed4db62f/t/6317501ea69ff749ab37286c/166247222885/Concerned+Lay+Catholics+in+Canada+Synodal+Report+Final_2022_06_27.pdf).

<sup>75</sup> “‘Enlarge the Space of Your Tent’ - Working Document for the Continental Stage” (General Secretariat of the Synod, October 2022), para. 5, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf>.

<sup>76</sup> “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” para. 5.

put together the DCS report) explains that they were given the following instructions:

To be the voice of God’s people, added Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J., the synod’s relator, “you need not just your mind but your whole selves to be present.” It meant being attentive, for example, to the way in which in some synod reports filters had been applied to what the people were saying by bishops keen to embellish or groups with agendas.<sup>77</sup>

This instruction is a clear indication that the Synod Secretariat was well aware of the problems of filtering and the need to rebalance the inputs to the process to more closely reflect the concerns of all the faithful.

Ultimately, the DCS report was much more nuanced than the Canadian Synthesis Report. The main body of the report (chapters one to three), which was forty-three pages, contained thirty-one references to women (which ignores occurrences where “men” and “women” were paired together). Of these references to women, twenty-eight are found in a section entitled “Rethinking women’s participation.” This is the longest section on any particular issue and consisted of six paragraphs focusing exclusively on women in the Church. Illustrating the desire for a deeper discernment of the *sensus fidelium* (rather than simply summarizing viewpoints), the first paragraph provides the theological justification for the inclusion of women by stating, “A critical and urgent area in this regard concerns the role of women and their vocation, rooted in our common baptismal dignity, to participate fully in the life of the Church.”<sup>78</sup> The expression “common baptismal dignity” echoes the Second Vatican Council which affirmed the dignity of all the faithful when it said:

Therefore, the chosen People of God is one: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism”; sharing a common dignity as members from their regeneration in Christ, having the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection; possessing in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity (LG 32).

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<sup>77</sup> Austen Ivereigh, “I Helped Write the First Global Synod Document. Here’s What We Heard from Catholics around the World,” [austeni.org](https://www.austeni.org/blog/i-helped-write-the-first-global-synod-document-heres-what-we-heard-from-catholics-around-the-world), October 27, 2022, <https://www.austeni.org/blog/i-helped-write-the-first-global-synod-document-heres-what-we-heard-from-catholics-around-the-world>.

<sup>78</sup> “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” para. 60.

In the second paragraph, the discussion goes on to include representative observations from around the world recognizing the value of women’s contributions, the lack of opportunities for women to make their voices heard, and their exclusion from decision-making processes.

From these observations it concludes that:

The Church faces two related challenges: women remain the majority of those who attend liturgy and participate in activities, men a minority; yet most decision-making and governance roles are held by men. It is clear that the Church must find ways to attract men to a more active membership in the Church and to enable women to participate more fully at all levels of Church life.<sup>79</sup>

The third and fourth paragraphs summarize what women need from the Church based on nearly universal recognition of these needs from around the world. The main focus is the need for greater support for women, equality with men, and greater inclusion in meaningful roles including decision-making.

The issue of women’s vocations is discussed in the fifth paragraph. In this case, the worldwide responses to this issue are more diverse and less clearly aligned than for equality and inclusion. With respect to leadership and ordination, the document reports that:

After careful listening, many reports ask that the Church continue its discernment in relation to a range of specific questions: the active role of women in the governing structures of Church bodies, the possibility for women with adequate training to preach in parish settings, and a female diaconate. Much greater diversity of opinion was expressed on the subject of priestly ordination for women, which some reports call for, while others consider a closed issue.<sup>80</sup>

Interestingly, the ordination of women into the diaconate is not treated as any more controversial than leadership of women in a non-ordained capacity. This bottom-up openness to the ordination of women to the diaconate contrasts with the top-down resistance of the Church hierarchy to implementing any form of women’s ordination in modern times.

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<sup>79</sup> “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” para. 61.

<sup>80</sup> “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” para. 64.

The last paragraph recognizes the important contributions of religious women especially their leadership in synodal practices.

## **2.5 Discussions of the Seven Continental Assemblies**

After the completion of the DCS in October 2022, it was sent back to all the local Churches to reflect on local experiences in the context of worldwide concerns through a process of listening, dialogue and discernment. This reflection was guided by the following three questions:

1. After having read and prayed with the DCS, which intuitions resonate most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the Church in your continent? Which experiences are new, or illuminating to you?
2. After having read and prayed with the DCS, what substantial tensions or divergences emerge as particularly important in your continent's perspective? Consequently, what are the questions or issues that should be addressed and considered in the next steps of the process?
3. Looking at what emerges from the previous two questions, what are the priorities, recurring themes and calls to action that can be shared with other local Churches around the world and discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023?<sup>81</sup>

Effectively, this was a preparation stage for the Continental Assemblies that were to follow in early 2023. The Continental Assemblies divided the world into seven continental regions which include: Africa and Madagascar, North America, Latin American and the Caribbean, Asia, Europe, Middle East – Oriental Churches, and Oceania.<sup>82</sup>

How the preparation stage took place and who was included was the responsibility of each local Church and guided by the corresponding Continental Assembly. In Africa and Madagascar, for example, the preparation stage was used to learn the Spiritual Conversation Model at a continental session and then go back to the local Churches to practice what was

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<sup>81</sup> “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” para. 106.

<sup>82</sup> *The Synodal Journey - Documents* (General Secretariat of the Synod, 2023), 65–242, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/bookdocuments/The-synodal-journey-Documents-EN.pdf>.

learned with the people of their faith communities. In Asia, each local Church was requested to prepare a ten-page report based on the three questions to be submitted to the continental level.

Regardless of the requirements, this preparatory stage was an opportunity to initiate further synodal consultations with all the faithful. In Canada, reflection appears to have mainly been carried out at the level of the diocesan curia. For example, in a survey of the websites of fifteen dioceses representing major cities in Canada, there were only three published invitations for public consultation. Though not a formal survey, it does suggest a missed opportunity to redress imbalances or reintroduce the voices of marginal groups missed in the DCS report.

Once the local Church reflections were completed, the bishops with their delegates were invited to participate in the appropriate Continental Assembly. Although each Continental Assembly was not run identically, the general format was similar. The participants in these assemblies continued the discernment of the DCS based on the same three questions used by the local Churches. The number of participants in each of the assemblies ranged from about 125 (Middle East – Oriental Churches) to over 900 (North America) and typically included bishops, priests, deacons, religious women and men, and lay women and men.<sup>83</sup> Lay involvement was typically on the order of 50 percent and the involvement of women ranged from 5 percent (North America) to about 15 percent (Asia).

There were two main stages in the continental process. In the first stage, the assembly was divided into small groups to consider the questions using the method of spiritual conversation suggested by the Secretariat for the General Synod (and discussed in the next subsection). In the second stage, the salient points developed from the small group sessions were provided to a Synod Team of ten to twenty people who were tasked to draft the continental

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<sup>83</sup> *The Synodal Journey - Documents*, 65–242.

report. The report was then subject to revisions by the Continental Assembly or the bishops before final approval. The seven continental reports were published in April 2023.

Comparing these reports in the context of women's issues provides interesting insights into the uniformity or diversity of the concerns and the geographical nature of these concerns. Focusing on women's participation and leadership, there was universal recognition of the valuable role women play in the church and that, as the North American report expressed, "there can be no true co-responsibility in the Church without fully honoring the inherent dignity of women."<sup>84</sup> This is reflected in calls from all the assemblies summarized here as:

- "The Church in Africa wishes that, following the principle of subsidiarity, formal forums for women participation in the Church be enhanced"<sup>85</sup> (Africa and Madagascar).
- "The discernment of how baptismal co-responsibility for the Church's mission should be appreciated and achieved demands a better understanding of the roles of the laity in general, and of women and young people in particular"<sup>86</sup> (North America).
- "One challenge is to open the spaces, provide the means and generate ways for the effective participation of women in the instances of discernment and decision making"<sup>87</sup> (Latin America and the Caribbean).
- "The synodal conversations have called for a rethinking of women's participation in the life of the Church given that women played an important role in the Bible. There is a need in the Church for a renewal of governance structures that will allow the meaningful participation of women in all aspects of the Church"<sup>88</sup> (Asia).
- "Take concrete and courageous decisions on the role of women within the Church and on their greater involvement at all levels, including decision-making and taking processes"<sup>89</sup> (Europe).
- "To abandon any form of exclusion of women from participation in the life of the Church, especially in making ecclesial decisions"<sup>90</sup> (Middle East – Oriental Catholic Churches).
- "Full and just participation of women in Church governance, decision-making, mission

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<sup>84</sup> "Final Document of the Continental Stage in North America," in *The Synodal Journey - Documents*, n.d., para. 19.

<sup>85</sup> "Final Document of the Continental Stage in Africa and Madagascar," in *The Synodal Journey - Documents*, n.d., sec. Conclusion, para. 6.

<sup>86</sup> "Final Document of the Continental Stage in North America," para. 54III.

<sup>87</sup> "Final Document of the Continental Stage in Latin America and the Caribbean," in *The Synodal Journey - Documents*, n.d., para. 39.

<sup>88</sup> "Final Document of the Continental Stage in Asia," in *The Synodal Journey - Documents*, n.d., para. 66.

<sup>89</sup> "Final Document of the Continental Stage in Europe," in *The Synodal Journey - Documents*, n.d., para. 92.

<sup>90</sup> "Final Document of the Continental Stage in Middle East - Oriental Church," in *The Synodal Journey - Documents*, n.d., para. 48h.

and ministry”<sup>91</sup> (Oceania).

The only negative comments were expressed in the Asian report which acknowledged that, “In some places, women in leadership roles are not very welcome due to their cultural mindset ... The role of women is considered secondary or simply discarded as being an assistant to men, this includes women in consecrated life.”<sup>92</sup>

The issue of the women’s diaconate was discussed in a more cautious way in five of the seven continental reports. The Latin American and Caribbean report contained the most positive response saying, “Many voices consider the institution of the female diaconate an urgent need, recognizing what is being experienced in several communities.”<sup>93</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, given the cultural context, the Middle Eastern – Oriental Churches report also reflected a positive stance, recommending that, “Our respective Churches should begin to reflect seriously on the re-establishment of the diaconate for women.”<sup>94</sup>

On a less affirmative note, the Oceania report simply mentioned that, “the issue of women’s ordination was raised in the Australian response” and that “the New Zealand response noted that ‘one group asked for their [women’s] ordination as deacons.’”<sup>95</sup> The report did, however, say that “those aspects of Church teaching which are perceived as ‘exclusionary or hurtful’ ... include teaching on ... the restriction of ordination to men.”<sup>96</sup>

The European and North American reports contained comments related to women in ordained ministry without differentiating between the diaconate and the priesthood. The European report remarked that women’s access to ordained ministries is a divisive issue that

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<sup>91</sup> “Final Document of the Continental Stage in Oceania,” in *The Synodal Journey - Documents*, n.d., para. 36d.

<sup>92</sup> “Final Document of the Continental Stage in Asia,” para. 96.

<sup>93</sup> “Final Document of the Continental Stage in Latin America and the Caribbean,” para. 86.

<sup>94</sup> “Final Document of the Continental Stage in Middle East - Oriental Church,” para. 48h.

<sup>95</sup> “Final Document of the Continental Stage in Oceania,” para. 58.

<sup>96</sup> “Final Document of the Continental Stage in Oceania,” para. 132.

“must be studied in more depth.”<sup>97</sup> The North American report adopted a conservative stance and had this to say about women: “While clarity is still needed around exactly what a fully co-responsible Church looks like, delegates proposed the examination of a variety of aspects of Church life, including decision-making roles, leadership, and ordination.”<sup>98</sup> This conservative response seems surprising given the cultural context especially the history of women’s rights in North America, the number of feminist theologians, and the number of organizations promoting feminist religious ideals.

The question of women’s ordination to the priesthood was considered in three reports but only in the general category of women’s ordination. The North American, European and Oceania responses were already discussed. The Oceania report did, however, confirm “there was no request for the consideration of ordination of women as priests”<sup>99</sup> in New Zealand.

Comparing the Continental reports to the DCS, the need to attend to the issues of women’s leadership was universally expressed in all documents. The desire for women’s ordination either to the diaconate or the priesthood was generally downplayed in the Continental reports. The two most likely explanations for this are filtering based on clericalism and the influence of traditionalism. In the event of conflict between traditionalist views rooted in magisterial teaching and discernment of the *sensus fidelium*, the ITC advocated that there is a need to “reflect on the teaching that has been given and consider whether it needs clarification or reformulation in order to communicate more effectively the essential message” (SF 80). From this perspective, the lack of attention towards a women’s priesthood in the continental reports seemed to ignore this advice since, at a minimum, this issue should have warranted a stronger

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<sup>97</sup> “Final Document of the Continental Stage in Europe,” para. 75.

<sup>98</sup> “Final Document of the Continental Stage in North America,” para. 19.

<sup>99</sup> “Final Document of the Continental Stage in Oceania,” para. 58.

desire for a theological exploration to bring greater clarity.

Similarly, the collective discussion of a women's diaconate in the Continental reports should have matched the DCS which stated "many reports ask that the Church continue its discernment in relation to ... a female diaconate."<sup>100</sup> Only three Continental reports mentioned the female diaconate specifically, two reports conflated the diaconate and priesthood into women's ordination, while the other two reports omitted the subject of women's ordination completely. Overall, the continental response seemed diminished compared to the DCS. Adding to this, the North American report's muted response in light of the North American cultural context does suggest that filtering has negatively influenced this and possibly the other Continental reports (for similar reasons) with respect to women's ordination.

### ***Method of Spiritual Conversation***

One of the significant developments of the continental stage was the exposure of the many participants to Ignatian spirituality in the form of the method of spiritual conversation advocated by the Synod Secretariat.<sup>101</sup> Spiritual conversation is used to help groups create an "atmosphere of trust and welcome, so that people can express themselves more freely"<sup>102</sup> allowing them "to collaborate more fully with the work of the Holy Spirit in the world."<sup>103</sup>

In this method, participants first spend time in personal prayer and reflection on the questions under consideration and what they will later share in small groups. After personal prayer, six to eight participants (ideally) gather around a table. In this initial gathering, a facilitator welcomes everyone and leads them in an opening prayer. Each participant then shares

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<sup>100</sup> "Enlarge the Space of Your Tent," para. 64.

<sup>101</sup> "The Spiritual Conversation" (Synod of Bishops, December 2021), [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/en/EN\\_Step\\_6\\_Spiritual-Conversation.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/en/EN_Step_6_Spiritual-Conversation.pdf).

<sup>102</sup> "The Spiritual Conversation," 1.

<sup>103</sup> Laurence Loubières, "Spiritual Conversation: A Heart-to-Heart Dialogue," Jesuits of Canada, accessed June 27, 2024, <https://jesuits.ca/stories/spiritual-conversation-a-heart-to-heart-dialogue/>.

a few words about their interior state.

This prepares the participants for the first round where each of them shares their prayer experiences and the insights they gained. Each sharing lasts no more than three minutes. While each person is speaking, everyone else remains silent, listening to the speaker with open hearts. There is no back and forth discussion about what anyone has said. Once everyone has had an opportunity to speak, there is a time of silence to reflect on everything that was heard.

The second round involves a sharing of what emerged for participants in their silent reflection. Each person is again allowed to share without observing any particular order. There is no discussion, critiquing or defending of anyone's position. It is an opportunity to reflect on what resonated, the insights that were gained, commonalities that were observed, experiences of harmony, revelation, etc. This is followed by another period of silence for reflection.

In the third and final round, the participants once again share what emerged for them during silent reflection, building on key points and consensus, and noting how the Holy Spirit has moved within the group. Once the sharing is finished, a prayer concludes the conversation.

In terms of the synodal process, one of the most important aspects of the method of spiritual conversation is that it guides the participant towards respectful listening, dialogue, and sharing. This contrasts to discussions where the dominant personality monopolizes the conversation and pushes a group to adopt their position. Listening to the *sensus fidelium* is more easily facilitated when everyone is treated with respect and allowed to equally share their understanding of the issues under consideration.

This aspect was appreciated by the participants of the Continental Assemblies who, after learning this approach, happily embraced it. The North American Continental Report, for example, had this to say:

The listening experienced by the delegates during the spiritual conversation was greatly appreciated. Many spoke of it with admiration, acknowledging that they had been transformed. Not only did the synodal experience create a space for them to speak freely, but it also provided an opportunity to be heard. For many it was a discovery, an illuminating experience. It filled them with joy, hope, and gratitude.<sup>104</sup>

This strongly resonates with the earlier discussion on the positive aspects of synodality (“Church of the Future”).

## **2.6 *Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session of the Synod of Bishops**

The *Instrumentum Laboris*, which was published in June 2023, was the document drafted primarily from the Final Documents of the seven Continental Assemblies and then used to guide discussion at the First Session of the Synod on Synodality in October 2023.<sup>105</sup> The *Instrumentum Laboris* was meant to be used in conjunction with the DCS as well as the continental reports.

The main areas for discussion identified in the *Instrumentum Laboris* included: “A Communion that Radiates,” “Co-responsibility in Mission,” and “Participation, Governance and Authority.” Each of these areas was then explored, guided by five questions. In terms of the issues of women’s leadership, diaconate, and priesthood, the question which most resonated was found in “Co-responsibility in Mission” and asked, “How can the Church of our time better fulfil its mission through greater recognition and promotion of the baptismal dignity of women?”<sup>106</sup>

The text that accompanies this question primarily focuses on a synodal Church that offers “greater recognition of women’s baptismal dignity and rejection of all forms of discrimination and exclusion faced by women in the Church and society.” Although no specific mention was made of a women’s priesthood, prayerful reflection on women’s inclusion in the diaconate was

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<sup>104</sup> “North American Final Document for the Continental Stage of the 2021-2024 Synod” (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, April 12, 2023), para. 9, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/North%20American%20Final%20Document%20-%20English.pdf>.

<sup>105</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris for the First Session (October 2023)* (General Secretariat of the Synod, 2023), [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/ENG\\_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/ENG_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS.pdf).

<sup>106</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris for the First Session*, 41.

suggested.<sup>107</sup> Additionally, discussion of both the women’s diaconate and priesthood had already been identified as significant issues in the DCS and the continental reports which were being used as reference documents.

## **2.7 First Session of the XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops**

The First Session of the Synod of Bishops took place from October 2 to 27, 2023 in Rome and embraced the theme: “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.” The assembly consisted of 363 voting delegates and 75 non-voting participants.<sup>108</sup> Of the voting delegates, 268 were bishops and 54 were women (both lay and religious).<sup>109</sup>

The synthesis report from the Synod of Bishops was approved on October 28, 2023 after the completion of the synod.<sup>110</sup> It was not intended to repeat the *Instrumentum Laboris* but rather to give new impetus to the questions and themes that were considered to be priorities. The synthesis report is structured in three parts: “The Face of the Synodal Church”; “All Disciples, All Missionaries”; and “Weaving Bonds, Building Community.” Each of these parts was divided into six or seven subsections and each of these subsections was further subdivided into “Convergences,” “Matters for Consideration,” and “Proposals.”

In terms of women’s issues, the subsection in “All Disciples, All Missionaries” called “Women in the Life and Mission of the Church” was particularly relevant. In the expression of convergences, the report said that women and men “are called together into a communion of loving, non-competitive relationships in Christ, and to a co-responsibility to be expressed at

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<sup>107</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris for the First Session*, 42.

<sup>108</sup> CNA Staff, “Synod on Synodality: Final and Full List of Delegates,” Catholic News Agency, September 22, 2023, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/254758/tk-full-list>.

<sup>109</sup> Carol Glatz, “Pope Appoints Hundreds to Attend Synod of Bishops on Synodality,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, July 7, 2023, <https://www.usccb.org/news/2023/pope-appoints-hundreds-attend-synod-bishops-synodality>.

<sup>110</sup> Synod of Bishops, *XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops First Session (4-29 October 2023) Synthesis Report - A Synodal Church in Mission* (General Secretariat of the Synod, 2023), <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf>.

every level of the Church's life."<sup>111</sup> The report then goes on to acknowledge the "very positive experience of the reciprocity between women and men during this Assembly."<sup>112</sup>

Focusing first on women's participation and leadership, under "Matters for Consideration," the report reflects that, "Churches all over the world have expressed a clear request that the active contribution of women would be recognised and valued, and that their pastoral leadership increase in all areas of the Church's life and mission."<sup>113</sup> The corresponding proposal reads:

It is urgent to ensure that women can participate in decision-making processes and assume roles of responsibility in pastoral care and ministry. The Holy Father has significantly increased the number of women in positions of responsibility in the Roman Curia. This should also happen at other levels of Church life, in consecrated life and dioceses. Provision needs to be made in Canon Law accordingly.<sup>114</sup>

Effectively, these statements affirm the observations made in the DCS and the continental reports.

Similarly for women in the diaconate, the report expresses a greater diversity in views under "Convergences" by saying:

Different positions have been expressed regarding women's access to the diaconal ministry. For some, this step would be unacceptable because they consider it a discontinuity with Tradition. For others, however, opening access for women to the diaconate would restore the practice of the Early Church. Others still, discern it as an appropriate and necessary response to the signs of the times, faithful to the Tradition, and one that would find an echo in the hearts of many who seek new energy and vitality in the Church. Some express concern that the request speaks of a worrying anthropological confusion, which, if granted, would marry the Church to the spirit of the age.<sup>115</sup>

Every paragraph in the synthesis report required a two-thirds vote before it was approved as written. This particular paragraph on the diaconate received the most negative votes of any

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<sup>111</sup> Synod of Bishops, para. 9b.

<sup>112</sup> Synod of Bishops, para. 9c.

<sup>113</sup> Synod of Bishops, para. 9i.

<sup>114</sup> Synod of Bishops, para. 9m.

<sup>115</sup> Synod of Bishops, para. 9j.

paragraph in the report although it still received strong support with 80 percent of the delegates who voted in favour (out of a total of 346 delegates who were present for voting).<sup>116</sup>

The report then proposes that:

Theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate should be continued, benefiting from consideration of the results of the commissions specially established by the Holy Father, and from the theological, historical and exegetical research already undertaken. If possible, the results of this research should be presented to the next Session of the Assembly.<sup>117</sup>

This paragraph received the second most negative votes but was still accepted by 81 percent of the voting delegates.

One other paragraph related to the women's diaconate was found in a later subsection, "Deacons and Priests in a Synodal Church" and proposed that:

The uncertainties surrounding the theology of the diaconate are related to the fact that it has only been restored to a distinct and permanent hierarchical ministry in the Latin Church since the Second Vatican Council. Deeper study will shed light on the question of the access of women to the diaconate.<sup>118</sup>

This paragraph received the third most negative votes (accepted by 82 percent). Even assuming that the negative votes primarily came from the bishops, approximately 75 percent or more of the bishops were still in favour of exploring the possibility of a women's diaconate. At least, at this point in the process, this issue has remained very much in Church consciousness.

There was no explicit discussion about the more controversial topic of women's ordination to the priesthood mentioned in the synthesis report. One of the reasons that it may not have been considered is that it was too controversial for a Synod of Bishops whose primary focus was to further develop the process of synodality.

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<sup>116</sup> "Risultati Introduzione," October 28, 2023, <https://press.vatican.va/content/dam/salastampa/image/Risultati%20delle%20votazioni.pdf>.

<sup>117</sup> Synod of Bishops, *A Synodal Church in Mission*, para. 9m.

<sup>118</sup> Synod of Bishops, para. 11i.

It might seem from the synthesis report that the Synod of Bishops, so far, has not led to any significant visible change in the Church or demonstrated the will to deal with the hard issues. There is truth in this as both sessions of the Synod of Bishops are meant to be part of a discernment process not a mechanism for making decisions. It is a journey meant “to open horizons of hope for the fulfilment of the Church’s mission.”<sup>119</sup> The main focus is ultimately about doing things in a new way, a synodal way, which will have profound transformative effects on the Church of the future.

## **2.8 Action Following the First Session of the Synod of Bishops**

In December 2023, the Secretariat of the Synod released a document, “Towards October 2024,” asking local Churches around the world to reflect on the question, “How can we be a synodal Church in mission?”<sup>120</sup> The question was intended to be addressed at the local Church level and in the context of the relationship of local Churches with each other, other levels of Church, and the Bishop of Rome. This was not intended to be a repeat of the consultation of the faithful carried out in the first step of the synodal process. Instead, consultation was expected to involve “people and groups that express a variety of experiences, skills, charisms, ministries within the People of God and whose point of view is of particular help in focusing on the ‘how.’”<sup>121</sup> Local Churches were also encouraged to engage with people with theological and canonical expertise, as well as experts in the field of human and social sciences. The contributions from the local Churches were to be coordinated by the corresponding Episcopal Conferences or Oriental Hierarchical Structures. These contributions were to be summarized in

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<sup>119</sup> “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” para. 6.

<sup>120</sup> “Towards October 2024” (General Secretariat of the Synod, December 12, 2023), [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2023-12-12\\_towards-2024/ENG\\_Document\\_TOWARDS-OCTOBER-2024\\_XVI\\_II-Session.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2023-12-12_towards-2024/ENG_Document_TOWARDS-OCTOBER-2024_XVI_II-Session.pdf).

<sup>121</sup> “Towards October 2024.”

eight pages and then sent to the Synod Secretariat no later than May 15, 2024.

The document, “Towards October 2024,” also contained the acknowledgement that the First Session of the Synod of Bishops had dealt with “matters of great importance, some of which need to be considered at the level of the whole Church and in collaboration with the Dicastries of the Roman Curia.” This is recognition that dealing with these matters of great importance go beyond the scope and purposes of the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops and need to be studied to a greater depth. To facilitate this in-depth study, the pope directed that these matters of great importance be examined by ten different study groups and tasked the Synod Secretariat to constitute these groups in February 2024.<sup>122</sup> With respect to the topics of a missionary Church and women’s issues, the fifth study group was tasked with, “Some theological and canonical matters regarding specific ministerial forms.”<sup>123</sup>

In responding to the pope’s directive, the Synod Secretariat released a document in March 2024 providing more detail on the ten study groups. On the subject of women’s issues, the focus of the fifth study group was given as:

The role of women in the Church and their participation in decision-making/taking processes and community leadership.

It is in this context that the question of women’s possible access to the diaconate can be properly posed: to this Group is entrusted the task to continue “Theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate [...], benefiting from consideration of the results of the commissions specially established by the Holy Father.”<sup>124</sup>

This Group will also aim to respond to the Synodal Assembly’s desire for “a greater recognition and appreciation of the contribution of women and a growth in the pastoral responsibilities entrusted to them in all areas of the life and mission of the Church.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Francis, “Letter of the Holy Father to His Eminence Cardinal Mario Grech,” March 14, 2024, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/03/14/240314f.html>.

<sup>123</sup> Francis.

<sup>124</sup> Synod of Bishops, *A Synodal Church in Mission*, para. 9n.

<sup>125</sup> Synod of Bishops, para. 9i; General Secretariat of the Synod, “Study Groups for Questions Raised in the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to Be Explored in Collaboration with the Dicastries of the Roman Curia” (Holy See Press Office, March 14, 2024), <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/03/14/240314h.html>.

All ten study groups were tasked with submitting a brief report with an outline of their tasking by September 5, 2024 so that it could be presented at the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops. The recommended completion dates given for the final reports of the study groups was June 30, 2025. There was no discussion of what would happen next.

## **2.9 *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops**

The *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops provides a general layout for discussion that builds on the work of the first session. The main discussion is divided into three major parts entitled, “Relations,” “Pathways,” and “Places.”<sup>126</sup> These three parts are meant to focus on becoming a more effective synodal Church, especially the missionary aspects considered from three particular perspectives, namely:

- I. from the perspective of the relationships - with the Lord, between brothers and sisters and between Churches - which sustain the vitality of the Church in ways more profound than the merely structural;
- II. from the perspective of the pathways that support the dynamism of our ecclesial relationships;
- III. from the perspective of the places that are the tangible contexts for our embodied relationships, marked by their variety, plurality and interconnection, and rooted in the foundation of the profession of faith, resisting human temptations to abstract universalism.<sup>127</sup>

Each of these parts is divided into three to five sections and, in much the same way as it was done in the first session, each of these sections will be the object of prayer, exchange and discernment using the method of spiritual conversation.

Although the second session will not be considering women’s ordination, it is worth looking more in depth at what the *Instrumentum Laboris* says about the remaining women’s

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<sup>126</sup> *How to Be a Missionary Synodal Church - Instrumentum Laboris for the Second Session (October 2024)* (General Secretariat of the Synod, 2024), <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly2024/il/ENG-INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS-A4.pdf>.

<sup>127</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris for the Second Session*, 6.

issues up for discussion. In a section called “Foundations” which precedes the main parts, the document lays out the following requests which emerged from the Episcopal Conferences for consideration in response to the document, “Towards October 2024”:

- a) the promotion of domains for dialogue in the Church so that women can share their experiences, charisms, skills, and spiritual, theological and pastoral insights for the good of the whole Church;
- b) a wider participation of women in the processes of ecclesial discernment and all stages of decision-making processes (drafting and decision-making);
- c) wider access to positions of responsibility in Dioceses and ecclesiastical institutions, in line with existing provisions;
- d) greater recognition and support for the life and charisms of consecrated women and their employment in positions of responsibility;
- e) access for women to positions of responsibility in seminaries, institutes and theological faculties;
- f) an increase in the number of women judges in all canonical processes. The reports received also continue to call for greater attention to be paid to the use of language that is more inclusive and to a range of images from Scripture and Tradition in preaching, teaching, catechesis and the drafting of official Church documents.<sup>128</sup>

These cover a wide range of women’s roles but are mainly focused on leadership roles in the Church from which women have been excluded.

Given this leadership context, the various suggestions for addressing women’s leadership were mainly found in part II (“Pathways”). These suggestions include:

- “Formation that is communal and shared, in which lay men and women, consecrated men and women, ordained ministers and candidates for ordained ministry participate together.”<sup>129</sup>
- “It is crucially important that women have access to teaching and formation roles in theological faculties, institutes, and seminaries.”<sup>130</sup>
- “It is also suggested that priests, bishops, and the laity be offered formation to make them aware of the roles and tasks women can already perform in the Church and that an evaluation of the effective use of these opportunities be promoted in all areas of Church life.”<sup>131</sup>
- “It is up to the local Churches to increasingly implement all the possibilities of giving life to authentically synodal decision-making processes that suit the context's specificities. This is a task of great importance and urgency since the successful implementation of the

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<sup>128</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris for the Second Session*, para. 16.

<sup>129</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris for the Second Session*, para. 57.

<sup>130</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris for the Second Session*, para. 57.

<sup>131</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris for the Second Session*, para. 57.

Synod largely depends on it ... This applies most especially to the effective participation of women in drafting and decision-making and taking processes.”<sup>132</sup>

- “An annual statement on the performance of the mission, including an illustration of the initiatives undertaken in the area of ...promoting women’s access to positions of authority and their participation in decision-making and taking processes.”<sup>133</sup>

These discussion points are only the starting point for much deeper reflections but do indicate a significant desire to address the issues of women’s leadership in the Church.

### **Chapter Three: The Winds of Change**

The previous chapter portrayed a generally positive picture of the potential for the synodal process. This positive assessment is conditioned on the observation that despite limited participation of the lay faithful during the first step (consultation), human biases affecting the collation process, and human attitudes colouring the discernment process, the diversity of issues affecting all the faithful were well represented at the First Session of the Synod of Bishops. However, this apparent success doesn’t paint a complete picture; there are other human and societal factors which come into play. These factors are discussed in the rest of this chapter.

#### **3.1 Cultural and Political Issues**

In considering the theological framework for a synodal Church and the current synodal initiative, the proposed vision is both old and new. Old in the sense that a synodal Church more sensitive to the *sensus fidelium* connects back to the tradition of the early Church which made major decisions of faith in consultation with the apostles, church elders and all the faithful. New in the sense that trying to capture the essence of this early grassroots Church has never been done before for a Church with 1.4 billion members and which has been strongly influenced by sociological pressures encompassed by the iron law of oligarchy.

Conceptually, a synodal Church which listens to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit through

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<sup>132</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris for the Second Session*, para. 71.

<sup>133</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris for the Second Session*, para. 79.

the *sensus fidelium*, as well as the Apostolic Tradition and the magisterium, has a strong foundation. In the practical application of the synodal process, the voices of the faithful have been heard at the highest levels. However, theology and the application of this theology must also attend to the diverse living experiences of all the faithful to be an effective source of God's transformative truth.<sup>134</sup> For example, the current approach to listening to the *sensus fidelium* generally involved small group gatherings of people in churches and online. In many African countries and other countries throughout the world, homosexuality, for example, is punishable by a prison term and, in some countries, even the death penalty.<sup>135</sup> Not surprisingly, LGBTQ+ issues are not mentioned anywhere in the *Final Document of the Continental Stage in Africa and Madagascar*. Under these conditions, how will the voices and concerns of homosexuals be heard if people are too afraid to speak for fear of political reprisals? Issues immersed in cultural taboos will be similarly affected including the roles of women. The regional differences in the opinions and viewpoints collected from around the world will complicate the discernment of the sense of the Holy Spirit in all the faithful. Applying the help of historical and social sciences to minimize the human biases that have distorted the results during the discernment steps is clearly a necessity.

### **3.2 Social Resistance to Change**

One of the challenges to change, such as the change likely to be prompted by a synodal process, is the Church's strong adherence to Apostolic Tradition and magisterial teachings. This stability ensures that the Church is not overwhelmed by the changing ways and ideals of a world whose beliefs are not rooted in God. For an organization meant "to bring the light of Christ to

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<sup>134</sup> Steven B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Faith and Cultures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 15.

<sup>135</sup> "Map of Jurisdictions That Criminalise LGBT People," Human Dignity Trust, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.humandignitytrust.org/lgbt-the-law/map-of-criminalisation/>.

all,” this has obvious benefits (LG 1). However, for a community that is also growing and changing, the developments that served so well to guide the Church of yesterday may need to be reformulated to facilitate new growth in the Church community of today.

The Second Vatican Council recognized this dynamic nature of human life saying that “there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down.”<sup>136</sup> Church teachings can be deepened and updated to be more relevant to the current context. The council also recognized that “although the Catholic Church has been endowed with all divinely revealed truth and with all means of grace, yet its members fail to live by them with all the fervor that they should.”<sup>137</sup> Some teachings might need to be modified if it is revealed that, through human error, the divinely revealed truth has been obscured.

### ***Changes Motivated from the Grassroots***

Objectively, how easily certain teachings can be changed is dependent on how deeply embedded they are in Church doctrine and the authority by which they were promulgated. Backed by the authority of an ecumenical council, a doctrine considered as a truth to be held by the whole Church is difficult, but not impossible, to change. The modern liturgical movement, which culminated with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, provides an illustrative example. This movement was a grassroots process which grew over a long period of time as a reaction to the way the liturgical reforms of the Council of Trent had been adopted. Specifically, the council had prescribed strict rubrics and guidelines for liturgical celebrations (such as the Tridentine Mass) which addressed significant liturgical abuses but had the side effect of

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<sup>136</sup> Second Vatican Council, “*Dei Verbum*,” para. 8.

<sup>137</sup> Second Vatican Council, “*Unitatis Redintegratio*,” in *Vatican Council II - The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, vol. 1 (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1998), para. 4.

suppressing creative expression at the grassroots level.<sup>138</sup> This is an example where maintenance concerns (stability and order) outweighed mission preferences (engaging people in the liturgy).

An important early influence on reintroducing creativity occurred with the revival of Gregorian chant at the abbey of Solesmes in the nineteenth century, a liturgical expression which then spread across Western Europe. The movement received its greatest impetus in the twentieth century through deeper insights provided by: historical studies of liturgy using newly available liturgical sources; pastoral considerations such as more frequent reception of communion; and theological developments related to the understanding of the Church as the mystical body of Christ.<sup>139</sup> These insights were the basis for returning to a way of doing liturgy authentic to the early Christian Church while also recognizing that the Church had grown since its early days. Effectively, the Church charted a new direction which remained true to its fundamental core while jettisoning unnecessary and unhealthy adaptations and accretions.

The theological justifications for the changes are articulated in the Apostolic Constitution on the New Roman Missal issued in 1969. Pope Paul VI first acknowledged that the reform of the Council of Trent “has been received by all as one of the numerous and admirable fruits which the holy Council has spread throughout the entire Church of Christ.”<sup>140</sup> Then defending the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, he points out the wealth of liturgical resources and research that have become available since the Council of Trent and that the richness of this work should not be hidden. Pope Paul also goes on to describe more specific changes. Quoting from the reform teachings of the Second Vatican Council, for example, he states that “elements which,

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<sup>138</sup> Johannes H. Emminghaus, “The Modern Liturgical Renewal,” in *The Eucharist: Essence, Form, Celebration* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 88–97.

<sup>139</sup> Johannes H. Emminghaus, 90–94.

<sup>140</sup> Paul VI, *Missale Romanum* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1969), [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_apc\\_19690403\\_missale-romanum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_19690403_missale-romanum.html).

with the passage of time, came to be duplicated, or were added with but little advantage,”<sup>141</sup> were to be eliminated and “other elements which have suffered injury through accidents of history are now to be restored to the earlier norm of the Holy Fathers.”<sup>142</sup>

A helpful observation is that Church reform motivated by the grassroots can be very slow. By way of comparison, Church reform occurring because of the current synodal process has received a strong push during the pontificate of Pope Francis providing a sharp contrast between the time it takes to implement grassroots motivated and top-down motivated initiatives. This contrast between high-level and grassroots support is also likely to play out in the synodal process but on a shorter time scale given synodal sensitivity to the *sensus fidelium*.

### ***When Changes Affect the Decision-Makers***

Another challenge to change is created by the hierarchical nature of the Church. Given the current top-down authority structure of Church governance, the greatest authority for facilitating or preventing change on a societal wide scale is found at the top of the hierarchy. It means the power for change rests in the hands of a minority of men so the question of change depends on their interests. Given the elitist tendency of the upper levels of a hierarchy predicted by the iron law of oligarchy, then changes which affect the status and power of these positions are easily resisted or prevented by the ruling elite. This is a major issue if one of the goals of change is to eliminate clericalism.

What makes the response to the proposal to become a synodal Church less predictable in the context of the iron law of oligarchy is that synodality was proposed from the top governance levels. In addition, the most influential and arguably most powerful supporter (in the secular

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<sup>141</sup> Second Vatican Council, “Sacrosanctum Concilium,” in *Vatican Council II - The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, vol. 1 (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1998), para. 50; Paul VI, *Missale Romanum*.

<sup>142</sup> Paul VI, *Missale Romanum*.

sense of power) of this initiative is Pope Francis. Despite this high-level support, it does not guarantee that all the bishops and priests at intermediate levels are on board with the proposed synodal initiative where the iron law of oligarchy remains applicable, particularly with respect to mission versus maintenance concerns.

Against this tendency, it is telling that the theme for the Synod on Synodality, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission,” places a strong emphasis on the missionary aspect of the Church rather than maintenance. Additionally, the main focus of the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops is, “How to be a synodal Church in mission?”<sup>143</sup> The emphasis from the highest level is clearly on addressing the grassroots mission needs rather than a focus on maintaining the status quo.

Despite these high-level efforts, there is still evidence of resistance to change from other levels of the Church. An elitist desire to maintain the status quo for personal benefit or fear of the unknown is easily masked by traditionalist concerns, i.e., a strict adherence to a static understanding of Apostolic Tradition and magisterial teachings. This traditionalist perspective has been reflected through numerous critical commentaries expressed in the form of open literature articles and talks at public venues, and has come from all levels of the Church including cardinals, bishops, priests, and lay people.

Probably the most noticeable among these critics has been American Cardinal Raymond Burke who was the Prefect of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura from 2008 until 2014. He has made numerous comments at different venues over the last few years expressing his criticism of the synodal process. He even played an active part in a conference in Rome called “The Synodal Babel” on the eve of the First Session of the Synod of Bishops in October

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<sup>143</sup> “Towards October 2024.”

2023.<sup>144</sup> As a main speaker, he used this platform to reiterate his concerns about the synodal process. Arguably, Cardinal Burke represents a minority viewpoint given the strong majority support of the bishops for the synodal process exhibited at the Synod of Bishops (75 percent or more as mentioned previously). Traditionalist arguments are not, by themselves, a bad thing as healthy disagreement can be a valuable part of the discernment process. However, these kinds of concerns beg the question of whether they reflect a genuine concern for the future of the Church or whether they mask the desire to maintain a privileged way of life in a static Church.

Passive resistance, malaise, and cynicism (where no effort is made to support progress) are harder to quantify because they are not an obvious part of the public record. The apparent lack of energy in most Canadian dioceses to publicly engage people after the DCS had been sent back to the local Churches was likely a reflection of this kind of resistance. Given that this is not an energetic form of resistance, most people in this category will adopt synodal ways if properly instructed and directed. Given sustained efforts from the highest levels, people will begin to adopt the new way of doing things rather than hold onto the old ways.

Overcoming passive resistance will also require the formation of a new generation of lay people and ordained ministers because informed leadership at all levels will be needed. This is, in fact, the subject of one subsection in the synthesis report from the First Session of the Synod of Bishops called, “A Synodal Approach to Formation.”<sup>145</sup> It is also a study area identified in *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops and called “An Integral and Shared Formation.”<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Cindy Wooden, “Cardinal Burke Says His Concerns about Synod Are Sign of Faith,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, October 3, 2023, <https://www.usccb.org/news/2023/cardinal-burke-says-his-concerns-about-synod-are-sign-faith>.

<sup>145</sup> Synod of Bishops, *A Synodal Church in Mission*, pt. 3, sec. 14.

<sup>146</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris for the Second Session*, paras. 51–57.

Objectively, given sufficient time and based on the analysis carried out so far, there are good reasons to believe that the synodal transformation of the Church will occur and that many of the benefits expected of a synodal Church can be achieved. The main key is a push from the highest levels sustained until the synodal way has established itself as the new status quo.

### **3.3 Outlook for the Synodal Process**

Despite the suppression of voices due to cultural, political, or sociological pressures predicted by the iron law of oligarchy, the sheer diversity of people, communities and cultures from around the world have ensured that larger issues are still being heard. Accepting that further development of the contextual aspects of the theology of synodality will necessarily be an evolutionary process, the current process has been a good starting point. If the completion of the current process from the first step of consultation with the faithful up to and including the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops is considered a single cycle and given the current level of support for the synodal process within the Church, then the way seems clear for the Church to initiate further cycles on a continuous basis. The lessons learned from each cycle could then be used to further improve the process for the next cycle. Doing things better as a synodal Church is, in fact, the primary focus of the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops.

Additionally, the example of the liturgical movement suggests that issues having grassroots level support, but not supported in the upper levels of the Church, can still reach a successful resolution although it might take a number of cycles through the synodal process for this to happen.

## **Chapter Four: The Synodal Process and Women’s Issues**

Collectively, the two previous chapters evaluated the success of the synodal process as it has been implemented. This is based on the ability for the needs of the faithful expressed during consultations at the grassroots level of the Church to be heard at the highest levels. This chapter focuses on whether what is heard at the highest levels initiates the appropriate actions to successfully address these needs. As will become apparent in the rest of this chapter, when it comes to the needs of women, there are challenges to be overcome which will likely require further efforts on the part of women to ensure that a successful outcome is ultimately achieved.

### **4.1 Resistance to Addressing Women’s Issues**

Based strictly on numbers, it is surprising that women find themselves as a marginalized group in the Church. In Canada, for example, 52 percent of Catholics are women and in the United States the number is 54 percent.<sup>147</sup> Despite these numbers, however, women’s participation in the Church has been suppressed especially in terms of leadership and ordination, problems which have been clearly articulated around the world in the various continental level synthesis reports. In order to understand whether a synodal Church in its current rendering can redress these roles, it is important to understand the landscape in which changes need to be made.

#### ***Doctrinal Challenges***

Beginning with women in lay leadership positions, there are no theological reasons why women cannot occupy many of the lay (or not exclusively ordained) leadership roles in the administrative function of the Church even at the highest level. In 2022, the Apostolic

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<sup>147</sup> Statistics Canada Government of Canada, “Special Interest Profile, 2021 Census of Population - Profile of Interest: Religion,” March 20, 2024, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/sip/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&PoiId=8&TId=0&FocusId=8&AgeId=1&Dguid=2021A000011124#sipTable>; “Religious Landscape Study - Gender Composition,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/>.

Constitution, *Praedicate Evangelium*, was promulgated by the pope as part of the effort to reform the Roman Curia. With respect to lay roles of responsibility, the constitution states that:

Each Christian, by virtue of baptism, is a missionary disciple “to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus.” This must necessarily be taken into account in the reform of the Curia, which should consequently make provision for the involvement of lay women and men, also in roles of government and responsibility.<sup>148</sup>

Pope Francis has, in fact, already begun addressing this issue. Paving the way for greater lay involvement, the number of women now working in the curia has risen from 19.2 percent at the beginning of the pontificate of Pope Francis to 23.4 percent in 2023 including five women in senior positions working as undersecretaries and one woman as the secretary of a dicastery.<sup>149</sup>

The possibility of a women’s diaconate is currently an open theological question and has been the subject of three Vatican reports. The ITC, for example, produced a document which provides a historical overview of deaconesses throughout the life of the Church showing evidence of ordination particularly the deaconess “Olympias, the superior of a monastery of women, who was a protegee of Saint John Chrysostom ... Canon 15 of the Council of Chalcedon (451) seems to confirm the fact that deaconesses really were ‘ordained’ by the imposition of hands.”<sup>150</sup> The document concluded that in regards to the ordination of women to the diaconate, the function of deaconesses was not strictly equivalent to male deacons and that further magisterial discernment was required.

Later in 2016, in response to requests made at the Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), Pope Francis established an official commission to study the inclusion of women in the diaconate. The commission produced an interim report in 2019 but

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<sup>148</sup> Francis, *Praedicate Evangelium*, para. 10.

<sup>149</sup> Gudrun Sailer, “10 Years of Pope Francis: Significantly More Women Working at the Vatican,” Vatican News, March 8, 2023, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-03/pope-francis-10-years-women-vatican.html>.

<sup>150</sup> International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*, 2004, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_pro\\_05072004\\_diaconate\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_pro_05072004_diaconate_en.html).

the members were unable to produce a final report due to a lack of consensus.<sup>151</sup> In 2020, a request for the establishment of a permanent diaconate for women was made in the final document of the Pan-Amazon Synod.<sup>152</sup> Pope Francis responded to this request by establishing a second commission in 2020.<sup>153</sup> Despite the importance of the question of the women's diaconate raised in the synodal process, no report from either commission was provided to the participants of the First Session of the Synod of Bishops.

In terms of women as priests, the current position of the Church is against this possibility. In his response to a letter from Anglican Archbishop Frederick Donald Coggan in 1976, Pope Paul VI articulated this position by saying “it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood.”<sup>154</sup> Pope John Paul II reiterated this position in his apostolic letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, by stating that:

It is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood, for very fundamental reasons. These reasons include: the example recorded in the Sacred Scriptures of Christ choosing his Apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his Church.<sup>155</sup>

As an apostolic letter, this defines an engrained Church position that will be difficult to change.

Ultimately, how these three women's issues are addressed will provide a good indication of the level to which the current synodal process is either (1) able to inspire positive changes or

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<sup>151</sup> Dominic Cerrato, “Women and the Diaconate: A Theological Perspective,” *The Deacon*, December 15, 2023, <https://www.the-deacon.com/2023/12/15/women-and-the-diaconate-a-theological-perspective/>.

<sup>152</sup> Synod of Bishops, *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology* (General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, 2020), <http://secretariat.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.html>.

<sup>153</sup> Bernadette Mary Reis, “Pope Institutes New Commission to Study Women Deacons - Vatican News,” *Vatican News*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-04/pope-commission-women-deacons.html>.

<sup>154</sup> “Paul VI, Response to the Letter of His Grace the Most Reverend Dr. F.D. Coggan, Archbishop of Canterbury, Concerning the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood,” in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. 68, 1975, 599.

<sup>155</sup> John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), para. 1, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19940522\\_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html).

(2) lead to the development of a richer and fuller theology which better attends to women's concerns.

### ***High Level Attitudes***

Although the predicted shift of the Church towards a more synodal approach is a positive sign, it does not guarantee that women's issues will be properly addressed. Despite the inroads made in the Roman Curia to introduce women into leadership positions, every level of the Church, including the senior ones are dominated by male clerics. Whereas the introduction of the synodal process has been strongly supported at the senior levels of the Church the evidence of this kind of support for addressing women's issues is more uneven.

In terms of women's leadership roles in the Church, there appears to be strong support at the highest levels. The Council of Cardinal Advisors has been meeting with Pope Francis since the beginning of his pontificate on a quarterly basis to deal with issues of Church governance. On December 4-5, 2023, the council met to consider the roles of women in the Church.<sup>156</sup> The topic of women's roles was also considered in the next meeting on February 5-7, 2024 and the following meeting on April 15-16, 2024.<sup>157</sup> This high-level focus on women's leadership roles illustrates the great importance placed on dealing with women's issues and is consistent with the calls from the continental reports to address these issues.

Although this support bodes well for future changes, the extent of the changes that will result in the next few years remains to be seen. Canon 129 of the Code of Canon Law states that "those who have received sacred orders are qualified, according to the norm of the prescripts of the law, for the power of governance, which exists in the Church by divine institution and is also

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<sup>156</sup> "Pope Presides over Council of Cardinals Meeting - Vatican News," Vatican News, February 5, 2024, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-02/pope-francis-council-cardinals-meeting-february.html>.

<sup>157</sup> "Council of Cardinals Adjourns until April - Vatican News," Vatican News, February 7, 2024, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-02/council-of-cardinals-cadjourns-until-april.html>.

called the power of jurisdiction.”<sup>158</sup> It then goes on to say that “lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this same power according to the norm of law.” Despite the openness for the inclusion of women in leadership positions, Canon 129 limits lay involvement to cooperation rather than leadership. This is an impediment to women’s full participation unless the canon is changed or women are allowed to be ordained.

The outlook for women’s ordination, at least during this first synodal cycle, is not very promising. The greatest open resistance is best exemplified by the actions of Cardinal Raymond Burke along with German Cardinal Walter Brandmüller, Chinese Cardinal Zen Ze-Kiun, Mexican Cardinal Juan Sandoval Íñiguez, and Guinean Cardinal Robert Sarah. In August 2023, these five cardinals submitted a set of five questions or dubia (doubts) to the pope related to their concerns about the synodal process rooted in traditionalist views. In particular, the fourth question asked about the priestly ordination of women reflected in the following excerpt:

It is furthermore asked whether the teaching of St. John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, which teaches as a truth to be definitively held the impossibility of conferring priestly ordination on women, is still valid, so that this teaching is no longer subject to change nor to the free discussion of pastors or theologians.<sup>159</sup>

The body of the question also included references to *Lumen Gentium* and *Presbyterorum Ordinis* framing the question in traditional Church teachings.

The pope’s response affirmed Church teachings but was very pastoral, pointing out “that while the priestly function is ‘hierarchical,’ it should not be understood as a form of domination.” Interestingly, the definitive character of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* was affirmed in 2018 by Cardinal Luis F. Ladaria, the Prefect of the CDF in a document that included references

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<sup>158</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, 2022, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/cic\\_index\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/cic_index_en.html).

<sup>159</sup> “‘Dubia’ of Two Cardinals (10 July 2023) and ‘Respuestas’ of the Holy Father (11 July 2023),” Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, September 25, 2023, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_risposta-dubia-2023\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_risposta-dubia-2023_en.html).

to Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict and Pope Francis.<sup>160</sup> However, in responding to the fourth question, Pope Francis also said:

To be rigorous, let us recognize that a clear and authoritative doctrine on the exact nature of a “definitive declaration” has not yet been fully developed. It is not a dogmatic definition, and yet it must be adhered to by all. No one can publicly contradict it, and yet it can be a subject of study, as with the case of the validity of ordinations in the Anglican Communion.<sup>161</sup>

The pope is acknowledging that a definitive declaration cannot automatically be equated to an infallible expression of truth so this declaration is still open to change. However, attitudes which ascribe infallibility to *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* still need to be overcome.

Despite the apparent openness to women’s issues, Pope Francis promulgated revisions to the Code of Canon Law in 2021 including an amendment to the section of “Offences against the Sacraments.” In particular, a new offence subject to immediate excommunication was added to Canon 1379 which states:

Both a person who attempts to confer a sacred order on a woman, and the woman who attempts to receive the sacred order, incur a *latae sententiae* excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See; a cleric, moreover, may be punished by dismissal from the clerical state.<sup>162</sup>

More recently, in an interview of Pope Francis by Norah O’Donnell on May 21, 2024 for the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) television program “60 Minutes,” Norah asked the question, “I understand you have said no women as priests, but you are studying the idea of women as deacons. Is that something you are open to?”<sup>163</sup> The pope responded, “No. If it is deacons with holy orders, no. But women have always had, I would say the function of

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<sup>160</sup> Luis F. Ladaria, “In Response to Certain Doubts Regarding the Definitive Character of the Doctrine of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (29 May 2018),” Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2018, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/ladaria-ferrer/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20180529\\_caratteredefinitivo-ordinatiosacerdotalis\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/ladaria-ferrer/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20180529_caratteredefinitivo-ordinatiosacerdotalis_en.html).

<sup>161</sup> “Dubia of Two Cardinals.”

<sup>162</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1379.

<sup>163</sup> *Pope Francis: The First with Norah O’Donnell*, YouTube Video (CBS News, 2024), 23:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1rRj2ecNew&t=1401s>.

deaconesses without being deacons, right? Women are of great service as women, not as ministers. As ministers in this regard, within the Holy Orders.” Although this was an opinion, not a doctrinal statement, it does echo the change in canon law he promulgated making his “no” more emphatic. Despite this, the pope’s comments do indicate he is open to further study of some form of women’s non-ordained diaconate ministry.

If the pope’s opinions are shared among the majority of bishops, this presents an impediment to women who feel called to ordination in the diaconate, especially in the context of the iron law of oligarchy. To some extent, this challenge could be lessened if the Vatican Study Group looking into women’s issues produces a report supporting a diaconate of ordained women. If the study group reaches the opposite conclusion, the challenge will be much steeper. Given the members of this study group were not named, however, raises concerns about the lack of transparency.

Ordaining women as priests is an even steeper challenge given the definitive statement made in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. Further study is clearly needed to: discern a deeper and more pastoral explanation for the ban on women’s ordination that better resonates with women’s experiences; or discern a path towards ordination which is able to navigate the theological landscape in concert with Apostolic Tradition, magisterial teachings, and the *sensus fidelium*.

#### **4.2 The Importance of Feminist Theologians**

Considering the prejudicial attitudes that will need to be overcome and the changes or clarification in Church teaching that will be required to address women’s issues in their fullness, it is probable that this will not occur as a result of the current cycle of the synodal process. This includes the completion of the work of the study groups in June 2025. It is more likely that another or even several cycles of the synodal process will be required before this fullness is

reached. Since there is a danger that many women will give up on the process, the help of women theologians will be needed to continually raise awareness of these issues to the public and to be an integral part of the discernment process.

Three women theologians are considered here including Phyllis Zagano, Elizabeth Johnson, and Serena Noceti. All three of these women represent challenges to the status quo in terms of doctrine, ways of thinking, and ecclesial structures. These women are not meant to represent the entire spectrum of theological work carried out in support of women, but simply illustrate the importance of women's theological contributions to the overall synodal process.

### ***Phyllis Zagano***

Phyllis Zagano has been a Senior Research Associate and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Religion at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York since 2002. She is considered to be one of the world's foremost experts on the history of the diaconate. She has authored numerous books, articles, presentations, etc., on how the meaning of the role of the deacon has shifted over the last two millennia especially in the context of women. Her expertise was recognized by Pope Francis when she was appointed as a member of the first Commission for the Study of Women in the Diaconate in 2016.<sup>164</sup>

One of the foundational principles on which Zagano roots her theological arguments is the understanding that “men and women are ontologically equal. That is, all human beings, all persons, are equal before God. Because they are equal – male and female – one cannot be subordinated to the other.”<sup>165</sup> The conception of subordination in this statement is not referring to necessary relationship dynamics, (e.g., mother-daughter, supervisor-employee, etc.), it is referring to the dynamics where subordination transfers, “a distorted view of the human person,

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<sup>164</sup> “Hofstra University,” Phyllis Zagano, accessed July 12, 2024, <https://sites.hofstra.edu/phyllis-zagano/>.

<sup>165</sup> Phyllis Zagano, *Just Church: Catholic Teaching, Synodality, and Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 2023), 8.

such that the woman is always considered subordinate to the man.”<sup>166</sup>

Her research on the women’s diaconate and the research of others has led her to the question:

Historically, women have been ordained as deacons. Consecrated abbesses, many of whom were ordained as deacons, have held absolute authority and jurisdiction over lands and persons. Should the history of women in authority be recovered or should new ways of incorporating women into “church” be attempted, or both?<sup>167</sup>

Current historical research on women deacons or deaconesses has shown that many were probably not sacramentally ordained. Researchers are divided on the question of whether the sacramental ordination of women deacons ever occurred although the evidence favours an affirmative answer. The Vatican Library and other European library collections, for example, contain manuscripts of liturgies “used by bishops to ordain women as deacons within the sanctuary, during the Mass, in the presence of the clergy, through the imposition of hands by the Holy Spirit; they self-communicated from the chalice, the bishop placed a stole around their necks, and the bishop called them deacons.”<sup>168</sup>

Based on the historical review, the roles of women deacons were generally limited to ministering to women and children. This limitation has been raised as one of the reasons to exclude women from the diaconate. However, as Zagano has asked, “who ministers to women today?”<sup>169</sup> Given that women form the majority of the Church, women deacons who minister to women is a major need and a better argument for ordination than against it.

Zagano differentiates between the ordination of women to the diaconate and the ordination to the priesthood.<sup>170</sup> This is based on the original permanent diaconate which was a

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<sup>166</sup> Phyllis Zagano, 9.

<sup>167</sup> Phyllis Zagano, 54.

<sup>168</sup> Phyllis Zagano, 75.

<sup>169</sup> Phyllis Zagano, 72.

<sup>170</sup> Phyllis Zagano, 76.

ministry in its own right and, historically, formed before the priesthood. It was centuries later that the diaconate would transform to become a transitional step on the way to priesthood. Based on the original formulation, there is no path for women deacons to the priesthood allaying doctrinal fears that the women's diaconate is being used to open the doors to the women's priesthood. Many of the fears directed towards a women's diaconate are based on circular arguments which intertwine diaconal and priestly ordination, fears which will likely persist into the foreseeable future.<sup>171</sup> Zagano takes hope from Pope Francis' view that the "deposit of faith is not a museum, but a 'living spring' that illuminates the 'deposit of life.'"<sup>172</sup>

An important aspect of Zagano's work is that she raises tough questions which challenge traditional Catholic theological thinking. Answering these questions could help facilitate creative solutions for overcoming the current doctrinal barriers to women's ordination or lead to deeper insights into current teaching which provide greater clarity.

### ***Elizabeth Johnson***

Elizabeth Johnson is a well-respected American Catholic feminist theologian and a Distinguished Professor Emerita of Theology at Fordham University in New York City.<sup>173</sup> She is also a member of the Sisters of Saint Joseph since the 1960s. Author of numerous books and articles, she first gained attention in the 1990s by integrating feminist concepts into classical theology and shining a light on the rediscovery of the feminine God of Christianity.

One of the important things about her work in the current synodal context, is that it goes beyond simply identifying the symptoms of the women's problems in the Church to provide a deeper

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<sup>171</sup> Phyllis Zagano, 94.

<sup>172</sup> Phyllis Zagano, 93; "Introductory Remarks by His Holiness Pope Francis" (Synod for the Family 2015, October 5, 2015), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151005\\_padri-sinodali.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151005_padri-sinodali.html).

<sup>173</sup> "Elizabeth A. Johnson," Fordham University, accessed July 12, 2024, <https://www.fordham.edu/about/leadership-and-administration/administrative-offices/office-of-the-president/about/hall-of-honor/elizabeth-a-johnson/>.

reflection on the root causes of the problems. For example, in her book, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, Johnson begins by considering the question: “What is the right way to speak about God?”<sup>174</sup> She addresses this question by utilizing both feminist and classical theology to draw out the sometimes forgotten feminine images of God in scripture which resonate with the experiences of women in the world.<sup>175</sup> These images can then be used to counterbalance the pervasive masculine images of God used in the Church today.

Recognizing the normalizing power of language, Johnson argues that “Speech about God shapes the life orientation not only of the corporate faith community but in this matrix guides its individual members as well.”<sup>176</sup> This shaping power is reflected in liturgies, preaching, religious instruction and catechesis which all tend to emphasize the maleness of God while minimizing the feminine aspects.<sup>177</sup> This male God language also leads to undue emphasis on the subordination of women serving to devalue their human dignity. In attempting to rebalance the language about God, feminist theologians have engaged in developing new speech patterns about God which are both transformative and lead to healthier relationships between women and men.

It is not difficult to see that Johnson’s arguments have merit. Yet, even though her arguments made an impact over thirty years ago, there was only one mention of more inclusive language in the DCS which said, “Sexism in decision-making and Church language is prevalent in the Church... As a result, women are excluded from meaningful roles in the life of the Church, discriminated against by not receiving a fair wage for their ministries and services.”<sup>178</sup> On the other hand, the final synthesis report for the First Session of the Synod of Bishops,

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<sup>174</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 3.

<sup>175</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, 8.

<sup>176</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, 4.

<sup>177</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, 5.

<sup>178</sup> “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” para. 63.

grasped the significance of the problem of language and proposed:

There is a need to ensure that liturgical texts and Church documents are more attentive to the use of language that takes into equal consideration both men and women, and also includes a range of words, images and narratives that draw more widely on women's experience.<sup>179</sup>

Clearly, the discernment process at the synod has highlighted an issue which was almost lost in the filtering during previous steps.

The importance of this example is that this statement was not simply the result of collecting the opinions of the faithful in the first step of the synodal process, it was the product of further discernment by people who were theologically and sociologically versed on the power of language. It is also an example of how including experts from diverse fields including theology, human sciences, and pastoral work in the discernment process at the highest levels of the Church can lead to a deeper and richer understanding of the needs of the faithful. This is true even when these needs have not been explicitly articulated during the first phase of the synodal process. In light of this, involving women theologians with the kind of background and experience of someone like Johnson in the discernment process is obviously an important key to developing a synodal Church which is responsive to the problems caused by masculine ways of thinking that have minimized women in both the Church and the rest of society.

### ***Serena Noceti***

Serena Noceti is an Italian theologian and a professor of systematic theology in the Faculty of Theology at Dell'Italia Centrale in Florence. She is also a founding member of the Coordination of Italian Theologians which seeks "to enhance and promote gender studies in the theological, biblical, patristic, historical, ecumenical perspectives and to promote the visibility of

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<sup>179</sup> Synod of Bishops, *A Synodal Church in Mission*, para. 9q.

women theologians in the Italian ecclesial and cultural panorama.”<sup>180</sup>

A published author, Noceti’s recent work, *Reforming the Church: A Synodal Way of Proceeding*, offers an analysis of Church structures that need to be developed or reformed to embrace the synodal vision. Noceti sees these changes taking place both organically and systematically on three different levels which include: the Church’s self-understanding, the forms of relationship and collective behaviour, and the institutionalized structures. Focusing on the local Church, which embodies all the basic synodal elements of the whole Church, Noceti identifies communication as an important key to synodality, particularly the development of communication channels which make use of different forms of expression and fosters networking. In a dynamic understanding of the Church, communication is vital.

Noceti also identifies the diocesan synod and the diocesan pastoral council as significant platforms for synodality. Although these were also identified for similar purposes by the ITC (as mentioned previously), Noceti goes deeper by discussing how these platforms would operate in a synodal Church. The positive outcome of diocesan synods, for example, can be enhanced by adopting certain practices. One is to choose broad topics for reflection which “can foster an overall sense of being church and can allow a shared vision to emerge.”<sup>181</sup> A second practice is that the bishop embraces the synod as a way to enhance communion and co-responsibility in the Church. Synodal recommendations are then taken seriously and responded to accordingly. The third practice is to promote the widest possible participation and representation of all the faithful.

In considering new synodal structures, Noceti points to the experiences of small grassroots ecclesial communities which have appeared in Africa, Latin America and Europe.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> “Proposta attiva del CTI,” accessed July 31, 2024, <http://www.teologhe.org/chi-siamo/curriculum-vitae-del-cti/>.

<sup>181</sup> Serena Noceti, *Reforming the Church: A Synodal Way of Proceeding*, 102.

<sup>182</sup> Serena Noceti, 122.

The small size of these communities encourages greater involvement of the members in their gatherings rather than the members being present as passive observers. It also means the community will be more sensitive to the local context so that the Word of God can take root more deeply. As an organic outgrowth, Noceti sees this as one possible way that the structures of a synodal Church might adapt to becoming a community of communities where “laypeople are truly the primary subjects of ‘doing church.’”<sup>183</sup>

Another important synodal issue that Noceti addresses is the decision-making process. Based on sociological work, she proposes a multi-step process which involves: (1) identifying the issue to be addressed, (2) collecting information, (3) considering alternatives, (4) identifying the criteria to be used in discernment, (5) discernment and (6) making the decision.<sup>184</sup> This is also an integrated process which involves the engagement of one person, some people, and all people throughout the various steps. In the diocesan context, “one person” is the bishop, “some people” are those chosen for their particular experience and expertise, while “all people” represent the faithful. Although Noceti acknowledges that women are often excluded from being the “one person” in many Church decisions, an integrated approach ensures that the authoritative voices of women are preserved.

For the most part, Noceti’s analysis of Church structures points to future possibilities and is relatively independent of women’s issues. However, the importance of her work is that she not only offers creative solutions toward developing a synodal Church of the future, she offers these solutions from a women’s perspective focused on a synodal vision of co-responsibility. A vision counteracting male perspectives which are consciously or unconsciously insensitive to women’s issues. Changing or reforming Church structures is not a simple task and these structures can also

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<sup>183</sup> Serena Noceti, 125.

<sup>184</sup> Serena Noceti, 131.

have a significant impact on attitudes. Consequently, exploring all creative options including those proposed by women theologians and taking the time to get things right is critical to developing a synodal Church which meets the needs of all the faithful.

### **4.3 Women's Allies**

It seems very likely that women's issues related to the leadership roles of women in the Church will be considered seriously but will need some time to resolve. An obvious problem is that even though many women participated in synodal consultations to identify issues affecting them, based on the current hierarchy of the Church, it will mainly be men making decisions about how to solve these issues. Consider, for example, the makeup of the ten study groups that were formed to address the deeper issues raised by the synodal process identified in the First Session of the Synod of Bishops. The number of known participants in each of these groups ranged from seven to thirteen and yet none of these groups contained more than three women with the average number being less than two.<sup>185</sup> Many of the men in decision-making positions in the synodal process (the pope, cardinals, bishops, etc.) have seemingly demonstrated an intent to make real progress and have consulted numerous women experts. However, coming from a male context, can they truly be expected to get things right the first time around?

The question is even more pressing when it comes to women's ordination. If the Holy Spirit is either for or against women's ordination, it will take time to discern an answer that is truly free from masculine or feminine biases. Is there a danger, then, that male biases could lead to a deeper entrenchment of attitudes which deny the possibility of women's ordination without studying the issues objectively?

In light of these questions, it is critical that a strong push for a fair resolution of all the

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<sup>185</sup> "10 Gruppi Di Studio" (General Secretariat of the Synod, July 9, 2024), [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly2024/infographics/il/ELENCO\\_10\\_GRUPPI.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly2024/infographics/il/ELENCO_10_GRUPPI.pdf).

current and future women's issues continues for the foreseeable future. Women's organizations who help educate women on the issues and provide them with a stronger voice will be key in this process. Fortunately, there are numerous organizations of this kind. Two worldwide organizations are worth mentioning based on their size and longevity. The first is the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO) comprised of over ninety women's organizations from around the world.<sup>186</sup> The second is the UISG which encompasses 1,903 Superiors General worldwide.<sup>187</sup> In this case, education and advocacy are focused on religious women. The power of this advocacy is illustrated by the fact that it was the UISG who motivated Pope Francis to create the First Study Commission on the Women's Diaconate in 2016. The main points are that these organizations will give women a stronger voice and help keep important issues related to women in the public consciousness at a critical time in Church history.

## **Conclusion**

The Church is currently embarked on a journey into the third millennium guided by a vision of synodality where all the faithful walk together as community discerning the path towards Christ inspired by the Holy Spirit. This discernment emerges from the collective sense of all the faithful to this inspiration, or *sensus fidelium*, which is carried out in concert with Apostolic tradition and the magisterium. It is a dynamic process which recognizes the dynamic nature of human reality without being locked to the conditions of the past.

The reasons for embarking on the synodal journey are many including addressing the problems of clericalism, the unequal roles of women versus men, and the divide between the

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<sup>186</sup> "Our History," WUCWO, accessed July 14, 2024, <https://www.wucwo.org/index.php/en/home-4/historia/our-history>.

<sup>187</sup> "About Us," UISG International Union Superiors General, accessed August 1, 2024, <https://www.uisg.org/en/about/>.

local and universal Churches. As well as being more sensitive to the voices of all people, it is also a place where people can feel safe.

The practical implementation is challenged by the problem of truly listening to the faithful and discerning the *sensus fidelium*. In the current synodal initiative or Synod on Synodality, the synodal process has been implemented as a multi-step process or cycle. This includes consultation with the faithful, collation of these inputs upwards through all ecclesial levels, multiple steps of discernment including the First Session of the Synod of Bishops, and, the final step, the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops. “Final step” is probably a misnomer since the end of the Synod on Synodality will likely mark the beginning of a new synodal cycle.

In this practical implementation, a number of significant issues were identified. Beginning with the consultation step, one issue was low participation rates. Using the Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall as an example, an estimated 7,000 out of 525,387 Catholics participated in the consultation step representing a participation rate of only 1.4 percent. Another problem was the lack of resources made available to guide people on how to take effective notes for summarizing the discussion of small group gatherings. Since capturing the essence of this discussion is an essential element in the consultation process, the lack of guidance may have led to greater subjectivity in the summaries of the collected responses.

During the collation steps, biases in the collation process led to some issues being ignored or downplayed (i.e., filtered). Women’s issues were a good example. The lack of opportunities for women to participate in leadership positions in the Church was widely reported at all levels. However, more controversial issues involving women’s ordination were sometimes ignored or minimized. In the Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall, women’s leadership and ordination were conflated into a single concern for women’s equality.

Despite all the problems identified in the consultation and collation steps, the sheer number and diversity of responses, as well as, the diversity of people involved in collating these responses from around the world and every culture, ensured that the results were more balanced than might have been expected based on a particular local context. Of note, the worldwide collation of responses reflected in the DCS were remarkably nuanced, at least with respect to women's issues. This was evident when compared to the synthesis report produced by the CCCB which oversimplified women's issues. Part of the reason for this is that the people chosen to write the DCS were experts from different walks of life capable of detecting the effects of filtering and rebalancing the responses.

Filtering was also an issue in the discernment steps reflecting the cultural attitudes of particular regions or the attitudes of certain assemblies of bishops. With only seven continental assemblies, diversity was less of a factor in ensuring balanced results. Even still, in terms of women's issues, the lack of opportunities for women's leadership in the Church was acknowledged by all seven assemblies as a significant problem. The possibility of a women's diaconate was mentioned by five of the assemblies ranging from being an urgent need to a subject of further study. The possibility of a women's priesthood was mentioned by three of the continental assemblies who suggested the issue should be studied. One of these assemblies also noted that it was a divisive issue.

The same emphasis on women's issues was reflected in the synthesis report of the First Session of the Synod of Bishops. The participation of women in leadership roles was considered to be an urgent issue. The issue of a women's diaconate was considered to be more controversial, however, the need for further study was agreed upon by 80 percent of the synod participants. In this case, there was no mention of the women's priesthood.

Although the practical implementation of the synodal process up to the summer of 2024 has exhibited some biases with respect to the issues that are being considered, the process has been remarkably resilient to the effects of human filtering. Diversity in the sheer number of collected responses and the help of experts in theology and the social sciences who can rebalance the responses has been key. Based purely on this assessment, the synodal process has been successful enough to continue.

The implementation of guided listening and discussion methods at all stages of the process has been another positive indicator. In particular, the Ignatian method of spiritual conversation resulted in very positive feedback from participants at the continental level demonstrating that a Church that listens to all voices is more than an ideal, it is realizable.

The early success of the synodal implementation is also not a guarantee for long term success. Major changes in any organization are often met with resistance. Sociologically, the current top-down governance structure of the Church can be understood in terms of the iron law of oligarchy which predicts higher levels of the hierarchy will exercise power in ways which satisfy their own elitist interests. However, the Synod on Synodality is being supported at the highest level and, even though there has been some criticism expressed publicly, the effect of this publicity has been minimal. There is also the problem that at the higher governance levels there tends to be an overemphasis on the stability and viability of the Church at the expense of the mission carried out by the grassroots level. This often manifests itself as traditionalism which resists change for fear of the unknown. This tendency, however, has been counteracted by the strong emphasis that has been placed on mission for the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops.

A more insidious form of resistance potentially exists as ignorance, cynicism, indifference or lack of trust. After the DCS was published, it was sent back to the bishops of each

of the local Churches for further consultation and discernment. How this consultation and discernment was carried out was the purview of the local bishop. In Canada, there was public consultation in only three of fifteen dioceses based on websites visited. Was this lack of transparency a sign of the lack of trust in the synodal process? This is only circumstantial evidence but it does raise concerns. If the key contributors to the synodal process are not being kept informed, the next cycle of the synodal process is likely to see even less participation than the first time around. Without the grassroots participation, there can be no synodal process.

Despite these potential problems, education and formation of people at all levels of the Church will be key to ensure that this hidden resistance does not sabotage synodality. Formation was an important topic at the First Session of the Synod of Bishops and expected to be an important topic of conversation at the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops. Based on this and assuming that the push from the highest levels of governance to become a synodal Church is sustained long enough to establish it as the norm, synodality appears to be here to stay. This conclusion, however, is also based on the assumption that the deliberations of the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops in October 2024 and the work of the ten study groups to be completed by June 2025, will lead to significant changes in response to the concerns of the faithful expressed during consultation. Otherwise, there is a risk of alienating a large portion of the faithful putting the vision of a synodal Church in jeopardy.

One of the biggest tests of the current synodal approach will come in its ability to deal with women's issues. Women represent over half the Church so that alienating women by not effectively addressing women's issues could have disastrous consequences in terms of their continued participation in the synodal process and even Church life. Much of the current success of the synodal process is owed to the thought, preparation, and energy that has been poured into

the process by the top levels of the Church. Unfortunately, this high-level support is not nearly as strong when it comes to facing the more controversial issue of women's ordination. Comments from the pope stating that women will never be ordained presuppose a conclusion for an issue that has not adequately been studied suggesting a fear of a discernment which might reach the opposite conclusion. There is also a question of whether a predominantly male hierarchy can fully appreciate the nuances of women's issues and do justice to the discernment process.

Given the clerical and male centric attitudes reflected by the pope coupled with the canonical and doctrinal impediments placed on women's ordination, women face significant challenges in addressing women's needs in the Church. However, even though it is very unlikely that women's ordination will be fully addressed in only one synodal cycle, time is on women's side even if it takes generations for deeply engrained prejudices to fade away. In this context, the role of women theologians to find creative ways ahead that change attitudes will be crucial as will the support of women's advocacy organizations who continually raise women's issues.

Ultimately, the ability of the synodal process to fully address women's issues will be a litmus test on the effectiveness of the process. Given current efforts aimed at improving the synodal process (the main focus of the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops) and the progress documented so far, there is every indication that the synodal process is headed in a positive direction and that true co-responsibility in the Church will ultimately be achieved in a way that fully recognizes the baptismal dignity of women.

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