

SYNODALITY: POPE FRANCIS' WAY OF BALANCING MAGISTERIUM WITH SENSUS FIDELIUM

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The paper argues that by convening a Synod on “synodality,” Pope Francis has reimagined an ecclesial process rooted in Scriptures and tradition and used it as a mechanism to strike a balance between the magisterium, which is the teaching authority of the Church, and the sensus fidei, which is the sense of faith of the whole Church. Having its earliest roots in the Council/Synod of Jerusalem as reported in the Scriptures (Acts of the Apostles 15 and Galatians 1-2), the synodal process became a definitive church teaching in the Second Vatican Council (Lumen Gentium, 12), particularly with its emphasis on the mutuality of the common priesthood of all baptized and the ministerial priesthood of those ordained to nurture the gifts of baptism. The Synod on Synodality, which officially began in October 2021 and had its First Session two years later, already bears witness to the robust appreciation of the sensus fidei fidelium as a vital resource for dialogue and consultation, discernment, and deliberation, thus fostering a culture of co-responsibility and collaboration within the Church unprecedented in centuries. By balancing the magisterium and the sensus fidei, and the ministerial and common priesthoods as well, in a way that enhances their respective reciprocity, Pope Francis ensures, moving forward, the active participation of all in the decision-making structures, life processes, and mission activities of the Church as a whole.

Keywords: Synod of Bishops 2023, sensus fidei fidelium, Acts 15: Synod/Council of Jerusalem, Pope Francis, conversation in the spirit, the common priesthood of the faithful

INTRODUCTION

In the Catholic Christian tradition, we normally take it for granted that the Magisterium of the Church refers to the teaching authority entrusted to the bishop of Rome and the bishops in communion with him. It is supposed to be the authoritative body

that preserves, interprets, and transmits the deposit of faith as contained in the Sacred Scripture and Tradition. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church succinctly puts it: “The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.”¹

While Pope Francis may not be questioning this formulation, he is obviously not fully satisfied with it. He wants to ensure that the bishops in communion with his Petrine Office are also genuinely in communion with the local churches or communities of the faithful entrusted to their care. By this we mean the communion of the rest of the baptized, namely: the ordained, the consecrated persons, and the Laity among them. Ever since he assumed the Petrine office, he has been calling on bishops around the world to engage in an in-depth consultation with the faithful on what it entails to grow into a truly synodal church— in communion, participation, and mission, and on how to foster a Church that rises above its self-preferentiality and goes forth to bring to the world the “delightful and comforting joy of the Gospel.”²

For this purpose, he has convened a synodal process for a Synodal Church, a unique kind of Synod which officially began in October 2021 and, after engaging with dioceses across the world and seeking to include all Catholics in the process, had its first session in the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of Bishops two years later. The session concluded with a Synthesis Report which is currently in the hands of the local churches around the world for a fresh round of synodal consultation that would prepare the ground for the second session of the Synod in October 2024.

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 85, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

² Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975): 80, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html.

What comes to light is thus a unique way of striking a balance between the teaching authority of the bishops, on the one hand, and the *sensus fidei fidelium* (sense of the faith of the faithful), on the other. To describe this balance as a *syn + hodos* (together + road/way) is not a neologism because consistent with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis is simply reintroducing a Greek vocabulary for the Latin word *concilium*. What the post-Vatican II generations would call “conciliarity” is finding a new expression in his persistent call for “synodality.”³ It is not new at all because it has been integral to the Church from its earliest beginnings and preserved especially among our Eastern Catholic and Orthodox Christian siblings. Pope Francis has merely retrieved, reinvented, and used synodality as a mechanism for gauging the Church’s *sensus fidelium* and ensuring that the Magisterium is grounded on it.

This paper is organized into two parts. The first part draws heavily from Scripture, particularly Acts 15, the text often cited in the October 2023 Synod, which narrates how the Synod/Council of Jerusalem resolved the earliest crisis of the Church. The second part will draw mainly from the first session of the October 2023 Synod and the way Pope Francis has reoriented the synodal process to serve the purpose of striking a balance between the Church’s *sensus fidelium* and *Magisterium* in continuity with the vision of the Second Vatican Council.

THE SYNOD/COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM (C. 48-50 AD) AND THE EARLIEST CRISIS OF THE CHURCH IN ACTS 15

It is noteworthy that it was at Antioch, not in Jerusalem, that the followers of Jesus were called “Christians” for the first time (Acts 11:26). Why at Antioch? Perhaps because, even if it was indeed in Jerusalem that the Holy Spirit had first descended upon them at Pentecost, the community that was formed there continued to regard itself as a sectarian movement within Judaism. In

³ See, for instance, Massimo Faggioli, <https://international.la-croix.com/news/signs-of-the-times/understanding-the-anti-synodal-sentiment-and-tactics/18203>.

Antioch, however, this movement began to “widen the spaces of its tent” and open its doors to Gentile converts without requiring them to be “Judaized” first. This decision triggered a serious conflict that would have led to a parting of ways between the two local churches (Jerusalem and Antioch), had the apostles not convened a Council (Synod) that eventually led to a consensus decision to welcome Gentile converts to the Church.

The challenges and issues faced by the nascent Church should not be underestimated. In the letter drafted by the apostles after coming up with a synodal decision, they were perturbed that “some of our number [who went out] *without any mandate* from us have upset you with their teachings and disturbed your peace of mind” (Acts 15:24; italics mine). The letter does not identify the people who had apparently upset the Gentile converts of Antioch and “disturbed their peace of mind.” Nonetheless, it states explicitly that they did not have the authority to do so for they seemed to have simply assumed it. In Acts 15:1, however, Luke mentions that “some who had come down from Judea were instructing the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved.’” Later, he identifies them as members of the Jerusalem community who were “from the party of the Pharisees who had become believers” (Acts 15:5). Apparently, they had the boldness to make such a declaration because they did indeed enjoy the support of some of the apostles. What may be the earliest sign of the ugly face of clericalism is clearly discernible in their divisive attitude.

Furthermore, the issue may have been the main reason behind the defection of Mark (sometimes also called John) from the mission team that had been dispatched from Antioch. “From Paphos, Paul and his companions set sail and arrived at Perga in Pamphylia” but, according to Luke, “*John left them and returned to Jerusalem*” (Acts 13:13; italics mine). Take note that instead of returning to Antioch upon his defection, this John/Mark would instead proceed to Jerusalem. Probably because John/Mark had a heavy conscience about the correctness of the decision of his companions (Paul and Barnabas) he felt the need to consult first with the authorities in Jerusalem. Could his report have reached

James? Could the representatives from Jerusalem who “disturbed the peace” of the Gentile converts have been dispatched by James?

For his part, Paul seems to allude to this conflict when a similar issue occurred in the Galatian community. In his letter to the Galatians (Gal 2:4), he speaks about the disturbance caused by “false brothers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus.” He explains that Peter himself seemed to have shifted his demeanor from being supportive to keeping his distance again and that he had done so when he became aware of the presence of spies who had been sent by James (later called the “brother of the Lord”). Thus, in Galatians 2:12 we read, “For, until some people came from James, he (Peter) used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to draw back and separated himself, because he was afraid of the circumcised.”

Interestingly, Paul identifies James as the only other apostle whom he had met in Jerusalem aside from Cephas (Peter). Paul, in Galatians 1:18-19, narrates that “after three years (he) went up to Jerusalem to confer with Cephas and remained with him for fifteen days” but he “did not see any other of the apostles, only James the brother of the Lord.” Most likely, the James that Paul is speaking about as an apostle and leader of the Jerusalem community was not one of the twelve, but rather the one identified as a relative of Jesus in Mk 6:3.

The fact that the apostles and presbyters leading the Church in Jerusalem finally came up with a resolution about the issue only after conducting a consultation we now call the Synod or Council of Jerusalem is momentous. Luke bears witness to the event: “Then the apostles and presbyters, in agreement with the whole church, decided to choose representatives and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas” (Acts 15:22). It means the leaders, namely, the apostles and presbyters did not decide alone by themselves. They consulted the rest of the faithful about the issue and, after some prayer and discernment with them, arrived at a consensus decision. In doing so the meeting at Jerusalem did not only resolve the issue of membership into the Christian community. More importantly, it set into motion a process of settling an issue or solving a crisis which they formalized into a norm or, better yet, a policy for the whole Church.

Two more facts resolve the conflict in Acts 15 particularly interesting, namely: how Peter would rise to the occasion and assert his leadership by leading the discussions to resolve the issue, and how James, who earlier represented a contrary opinion, would change his mind, and express his agreement with the resolution proposed by Peter.

In Acts 15:7-8, Luke tells us, “After much debate had taken place, Peter got up and said to them, ‘My brothers...God, who knows the heart, bore witness by granting them (i.e., the Gentile converts) the Holy Spirit just as he did to us.’” Then, he tells us in Acts 15:12 that “the whole assembly fell silent, and they listened while Paul and Barnabas described the signs and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles through them.” Peter made the necessary step to open the minds of the objectors, including James, to what God had done through the instrumentality of Paul and Barnabas. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that James would later express his concurrence with Peter saying: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we ought to stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God” (Acts 15:19). Moreover, his proposal to formally communicate the decision of the Synod/Council of Jerusalem in the form of a letter further attests to the sincerity of his concurrence.

Having achieved the robust consensus, the Synod resolved to communicate the decision in a letter that was to be read by Judas and Silas, the two chosen representatives who would accompany Paul and Barnabas, specifically to “the brothers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia of Gentile origin” (Acts 15:23). The message is summarized in Acts 15:28-29: “It is the *decision of the holy Spirit and of us* not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities” (italics mine). In short, except for some minor instructions about eating meat offered to idols and provisions about unlawful marriage, the Gentile converts were being assured that they were no longer required to have themselves circumcised nor to subject themselves to all the legal requirements of the Torah to be welcomed into the Christian community. Take note of how they referred to this resolution as a “DECISION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND OF US.”

The *magnum opus* “Judaism and Hellenism” of the German exegete Martin Hengel sheds light on the historical background of the radical implications of the Jerusalem Council’s decision.⁴ According to him, in most of the Diaspora Jewish communities, many Gentiles had converted to Judaism and attended Synagogue services. They were called *Proselytes* and remained marginalized from the mainstream Jewish communities. They were given access only to an outer area of the Synagogue called the “Court of the Gentiles” as they were the kind who found it difficult to submit themselves to certain aspects of the Mosaic Law, such as circumcision, food regulations, and the no-work rule on Sabbath.

Luke tells us in Acts 13:14ff how Paul and his companions, during their first missionary journey, entered a Synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia and preached to two audiences: the mainstream Jews in the Synagogue’s Inner Court, and the Gentile Converts called “God-fearers.” At the start, they were able to get some adherents from both the insiders and outsiders. But when they started to attract big crowds, the insiders “were filled with jealousy and with violent abuse contradicted what Paul said” (13:45). Faced with such hostility, they shifted their attention to the outsiders or “God-fearers.” Paul and Barnabas addressed the “insiders” and said, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first, but since you reject it...we now turn to the Gentiles” (v. 46; emphasis mine). They then justified their shift as a command of the Lord by quoting Isaiah 49:6, “I have made you a light to the Gentiles, that you may be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth” (v. 47).

In this poignant episode, we can only imagine how these long-marginalized Gentile converts must have felt when suddenly, this sect of Jews who were called “Christians,” unlike the mainstream Jews, made space for them in their house churches, which began to function as alternative Synagogues. They were like a huge captive audience that perhaps even outnumbered the

⁴ Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period*, 2nd ed., tr. John Bowden, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974).

mainstream Diaspora Jews who had access to the inner court. The earlier chapters in the Book of Acts had already actually cited other “God-fearing Gentiles” like the Ethiopian Eunuch, Cornelius, and countless others on whom the Holy Spirit had also been poured out. First, it was Peter who would testify to this; later it would be James himself. That their points of divergence would turn into points of convergence through that first Synodal consultation in Jerusalem was truly a defining moment for the early Church.

How Pope Francis Balances the Magisterium with the *sensus fidelium* through the Synod on Synodality

During the first session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome (4-29 October 2023), the constant reference to Acts 15, both in the small group sessions and in the plenary meetings several times, was remarkable and for obvious reasons.

Long before the Synod, the Catholic media had been awash with reactions to the Synod ranging from the apprehensive to the cynical. Some sectors worry that the Synod might pursue some radical changes in the formulation of the Church’s doctrine and morals, while not a few dismissed it to be more of the same, meaning that no changes would be expected from it. The reactions tended to highlight some polarities, especially in the local churches in the northern hemisphere, particularly on issues about sectors that have long been alienated from the Church, such as those who identify themselves as LGBTQ+, and people living in irregular marital conditions such as remarried divorcees. Issues about women’s participation in Church ministries, Church policies restricting the ordained ministry to celibates, and the problem of clericalism and sexual abuse, among others, were also contentious.

The reactions that had already surfaced decades ago against Vatican II seemed to have taken on new forms, and with a vengeance. They are akin to the reactions of religionists who feel that the foundations of their faith are being threatened, that the formulations of doctrine and morals are being compromised by modern tendencies to capitulate to the values of the secular age.

Some expressed the misgivings that the call to synodality might be a mere camouflage to a systematic demolition of the essentials of the Catholic tradition and that it could trigger another schism that might further deepen the already profound and scandalous divisions within Christianity.

Was Pope Francis turning the Synod into a parliament? As if to address these concerns, no less than the Pope himself reminded us at his homily at the beginning of the Synod: “We are not here to carry out a parliamentary meeting or a plan of reformation” but “to walk together with the gaze of Jesus.” Calling the Holy Spirit as “the protagonist,” he added that the Synod “is not a political gathering, but a convocation in the Spirit; not a polarized parliament, but a place of grace and communion.”⁵

On a personal note, this was the biggest difference that I experienced in this Synod compared to the first one that I attended in 2008. Not only did it begin with a three-day retreat, but the whole Synod was also conducted in an atmosphere of prayer at the start and end of each session whether in plenary sessions or small groups. In between the sessions, delegates paused for four minutes of silent prayer and reflection after a series of three interventions, sat around round tables, and followed the method called “Conversation in the Spirit” for our group discussions. Our facilitators constantly reminded us to keep the atmosphere of prayer and made it a point not to allow the discussions to turn into debates.

I am a personal witness to the amazing impact of this method on me and my fellow synod delegates. The process disposed us to have the patience to listen attentively to one another, including those whose ideas we did not necessarily agree with, keeping our focus, not on our own opinions or ideas but on the promptings of the Spirit. We were constantly reminded to set aside whatever personal agenda we might have brought with us and to humbly admit the partialness or incompleteness of our personal views, as well as the gradualness of the unfolding of the Spirit’s voice of truth as we listened to one another and discerned together

⁵ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-10/pope-at-opening-mass-for-synod-let-us-walk-with-the-holy-spirit.html>.

the directions the Spirit was leading us to. I felt this most strongly communicated by Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, OP in the retreat that he facilitated for the Synod delegates before the actual start of the Synod. There we were also oriented about the method of “Conversation in the Spirit” that was to be followed during the rest of the Synod.

In the four round tables that I joined for our small group sharing, we had facilitators who guided our “spiritual conversations,” oriented us with its rules and principles, and made it a point that our exchanges were done in the atmosphere of prayer and discernment. I am a personal witness to Synod delegates whose views began to change or became more nuanced after entering more deeply into our spiritual conversations, after listening intently to one another. We had an assigned secretary and rapporteur who summarized the points that were emerging in our spiritual conversations into three parts: points of convergence, points of divergence, and some proposals and suggestions.

The Synod is a work in progress. There is, for instance, a section in the Report called “Points of Divergences” and, in fidelity to the synodal process, the Synod Secretariat renamed it into “Matters of Consideration.” For now, the Synthesis Report is undergoing another round of consultation in the local churches and its revisions shall be submitted for appraisal during the Synod’s Second Session in October 2024. It will not be a surprise if the delegates may still change their views between now and the second session.

The other big difference that I saw in this Synod was the fact that although most of the Synod delegates were bishops - this being a Synod of Bishops after all - we also had among ourselves some voting delegates who were deacons, presbyters, male and female religious, as well as lay men and women. More noteworthy perhaps is that we also had the fraternal delegates from other Christian denominations. In the earlier Synod that I had attended as an elected delegate, the presence of non-Catholics called “fraternal delegates” from the Orthodox Church, Protestants, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and other Christian denominations was notable. But this was the first time that we had non-bishops as voting delegates.

Almost all the delegates who were non-bishops were appointed upon the recommendation of the Synod General Secretariat, on the strength of their involvement in the synodal consultations that had taken place on many levels, starting from the parish, diocesan, national, and continental. Many of them carried the voices of the sectors they represented, especially the consecrated persons and the laity, pastoral workers and catechists, women and young people, digital evangelizers, social media influencers, and business entrepreneurs, among others.

Despite all the earlier press releases already made by the Synod General Secretariat explaining why Pope Francis had appointed non-bishop delegates to the Synod, a few bishop-delegates, both from the Eastern and Latin Rites, still questioned the nature of the Synod as it includes non-bishops who will be full voting delegates on a par with them (around 70 appointed delegates, some of whom were priests, deacons, consecrated persons, lay women and men). Some of them asked if it was not more appropriate to call this an Ecclesial Synod instead of an Episcopal Synod. "It is a decision of the Holy Father," came the reply.

Numbers-wise, the majority of the delegates were bishops. And it was also obvious that, even if this Synod were to be treated as a parliamentary process, there was no way the bishops could be outvoted by the non-bishop delegates. So, what is the point in making space for them in a Synod that is meant to be exclusively for bishops anyway? Is it not to be presupposed that bishops can capably represent the rest of the faithful in their local churches? Yes, and no. Yes, if the bishops are truly immersed in the lives of the faithful and are the kind who practice a more synodal kind of leadership; but a No if their mode of leadership is clericalist.

Is the Pope turning the Church into a democracy through Synodality? It does not seem so. How can it be a democracy if the laity who comprise the majority in the Church can be outvoted by a minority episcopal leadership body? What matters most for Pope Francis, it seems, is not the vote but the more widely participatory character of the consultation process, one that would involve some serious listening and discerning on the part of bishops, making sure

that the voices from below are heard through these appointed non-bishop delegates in the context of a spiritual conversation.

Take note, the synodal dynamism of consultation does not automatically happen even in current forms of democracy. Democracies all over the world are falling into crisis precisely because they have not succeeded in coming up with safety nets or control systems that would protect the integrity of the citizens' votes from bribery, intimidation, manipulation, disinformation, etc. Political democracies can learn much from Christianity, and the insights from the Christian tradition can contribute to their enrichment. This may sound absurd for political scientists who are familiar with the Church's ambivalent history and its undemocratic system of governance. But Pope Francis believes the Church has something better to offer: the synodal approach.

The Pope knows the Scriptures and tradition well enough to acknowledge he is not offering something radically new or innovative. He is retrieving the dynamic interaction between the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood, on the one hand, and the creative balance between the *Magisterium* and the *Sensus Fidei Fidelium*, on the other. For him, one is meaningless without the other or, better yet, one is ordered towards the other.

The Ministerial Priesthood of the Ordained and the Common Priesthood of the Faithful

A Church that practically reduces the priesthood to the ordained ministerial priesthood will never grow into a missionary Church. In that mode of thinking that has practically revived the clericalization of the temple priesthood of the old dispensation, the laity will never be able to imagine themselves as part of what Vatican II calls the COMMON PRIESTHOOD OF THE FAITHFUL.⁶ They will tend to remain followers and expect only the clerics to play the role of *alter Christi* as if the clergy had been ordained to substitute for Christ. Should we then be surprised when bishops and presbyters forget that they have been ordained

⁶ *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), Chapter 2, especially no. 10.

precisely to assume the role of nurturing the rest of the Church to grow in the common priesthood of the faithful?

St. Augustine expressed it so well when he said to the faithful of his local church, “For you, I am a bishop, but with you, I am a Christian.” This was his way of saying, “I cannot be a good, ordained minister for you if I cannot, first and foremost, see myself as a fellow Christian with you, a fellow member of the body of Christ.” At the Eucharist, it is not the ordained presider alone who makes Christ present. It is rather the whole Church acting in the name of Christ, the head and body together. The ordained minister is tasked to PRESIDE in such a way that Christ becomes genuinely present, not just in the sacred species but most especially in the whole community that celebrates in the intimate communion of the body with its head, and of the members with one another. Through COMMUNION, the whole body of the faithful, both the ordained and lay, PARTICIPATES in the life of the corporate Christ, and represent him in our shared MISSION to witness to the liberating good news of the kingdom of God.

For as long as our laity are conditioned to think of themselves permanently as followers or, worse, as onlookers, the vision of the Church as communion, participation, and mission will never come to full fruition. They will never take part in the Church’s corporate mission of shepherding the last, the least, and the lost in this world if the ordained continue to define themselves as THE SHEPHERDS and the laity as THE FLOCK. In this paradigm, the ordained priesthood degenerates into clericalism. In a clerical Church, the laity will never think of themselves as an integral part of a Church that evangelizes, leads, liberates, and saves.

The Magisterium and the *Sensus Fidei Fidelium*

Pope Francis has kept the institution of the Synod of Bishops as established by Paul VI after Vatican II, but he has introduced some changes in it through the Synod on Synodality. Given these changes future Synods will no longer be held the same way they used to be. The Synod of 2023 bears witness to the fruitfulness of listening to the *sensus fidei fidelium* and engaging in dialogue with the faithful and, also, in conducting a more inclusive

and participatory process of decision-making within the Church that seeks to involve the voices and experiences of the people of God.

And yet, for Pope Francis, the *sensus fidei fidelium* is neither simply a matter of popular opinion nor majority rule within the Church. It is rather a deeper reality rooted in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the faithful. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis calls it "a supernatural instinct that enables the believer to judge spontaneously whether a particular teaching or practice conforms with the Gospel and with the apostolic faith."⁷ Here one finds a distinct echo of Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*: "The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people, when, 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful' they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals."⁸ Hence, his emphasis on the role of the faithful in discerning the truth and their participation in the life of the Church has been unwavering.

He reiterated this in his unique way in one of his interventions during the first session of the Synod on Synodality. "One of the characteristics of this faithful people," he said, "is its infallibility; yes, it is infallible in belief. (*In credendo falli nequit*, says LG 9). Infallible in belief. And I explain it thus: 'When you want to know what the Holy Mother Church believes, go to the Magisterium because its task is to teach it to you. But when you want to know how the Church believes, go to the faithful people.'"⁹

However, Pope Francis also acknowledges that the *sensus fidei fidelium* needs to be properly understood and discerned. It is not a license for individualism or relativism, but rather a

⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium* (Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World), 119.

⁸ *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), 12.

⁹ "Address of the Holy Father to the 18th General Congregation of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops," accessed at <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/2510/ENG-2023.10.25-Papa-Francesco-TRADUZIONE-DI-LAVORO.docx>.

participation in the faith of the Church, guided by the Magisterium and in communion with the Pope. It is not to be understood as separate from the teaching authority of the Church but complements it, as the faithful and the Magisterium mutually enrich one another in their journey of faith.¹⁰

The precise aim, therefore, of the ongoing Synod on Synodality is to engage with and foster the *sensus fidei fidelium*. The concept of synodality recognizes the **importance of listening** to the voice of the entire people of God in the discernment and decision-making processes within the Church. From the time the Synod officially opened in October 2021, it has sought to explore how synodality can be more fully realized in the life and governance of the Church. The synodal process has been relentless in seeking to deepen and widen the participation and collaboration of all members of the Church, including the laity, in the discernment of God's will and the Church's mission. Make no mistake about it, the Synod's working document or *Instrumentum Laboris* is crystal clear about its overall trajectory: to "listen to the Holy Spirit speaking through the faithful people, pastors, and theologians, to discern the paths that the Lord points out to the Church."¹¹

By engaging the local churches all over the world in a synodal process, the Synod on Synodality seeks to create spaces for dialogue, consultation, and active participation of the faithful, including the laity, in the decision-making structures and processes of the Church as a whole. This includes listening to the experiences, insights, and perspectives of the faithful, and recognizing the *sensus fidei fidelium* as a valuable resource for discernment and deliberation. The Synod aims to foster a culture

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 92: "The whole body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when 'from the bishops down to the last of the lay faithful' they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals." For a summary explanation by a member of the International Theological Commission see Paul McPartlan, "The *sensus fidei*: a vital resource for the Church" accessed at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140625_mcpartlan-sensus-fidei_en.html.

¹¹ *Instrumentum laboris*, 4 (For the First Session, October 2023) accessed at https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/ENG_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS.pdf.

of co-responsibility and collaboration within the Church, where the *sensus fidei fidelium* is given due consideration and the entire people of God can contribute to the life and mission of the Church.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE *SENSUS FIDELIUM* IN THE SYNTHESIS REPORT OF THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY

By way of concluding this paper, it is important to bear in mind that the Synod on Synodality is still a work in progress and its conclusions are yet to be determined when the second session convenes in October 2024. In this light, the foregoing discussion is an initial reflection on the theme drawn from a personal participation in the said ecclesial event. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that, in the Synthesis Report that is currently making a round of consultation at the local level, there is a robust convergence on baptism not only as the fundamental basis for the common priesthood of all in the Church but also as the unique source of the *sensus fidei*.¹² Quoting Paul in 1Cor 12:13, the Report explains that, by virtue of our baptism “by one Spirit into one body...there is a genuine equality of dignity and a common responsibility for mission” among all baptized. Moreover, “by the anointing of the Spirit, ‘who teaches all things’ (1Jn 2:27), all believers possess an instinct for the truth of the Gospel, the *sensus fidei*” which “consists in a certain connaturality with divine realities and the aptitude to grasp what conforms to the truth of faith intuitively.” The Synthesis Report calls the *sensus fidei* a “gift” that synodal processes can enhance in a manner that allows and confirms “the existence of that consensus of the faithful (*consensus fidelium*).” This consensus, according to the Report, “provides a sure criterion for determining whether a particular doctrine or practice belongs to the apostolic faith.”¹³

¹² “Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission” (28 October 2023), 3c, accessed at <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf>.

¹³ In paragraph 3 of the document “*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church” (2014), the International Theological Commission explains that “the *sensus fidei* refers to a communal and ecclesial reality: the instinct of faith of the Church

How the second session of the Synod will conclude on the value of the *sensus fidei fidelium* in the life of the Church remains to be seen. This teaching of the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen Gentium* 12) has been the subject of debate and study for decades. And the way Pope Francis strikes a balance between the Magisterium and the *sensus fidelium* has already drawn varied reactions.¹⁴ But through this Synod on Synodality, the Pope appears to have already brought the Church along this pathway and, for him, there is no turning back.

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herself, by which she recognizes her Lord and proclaims his word. The *sensus fidei* in this sense is reflected in the convergence of the baptized in a lived adhesion to a doctrine of faith or to an element of Christian *praxis*. This convergence (consensus) plays a vital role in the Church: the *consensus fidelium* is a sure criterion for determining whether a particular doctrine or practice belongs to the apostolic faith.” The document is available in https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html (2014) (vatican.va).

¹⁴ “While Catholic teaching affirms that the faithful cannot err in matters of belief when they manifest universal consent, many theologians and bishops warn about the inadequacy of attempting to gauge this through formalized consultation,” reports Jonathan Liedl, “Synod on Synodality 2023: Summary report calls for greater ‘co-responsibility’ in Church,” (28 October 2023) accessed at <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/255852/in-summary-report-synod>. Also see, Cindy Wooden, “Opinion vs. Inspiration: Synod grapples with concept of ‘sensus fidei’” (27 October 2023) accessed at <https://www.usccb.org/news/2023/opinion-vs-inspiration-synod-grapples-concept-sensus-fidei>.