

CONVERSATIONS IN THE SPIRIT THROUGH THE NORMATIVITY OF THE FUTURE

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The preliminary report of the Synod on Synodality proposes that the Church must promote a conversation in the Spirit that includes listening to the perspectives of individuals, particularly those who are poor and marginalized. This paper aims to explore the concept of conversation in the Spirit to understand its defining features. It also examines the Normativity of the Future to determine how this biblical interpretative approach can aid the Church in engaging in Spirit-inspired conversations. The paper will provide a practical method for implementing the approach within the Church and discuss a challenge that the Church must overcome when engaging in conversations in the Spirit.

Keywords: Synodality, Conversations in the Spirit, Sensus Fidei, Normativity of the Future

INTRODUCTION

In its first session synthesis report, the Synod on Synodality calls on the Church to engage in a conversation in the Spirit. This is a summon to the faithful to explore manners of dialogue that would enable mutual learning and journeying together, characterized by “evangelical proclamation, service to those experiencing poverty, care for our common home, and theological research.”¹ Conversations such as this must assist people in

¹ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission,” Part I. 2. e October 4-29, 2023, accessed May 6, 2024, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf>.

“discerning what the Spirit is saying to the churches”² and lead them toward participating in the building of the kingdom of God.

The Second Vatican Council underlines the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. It teaches that it is through the Spirit that the Church, “equipped with the gifts of its Founder . . . receives the mission to proclaim and to spread among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God and to be, on earth, the initial budding forth of that kingdom.”³ This declaration emphasizes the Spirit’s work in empowering and guiding the Church. The Synod on Synodality recognizes this same truth by asserting that to progress collectively, the Church must allow itself to be educated by the Spirit.⁴ The Church must develop ways how to listen to the Spirit because it is the Spirit who helps the Church mature by giving it continual guidance and formation which it always needs.⁵ The ability of the Church to understand the meaning and demands of God’s message is essential, as it enables the Church to more accurately and faithfully pursue and accomplish its purpose and mission.⁶ In this context, the Synod urges the Church to explore approaches that would help the faithful to have a conversation in the Spirit.

The synodal report highlights two discernment frameworks: the *Lectio Divina* and the See-Judge-Act method in

² Ibid., Part I. 2. d.

³ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 5 (Vatican City, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964).

⁴ Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*, 9 (Vatican City, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021).

⁵ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: The Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World*, 26 (Vatican City, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013).

⁶ See Peter Casarella, “The Pneumatology of the Synodal Church,” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 87, no. 2 (2023): 277; John William Sullivan, “Friendship and Spiritual Learning: Seedbed for Synodality,” *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 592; and Declan Marmion, “A Church that Listens: Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” *New Blackfriars* 102, no. 1100 (2021): 442, 444.

fostering conversations in the Spirit.⁷ *Lectio Divina*, rooted in Scripture, invites the faithful to prayerfully reflect on God's Word and discern its relevance for their lives and the Church. Meanwhile, See-Judge-Act, a method originating from Catholic social thought, encourages engagement with human experience by analyzing realities through the lens of faith and committing to transformative action. In proposing the Normativity of the Future approach, I seek to integrate the strengths of both these frameworks. Like *Lectio Divina*, it draws inspiration from Scripture and ground discernment in God's will for all. At the same time, akin to the See-Judge-Act, it recognizes the significance of human experience, enabling an active response to present challenges by envisioning future transformation.

CHARACTERIZING A CONVERSATION IN THE SPIRIT

But what is a conversation in the Spirit? This conversation can be described as a dialogue in which the Spirit is placed at the center of Church meetings and discussions to discover how God is present and directing the Church's life. Borrowing Brian Grogan's words, it is a conversation where each member of the Church "tries to cultivate openness and uncertainty, in anticipation of the Spirit's preferred option, . . . each becomes a learner; status and rank have no priority; each contributes humbly and tentatively what they sense God may be asking."⁸ In other words, a conversation in the Spirit is a collective discerning process. It is an open, dialogical, and co-learning encounter to listen to God through the Spirit who is present in the Church.

⁷ "A Synodal Church in Mission," Part I. 2. h and i.

⁸ Brian Grogan, "Give the Spirit the Mic! – A Strategy for Communal Discernment and Synodality," *The Furrow* 71, no. 5 (May 2020): 263-264.

The Synod on Synodality's initial meeting report provides insights that can further help in understanding what a conversation in the Spirit means and how it can be done in the Church.

1. Recognizing the *Sensus Fidei*

First, the Synod made an essential affirmation in Part 1, Section 3b of the synthesis report. Drawing from 1 Corinthians 12:13, the Synod emphasizes: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” This assertion insists that the Holy Spirit makes all believers into a singular spiritual body. It declares unity within the Church before delineating diverse spiritual gifts and ministries. It recognizes all believers' shared identity rooted in the Holy Spirit's transformative work. Here, the Synod establishes the essential premise that Christians share equal dignity irrespective of distinctions in charisms and ministries.⁹ Being baptized with the same Spirit who “teaches all things” (1 Jn 2:27) allows people to possess an instinct for the truth of the Gospel. This reality is the *sensus fidei* – the spiritual instinct that empowers individuals to make spontaneous judgments regarding aligning a specific doctrine or practice with the Gospel and apostolic faith.¹⁰

Vatican II recognizes *sensus fidei* by stating that the Holy Spirit “dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful as in

⁹ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms this unity, stating that through Baptism, “the faithful are incorporated into Christ and integrated into the People of God.” This common incorporation establishes a fundamental equality among the baptized, rooted in their shared identity as members of the Church. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1267, accessed May 6, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P3N.HTM. Hereafter referred to as CCC with paragraph number.

¹⁰ See Beáta Tóth, “Knowledge of the Heart: Notes on the Definition of the *Sensus Fidei* in the Personal Life of the Believer,” *New Blackfriars* 104, no. 1110 (2023): 199.

a temple.”¹¹ The presence of the Spirit instills a sense of faith in all of God’s people, ensuring that they believe and practice the Gospel. This shared *sensus fidei* entails a certain familiarity with divine realities and the ability to intuitively grasp what conforms to the truth of faith. Pope Francis emphasizes this in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is true of God.”¹² The Pope underscores here that every member of the Church, through the Spirit’s guidance, possesses an inherent capacity to discern and embrace the profound truths of the Gospel. The Spirit empowers the Church members to know and understand God’s will.¹³

In the context of Synodality, a conversation in the Spirit means recognizing people’s *sensus fidei*. It is an encounter where those in dialogue actively foster an environment in which the diverse voices of people are heard because all the baptized can know and understand the truths of the faith and how these truths relate to their lives. This requires, as Declan Marmion is saying, “bishops and theologians listening to how the faithful have faced dilemmas, namely, listening to them ‘tell their stories’, how they are trying to make sense of the Gospel, their *sensus fidei*, as it were.”¹⁴ A conversation in the Spirit recognizes the believing community’s gift and shared ability to discern God’s will. It is a sincere openness to every believer’s insight and intuition, acknowledging that the Spirit’s guidance is not reserved for a select few but is a collective and democratic privilege available to the entire People of God.

¹¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

¹² *Evangelii Gaudium*, 119.

¹³ CCC 1285 further affirms the transformative nature of this empowerment, stating that through the sacrament of Confirmation, the baptized are more “perfectly bound to the Church” and “enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit.” This strength enables them to profess and spread the faith, becoming true witnesses of Jesus.

¹⁴ Marmion, “A Church that Listens,” 448.

2. Pursuing Solidarity

Secondly, the term conversation in the Spirit goes beyond recognizing the Christian community's capacity to comprehend and share the truth of the faith. The Synod clarifies that this conversation has direction and goal. Synodality is a path toward the kingdom of God in communion with Christ. The report expresses that "Synodality can be understood as Christians walking in communion with Christ toward the Kingdom along with the whole of humanity."¹⁵ This means that the Synodal journey of the Church is mission oriented. The Synod refers to this orientation as "solidarity."¹⁶

Solidarity is one of the key principles in the Catholic Social Teaching. It is a strong belief that all humanity is interconnected. This connection binds each person with a duty to care for everyone, most especially those who are in need because all individuals have equal importance, and all are sisters and brothers to each one. Solidarity is "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all truly responsible for all."¹⁷ It prompts Christians to engage in decisions and actions that confront the prevailing injustices within society and be compassionate to the plight of the poor and marginalized.

For the Church, the principle of solidarity, which urges people to actively participate in efforts to promote the well-being of others, is inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus. In his Public Ministry, Jesus goes out to all people, especially to the sick, sinners, and less fortunate members of society. Jesus meets their needs by listening to them, healing their illnesses, forgiving their sins, and

¹⁵ Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission, Part I. 1. h.

¹⁶ Ibid., Part I. 2. d. e, 4. m, and 5. f.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis: For the Twentieth Anniversary of Populorum Progressio*, 38 (Vatican City, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1987).

fighting for them against the oppressive and marginalizing forces of society. He sees the poor and ostracized as people who are loved by God. Jesus proclaims, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Mt 25:40) Albert Nolan highlights how this passage reveals Jesus’ profound solidarity for humanity particularly for the least fortunate by pointing out that Jesus did not employ metaphors or similes. Nolan insists that Jesus did not say “When you did this to the least of my brothers and sisters, *it was as if* you did it to me” but rather, “you did it to me.” Jesus’ identification and solidarity with the least is direct and real.¹⁸ Today, Jesus continues to manifest this solidarity and move people towards this direction through his presence in the Church. The Philippine Synodal Report attests to this.

He (Jesus) guides, supports, and accompanies us. He impels us towards solidarity and companionship with each other in the journey towards holiness and the fullness of life . . . The Spirit of the Risen Lord is expanding our vision, making us see beyond personal interests, blood ties, locality, business gains, and political parties. Jesus is always accompanying us in the path of conversion, towards total dedication to the service of God and neighbor.¹⁹

The service to God and neighbor in the spirit of solidarity is the fruit that the Synod on Synodality aspires from conversations done in and by the Church. A conversation in the Spirit must

¹⁸ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 161.

¹⁹ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *Salubong (Welcome Encounter) The Philippine Catholic Church Synodal Report* (August 15, 2022), accessed May 6, 2024, https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://synodphilippines.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Philippines_National-Synodal-Report.pdf&hl=en.

transcend mere verbal exchanges toward transformative decisions and actions that would concretely manifest Jesus' solidarity with the Church and the world, especially to the impoverished and oppressed. This challenge is highlighted in the first session of the Synodal Report: "The logic of dialogue, expressed in mutual learning and journeying together, must come to characterize evangelical proclamation, service to those experiencing poverty, care for our common home."²⁰ Solidarity emerges as a necessary outcome of a conversation in the Spirit. There is an inseparable link between a conversation in the Spirit and the call to solidarity, particularly in support of the poor and marginalized.

3. Listening to God's Will

Third, critical caution emerges in pursuing a conversation in the Spirit. The Synod emphasizes the necessity for conversations in the Church to "bring about true listening to the Father's [sic] will."²¹ This raises two essential questions: How can we ensure that conversations in the Church genuinely align with God's will? How can conversations in the Church steer away from the inherent human tendency to prioritize individualistic desires and agendas rather than seeking the will of God in unity with the community?

It is imperative to recognize that the inclination toward individualistic pursuits is deeply ingrained in human life due to the pervasive nature of sin. The Apostle Paul attests to this. He said, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... If I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me." (Rom 7: 15, 20) Despite people's well-intentioned motives, the presence of sin in human life and the world can distort our choices and desires. Sin

²⁰ Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission, Part I. 2. e.

²¹ Ibid., Part I. 2. f.

leads people to self-centered actions that may deviate from the loving and God-oriented path.²² The effect of sin in human life can be seen, for instance in how sinful social structures influence people to become self-centered and indifferent to others. These negative behaviors can lead people to pursue decisions and actions for their own well-being without regard to the life and needs of their community. The reality and effect of sin in human life entail that conversations within the Church must be done with the recognition of the impact of sin on human understanding and decision-making.

The Synod highlights the importance of attentively listening to God's will but does not offer recommendations on how to guide conversations in the Church away from potential individualistic and sinful agendas. The Synod, however, proposes the Church to "experiment with and adapt"²³ approaches that could be beneficial for communities participating in Spirit-centered conversations. The task of discovering how people may faithfully listen to God's will is crucial as individualistic pursuits can lead to harmful disagreements and divisions within the Church. When people prioritize their individualistic agendas over God's will, conversations can diverge from the collective pursuit of the common good. In considering diverse approaches for a conversation in the Spirit, one noteworthy approach that aligns with the Synod's call is the Normativity of the Future approach.

²² The Catholic teaching affirms the reality of sin and its effects on human nature. CCC 386-409, for instance, acknowledge the wounds of sin that affect human freedom and understanding, emphasizing the ongoing struggle against the allure of individualistic tendencies.

²³ Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission, Part I. 2. j.

UNPACKING THE NORMATIVITY OF THE FUTURE

The Normativity of the Future Approach²⁴ is primarily designed by Reimund Bieringer, a biblical scholar, theologian, and professor of New Testament Exegesis. This approach guides Christians in reading the Scripture as not simply a historical and literary text but as a religious and symbolic text infused with the active presence of the Spirit. Bieringer, along with Mary Elsbernd, a former professor of pastoral theology in ethics, asserts that in reading the Scripture, the Spirit engenders vision in people. This vision is a “glimpse of God’s preferred future, universal salvation.”²⁵ The Spirit who inspires people when reading the Scripture awakens the people’s longing and hope for a better world. Bieringer and Elsbernd encapsulate this understanding by describing the Spirit as the driving force moving individuals toward the advocacy of “justice, community, peace, dignity, and intimate relationship with God, delight, absence of oppression, security, health, and provision for basic human needs.”²⁶ Through the Spirit, God engages people, as expressed in John 14:26, to instruct and remind them of Jesus’ teachings. The Spirit further empowers individuals to bear witness to Jesus’ life and teachings to the entire world, as seen in Matthew 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8. In essence, the transformative realization of God’s dream becomes possible through the agency of the Spirit, affirming the theological foundation of the Normativity of the Future approach.

²⁴ To gain a deeper knowledge of the approach, see Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd, “The ‘Normativity of the Future’ Approach: Its Roots, Development, Current State and Challenges,” 3-26 in *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in An Eschatological Perspective*, eds. Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2010).

²⁵ Ibid., 15.

²⁶ Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer, “Interpreting the Signs of the Times in the Light of the Gospel Vision and Normativity of the Future,” 60 in *Normativity of the Future*.

The vision for God's preferred future is discovered by human beings through their imagination. Maria Lucia Natividad has this to say about imagination:

The human ability to recognize and understand God's active presence in human life and in the world is referred to as imagination. It is not about fantasy or make-believe. Imagination perceives the material world, persons, events and objects as radically open to the realm of the divine and discerns the divine presence in all these... As a human capacity, imagination helps the person to understand oneself and one's relationship with God, others, and creation.²⁷

The authors of the Normativity of the Future have the same belief as Natividad by emphasizing that imagination is not a projection of people's unfulfilled expectations but rather a human creative capacity. It is an ability to generate, intuit, and understand insights and meanings.²⁸ This means that imagination is closely linked to the cognitive and affective realities of human beings. Imagination affects how people think and understand, and how they feel and appreciate the experiences they have.

The Spirit touches human imagination for people to discover the vision of God's preferred future.²⁹ The Spirit inspires the human imagination for individuals to conceive new ways of living in the present and reconfigure current ideas and positions

²⁷ Maria Lucia C. Natividad, *Teaching the Faith: Renewals in Religious Education in the Philippines* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Communications Foundation, Inc., 2018), 76.

²⁸ Bieringer and Elsbernd, "The 'Normativity of the Future' Approach, 14.

²⁹ Mary Ivancic supports this insight by stressing that it is through imagination that human beings have "an encounter with the reality of God in faith by means of the evocative language of Scripture." See Mary Karita Ivancic, "Teaching the Scripture Through Arts, A Model for Stimulating Biblical Imagination as a Means of Faith Development in the Adult Student" (Doctor of Ministry diss., St. Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology, 2004), 27.

regarding how human life and relationships must be established and nurtured. This has been the experience of the first Christians who after receiving the Spirit, lived “together and had everything in common.” (Acts 2:44) They created a community of service and fellowship patterned after the kind of life and relationship that God calls all people to build. In all succeeding generations, the Spirit continues to help people imagine new and creative ways in which the human community and the rest of creation can be transformed into a just and inclusive world.

The Normativity of the Future uses imagination in the reading of Scripture by asking the readers a series of questions that will lead them to discover God’s vision and moral demands from the Scripture texts.

1. Vision

The first set of questions in the use of the Normativity of the Future centers on vision. Finding the vision is imperative to achieve the purpose of reading and hearing the Scripture which is to determine the proposed just and inclusive world that humanity must dispose and orient themselves to.³⁰ God’s vision in Scripture empowers and transforms human life and actions to pursue the realization of God’s plan for universal salvation. The questions that may guide the interpreters to draw out the vision are the following: “Where does the text contain explicit vision statements? What are the concepts in the text which express the visions?... What kind of world does the text project?”³¹

³⁰ See Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics, and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. John Thompson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 176-181, 177.

³¹ Bieringer and Elsbernd, “The ‘Normativity of the Future’ Approach,” 20.

2. Inclusive and Exclusive Dimensions

In dealing with the vision projected by the text, interpreters may encounter inclusive and exclusive dimensions. The inclusive dimension refers to the meanings from the text that promote care and respect for all creatures. These meanings can move and inspire people to love others regardless of age, gender, and nationality, and to include non-human creations in this love. The exclusive dimension pertains to the problematic insights that come from the difficult texts in Scripture such as those that present or propose actions that may support or encourage slavery, violence, and discrimination.³² The focus of the Normativity of the Future is to determine the inclusive dimension of the text and use it as a source in discovering the transforming message of Scripture. However, attention to the exclusive dimension is given. The Normativity of the Future recognizes that “despite the fact that the biblical writers and the communities in which they lived were endowed with special grace, they were affected by sin, and through them oppressive elements found their way into the texts they produced.”³³ The interpreters must be aware of the exclusive dimension of the text, especially in confronting the sinful elements in the text that contradict God’s saving plan for all creation. The questions that must be asked at this part of interpretation are the following: “What are inclusive and universal statements in the text? What are exclusive statements in the text? Where does the text implicitly or explicitly transcend its own exclusive tendencies?”³⁴

³² Some examples are Ex 21:20-21 which promotes slavery, 1 Tim 2:12 which teaches an action that is considered today as sexual discrimination, and Ex 21:16 which encourages violence to those who have committed crimes.

³³ Elsbernd and Bieringer, “Interpreting the Signs of the Times,” 63.

³⁴ Bieringer and Elsbernd, “The ‘Normativity of the Future’ Approach,” 20.

3. Ethical Values and Directions

The next set of questions focuses on helping the readers and hearers of Scripture identify the kind of attitudes or character traits that God encourages people to have. Bieringer and Elsbernd insist that “the vision of a just and inclusive community puts us in touch with values, e.g., justice and solidarity.”³⁵ God’s vision that the readers and hearers encounter in the sacred texts points them to practical decisions that will lead to the realization of the vision today. To draw out these values, the interpreters may ask, “What does the text call us to become? What does the text call us to do? What values and norms are implicit and explicit in the text?”³⁶

4. Pneumatological Perspective

The Spirit who guided the human authors of Scripture in writing God’s word guides people today and in the future in understanding and living out the message of the sacred texts. In using the Normativity of the Future, the interpreter must be aware of the Spirit’s movements in the text. By helping them discover God’s vision in the Sacred Scripture, the Spirit attracts and draws believers to participate in God’s saving work for all by inculcating in the person desires to promote conditions such as justice, community, peace, dignity, intimate relationship with God, delight, absence of oppression, security, health and provision for basic human needs.³⁷ The next set of questions that the interpreters must answer are the queries on the Spirit’s presence and movement in the text, such as, “What are the explicit or implicit statements saying about the Spirit? In which way is hope present in the text, and what are the implicit and explicit meanings of hope statements?”

³⁵ Ibid., 16.

³⁶ Ibid., 20.

³⁷ Elsbernd and Bieringer, “Interpreting the Signs of the Times,” 60.

How does the text invite us to a shared life and friendship with God?"³⁸

5. Meta-questions that Focus on the Interpreter and the Interpretative Process

Finally, the interpreters of Scripture must answer meta-questions or questions that will help them evaluate their understanding of the text. The approach recognizes that the interpreters' human limitations can affect their understanding of Scripture. Using the Normativity of the Future requires admission on the part of the reader that one's human shortcomings and self-centeredness may affect one's interpretation of the Scripture. "We too can use our interpretative strategies, including Normativity of the Future, for our own sinful purposes."³⁹ The realization that human limitations can affect their reading of Scripture requires reflection on questions such as: "In which ways does our own sinfulness misguide us in a particular interpretation?", "In which ways does the unfolding vision operate as a corrective for our work [interpretation]?", and "How does our interpretation impact the marginalized and oppressed?"⁴⁰

ENGAGING IN A FUTURE-ORIENTED CONVERSATION IN THE SPIRIT

Originally designed as a biblical interpretive approach, the Normativity of the Future transcends its initial purpose by recognizing the Spirit's active presence in believers' lives. At its core, this approach is founded on the belief that the Spirit guides

³⁸ Bieringer and Elsbernd, "The 'Normativity of the Future' Approach," 14.

³⁹ Elsbernd and Bieringer, "Interpreting the Signs of the Times," 51.

⁴⁰ Bieringer and Elsbernd, "The 'Normativity of the Future' Approach," 20.

individuals in discovering God's dream for the future salvation of all creation. This theological foundation resonates with the Synod's emphasis on the *sensus fidei*, underlining the collective sense of faith within the Church. Recognizing the Spirit's presence and guidance to people in seeking God's will, the Normativity of the Future offers a valuable guide for the Church in entering a conversation in the Spirit in diverse contexts. The following steps offer a practical way how to use the Normativity of the Church in Church conversations.

First, imagine an alternative world. The connection between the Normativity of the Future and the recognition of *sensus fidei* becomes vivid when considering the role of imagination. Imagination, viewed as a human creative capacity intricately linked to cognitive and affective realities, becomes a powerful tool inspired by the Spirit. Through the help of the Spirit, imagination enables individuals to conceive new ways of living and to reconfigure human life and relationships in alignment with God's will. The Spirit moves people through their imagination to envision the world God wills for them to achieve.

Applying the Normativity of the Future in conversations within the Church involves a commitment to listen to all participants to identify their visions for a better world that emerges from their imagination. Two key questions can be used to achieve this: "What vision or visions for a better world do we see emerging as we engage in this conversation?" "How do these visions align with the just and inclusive world that God dreams for us all?" These inquiries can guide discerning the Spirit's movement in a conversation. The questions encourage a collective effort to conceive a future following God's divine plan for justice, community, peace, and inclusive love.

Second, sift what is inclusive. The Normativity of the Future is a crucial reminder for interpreters of biblical texts, urging them to discern the inclusive and exclusive dimensions embedded

within the scriptures. Despite the presence of the Spirit, human life and understanding can be tainted by sin, leading to insights that may deviate from the Gospel values. In Church conversations, members engaged in a dialogue should scrutinize the inclusivity of their visions. By ensuring that visions are inclusive, people actively participate in fostering solidarity, which is the goal of a conversation in the Spirit. The next set of questions that may be asked using the Normativity of the Future can be: “Which of our visions include deep concern and respect for the life of all people regardless of their context and situation? Which visions genuinely promote the common good, particularly the welfare of the poor and marginalized?”

Third, proceed to solidarity. The discovery of vision must continue to the identification of concrete actions. It is not enough to merely discuss ideals. There must be a commitment to draw out and take concrete actions that align with the vision cultivated through collective discussion. The Normativity of the Future underscores the importance of deriving moral imperatives and directions from visions discovered from Scripture interpretations. The emerging visions are not mere abstract concepts but carry a call to action. Similarly, visions discovered by the community in their conversations call for moral responses. The Synod characterizes these responses as acts of solidarity. As explained above, the call for solidarity demands the Church’s commitment to pay attention and respond to the needs of all people, especially those who are overlooked and disadvantaged in the Church and society.

Simultaneously, the identification and actualization of moral values and challenges arising from the envisioned future contribute to the community's transformation in dialogue. Identifying and doing the moral challenges in the vision contributes to the external betterment of society and becomes an internal transformative direction for the Church. Moral challenges are inherent in the visions, and by addressing these challenges, the

community transforms by being moved to be more compassionate and inclusive. The set of questions that may be asked by the community using the Normativity of the Future at this part are: “What do the visions call us to do and become?” and “Do the actions we identify truly lead us into deeper solidarity and in favor of the poor and marginalized?”

Fourth, go back to Jesus. The Normativity of the Future, while undeniably focused on the Spirit, notably lacks a Christological lens. According to its authors, the reason for this is to complement Christological interpretative approaches already abundant in the Church.⁴¹ However, this raise concerns as the interpretative approach appears to miss the Christocentric nature of the Christian life. In the Catholic faith, only in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection can people find the deep meaning and purpose of God’s saving vision for the world. Jesus is the full revealer and realization of God’s desire to save the entire creation by freeing it from evil and destruction and to make it share in God’s life and loving communion. Karl Rahner provides a foundation for understanding why Christ must remain central to any interpretative framework of faith and discernment. He highlights that Jesus Christ is the absolute and unsurpassable self-communication of God.⁴² This means that in Christ, God has fully and definitively revealed God’s own self to humanity. Christ is not merely a teacher or moral guide but the concrete realization of God’s eternal plan. He is the Word through whom creation and redemption find their meaning. Any attempt to discern the future of the Church and the world cannot bypass Christ, for he is both the revealer of God’s vision and the embodiment of humanity’s ultimate future in God.

⁴¹ Ibid., 23.

⁴² Karl Rahner, “Christology Today,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 21, trans. H. M. Riley (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 224–225.

Incorporating a Christological lens into the Normativity of the Future is also imperative due to the consistent direction of the Spirit toward Jesus. The Spirit works within the context of Jesus' teachings, speaking in his name and guiding individuals always toward him. The Catechism underscores this by highlighting the inseparable connection between the Spirit and Jesus in the lives of believers. "The Holy Spirit will come, and we shall know him; he will be with us forever and remain with us. The Spirit will teach us everything, remind us of all Christ said to us, and bear witness to him. The Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth and glorify Christ." (CCC 792) This affirmation emphasizes the indispensable place of the Christological lens in understanding the Spirit's guidance in the life of believers. Furthermore, the Christological lens aligns with the Synod's conviction that all members of the Church, laymen and laywomen, those in consecrated life and ordained ministries, are called to follow and imitate Jesus. "Wherever they are present, they are called to witness to Jesus Christ in daily life and to explicitly share the faith with others."⁴³ Conversations in the Church must lead every member of the Church to be a living witness of Jesus, demonstrating the transformative power of the Gospel through their actions and words.

To bring the Christological lens into the use of the Normativity of the Future in Church conversations, participants can pose questions such as: "How do the visions and actions identified in our conversation align with the life, work, and teachings of Jesus?" and "In what ways does Jesus correct and enrich the articulation of our visions and the moral demands that come from them?" These questions must be answered by going back to the gospels.

⁴³ Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission, Part II. 8. d.

CONCLUSION

This paper responds to the Synod on Synodality's call to adapt approaches that can help facilitate Spirit-led conversations within the Church. Conversations in the Spirit, guided by the Normativity of the Future, ensure that marginalized voices and experiences are central to Church reflection while engaging people in imagining visions of a more just and loving world. This approach helps the Church to overcome hierarchical tendencies and exclusion, which have historically silenced or sidelined marginalized communities. By making space for the voices and experiences of the poor, the oppressed, and those who have suffered from unjust structures, this approach fosters a radical openness to the Spirit, who speaks through the experiences of those often overlooked. In doing so, the Church is led to rejecting decisions and actions that fail to promote love and justice for the marginalized and with them.

As beneficial as the Normativity of the Future approach is in helping promote conversations in the Spirit in the Church, it is not positioned as the answer to all the questions about how to facilitate deeply inclusive dialogue. One key challenge is that it does not guarantee the full inclusion of all voices in a dialogical encounter. This is because the approach relies on participants' openness to future possibilities, which existing power dynamics may constrain, as well as their implicit biases or deeply ingrained theological and institutional perspectives. To overcome these limitations, it is essential to take the meta-questions that focus on the interpreter and the interpretative process within the steps of using the Normativity of the future approach seriously and integrate complementary dialogical ways that ensure broader participation and safeguard against exclusion. These may include incorporating dialogical approaches from other ecclesial traditions,

such as practices from liberation theology or indigenous spiritualities, which can enrich conversations in the Spirit by fostering deeper engagement with diverse lived realities.

While recognizing that there can never be a single ultimate approach, the Normativity of the Future is a compelling way to help people engage in a conversation in the Spirit. This kind of conversation, however, where all voices are included and listened to, including the voices of the marginalized and oppressed, may bring discomfort. This is because radical visions will come out particularly “in the stifled voices and tears of marginalized peoples”⁴⁴ or when the community seriously considers the situation and context of the people who are set aside and repressed. Listening to the experiences of the poor and oppressed will call and demand radical transformations and personal conversions that may be uncomfortable to people. The stifled voices and suppressed contexts and experiences of the poor and marginalized will put into question systems, beliefs, relationships, and behaviors that might have been accepted already in and by the Church but are not necessarily just, loving, and inclusive. People who have been accustomed to these oppressive structures might experience uneasiness.

It is crucial, nevertheless, to acknowledge that discomfort due to voices calling for transformations in the Church is not necessarily a negative occurrence but could rather be a sign that crucial changes are underway. The Spirit of God, ever-present and transformative, moves the Church to confront uncomfortable truths and embrace radical visions for progress in the Church and world to happen. People who engage in a conversation in the Spirit will discover that the Spirit is intimately connected with the lives of

⁴⁴ Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer, *When Love Is Not Enough: A Theology of Justice* (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2009), 223.

the poor and marginalized, making it imperative for the Church to align itself with the radical changes, discomforting truths and visions, and uneasy demands and conversions. All these experiences, while very challenging, are inherent in the Spirit's work. In essence, the discomfort that will be encountered in the face of radical visions is an integral part of the transformative journey that the Church is called to undertake. To be comfortable with the Spirit is to be comfortable with radical visions and transformations. The Spirit is not static. The Spirit is the force of continual change and empowerment. Thus, for the Church to truly embody Jesus' radical love and become a Synodal Church, especially in solidarity with the poor and marginalized, it must be open and submissive to the discomfort of transformation. As the Church engages in a conversation in the Spirit, it must embrace a path that aligns with the ever-changing and empowering Spirit, ensuring that it remains a beacon of radical love in this journey toward the full realization of God's kingdom in the world.

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