

SYNODALITY AND LOCAL CHURCH THEOLOGIZING: EXPLORING EXPERIENCES AND PATHWAYS

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*Local church theology, first presented in *Lumen Gentium*, is renewed through the Synod on Synodality. The paper explores the consultation processes from the local to the universal level and how it illuminates the understanding of communion, participation, and mission. Reviewing *Lumen Gentium*'s definition of the local church and how it has been received in the Philippines and the region of Asia, the synod poses insights and questions on how to listen and interpret the *sensus fidei* which is also expressed powerfully in popular religiosity, communal discernment processes, and bridge-building mission. The synod shapes local theologizing and vice versa. Reinterpreting Christian tradition and expanding ecclesial imagination confirms the urgency for a new way of doing theology.*

Keywords: Synodality, Local church, local theologizing, People of God, *Lumen Gentium*, *sensus fidei*

INTRODUCTION

Sixty years after Vatican II, we want to look at its continuing renewal, especially with *Lumen Gentium*'s concept of the Local Church. This paper intends to look at the experience of Synodality and Local Church Theologizing by exploring experiences and the pathways they created from the local to the universal level. It has four parts: Part 1 is about

the Local Church in the Synodal Process,¹ looking through the experiences of communion, participation, mission in the Philippines, Asia, and the recent Synod sessions at the Vatican. From these local and universal church experiences, in Part 2, we reread *Lumen Gentium*: its reception especially highlighted in the ongoing Synodal Process. Part 3 considers the praxis of the local church in the Philippines as a pathway to nourishing the *sensus fidei fidelium*, its addition to the developing theology of the Local Church, responding also to the questions posed by the Synodal Process. Part 4 looks into the continuing Christian Tradition and how the Synodal Process brings out a new ecclesial imagination, strengthened by the latest *Motu Proprio* of Pope Francis on “Promoting Theology.”

THE LOCAL CHURCH IN THE SYNODAL PROCESS

In 2021 Pope Francis announced the holding of a Synod on Synodality, a call to renew the Church by becoming a Synodal Church. Entitled “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission,” Pope Francis believes that “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church in the Third Millennium.”² Clarifying that it is not a new model but the way the church is intrinsically constituted, synodality will be the ‘*modus vivendi and modus operandi*’ of the Church.”³

The Synodal Process has highlighted the important role of the local church – calling it a “privileged point of reference”, as “the theological place where the baptized experience in practical terms

¹ ‘Synodal Process’ refers to the whole range of synodal activities from 2021-2024: from the local church consultation to the national and continental synodal assemblies, guided by the Synod Secretariat, up till the Synod Sessions in Rome from Oct 1-29, 2023.

² Pope Francis, *Presentation of the Programme for the celebration of the upcoming Synod approved by Pope Francis during his audience with Cardinal Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops*, 24 April 2021.

³ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” (SLMC) no.6, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

“walking together.”⁴ The local church is also called the ‘departure point’ as all theological insights and pastoral practices used in the *Instrumentum Laboris* (IL) came from the lived experiences of different levels of local churches – parishes, dioceses, metropolitans, national and Continental.

What are some experiences of the local churches in terms of communion, participation, and mission?

Communion: The Pyramid Flattens

In the Philippines, the discernment process of all the diocesan consultation and metropolitan synthetic experience, as well as the national level, was done through small groups - 6 people (bishop, priests, religious, and lay) huddled in small circles - praying, listening, discussing and discerning together. It proved to be the best learning for the participants because they understood synodality experientially.

As the author is a member of the Asian Synod Task Force, this set-up of small diverse groups as discernment circles were replicated at the Asian Synodal Assembly. Moreover, the circular seating at the Synodal session set-up at the Vatican was announced by the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops (GSSB) as something they have learned from Asia.

At the Vatican Synod, this circle models the face of the people of God. In all the sharing we had, especially in our differences, I⁵ realized that the church is deeply local. The phrase “but that is not our experience in our country, we understand it differently” is a refrain we hear all the time.

In synodal theologizing, walking together in Communion expresses the equality of the people of God, where baptismal calling and responsibility are the identity that calls for respect. This is

⁴ XVI Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “*Instrumentum Laboris*,” For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission for the First Session, October 2023, no.11 <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/06/20/230620e.pdf>.

⁵ The first-person pronoun ‘I’ has been employed in the first part of this paper, acknowledging the personal experience of one of the authors who is a voting member of the Synod.

specifically expressed in deeply listening to one another as we are coming from different states of life, parts of the world, cultures, contexts, church life, and theologies. The people of God, as a local church, live in a specific time, place, and context which affects and shapes its living out of its faith and mission.

With the circular seating arrangement as modeling communion, can we say perhaps the Synodal Process has flattened the pyramid? The pyramid has been used for the longest time to describe the hierarchical or dominating leadership that characterized church life for centuries. The synodal journey started with Pope Francis' intention to 'invert the pyramid.'⁶ From pyramid to circle is a tough reshaping, not just structurally but the way the church will proceed in the future as the people of God in communion, walking with one another and with the rest of humanity.

The deep respect for one another that the church of communion demands means authentically welcoming all members of the church and beyond.⁷ The synodal consultation made us so aware of the people who feel they do not belong to or have been hurt by the church, in its teaching and basically in the way the leaders relate to them in a dominating and judgmental way, for example, the LGBTQ+ community, the single mothers, PWD; the poorest are too often at the margin of church life or Christian communities, like migrants, refugees, street children, victims of human trafficking.

In this sense, the synodal process witnesses to a Trinitarian theology – centered on a relationship and mission of love, but also equality since the Trinity is the triune manifestation of the one God. The desire for authentic communion is sourced from the role of the Holy Spirit who recreates the church, breaking down walls of separation and helping us to sense and read clearly the 'signs of the times' so that we may follow Jesus even more faithfully, leading us to continuing journey towards the Reign of God, palpable even now in our world.

⁶ SLMC, no.57.

⁷ IL, no. 26.

One of the conflicting themes during the Synod in Rome was how the Synodal Church made credible that promise that “love and truth will meet” (Ps. 85) – referring to the fact that although the synodal church wants to welcome all (Pope Francis’s “*todos, todos, todos*”⁸), church teachings (e.g. on homosexuality, “irregular unions,” suicide victims, etc.) hinder such. One of the questions asked during the Synod was: how can we balance the dogmatic truths that we hold as a church and the pastoral ministry of welcoming? What does authentic communion mean in cases like this? How far will synodal communion take the church?

Participation: Decision-making Process

The Synod of Bishops is a permanent institution established by Pope Paul VI on 15 Sept 1965; an assembly of bishops representing the Catholic episcopate, tasked with helping the Pope in the governing of the Universal Church. It is a decision-making body as it pursues pastoral solutions that have universal validity and application. On its 50th anniversary, Pope Francis released *Episcopalis Communio*. Agreeing with Pope Paul VI that “all institutions can be improved over time,” he then transformed the Synod from an event assembling bishops to a listening process unfolding in stages, lasting for four years, in which the whole church – the people of God, College of Bishops, Bishop of Rome – participate more fully.

This Synodal Process fundamentally changes the decision-making⁹ process in the Catholic Church, hence its understanding of leadership and governance, manifesting the call of Pope Francis for a ‘healthy decentralization.’¹⁰ This decision-making process as widespread consultation of the local churches has been very participatory. We have not only witnessed a dialogue but a circularity of dialogue, as follows:

⁸ Pope Francis’ homily, opening mass of the Synod session Oct 4, 2023; originally from the speech of Pope Francis at the World Youth Day in Lisbon.

⁹ Difference between decision-making and decision-taking in SLMC, no. 69.

¹⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 16, 32; see also *Motu Proprio* 15 Feb 2022, *Assegnare Alcune Competenze*.

The Preparatory Document consisting of ten themes and questions for consultation went from parish (BECs, church associations, etc.) to diocese, to metropolitan, to national. The National Synodal Reports went directly to the GSSB, which gathered reports from 121 countries (including a Digital Synod reaching 1,200 people). A team of theologians produced the Document for the Continental Synod (DCS), which was then brought back to National/Diocesan Synodal Teams for comments and feedback. A continental synodal assembly was then held which discerned the feedback from the different Asian countries. These produced 7 documents coming from the 7 continental groupings; becoming the basis for the *IL* used for the first Synod session.

The more specific decision-making process will be in its second session in 2024. The Synthesis Report of the first session contained 'Convergences, Matters for Consideration and Proposals'. The Synthesis Report will go back to the local churches (dioceses - national) for feedback which would be sent directly to the GSSB, which will then produce the *IL* for the second and final session of the Synod. This would mean the theological insights and pastoral pathways to be reflected in the second *IL* would again be coming from the local churches – from their lived experiences and discernment processes. Such circularity of dialogue is a novelty for a synodal process.

At the center of our small group communal discernment was the tool called Conversation in the Spirit which has three rounds: in the first, each gets the same amount of time (4 min) to give their opinion on an issue. A few moments of silence follow. For the second round, one shares what has touched him/her from what someone in the group shared or what she/he thinks is emerging from the group answers. Silence again follows. The third round answers the question "Where is the Spirit leading us?" as the group tries to clarify, build up, and synthesize their answers as a group to the question or issue they were facing. In the end, this deep listening would lead to decision-making as a small group. The GSSB is quick to note that the synodal assembly is not a

democracy,¹¹ but unity in diversity, “an experience of the Triune God”¹²; the Holy Spirit is the protagonist in the Synodal Process.¹³

It is a very effective tool to move from “I to We.” Personally, I realized that every opinion (especially those different from mine) is not just an opinion, but comes from experience, of a local context and culture. I experienced openness and a willingness to listen and dialogue e.g. in the discussion on the women deacons, only 1 out of 10 in our small group disagreed; and on the issue of LGBTQ+, 4 out of 10 wanted to take the phrase out of the Synthesis Report. After a good sharing, discussion, and discernment, we agreed to report that we are open to studying these themes further. It could have been easier to invoke the majority. But the small group discussions have never been about voting or majority-minority competition; but about opening up, listening, and coming to a consensus – and all in a prayerful atmosphere.

Experiencing the decision-making process in this way will be the most important learning from the synodal experience and the most important change to come in the local churches: parishes, dioceses, and conferences, will have to decide also in this way. Moreover, in this discernment process, from the experience of the local churches, participants slowly enter into the reality of being a universal church or as I experienced, a synodal network of local churches as we are aware that their responses will affect the final decision for universally-valid responses or pastoral solutions to particular issues the Church is facing.

In the Synthesis Report (SR), there were also proposals to strengthen Structures of Participation (#18): the obligatory nature of Parish Councils, doctrinal and juridical nature of episcopal conferences including questions of doctrine that arise locally, the holding of ecclesial assemblies.

¹¹ Preparatory Document - For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission (PD), no. 14.

¹² *Instrumentum Laboris for the First Session Oct. 2023 (IL)*, no. 46.

¹³ Pope Francis, Moment of Reflection for the beginning of the synodal

In this communal discernment and decision-making process, the theology of the People of God possessing a *sensus fidei fidelium* has been highlighted:

the Council emphasized how, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit received in Baptism, all the faithful "cannot err when they believe, and this special prerogative of theirs is manifested by the supernatural sense of faith of the whole people when 'from the bishops down to the last of the lay faithful' they give their universal assent in things of faith and morals" (LG, n. 12). It is the Spirit who guides believers "into all truth" (Jn. 16:13).¹⁴

This is a powerful doctrine that states that the *sensus fidei* possessed by the baptized community is infallible. This is what the four-year synodal process was trying to achieve – sincerely listening to one another and the Spirit as bishops, priests, religious and lay.

But the synodal process also introduced a lot of questions: how does one (local or universal church) come to a common *sensus fidei fidelium*? What is the process to come to a consensus agreement 'from the bishop to the last of the faithful' (LG 12)? Does the *sensus fidei fidelium* have different levels - the 'all' (*universitas fidelium*), the 'some' (the collegiality of bishops), and the 'one' – primatial ministry of the Bishop of Rome?¹⁵ Moreover, does the unity achieved as *sensus fidei fidelium* mean 'balance' or 'avoiding conflict and division' (the two examples cited above on diaconate for women and LGBTQ+)?

Mission: Yardstick for Communion and Participation

The Philippine and Asian Synodal Reports, as well as the feedback to the DCS, were mission-oriented. The Philippine Report reiterated once again the call to be a Church of the Poor and to explore possibilities for positive engagement in the areas of ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, politics and social media. The

¹⁴ *Dei Verbum*, no. 10; PD no. 13.

¹⁵ SLMC, nos. 62-66.

Asian Church called for peacebuilding and becoming peacemakers; to continue the (triple) dialogue with the poor, religions, and cultures, caring for Mother Earth, and especially also for migrants and refugees. In fact, the Asian Report critiqued the lack of concern for ecology in the DCS.

My main critique of IL was it remained inward-looking. More space and time were spent on inner church concerns. Perhaps the reason was the topic of synodality itself talks about how we live as a church and therefore the focus was more on co-responsibility for mission. Its main contribution is that it clarified that the 'church is mission' and mission is the heart and yardstick for communion and participation;¹⁶ that everything that is being discussed to renew our sense of communion and participation - especially the leadership roles of bishops, more participatory structures for decision making - was so that the Church can become even more focused on its mission. It reiterated the call to be a church of the poor, which includes the care for our common home. SR#4 emphasized the role of the poor as protagonists in the mission as well as their integral role in the formation of the clergy, religious, and seminarians.¹⁷ Mission in the digital world was highlighted, calling for digital missionaries.

In this sense, a Synodal Church manifests a Eucharistic theology that focuses on service, as Jesus offered his life to all. In mission, as we believe in a better world and work for the common good, we witness to a Eucharistic hope that like Jesus, all the suffering and brokenness in ourselves and our world will be overcome. Having said that, I find that the 'dangerous memory' of Jesus, part of our Eucharistic theology, was not utilized as a central core of the call to mission.

¹⁶ SR, Part 2, no. 8.

¹⁷ SR, Part 1, no. 4

THE LOCAL CHURCH IN *LUMEN GENTIUM* AND BEYOND

***Lumen Gentium* and its Reception**

We credit *Lumen Gentium* for clearly defining the church as the People of God (Chapter 2), with all members equally called to participate in the *tria munera* of Jesus.¹⁸ And this people of God are found in their localities, the places where they live. LG uses ‘particular church’, also local; it also uses other terms like ‘various churches.’ However, there are only two main texts (LG 23 and 26) that discuss the ‘particular’, ‘local’ church, to quote:

The individual bishops...are the visible principle and foundation of unity in their particular churches, fashioned after the model of the universal church, in and from which the churches come into being the one and only Catholic Church... By governing well their church as a portion of the universal Church, they are effectively contributing to the welfare of the whole Mystical Body, which is also the body of churches.¹⁹

This church of Christ is present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful, which, in so far as they are united to their pastors, are also quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament. For these are, in their own localities, the new people called by God, in the power of the Holy Spirit and as the result of full conviction (see I Thes. 1:5). In them the faithful are gathered together through the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, and the mystery of the Lord’s supper is celebrated “so that, by means of the flesh and blood of the Lord the whole brotherhood of the Body may be welded together”. In these communities, though they often be small and poor, or existing in the diaspora, Christ is present, through whose power and influence the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is constituted.”²⁰

¹⁸ LG, no.10, 12, 32.

¹⁹ Ibid., no.23.

²⁰ Ibid., no.26.

From LG 26, we can surmise what characterizes a local church (4 elements): united with their pastors (the bishops, their apostolic link and guarantor of apostolicity), celebration of the Eucharist, proclamation of the Gospel and the presence of Christ. A bigger part of the LG in reference to local churches concerns structures: the leadership role of the bishops in these local churches and their leadership in relation to the leadership of the bishop of Rome, as well as the integral link and relationship between the local church and the universal church. In the western church, this relationship ignited a big debate between the head of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, and Bishop William Casper of the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart revolving around the location of the central governance of the Roman Catholic Church, and the comparison between the universal and the local church in terms of origin and identity.²¹ This paper cannot expound on this debate, suffice it to say that these issues were the ones highlighted by the Synodal Process and explored more deeply (next section).

Although we can presume that the ecclesiology of Vatican II, especially in LG which uses several images of being a church, is manifested in the local churches, the specific mention of particular/local churches is in the chapter of 'Hierarchical Structure of the Church and in Particular the Episcopate' (Chapter III) hence the deeper theological meaning of the local church has not been explored well. There was no further discussion on what the 'presence of Christ' means, especially in terms of mission. The 'presence of Christ' is the only characteristic of the local church mentioned in LG 26 that is not specifically connected to the bishop. Three of the four characteristics of the local church are all connected to the bishop since the proclamation of the Gospel has also been discussed as the main function of the bishop.²²

²¹ For a comprehensive discussion on the debate, see R. Odchique, *The Local Church in The Diverse Islands of Cultures Towards a Filipino Ecclesiological Perspective*, A dissertation presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor's Degree (Ph.D.) in Theology (S.T.D.) 2008.

²² LG, no. 25

However, in the Southern Hemisphere, especially in Asia, we find a beautiful and deep reception of the Vatican II theology of the local church. The Asian church, through the FABC and its theology,²³ clearly defined the local church, and from the very start clarified that its task and focus is “the building up of a truly local church.”²⁴

In its very first FABC Plenary Assembly, the Asian bishops described a local church as “a Church incarnate in people, a church indigenous and inculturated.”²⁵ It defines inculturation as the very “local self-realization of the church”²⁶. FABC also says “A local church emerges from an encounter between a people and the gospel.”²⁷ For Asia, the local church is ‘the people of God in a given place.’²⁸ For Asia, ‘locality’ is a determinant factor of ecclesiality in the genesis of the church. “For the Word of God is productive of the Church only as appropriated and interpreted in response to the challenges posed by concrete places, times, cultures, and situations.”²⁹ In Asia, the local church realizes itself by entering into new relationships with neighbors of other faiths and by involving itself in concerns of justice, human dignity and human rights and in the concrete fulfillment of the preferential love for the poor.³⁰

In the Philippine Church, we can say that the first reception of what it means to be a local church is found in the southern part of the country when in 1970, the dioceses of Mindanao called for a similar general assembly of the People of God (bishops, clergy, religious and lay) for decision making and direction setting, called the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC). It is interesting to note that although the SR cited the Australia’s Fifth Plenary Council and the First Ecclesial Assembly

²³ Ibid., 36-47.

²⁴ FABC 1,9 quoted in J. Gnanapiragasam and F. Wilfred, *Being Church in Asia: Theological Advisory Commission Documents (1986-1992)* Volume 1 (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1994), 34.

²⁵ Ibid., 50.

²⁶ Ibid., 36.

²⁷ Ibid., 52.

²⁸ Ibid., 43.

²⁹ Ibid., 47.

³⁰ Ibid., 57.

of Latin America as examples of participatory structures of decision-making, 50 years earlier, MSPC already happened. Although in its early years, it was also saddled with the same controversy and debate about the leadership of the church, between the lay members of its board and the bishops of Mindanao³¹. Until now, MSPC continues in its original intention as an ecclesial assembly, with all dioceses of Mindanao present represented by clerics, religious and lay, mission-oriented, and providing pastoral pathways to be a relevant church.

Almost two decades after its establishment of MSPC, the Philippine Church held its second Plenary Assembly participated by around 300 people composed of bishops, priests, religious, and lay. The PCP II Vision of the local church in the Philippines – to be a community of disciples and a church of the poor – would define church life and mission for the years to come.

In the southern hemisphere, Basic Ecclesial Communities would emerge soon after Vatican II also as a reception of local church in its most basic form. As early as 1968, Medellin (Medellin Documents JPP 10-11) proclaimed “The Christian base community is the first and fundamental ecclesiastical nucleus, which on its level must make itself responsible for the richness and expansion of the faith.” The East African bishops have called BECs “the most local incarnation of the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic church.”³² The Asian bishops have said that BECs are “the most fundamental ecclesial reality”³³. Our very own PCP-II proclaimed: “Our dream of the church as a community of disciples and as a church of the poor, a church of communion and participation, of a priestly, prophetic and kingly community is today finding expression in the movement to foster BECs.”³⁴ BECs have also been compared and

³¹ See Odchigue, *ibid.*, pp. 248-263.

³² AMECEA (Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa) Conference 1974.

³³ FABC Asian Colloquium on Ministries, 1974, Hongkong.

³⁴ PCP II # 137.

connected to the Pauline house churches as their origin,³⁵ the biblical foundation of the concept of the “local church.”³⁶

The Synodal Process in Dialogue with *Lumen Gentium*

Most of the novelties of the Synod have a lot to do with the concept of the local church and its link to the universal church: 1) the consultation process (involving the different levels of local churches) that produced the IL discussed for four weeks of the first Synod session; 2) inviting non-bishops (women, clergy, religious lay men and women) into the Synod of Bishops not as experts or fraternal delegates but as “witnesses” to the Synod (local processes), full members allowing them to vote deliberatively, a right previously given to the bishops alone; 3) changing and reshaping the structure of functioning during the synod – instead of a theatre-like set up to a circular seating with members coming from the local churches all over the world; 4) a very participatory way of coming up with a new teachings of the church - universally valid with local applicability, in a 4-year consultation process.

Comparing with LG, the Synodal process has really expounded and explored deeply the role of the local church, calling it a “reference point” and the point of departure, hence its theological locus. In that sense, the local church is the ground from which the Synodal Church bases itself. The local church is also the arrival point, since all the results will become pastoral directions in living faith and mission. In that sense, the local church is not just

³⁵ Bernard Lee, *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 6-7; J. Marins, *The Church From the Roots* (London, CAFOD, 1989), 7; see also Felix Wilfred, “Why Small Christian Communities” in Klaus Kramer and Klaus Velguth, *Small Christian Communities: Fresh Stimulus for a Forward-looking Church* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2013), 20-25. For international reports and reflections on BECs, see J. Healey and J. Hinton, *SCCs Today: Capturing the New Moment* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005) for BECs in Latin America, North America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Oceania; for BECs in Africa, Latin America and Asia, see also Klaus Kramer and Klaus Velguth, *ibid.*

³⁶ Other references on house churches in the Bible: Col.4:15 (house of Nympha), 1 Cor. 16:19 (house of Prisca and Aquila), Rom. 16:23 (house of Gaius), Phil. 1:1-2 (house of Philemon, Apphia and Archippus).

the two points that link the whole synodal process – departure and arrival – but is the bridge that will recast meanings, renegotiate conflicts, and reshape pathways in becoming a synodal church.

With the synodal process, the characteristics of the local church expressed in LG 26 became more focused on the “presence of Jesus and the proclamation of his Gospel” in the beautiful and painful realities of communion, participation, and mission experienced in the local churches. These gospel experiences could reinterpret the “apostolic link” mentioned in LG23 as the apostolic tradition continuing as the local churches grow into synodality—journeying together and walking with the rest of humanity. As the synodal process unfolds day by day, the small circle in its communal dialogue and discernment process became the palpable symbol of the intimate link between the universal and the local church (LG 23). From here I saw and felt that the universal church is the synodal network of local churches.

More importantly, the structural emphasis of LG – the issues that sparked the big debate: the leadership roles and relationship of the bishops with the bishop of Rome and the link between the universal and local church – has been experienced through the Synodal processes and in that way, the local church we have read in LG has also been redefined by the Synodal Process. The whole synodal process was a leadership exercise, a governance process. In its consultation, discernment, and decision-making, in its building up of the *consensus fidei fidelium*, it manifested and became the lived theology of the intrinsic link between the synodal dimension of the life of the church (the participation of all), the episcopal collegial dimension (the care of the bishop for the whole church) and the primatial dimension (the service of the Bishop of Rome, guarantor of unity).³⁷

However, one of the main contributions of the Synodal Process could also be its biggest challenge - the integral link of Primacy, Episcopal Collegiality, and Synodality. The SR also raised a lot of questions on the specific role of bishops in decision-making since all members of the Synod, including the non-bishops, have a

³⁷ The SLMC deeply explores the theology of the local church, especially nos. 58-61, 77 following.

deliberative vote and from the second session in 2024,³⁸ the new Synthesis Report will be sent to the Holy Father for his final decision. What is the role of episcopal collegiality in synodality, in an increasingly synodal church? The Synthesis Report #20 regarding the Synod of Bishops and Ecclesial Assemblies called for an evaluation of the participation of non-bishops and the criteria for their choice; mentioning the risk that the specific task of the bishops will be misunderstood.

The paragraphs that call for a bigger role of participatory decision-making bodies also received relatively high NO votes. Since bishops make up 80% of the assembly, we presume that the majority of these votes come from bishops. With the bishops on their own turf, how will they manifest or negotiate the “integral link of synodality, primacy, and episcopal collegiality?” (For example, in our small group, one bishop asked why we are still talking about accepting women deacons when the Pope has closed that discussion. Someone asked where he got that information. He cited an article he read. The same person said she read the same article, and she believes that the Pope has opened the discussion on the topic!)

Although the Pope is the supreme authority in the Catholic Church, I believe Pope Francis has shown his slant when he initiated the Synodal Process– synodality takes the primary focus. The office of primacy and episcopal collegiality serve the goals of synodality – communion that radiates, co-responsibility in mission, and participatory leadership structures that serve communion and mission.³⁹

Aside from the concerns raised above, some questions remain:

³⁸ Although it is not yet known if the Pope will call for a specific and separate Synod of Bishops, without the ‘non-bishops’ before he makes his Post-synodal Exhortation, etc.

³⁹ Pope Francis’ *Motu Proprio* entitled “*Assegnare Alcune Competenze*” released on 11 Feb. 2022, witnesses once more to the decentralization desired by Pope Francis as he assigns certain pastoral decisions to the local churches through their bishops’ conferences.

In the face of conflicting issues, how else can we nourish the *consensus fidelium* in the local churches? What tool, methods or approaches do we use? Also, how will the Pope exercise his office of unity in his discernment of these conflicting controversial issues, knowing that this “unity does not destroy uniqueness of each local church, but is built on their integral linkage?”

It will not be surprising how the different local churches can and will differ in their pastoral creativity in living out the dogmatic and doctrinal teachings of the Church, whatever comes out in the final synthesis to be given to the Pope, especially in the controversial issues raised- welcoming the LGBTQ community, opening up the diaconate to women, or celibacy as optional, even creating more participatory decision-making structures. On the other hand, how will these communities, who felt they had not been given space and voice in the Synodal Process, move forward? Moreover, how many other voices have we not listened to and spaces we have not opened up in the Church’s desire for communion?

Regarding decision-making, what does contextualization or inculturation mean? Not just liturgical and theological inculturation but responding to the specific context and needs of the local church. How far does the concept of the local church and its intrinsic link to inculturation go?

Moreover, what will pastoral praxis look like after the final decisions have been made? The most local base of the church – BECs, church associations, even individual Christians – very far from Rome and even the authority of the local episcopal conferences – live out these decisions. A mature adult or a Christian community also gives authority to designated leaders to influence their lives or not. I must say much of the living out of the synodal decisions will depend on the discipleship journeys of the most basic faith communities – families, neighborhoods, and church groups.

Let us listen to actual praxis in the local churches in the Philippines in the way they dialogue with the Synodal Process, extending it, and perhaps even challenging it. What pathways do they open in terms of communion, participation, and mission,

specifically in actively building up the *sensus fidei fidelium*. Perhaps we can see some responses to the questions raised above.

**(PHILIPPINE) LOCAL CHURCH PRAXIS IN DIALOGUE WITH
THE SYNODAL PROCESS**

Synodality facilitates the listening to the “*sensus fidei fidelis*” the “*sensus fidelium*.” *Sensus fidei* is “a spiritual instinct,” a “spontaneous natural knowledge,”⁴⁰ that enlightens the believer to live a life of faith.”⁴¹ Through the Spirit, Christians acquire a “connaturality with divine realities and a wisdom” enabling them to “feel, sense, and perceive in harmony with the church.”⁴²

As “an imaginative capacity to interpret revelation,”⁴³ *sensus fidei* is characterized by multiple senses that integrate the personal, heuristic, cognitive, practical, soteriological, integrative, and ecclesial,⁴⁴ and its corporate dimension constitutes the *sensus fidelium* or collective faith consciousness.

Beyond the responses generated through the synodal consultations, *sensus fidei*, *sensus fidelium*, is also manifested “in the various forms of the life and mission of ecclesial communities, from popular piety and generic pastoral care, as well as their specific competency in various sectors of cultural and social life.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ International Theological Commission. *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014), #49. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html

⁴¹ *Sensus Fidei*, #59

⁴² Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, #56.

⁴³ Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation*. (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2009) 238.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 238-240.

⁴⁵ SLMC, no. 73.

Communion: The Senses and Popular Religiosity

Popular culture, popular piety, and popular movements, which are often emphasized in Pope Francis' writings⁴⁶ underline the laity's participation as subjects of liberation. While popular piety is the "starting point for healing and liberation from deficiencies,"⁴⁷ it is also "a true expression of the spontaneous missionary activity of the people of God."⁴⁸ Aside from its evangelizing power,⁴⁹ popular piety is also a space for listening to the People of God and their ultimate concerns. Inclusive by its very nature, it attracts a wider range of beliefs and practices and a diverse group of followers. As an "interface between the faith lives and praxis of believers,"⁵⁰ popular religiosity grants access to the silent majority. As a space of dialogue, it is both mystical and political; where people manifest their hopes and aspirations, as well as resistance.

The popular devotion to the *Poong Nazareno* attracts more than a million devotees in its annual *Traslacion*. Xiao Chua, a historian opines that the rituals and practices embedded in the annual celebration, manifest not only the faith of the Filipinos but also the very deep ethos of *kapwa*.⁵¹ Devotees enter a stage of liminality in the ritual as they experience belonging and equality. Barefooted walking together, they become brothers and sisters with a common language and expression to follow. When the word "Sabya!" is shouted a group of men called '*sabyador*' will move in

⁴⁶ In *Evangelii Gaudium*, popular culture was mentioned 19 times, while in *Fratelli Tutti* 26 times accessed at http://\papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.pdf (vatican.va).

⁴⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no.69.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, no.122.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, no.126.

⁵⁰ Michael Canaris, "A Rahnerian Reading of *Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church," in *Learning from the All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidelium*, eds. Bradford Hinze and Peter Phan, (Pickwick Publications, 2016), 201. <https://www.everand.com/book/399744001/Learning-from-All-the-Faithful-A-Contemporary-Theology-of-the-Sensus-Fidei>.

⁵¹ Michael Charleston Briones Chua, "Limandaang Taon ng Paglakad ng Bayan Kasama ang Poong Hesus Nazareno," in *Black Nazarene: Devotion and Discourse*, *Nazareno Studies* 1, no. 1, eds. Roberto Ampil, et.al., (2022): 25.

unison to get the crowd going. A *pinga* is supposed to be the handle of the *andas* (or carriage) but during the *Traslacion*, some men participate as *pinga*; they stand at the edge of the carriage so that others can climb up to meet the Poon. When the rope that controls the crowd gets entangled, the crowd shouts “*otso*” to straighten the rope. The practice of *pa-Caridad*, people sharing food, including those pushing devotees out of harm’s way in the church, are all expressions of *pakikipagkapwa*. Xiao Chua’s diagram of the different actors and groups of people involved in the *Traslacion* reflects synodality. The devotees, church, state, and the private sector working together to enable a safe and fruitful *Traslacion*.

Espiritu points out that though many are devotees as a form of *panata* (vow) or *pagsusukli* (giving back) for favors asked and granted, they incorporate their social action through volunteer work or donating to causes organized by the Nazareno group.⁵² Panganiban presents how the Nazareno devotion has evolved from being merely a popular devotion in Quiapo church spreading to other parishes having their own Nazareno Friday and with brotherhoods of *hijos* spreading exponentially in different places.⁵³ It has also catechized as many as 3 million pilgrims participating in the procession, through the Marian meeting rites celebrated in parishes within the route of the *Traslacion*, and through regular spiritual accompaniment provided to *hijos*. The devotion has also sustained interfaith and ecumenical dialogue and partnership with the Silsilah Dialogue movement and Earist Interfaith Services as well as collaborative endeavors for charitable causes⁵⁴ and cultural enrichment.⁵⁵

Comments in the Synod regarding liturgy reflected more observations about priests’ performance and since there was no

⁵² Espiritu, *Rethinking the Panata to the Nazareno*, 39.

⁵³ Kendrick Ivan Panganiban, “The Historical development of Shrines in Honor of the Black Nazarene in the Philippines,” in *Black Nazarene: Devotion and Discourse...*, 154-178.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 154-178.

⁵⁵ The renowned photographer Raymond Gappi, who is a devotee, captures images of devotees in different moments, moods, and encounters during the *Traslacion*. See Jose Allain Austria, “Photography as Panata: Raymond Gappi’s Black Nazarene Oeuvre,” in *Black Nazarene: Devotion and Discourse...*

distinct question on popular religiosity, it was hardly reflected in the reports. Was it intentionally put on the sideline or is it simply because it is not easy to listen to the senses of the faithful? Canaris opines that though the church has emphasized how “popular piety is a road which leads to what is essential,” it also echoes its hesitation towards popular religiosity, when it says, that popular religiosity “appears to be corrupted by factors that are inconsistent with Catholic doctrine.”⁵⁶

Ryan notes that though the church recognizes the connection between popular religiosity and *sensus fidelium*, it is not seriously and intentionally reflected upon to inform and transform ecclesial life.⁵⁷ He points out the value of using ‘sense history’ in listening to the *sensus fidelium*,” exemplified by the Feast of the *Corpus Christi* which came about when the Eucharist was being distanced from the laypeople through rules and regulations. Because they were unable to taste and receive the body of Christ, the devotion developed the use of other senses to facilitate the encounter with the divine.⁵⁸ The Latin word *sensus* is *aesthesis* (perception) in Greek from which the word aesthetics takes root. Just like our encounter with a work of art, encountering the divine is a meaning-making process, and thus,⁵⁹ our listening ought to surface the “provisional, complex and retrospective character of the *sensus fidelium*” which is latent in popular devotions.⁶⁰

Espin regards popular religion by itself as an epistemology, an epistemological network, with various nodes including “beliefs, ethical expectations, rites. and experiences... assumed as plausible

⁵⁶ Canaris, “A Rahnerian Reading of *Sensus Fidei*...,” 202.

⁵⁷ Thomas Ryan, “Sensuous History: The Medieval Feast of Corpus Christi as an Expression of the *Sensus Fidelium*,” in *Learning from all the Faithful...*, 27-41.

⁵⁸ Juliana of Cornillon had persistent visions of the moon with a segment missing. This, she interpreted as an ‘absence in the church of a feast devoted to the Eucharist.’ Though the Feast was contested, it was instituted in 1246 and placed in between the Feast of the Ascension and Pentecost Sunday. See Thomas Ryan, “Sensuous History: The Medieval Feast of Corpus Christi as an Expression of the *Sensus Fidelium*,” *Learning from all the Faithful...*, 27-41.

⁵⁹ Rush, *The Eyes of Faith...*, 226.

⁶⁰ Ryan, “Sensuous History...,” 39.

premises for explaining reality.⁶¹ For instance, as the Philippine consultation results expressed the absence of men in ecclesial life,⁶² popular devotions witness male devotees' active and passionate engagement in the sacred rituals which interlocutors believe express not only religious belief or fanaticism but also "physical prowess through gaining proximity to power."⁶³

Participation: Communal Discernment and Decision Making

As a "practical, sapiential, and critical sense" applied in the concrete every day, the *sensus fidei* bridges "faith and reason, theory and praxis, story and significance, Gospel and context, the teaching of the magisterium's and one's life."⁶⁴ In the 2022 Philippine national elections, communal discernment became the only imperative to express collective resistance. Though the Catholic church always accompanies the faithful in political exercises through pastoral letters, voters' education, and through its Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) which acts as a guardian of the ballots on election day, there was a clamor to give voice to the Christian vision of truth and justice. Thus, many Catholic lay associations and movements as well as diocesan councils of the laity took the initiative to create their own communal discernment process.

The *Sangguniang Laiko ng Pilipinas* (Council of the Laity of the Philippines) through its network compiled statements of their member organizations.⁶⁵ Out of the 21 statements issued by these

⁶¹ Espin, "The Faith of the People...", 158. Taken from Edward Hahnenberg, "Learning to Discern the Sensus Fidelium Latinamente: A Dialogue with Orlando Espin," in *Learning from the Faithful...*

⁶² Salubong, The Philippine National Synodal Report, 2021.

⁶³ Paul Francois Tremlett, "Power, Invulnerability, Beauty: Producing and Transforming Male Bodies in the Lowland Christianized Philippines," in *Occasional Papers in Gender Theory and the Study of Religions no. 1* (London: The School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London, 2006), 15.

⁶⁴ Rush, *The Eyes of Faith...*, 229.

⁶⁵ The Sangguniang Laiko ng Pilipinas has 52 member Catholic associations and movements and 17 Diocesan commissions and/or Councils of the Laity. <https://www.cbclaiko.org/>.

associations (7 Charismatic movements and 14 diocesan councils of the laity), almost all endorsed a presidential candidate while a few also identified their senatorial and party list choices.

The author interviewed Mr. James Pasamonte, the Lead Convenor of LAIKKO-Pampanga, facilitated the discernment process of key leaders of the Archdiocesan Council of the Laity (ACL) of the Archdiocese of San Fernando, Pampanga.⁶⁶ Compelled to accompany the lay faithful to make sound decisions, the council through the guidance of the Archbishop, designed *Mapagkakatiwalang Katiwala* (Trustworthy Steward) Discernment Model, after reviewing and benchmarking with several methods followed by different groups and organized an online diocesan discernment process attended by parish lay leaders, interested parishioners, and some parish priests in attendance.

The discernment process includes an assessment of the national situation, a reflection on the principles of Catholic social teachings, and an analysis of the candidates' credentials and qualifications following their set guiding principles. There was also a time of silence and an invitation to pray and meditate on what had been presented. To decide on the candidates to endorse, participants first chose their top 3 candidates namely their favorite candidate, a candidate they don't like but has a strong chance of winning, and a candidate who they think is also winnable. Their votes were cast and presented to the participants.

In the second sessions profiles of the top three candidates were presented with the help of the volunteer researchers of the local university and Ibon Foundation. When participants were once again invited to give their three chosen candidates, there was a remarkable change in the results. The candidate that garnered the greatest number of votes was then endorsed by the group through a statement that was signed by its officers, published, and presented to the parish communities and their lay leaders.

⁶⁶ Online interview with Mr. James Pasamonte, Sept. 30, 2023. LAIKKO-Pampanga is the socio-political and ecological arm of the Archdiocesan Council of the Laity (ACL) of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of San Fernando (RCASF), Pampanga

Some members of the clergy questioned their endorsement, and this was brought up in the presbyterial council with some leaders of the Council of Laity in attendance. In response to their queries, they pointed the basic objectives as follows: to create a process, methodology, criteria as a guiding principle for “Circle of Discernment” for the 2022 National and Local Elections, to align the guiding principles with the teachings of the Church and to enlighten, inspire and act for the Common Good. Then the lay leaders humbly asked back to their pastors “is there any church law and/or Doctrine that were violated? If there are any? Please let us know...”

As to the question of announcement and endorsement, they confidently stated that unlike publicly commissioned surveys (e.g. SWS, Pulse Asia, etc.) that are released regularly, their discernment process in fact showed a more acceptable sampling of the population. Further, even before being asked on their preferred candidates, participants were guided through a process that included guiding principles, communal and individual silent prayer as well as the national situation and Catholic Social Teachings. *Sensus fidelium* expressed through dialogue and participation powerfully brings out the “subversive wisdom of the Gospel.”⁶⁷ In a few weeks after their endorsement, some of the Pampanga clergy also released their endorsement for the same candidates which were communicated to the respective parishes and communities of the participants.

Though the discernment model was not formally cascaded to the parish communities, LAIKKO were invited by some parishes to facilitate Voter’s Education. It has also enlightened participants on their role in political exercises and taught them to speak truth to power whenever the need arises. Just recently, LAIKKO dialogued with their congressional representatives regarding Maharlika Investment Fund and the call for Constitutional Convention, and created a synergy framework in political exercises with the PPCRV as they strive for the common good. Such critical conversations and a “fusion of horizons” happen in daily life by attending to differences and risking dialogue.

⁶⁷ Rush, *The Eyes of Faith...*, 278.

Some dioceses like the Diocese of Gumaca were also able to undertake communal discernment in the parishes and basic ecclesial communities. In their annual BEC convention in March 2022, the diocese accompanied BEC leaders in dialogue and discernment resulting in the diocesan endorsement of candidates for the national level through a process that included the voices from the center to the peripheries.

In the early church, the Christian community regularly assembled to address issues such as their particular response to those in need, to appoint a new leader, and even to reinterpret their Jewish beliefs in the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 15). Today's Christian community lament however, the "gross lack of dialogue,"⁶⁸ the absence of collective discernment, as well as "Impunity and unilateral decision-making" that curtail the voice of the laity.⁶⁹ Parish groups are "devoid of real conversations," and meetings are mere venues for "information dissemination whereby the lay are heard under the guise of consultation but in reality, it is only a means for ratification and immediate execution."⁷⁰

In some cases, communal discernment is affected by groupthink; a theory suggesting that the more exclusive and high group spirit of ingroups, members are less likely to employ critical thinking resulting in decisions that excludes outgroups.⁷¹ An experience of the author as a delegate to the Asian Synodal Assembly confirms this. Being the only lay woman in a group of clergy, discussions tend to converge to their points given their common social location.⁷² On the contrary, in the Philippine national synodal consultations, where the discernment circles had

⁶⁸ Salubong, *The Philippine National Synodal Report 2022*, 4. Accessed at https://synodphilippines.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Philippines_National-Synodal-Report.pdf

⁶⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁷¹ Irving Janis, "Groupthink," Reprinted from *Psychology Today Magazine* (Ziff-Davis, 1971): 85. <http://agcommtheory.pbworks.com/f/GroupThink.pdf>

⁷² Indicators of groupthink tendency include the "illusion of invulnerability and unanimity, belief in the inherent morality of in-group, existence of mindguards, and stereotyping outsiders." Ibid., 85-88.

an equal distribution of lay, bishops, and clergy, conversations were observed to explore varied perspectives.

A synodal church takes place when it is continually rooted at the base, from the people and their daily needs. Thus, intentionally considering “historical, linguistic, and cultural links that mold interpersonal communication,” could facilitate the “adoption of a synodal style in its daily life” and the “incisive initiation of synodal structures which serve mission.”⁷³ Culturally rooted methods and approaches might be helpful to consider. For example, traditional leadership in indigenous communities that have proven effective not only in making sound decisions but also in empowering the voice of the people, echo the synodal vision.⁷⁴

Mission: Co-Responsibility and Bridge-Building

Sensus Fidei is an “active sense forever on the lookout for God,” and it happens through a “long loving look at the real.”⁷⁵ Synodality already exists in issue-based endeavors through social action ministries that survive through a system of collaboration and networking. The Prelature of Infanta has been at the forefront of such processes for a long time. Under the leadership of the late Bp Labayen, the Prelature concretized the vision of a church of the poor, pioneering in organizing Basic Christian Communities (BCC-CO),⁷⁶ and in raising awareness of the plight of the marginalized. It is not surprising therefore, that when the urgent call to save Sierra Madre came, the Prelature took the first steps in consulting, raising awareness, and gathering stakeholders to work towards a common vision. Ninety percent of Sierra Madre, the longest mountain range in the country and home to the *Dumagat*-

⁷³ Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, no.77.

⁷⁴ Citra Anggita and Tsuyoshi Hatori, “Customary Practices of Musyawarah Mufakat: An Indonesian Style of Consensus Building,” 2020 IOP Conf. Ser.: *Earth Environ. Sci.* 589 012027. Also see Rio Malulana, et.al. “Analysis of Traditional Leadership Models in Indigenous Peoples of Kerinci on Affecting Policy Direction,” *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, Vol. 367.

⁷⁵ Rush, *The Eyes of Faith*...,225.

⁷⁶<https://web.archive.org/web/20160503065117/http://www.cbcpnews.com/cbcpnews/?p=76527>

Remontado indigenous people, have been denuded due to illegal logging, quarrying, and mining.⁷⁷

According to Mr. Conrad Vargas, Interim Executive Director of PI-COPI (Prelature of Infanta Community Organization of the Philippines, Inc.), though Task Force Sierra Madre for Balanced Ecology has been a mouthpiece of the Prelature for ecological purposes,⁷⁸ the national alliance which the church initiated through Fr. Pete Montallana and Sr. Bing, extended collaboration in the national level.⁷⁹ The network boasted of about 40 institutional partners especially after typhoon Ondoy resulted in the death of 1000 people and was instrumental in elevating the concern in government legislative and executive platforms, part of which resulted in the proclamation of Sept 26 as Save Sierra Madre Day. Its widescale consultations in various levels, facilitated awareness building as well as collaborative endeavors and created the pathway towards the creation of a Sierra Madre council. Though the pandemic crisis and government leadership changes hampered the plans, network members are involved in local initiatives related to Sierra Madre mountains. The national network is presently headed by two lay people who are not church representatives.

Indigenous peoples have mentioned how church sees them as “objects of missionary help” and not “subjects in the task of evangelization.”⁸⁰ Vargas notes the important collaboration with the *Dumagats* and he sees that organizing parallel BCCs (known as *Mumunting Kristiyanong Komunidad ng mga Katutubo*) has been helpful not only in faith formation but in deepening their understanding about their plight as a community. Collaboration also happens in responding to their varied needs such as education, health, and employment. He notes however that challenges that continue to exist in partnerships especially with those of different paradigms and paradigms that divide *Dumagats* especially regarding the issue of Sierra Madre. Notwithstanding this, the diocese

⁷⁸ Online Interview, October 26, 2023.

⁷⁹ <https://savesierramadre.page.tl/>

⁸⁰ *Salubong*, 5.

maintains its links with mission partners by including them in its organizational structure. This facilitates constant listening and walking together in planning, implementing, and evaluating their diocesan program and other initiatives. Such walking together can still be deepened, especially when a concerted effort such as that of ecological concerns is of paramount importance.

Many express that church does not “represent the voice of the people;” from the “unfelt presence” of those in the peripheries in ecclesial life, its silence in the public sphere, and inadequacy in their responses to people’s needs.⁸¹ The synodal consultations from the local to the Vatican level likewise reflect the perennial and obvious gaps between faith and daily life by the absence of substantial discussions regarding social issues and concerns.

Pope Francis emphasizes the need to “build bridges, towards mutual sharing of perspectives and programs and “to develop forms of closeness,” not for uniformity but towards “convergence of purposes.”⁸² Such dialogues are interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary; creating a culture in which the subject is the people.⁸³

In the pandemic, multi-stakeholder cooperation that extends across organizations, institutional sectors, and different levels of society taught the world to work in this way.⁸⁴ Systemic change to confront complex social problems requires collaboration and network that extends to the “others.”⁸⁵ By integrating various

⁸¹ Ibid., 4.

⁸² Pope Francis “A Critical Time For Bridge-Building: Catholic Theological Ethics Today” In the 3rd International Conference of Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church, Sarajevo, 26-29 July 2018. Accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180711_messaggio-etica-teologica.html

⁸³ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 216. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

⁸⁴ Dominique Vervoort, Xiya Ma, Jessica G.Y. Luc, “COVID-19 Pandemic: A Time for Collaboration and A Unified Global Health Front,” *International Journal for Quality in Health Care* 33, no. 1 (2020), Advance Accessed 27 June 2020, DOI: 10.1093/intqhc/mzaa065

⁸⁵ David Brown, “Bridge Building for Social Transformation,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* / Winter 2015

perspectives to achieve locally generated goals, leadership and coalitions extend to diverse groups, new theories of change as well as devising systems emerge, and resources for long-term sustainability are richly shared.⁸⁶

LOCAL CHURCH THEOLOGIZING

What have we learned and where is the Spirit leading us? While people wait for pointed answers on crucial issues, the synodal process is certainly not just about the results but the process. It is “our way of being church in history.” How is the synodal process shaping local theologizing? Or better yet, how can local theologizing shape synodality?

Tradition-Building as Ongoing and Dialogical

Synodality puts forward church as a living tradition that is ongoing and dialogical. With Vatican II, particularly *Lumen Gentium*, as part of the Christian Tradition that attempted to bring about a church relevant to the challenges of modern times, the ongoing synodal process continually build up the relevance of this Tradition. From the apostles, this Tradition “makes progress [*proficit* – develops] in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit” through the growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on.”⁸⁷ As Pope Francis emphasizes, tradition is a “living reality and only a partial vision regards the ‘deposit of faith’ as something static.”⁸⁸

Wisdom emerging from and through the ongoing synodal process as well as local church practices contribute to local theologizing and Christian tradition-building.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 36-29.

⁸⁷ *Dei Verbum*, no.8.

⁸⁸ Pope Francis, “Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church,”

<http://www.evangelizatio.va/content/pcpne/en/attivita/catechesi/anniversario-catechiso.html>.

Renewing of the Ecclesial Imagination

Synodality brings about the conversion of the ecclesial imagination. Walking together is a creative and imaginative task. Together, the holy people of God walk to perceive and reinterpret the Gospel story in today's time and to envision the path for a renewed church that lives its mission. Such a walking together happens in creative fidelity. As Rush suggests, "continuity with the past is preserved through creative innovation; sameness is maintained through faithful rejuvenation; unity is preserved through legitimate diversity."⁸⁹

As a "missionary going forth," the church is called forth "to seek out glimmers of truth that are already present."⁹⁰ Growing into the "art of accompaniment," it is calling bishops, priests, lay to "remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (see Ex 3:5)."⁹¹ Renewing ecclesial imagination means to dance in the creative tension of polarities, between love and truth, universal and local, old and new, structure and spirit. As a dynamic process it seeks to listen to an "echo of the word of God," "of what has authentic Gospel values or is at least open to the Gospel," and "what beats the mark of sin or of human frailty."⁹²

In the national synodal consultation, after a whole day of enriching dialogue in discernment circles, before the celebration of the Eucharist, some bishops inquired, "can we not celebrate the Eucharist remaining with our groups instead of dividing the clergy and the laity?" The renewal of the ecclesial imagination happens in circles of dialogue where every voice is heard but also in creative risk taking! Such practices of creative innovations, faithful rejuvenation, and legitimate diversity are already happening in local communities; many times, untouched or taken for granted. Though new interpretations of Scripture and tradition are contributing to the ecclesial imagination it also happens in the daily

⁸⁹ Rush, *The Eyes of Faith...*, 294.

⁹⁰ EG no.50

⁹¹ Ibid., no.169.

⁹² Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, Directory for Catechesis, (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020), no. 398.

grind of life, in the stories of trauma and suffering, among those who resist.

The life of the early church has been guided by the diverse *sensus fidei* of Paul and Peter through a “pattern of interpretation,” or “apostolic hermeneutic” that connected “story and significance in fidelity to the God of Israel, in fidelity with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in fidelity to the new needs of the receiving audience.”⁹³ Such bridging is reflected to what Latino/a theologians call *conjunto* theology which means ‘in conjunction with or conjoined to’ or being a group. Evident in “networks of communal care and healing,” as well as in the prevalence of popular religious expressions and the significant role played by women as traditioners of the faith,⁹⁴ *conjunto* integrates the diversity of traditions and ethnicities and is best done within a “communal, collaborative faith context,” where “diverse voices are acknowledged and taken seriously.”⁹⁵ It reflects “ecclesial synodality,” doing theology in a synodal way through listening, dialogue, and discerning together, harmonizing approaches and contributions.⁹⁶

Paradigm Shift in Theology

A few days after the conclusion of the Synod in October, Pope Francis released a *motu proprio* document that calls for a paradigm shift in theologizing.⁹⁷ Calling it popular theology – it is

⁹³ Rush, *The Eyes of Faith*, 126-127.

⁹⁴ Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, “Despierta Iglesia ! Reconfiguring Theologies of Ministry Latinamente,” *Concilium* (2010): no. 98.

⁹⁵ Graham, Jeannine, “Hispanic “Teologia en Conjunto, in *Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies*, 380, accessed at <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs/380>, 1099.

⁹⁶ SLMC, #75.

⁹⁷ Francis, “*Ad Theologiam Promovendam*,” https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html. See National Catholic Register, “Pope Francis Calls for ‘Paradigm Shift’ in *Theology for World of Today*,” accessed at https://www.ncregister.com/cna/pope-francis-calls-for-paradigm-shift-in-theology-for-world-of-today?amp&fbclid=IwAR2UkuoOeem6H3my57y0rxztkDM7yx-fGIQd9Ti7CZNz_mqkc44FSBVVB38.

inductive, transdisciplinary, and one that prioritizes people's "common sense" as it is seen to be a rich theological source, with a commitment to "intellectual charity," by prioritizing the needs of those in the existential peripheries.⁹⁸ As such, it calls on theology to undergo a "courageous cultural revolution," towards a "fundamentally contextual theology," transdisciplinary with theology, part of a "web of relationship" with other disciplines and knowledge.

The holy people of God walking together in synodality embodies this web of relationships called for by the new paradigm. Such a web suggests, "interaction, interdependence, interconnection;" a "shared dynamism" of all as subjects.⁹⁹ As the synodal process continues amid confusion and questions, may the walk and the listening extend to include all senses of the faithful, towards a "paschal transition to an ecclesial "WE" where every "I", clothed in Christ (cf. Galatians 3,27), lives and journeys with his or her brothers and sisters as a responsible and active agent of the one mission of the People of God."¹⁰⁰

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⁹⁹ Serena Noceti, "Synodality: Call for a Participatory Church," Paper Presented at the Towards a Synodal Church: Moving Forward, International Conference, 12-15 January 2023, Bangalore India.

¹⁰⁰ SLMC, 107.