

# From Collegiality to Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis's 'Listening Primacy'

Irish Theological Quarterly

2020, Vol. 85(4) 352–369

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0021140020916034

journals.sagepub.com/home/itq

**Massimo Faggioli**

Villanova University, USA

## Abstract

Synodality is a key term to understand Pope Francis's ecclesiology. This article analyzes Francis's use of synodality in the major documents, the speeches, and in the most important moment of his pontificates, especially in the Bishops' Synods. The goal of this study is to highlight the promise and accomplishments of Francis's synodality especially in terms of the conversion of the papacy into a listening primacy. This article also wants to raise some issues about the limits of his theology and practice of synodality in the global Catholic Church of today, and in particular whether there can be a synodal reform of the Church without new institutions of synodality.

## Keywords

collegiality, institutions, primacy, Synod of Bishops, synodality

## Introduction

The very first few moments of Francis's pontificate, when the newly elected bishop of Rome spoke from the Loggia in St Peter's Square that night of 13 March 2013, were already in the name of synodality disguised as a journey: 'And now, we take up this journey: Bishop and People. This journey of the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches. A journey of fraternity, of love, of trust among us. Let us always pray for one another.'<sup>1</sup> His request to the people gathered in the square to pray over the newly elected bishop of Rome called to mind the rites that were an integral part of the procedures of episcopal elections in the early centuries: 'I ask you to pray to the Lord that he will bless me: the prayer of the people asking the blessing for their Bishop.'

1 'First Greeting of the Holy Father Pope Francis,' 13 March 2013 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130313\\_benedizione-urbi-et-orbi.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco_20130313_benedizione-urbi-et-orbi.html).

## Corresponding author:

Massimo Faggioli, Villanova University, Philadelphia, PA 19085, USA.

Email: [massimo.faggioli@gmail.com](mailto:massimo.faggioli@gmail.com)

That first impromptu hint of Francis's ecclesiology was just the announcement of one of the most important contributions of Pope Francis's pontificate to the post-conciliar Catholic ecclesiological tradition: his emphasis on synodality connected with a renewed reliance on the Bishops' Synods, the first of which he announced a few months after his election, in October 2013.<sup>2</sup> Francis has brought about a revival of synodality in the Catholic Church, by making of synodality a recurring term in papal teaching in an unprecedented way. Synodality is the key to understanding Francis's ecclesiology also because this is an act of the papal reception of a theological debate that started in the early 1990s as a new phase in the debate on Vatican II.<sup>3</sup>

The synodal element permeates all the key moments of the pontificate: the Bishops' Synods of 2014–15 on the family and marriage, the Synod of 2018 on the youth, and the Synod of 2019 for the Amazon region, but also Francis's understanding of the ordinary and extraordinary governance of the Church, and of the new kind of relationship between center and periphery, between clergy and laity, between different Catholic churches in the global Church. As Christoph Theobald noted, for Francis synodality is not just an intra-ecclesial concern, but part of the relationship between the Church and the world: 'Le pape François plaçant la synodalité de l'Église (avec le *sensus fidei fidelium*) sur le devant de la scène et la considérant comme une réponse à un contexte mondial et local, caractérisé selon lui de "polyédrique", et soumis à une autre gestion du temps.'<sup>4</sup> Synodality is foundational to Francis's vision of the Church for the poor, a 'theology of ecclesial brotherhood and sisterhood,' in the words of Italian theologian Giuseppe Ruggieri: a poor Church is 'the guarantee for the Church that its livelihood is the Gospel

2 See Lorenzo Baldisseri (ed.), *A cinquant'anni dall'Apostolica Sollicitudo. Il Sinodo dei Vescovi al servizio di una Chiesa sinodale. Atti del seminario di studio organizzato dalla Segreteria generale del Sinodo dei Vescovi* (Città del Vaticano, 6–9 febbraio 2016), Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016; on the seminar of February 2016, see Klaus Schatz, *La sinodalità come caratteristica essenziale della Chiesa. Un seminario di esperti (6-9 febbraio 2016)*, in 'La Civiltà Cattolica,' 167: 4 (2016) 165–75.

3 See *La synodalité. La participation au gouvernement dans l'Église*. Actes Du VIIe Congrès International de Droit Canonique, Paris, Unesco, 21–28 Septembre 1990 (Paris, 1992); *Synod and Synodality. Theology, History, Canon Law and Ecumenism in New Contact*. International Colloquium Bruges 2003, eds. Alberto Melloni --Silvia Scatena (LIT, Münster 2005); *Chiesa e sinodalità. Coscienza, forme, processi*, eds. Riccardo Battocchio --Serena Noceti (Milano: Glossa, 2007); the monographical issue of the journal 'Theologische Quartalschrift,' 192/2 (2012) with articles by Piero Coda, Bradford Hinze, Bernd Jochen Hilberath, Peter Hünemann, Massimo Faggioli, Severino Dianich, *Diritto e teologia. Ecclesiologia e canonistica per una riforma della Chiesa* (Bologna: EDB 2016); Giuseppe Ruggieri, *Chiesa sinodale* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2017).

4 Christoph Theobald, *La synodalité de l'Église. Dossier préparatoire du 26e colloque des RSR* (Paris, 8–10 novembre 2018), in 'Recherches de Sciences Religieuses,' 2018/3 tome 106, p. 354; Giuseppe Ruggieri, *A propos des synodes: l'histoire nous interroge*, in 'Recherches de Science Religieuse' 2018/3 (tome 106), pp. 363–82. See also *La synodalité de l'Église. Actes du 26e colloque des RSR* (Paris, 8–10 novembre 2018), special issue of 'Recherches de Science Religieuse,' 2019/2 (tome 107), ed. Christoph Theobald, with essays by Jean-François Chiron, Céline Rohmer, Jean-Marie Donegani, Alzirinha Souza, Patrick Valdrini, Alphonse Borras, Arnaud Join-Lambert, Amphilochios Miltos, Christophe Chalamet.

and not some other psychological resource. Mercy is the link of ecclesial brotherhood and sisterhood with the larger brotherhood and sisterhood with the whole world.<sup>5</sup>

Synodality is also at the heart of the proposals for Church reform put forward during the pontificate.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore necessary to analyze the different aspects of Francis's synodality: not just in the speeches and documents focused on the topic, but also in all the crucial moments of Francis's way of governing since the election. It is also important to point out a few problematic and unresolved aspects of Francis's synodality that can be seen as open to development and in need of solutions—theologically, ecclesially, and juridically.

## Synodality in Francis, from 'Evangelii Gaudium' to the Synod for the Amazon Region of 2019

The concept of synodality is present in the major documents of the pontificate, although not always explicitly mentioned.

In the exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013) there is a clear connection between the missionary dimension of the Church for all its members (EG 3) and synodality, especially when Francis talks about the relationship between papal magisterium and local bishops: as he says, 'It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound "decentralization"' (EG 16). Francis talks about a reform of the structures for a Church going forth (EG 27, 30), with an emphasis on the 'conversion of the papacy': 'The Second Vatican Council stated that, like the ancient patriarchal Churches, episcopal conferences are in a position "to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit."' Yet this desire has not been fully realized, since a juridical status of episcopal conferences which would see them as subjects of specific attributions, including genuine doctrinal authority, has not yet been sufficiently elaborated. Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach' (EG 32).<sup>7</sup>

Chapter III on the proclamation of the Gospel *Evangelii Gaudium* offers more insights into a synodal reform of the Church. Francis discusses emphasizing the need to evangelize with different charisms (EG 130), referring to *Lumen Gentium* 12 in terms of the infallibility of the faith of the people. This key element of Catholic ecclesiology builds in *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 12 a connection between infallibility and the charismatic

5 Giuseppe Ruggieri, *Chiesa sinodale* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2017), 170–71. For the role of brotherhood and sisterhood in Francis see also Christoph Theobald, *Fraternità. Il nuovo stile della Chiesa secondo papa Francesco*. Prefazione di Enzo Bianchi (Bose: Qiqajon, 2016).

6 See especially the proposals made during the seminar organized by the Jesuit magazine 'La Civiltà Cattolica' in September 2015 and published in *La riforma e le riforme nella chiesa*, eds. Antonio Spadaro and Carlos Maria Galli (Brescia: Queriniana, 2016; English edition: New York: Paulist, 2017).

7 See Carlos Schickendantz, *Le conferenze episcopali. 'Questo auspicio non si è pienamente realizzato'* (EG 32), in *La riforma e le riforme nella chiesa*, eds. Antonio Spadaro, Carlos Maria Galli (Brescia: Queriniana, 2016; English edition: New York: Paulist, 2017), pp. 337–56.

structure of the Church: charisms are not extraordinary and exceptional in the Church, but they are common, diverse, universal, and not limited to a group of people. The Church is all-charismatic, and the value of every charism must be measured against the good of the people of God.

We observe an explicit reference to synodality toward the end, when Francis connects synodality, ecumenism, and one of the signs of our times, religious persecutions: 'Signs of division between Christians in countries ravaged by violence add further causes of conflict on the part of those who should instead be a leaven of peace. How many important things unite us! If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us. To give but one example, in the dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, we Catholics have the opportunity to learn more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and their experience of synodality. Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness' (EG 246).

Also in the 2015 encyclical on 'our common home,' *Laudato Si'*, there are elements of a synodal idea of the church, even though the terms collegiality and synodality do not appear. The most important stream of teaching sustaining the global appeal of *Laudato Si'* comes from the teachings of the national and continental bishops' conferences. More interestingly, the rejection of the 'technocratic paradigm' (esp. LS 106–12) explains also one of the ecclesiological ideas of Francis, that is, the rejection of functionalism and of an ecclesiological technocracy in the Church and in Church reform as well. In chapter III Francis places emphasis on dialogue and transparency in the decision-making processes with the need for an involvement of local peoples. In LS 219 Francis states that 'social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds.' *Laudato Si'* is a document on ecology but also on the ecology of power, and can be applied to an ecology of power in the Church. 'Common home' entails a Christian anthropology of interdependent relations where brotherhood and sisterhood play a key role. *Laudato Si'* addresses the crisis of economic globalization, but it can also be read as a response to the temptations to use technocratic solutions against the crisis of the globalization of the Church, proposing instead a shift in the missionary responsibility from the *institutional* church—bishops and clergy as presiders of local geographical communities—to a responsibility of the *charismatic* and *pneumatological* structure of the Church in evangelization.<sup>8</sup>

This is very visible in the 2016 exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, where synodality is part of the document and its history not only because it is a post-synodal exhortation following the Bishops' Synod in two sessions of 2014 and 2015. Compared to previous post-synodal exhortations since the institution of the Bishops' Synod by Paul VI in September 1965, *Amoris Laetitia* relies much more on the documents of the Synod and the debates, with more than 50 quotations and references from the relations of the Synods of 2014 and 2015. In the very beginning Francis states that 'not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various

8 See Christoph Theobald, *Fraternità. Il nuovo stile della Chiesa secondo papa Francesco*. Prefazione di Enzo Bianchi (Bose: Qiqajon, 2016), 47.

ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. Jn 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does' (AL 3). One first particularity in the history of the Bishops' Synods and the post-synodal exhortations is that *Amoris Laetitia* is a post-synodal papal document that was born from a Bishops' Synod lived experience. A second particularity is that Francis set the reception of the document as a synodal reception—the membership of this synodality extends beyond the membership of the bishops but comprehends essentially the whole people of God and in particular the lay people and families.

Synodality shaped also the preparation and experience of the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Bishops' Synod of October 2018 on the theme 'young people, faith and vocational discernment' announced by Francis on 6 October 2016. Several steps, with various degrees of involvement by Church members, characterized the preparation of the Synod. The *Preparatory Document* was published on 13 January 2017, together with a 'Letter to young people' by the Holy Father. The *Preparatory Document* included a *Questionnaire*, mainly addressed to Bishops' Conferences, to the Synods of Eastern Catholic Churches, and to other ecclesial bodies, with 15 questions for everybody and three specific questions for each continent, as well as a request to share three 'best practices.' From 11–15 September 2017, an *International Seminar on the Condition of Youth in the World* took place with the participation of many experts and young people that helped focus on the situation of young people today from a scientific standpoint. The preparation took care of the consultation of young people all over the world via the internet, but there was also the meeting of more than 300 young representatives from around the world, convened in Rome 19–24 March 2018 at the inaugural pre-synodal meeting of young people.<sup>9</sup> The *Instrumentum Laboris*, published in May 2018, speaks of discernment and discusses 'a path to walk together.'<sup>10</sup> In the post-synodal exhortation *Christus Vivit*,<sup>11</sup> dated 25 March 2019, Francis strongly emphasizes synodality: the document as the fruit of a 'synodal process' (par. 3) and the importance for 'youth ministry [...] to be synodal' (par. 206). The role of the youth in the Church is inserted synodally: 'None of this should be overlooked in pastoral work with young people, lest we create projects that isolate young people from their family and the larger community, or turn them into a select few, protected from all contamination. Rather, we need projects that can strengthen them, accompany them and impel them to encounter others, to engage in generous service, in mission' (par. 30). The entire third paragraph is about the synodal method bearing fruits for the papal document: 'I see no need for a detailed analysis of today's young people, their lives and their experiences. At the same time, since I do not

9 For the Final document of the pre-synodal meeting of March 2018, see <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/news/final-document-from-the-pre-synodal-meeting.html>.

10 For the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Synod of 2018, see <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/instrumentum-laboris-for-the-synod-2018--young-people--the-faith.html>.

11 Francis, post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit*, 25 March 2019 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20190325\\_christus-vivit.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html).

want to neglect that reality, I will briefly summarize some contributions received before the Synod and others that I heard in the course of our meetings' (par. 70).

A similar process of a truly synodal preparation of the Bishops' Synod can be seen for the Synod of October 2019 for the Amazon region. Announced in October 2017, ten years after the CELAM conference in Aparecida, different steps prepared the 2019 Synod: a long period of hearing and consultation with the local churches in the region with the involvement of the Pan-Amazon Ecclesial Network (REPAM), the preparatory document published in April 2018,<sup>12</sup> the meetings of the pre-synodal council in April 2018 and May 2019 with the discussion, approval, and publication of the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the 2019 Synod.

## Francis's Speech of 17 October 2015: From Vatican II Collegiality to Post-Vatican II Synodality

One of the most decisive moments of Francis's pontificate was the Bishops' Synod on the family and marriage in two moments—the Extraordinary general assembly of the Bishops' Synod of October 2014 and the Ordinary general assembly of the Bishops' Synod of October 2015. During that major event in the pontificate, at the end of the second week of the Synod of 2015, on 17 October, Francis delivered a speech for the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Bishops' Synod. It was not a ritualistic celebration of the anniversary of *Apostolica Sollicitudo*. On the contrary, it offered a chance to develop the institution of the Bishops' Synod by Paul VI in 1965 and to announce Francis's intentions to overcome its limits:

A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening 'is more than simply hearing.' It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth' (*Jn* 14:17), in order to know what he 'says to the Churches.' (*Rev* 2:7)<sup>13</sup>

The 17 October 2015 speech is the most important speech of a pope on the topic in the post-Vatican II Church and it can be called the *magna charta* of synodality. Francis did not introduce this path to synodality as an innovation, but in continuity with the tradition of the previous 50 years: from the institution of the Synod by Paul VI in 1965 during Vatican II, to the 2006 updates to the *Ordo Synodi* by his predecessor Benedict XVI. But Francis put his emphasis on the synodal Church in the context of the world of today: 'We must continue along this path. The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen

12 See *Preparatory Document for the Bishops' Synod for the Amazon region*, 8 June 2018, <http://www.sinodoamazonico.va/content/sinodoamazonico/it/documenti/documento-preparatorio-del-sinodo-per-l-amazonia.html>.

13 Francis, address during the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html).



cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.’

Francis talked about the Synod in terms of a convergence of a *listening process*: ‘The Synod of Bishops is the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church’s life. The Synod process begins by listening to the people of God, which “shares also in Christ’s prophetic office” according to a principle dear to the Church of the first millennium: “*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet.*” The Synod process then continues by listening to the pastors.’

The emphasis in his speech on the *cum Petro* and *sub Petro*, and the reference to the ‘hierarchical communion’ echoed and clearly responded to the tensions experienced between the minority of the episcopate at the Synod and Pope Francis in the Synods of 2014 and 2015. But Francis presented synodality as a step forward from the episcopal collegiality of Vatican II. Interestingly, Francis introduced this step forward not on the basis of the history of the first 50 years of the institution created by Paul VI—the previous Bishops’ Synods were not mentioned. The basis was in fact *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 12—a key passage in Francis’s ecclesiology—with the emphasis on the role of the people of God, which ‘shares also in Christ’s prophetic office.’<sup>14</sup>

Francis’s speech was receptive of the post-conciliar theological debate on synodality, in its approach to the three different institutional levels in the ‘particular Churches’ (the diocesan synod, the presbyteral council, the college of consultors, chapters of canons, and the pastoral council), in the second level of Ecclesiastical Provinces and Ecclesiastical Regions (‘Particular Councils and, in a special way, Conferences of Bishops’), and in the third level, that of the universal Church. Francis affirmed a role of the Synod of Bishops as ‘an expression of *episcopal collegiality* within an entirely synodal Church’ and an emphasis for a collegiality that is not just affective: ‘This level manifests the *collegialitas affectiva*, which can also become in certain circumstances “effective,” joining the Bishops among themselves and with the Pope in solicitude for the People God.’

The passage on the ecumenical implications of synodality in the Catholic Church was important with his reference exclusively to the Orthodox Churches (and not, for example, to the Anglican Communion or other Churches of the Reformation): ‘The commitment to build a synodal Church—a mission to which we are all called, each with the role entrusted him by the Lord—has significant ecumenical implications.’ Clear is the need, in this light, of a still unaccomplished reform of the papacy: ‘the urgent need to think about “a conversion of the papacy”’ and a reference to John Paul II’s *Ut Unum Sint*.

The most indicative part of the speech was the conclusion, where Francis explained synodality in the Church as an alternative model to the way of governing institutions the world of today:

Our gaze also extends to humanity as a whole. A synodal Church is like a standard lifted up among the nations (cf. *Is* 11:12) in a world which—while calling for participation, solidarity and transparency in public administration—often consigns the fate of entire peoples to the grasp of small but powerful groups. As a Church which ‘journeys together’ with men and

14 See Massimo Faggioli, “*Evangelii Gaudium*” as an Act of Reception of Vatican II,’ in *Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism: Evangelii Gaudium and the Papal Agenda*, ed. Gerard Mannion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 38–54.

women, sharing the travails of history, let us cherish the dream that a rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and of the function of authority as service will also be able to help civil society to be built up in justice and fraternity, and thus bring about a more beautiful and humane world for coming generations.

This conclusion of the speech was, as happens often in Francis's texts, a real hermeneutical key for understanding the role of synodality: not just as a way to govern the Church, but as a way for the Church to offer a different model to the current cultures of governance of states, international organizations, and private entities.<sup>15</sup>

## Re-Starting the Theology of Synodality: The 2018 Document of the 'International Theological Commission'

The focus of Francis's pontificate on synodality extended also to theological reflection developed by institutions of central government of the Catholic Church. The International Theological Commission published in May 2018 a document titled *La sinodalità nella vita e nella missione della Chiesa*.<sup>16</sup> The publication of the document was approved by the president of the International Theological Commission, the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith archbishop Luis F. Ladaria, SJ, in March 2018, after having received 'parere favorevole' from Pope Francis. The document was the fruit of the work of the Commission and its plenary sessions between 2014 and 2017.<sup>17</sup>

The 121-paragraph-long document represents a comprehensive synthesis of the idea and praxis of synodality in Francis's pontificate, in both its potential and its limits. The potential of synodality in the document concerns this official recognition of the very term, which is relatively new and a fruit of the post-Vatican II ecclesiological reflection (par. 5), together with the also new distinction in official Church documents between 'council' and 'synod' (par. 4). The introduction roots the ecclesiology of synodality 'in the footsteps of Vatican II,' acknowledging the need to proceed further in the trajectory of Vatican II (par. 8). Synodality is rooted biblically (par. 1–23), patristically, and historically in the first and second millennium up to Vatican II and the post-conciliar period (par. 24–41), and the document recognizes forms of synodality in other churches and 'ecclesial communities' (par. 36, 115–17). There is a strong recognition of the need for a consultation of all in the Church in the context of the distinction between deliberative and consultative vote (par. 68–69, 73) refusing to equate the meaning of consultative vote in the Church with the meaning of consultative vote in civil law: in the Church pastors need to consult and listen to the *vota* of the faithful before making decisions

15 See Roberto Repole, *Église synodale et démocratie. Quelles institutions ecclésiales pour aujourd'hui?* (Bruxelles: Lessius, 2016).

16 On the Vatican website *La sinodalità nella vita e nella missione della Chiesa*, dated 2 March 2018, was published on 3 May, in Italian only at first. The English translation was published in the month of September 2018 [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html).

17 For a series of good articles commenting on the document of the International Theological Commission, see *La sinodalità nella vita e nella missione della Chiesa*, eds Piero Coda and Roberto Repole (Bologna: EDB, 2019).



(par. 68). The document of the ITC paints the picture of an all-synodal Church, drawing from Francis especially for what concerns the relationship between synodality and social ministry of the Church: 'The Church's synodal life presents itself, in particular, as *diakonia* in the promotion of a social, economical, and political life of all peoples under the banner of justice, solidarity and peace' (par. 119).

The limits of the ITC document say something about the limits of the vision of synodality in Francis's pontificate. The limits are not in the historical reading of the conciliar, collegial, and synodal dimension of the Church (see the assessment of 14th- and 15th-century conciliarism at par. 34),<sup>18</sup> rather in the assessment of the collegial and synodal dimension of the Church in the post-Vatican II period. It is not surprising, given the need to show respect for the legacy of the predecessors, the fact that the document paints an overly optimistic picture of the development of synodality in the Church with a substantial silence about the experiences of frustration of the demands and need of synodality and collegiality at the universal, national, and local levels in the Church in these last 50 years (par. 41).

But it is more surprising that the document of the ITC is also silent about the need to integrate synodality with new forms of Catholic life and ministry in the Church, that is the new lay ecclesial movements and communities. The passage at par. 74 is silent on the challenges for the 'classical' discourse on synodality in the Church: that discourse relies heavily on the episcopal ecclesiology of Vatican II and is therefore based on the parish and diocesan model, which is not the model of the new movements and communities.<sup>19</sup>

The ITC document is also evasive when it talks about the ecumenical council (par. 97–98), because it does not address in any way the issue of the practicality and possible realization of an ecumenical general council in a Church with more than 5,000 bishops (with more than 1,000 of them retired bishops), nor the issue of the membership in the council.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the ITC document is vague about the connection between synodality and reform of the Roman Curia, merely recalling the demands advanced at Vatican II in terms of more inclusion for diocesan bishops and consultation of the lay faithful: 'In asking for its reform in the light of the ecclesiology of communion, Vatican II emphasized some elements that could promote an increase of synodality, such as: including diocesan Bishops to 'report more fully to the Supreme Pontiff the thinking, the desires and the needs of all the Churches' and consulting the laity 'so that they will have an appropriate role in the life of the Church' [quot. from decree *Christus Dominus*]' (par. 102).

18 About this, see Riccardo Battocchio, *Sul paragrafo 1.3. del Documento 'La sinodalità nella vita e nella missione della Chiesa': 'Lo sviluppo della prassi sinodale nel II millennio (nn. 31–41), in La sinodalità nella vita e nella missione della Chiesa, 39–48.*

19 About this, see Massimo Faggioli, *Sorting Out Catholicism: Brief History of the New Ecclesial Movements* (Collegeville MN, Liturgical, 2014) and *The Rising Laity. Ecclesial Movements since Vatican II* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist, 2016).

20 See Severino Dianich, *Primato e collegialità episcopale. Problemi e prospettive*, in *Riforma e riforme*, pp. 261–82. By Dianich about Pope Francis see also *Magistero in movimento. Il caso papa Francesco* (Bologna: EDB, 2016).

## Synodality or Enhanced Episcopal Collegiality? Pope Francis's Reform of the Bishops' Synod in 'Episcopal Communion'

A few months after the publication of the document of the International Theological Commission, Francis published the apostolic constitution *Episcopal Communion* 'on the Bishops' Synod,' dated 15 September 2018 (53rd anniversary of the institution of the Synod by Paul VI). This constitution is important for understanding Francis's effort to link the Bishops' Synod to synodality.<sup>21</sup>

*Episcopal Communion* replaces all previous texts—including various points of Canon Law—that in any way pertain to or regulate the working of the Synod. Francis quotes all the previous popes who helped shaped legislation on the Synod in justifying the 'developments' he has introduced. But in this new legislative text he also introduces and institutionalizes shifts and breaks from the previous popes. For example, the extensive consultation of the baptized faithful, which Francis introduced in preparations for the 2014 extraordinary assembly on the family and utilized again for the last two ordinary assemblies (2018 and 2019), is now a mandatory procedure. It was never even mentioned in previous papal documents, let alone mandated:

The history of the Church bears ample witness to the importance of consultation for ascertaining the views of the bishops and the faithful in matters pertaining to the good of the Church. Hence, even in the preparation of Synodal assemblies, it is very important that consultation of all the particular Churches be given special attention. In this initial phase, following the indications of the general secretariat of the Synod, the bishops submit the questions to be explored in the Synodal Assembly to the priests, deacons and lay faithful of their Churches, both individually and in associations, without overlooking the valuable contribution that consecrated men and women can offer. Above all, the contribution of the local Church's participatory bodies, especially the Presbyteral Council and the Pastoral Council, can prove fundamental, and from here 'a synodal Church can begin to emerge' [quot. of the speech of October 17, 2015]. (par. 7)

Francis set down precise articles outlining the consultation of the faithful which were to be carried out, including the 'possibility' of holding pre-Synod assembly meetings at the international, regional, and local levels: 'The Synod of Bishops must increasingly become a privileged instrument for listening to the People of God' (par. 6). This might mean that 'if circumstances so suggest, a single synodal assembly may be spread over more than one session' (par. 8). This would offer a pope the possibility to change the format (and membership) of a Synod assembly: 'It must be remembered that it pertains to him, according to the needs of the People of God, to select and promote ways in which the College of Bishops can exercise its proper authority over the universal Church' (par. 2).

In the final part of the document, in the articles regulating the Bishops' Synod, Francis specifies that others may participate: 'according to the theme and the circumstances, certain others who are not Bishops may be summoned to the Synod Assembly; their role

21 See Francis, apostolic constitution *Episcopal Communion*, 15 September 2018 <http://www.synod.va/content/synod/en/the-synod-of-bishops/apostolic-constitution-episcopal-communio.html>.

is determined in each case by the Roman Pontiff" (art. 2,2). In addition to the three types of Synod assemblies that have been convoked up until now—ordinary, extraordinary, and special—the pope now has complete freedom to use the Synod in a more flexible way: 'If he considers it opportune, especially for reasons of an ecumenical nature, the Roman Pontiff may summon a synodal assembly according to other formats established by himself,' the document stipulates (art. 1,3). Moreover, Francis ratifies what he had decided already for the Synods of 2014 and 2015: 'According to the theme and the circumstances, the Synod Assembly may be conducted in separate periods, held at different times, at the discretion of the Roman Pontiff' (article 3,1). This echoes and accepts a proposal that was made between 1980 and 1983 by another Jesuit, Carlo Maria Martini, and that was rejected back then.<sup>22</sup>

The novelty of Francis's apostolic constitution on the Synod is in making clear that it is a process divided into three phases: 'the preparatory phase, in which the consultation of the People of God on the themes indicated by the Roman Pontiff takes place; the celebratory phase, characterized by the assembly meeting of the Bishops; the implementation phase, in which the conclusions of the Synod approved by the Roman Pontiff must be accepted by the Churches. The central phase, in which the work of the discernment of the Pastors takes place, is thus preceded and followed by phases that call into question the totality of the People of God, in the plurality of its components.'<sup>23</sup>

The notable issue for synodality is that Francis reforms the Bishops' Synod by inserting it into his vision for a synodal church, but without really changing the strictly episcopal nature of the Bishops' Synod created by Paul VI in 1965. One sees evidence of this in the whole apostolic constitution; the only passage when he mentions synodality is in paragraph 6 of the introduction: 'Although structurally it is essentially configured as an episcopal body, this does not mean that the Synod exists separately from the rest of the faithful. On the contrary, it is a suitable instrument to give voice to the entire People of God, specifically via the Bishops, established by God as "authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church," demonstrating, from one Assembly to another, that it is an eloquent expression of synodality as a "constitutive element of the Church" [quotations of the speech of October 17, 2015].' One of the key novelties in the new apostolic constitution confirms this non-changing episcopal character of the Bishops' Synod, which is, should he deem opportune, the pope—the president of the Synod of Bishops—can allow an assembly's final document to be published as an official act of the magisterium (i.e. as official teaching): 'If it is expressly approved by the

22 Carlo Maria Martini, SJ, archbishop of Milan (1979–2002), made that proposal in his intervention at the plenary session at the Bishops' Synod of 1980 and then again in an intervention made during a meeting of the council of the Secretary General of the Bishops' Synod in April 1983: see 'Sintesi dell'intervento durante la 25a Congregazione generale, 23 ottobre 1980,' in Giovanni Caprile, *Il Sinodo dei vescovi 1980*, Roma 1982, p. 517; see Gilfredo Marengo, *Il metodo del Sinodo e la proposta di Martini*, in 'La Stampa—Vatican Insider,' 4 November 2014 <https://www.lastampa.it/2014/11/04/vaticaninsider/il-metodo-del-sinodo-e-la-proposta-di-martini-PBXT1f8WcLOh3SXFhOB2sL/pagina.html>.

23 From the webpage of the Bishops' Synod on the Vatican website, updated in March 2019 [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20190314\\_profilo\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20190314_profilo_it.html).

Roman Pontiff, the Final Document participates in the ordinary Magisterium of the Successor of Peter' (art. 18,1).

This essay is not the occasion for a detailed canonical analysis of Pope Francis's reform of the Bishops' Synod. But it seems clear that the ecclesiology of synodality has not modified the fundamental structure of the Bishops' Synod, especially in terms of membership. Between the Synod of Bishops and synodality there is a distance visible also in the *Instruction on the Celebration of the Synod* of 1 October 2018. The normal members of the Synods are still bishops, except those 'others appointed by the pontiff' (art. 2,5 3,5, and 4,5). All the members appointed by the pope, including bishops and clergy, cannot exceed 15% of the members designated *ex officio* and *ex electione* (art. 6,6). Also the members of the Ordinary Council of the General Secretary of the Bishops' Synod should be bishops (art. 10,4); the only exception—argument *e silentio* here—could be the case in which the Prefect of the Curia Dicastery competent for the topic of the Synod is not a bishop. In articles 12–14 there is no indication whether the clerical or episcopal status is required of the president of the Synod delegated by the pope, of the general relator, and of the special secretary.

## Francis's Style of Governing: Primacy of Listening

Synodality is an important aspect of Pope Francis's pontificate, also for his style of governing and using papal primacy. The interaction between Francis and the Bishops' Synod has already been examined in a previous section.

But a particular concept of governance shapes also his interaction with the Roman Curia. One of the first decisions in the pontificate, on 13 April 2013, was to create the 'Council of Cardinals' that met 30 times until June 2019. This council functions as a supra-Curial body of consultation with the pope and it is hardly an institution of ecclesial synodality, rather a different way of using papal primacy. Francis's primacy does not operate through the Roman Curia, but mostly bypasses the Curia. Under Francis, the activity of the dicasteries is not directed at supporting papal teachings or the priority of the pontificates, but rather at the day-by-day administrative work in response to the requests coming from the Church. Francis's vision for a synodal Church seems to entail a less prominent role for the Roman Curia. Worthy of note is the 2014 Christmas speech to the Roman Curia, where the pope said: 'It is attractive to think of the Roman Curia as a small-scale model of the Church, in other words, as a "body" which strives seriously every day to be more alive, more healthy [sic], more harmonious and more united in itself and with Christ.'<sup>24</sup> This passage is remarkable because it reflects Francis's attempt to insert the Curia in an ecclesiological model of Christian community. This attempt to make the Curia more synodal and less isolated was visible also in the meeting of February 2019 on the sexual abuse crisis, where the Curia played a totally secondary, if not virtually invisible, role in that unprecedented moment in the history of the Catholic Church dealing with the most serious moral and theological crisis of our times.

---

24 Francis, *Christmas Address to the Roman Curia*, 22 December 2014 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/december/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141222\\_curia-romana.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/december/documents/papa-francesco_20141222_curia-romana.html).

Francis's relationship with the national bishops' conferences is more synodal than in the recent past in the sense it tries to restore healthy mechanisms in those institutions reshaped by Vatican II. In more than one occasion during Francis's pontificate, local episcopates have appealed to the Vatican in order to have a decision resolving internal impasses. But this resulted in Francis's resolution to send back the issue to the national bishops' conference. For example, Francis pressed the Italian bishops to change their system of the selection of the president of the conference for the new president to be chosen in 2017, with the pope in favor of an election by the bishops (thus abandoning the system of papal appointment) against the resistance of a large part of the Italian episcopate. When the German bishops' conference raised the issue of the internal division about the policy for inter-communion in mixed marriages, the 25 May 2018 letter of the CDF in Francis's Curia was to send back the dossier to Germany and invite the bishops' conference to find unity.<sup>25</sup>

Another interesting and revealing episode is the history of the study commission on women deacons created by Pope Francis in August 2016. After meeting in May 2016 with the women religious of the International Union of Superior Generals who raised the issue of the role of women in the Church, Francis announced a study commission which gave him the results of the work and ended with a lack of consensus on the history and nature of women diaconate in the early Church. Francis announced the result of the study commission when he met with the UISG on 10 May 2019. The way Pope Francis will deal with this issue and with the stalling in the Catholic Church concerning the access of women to ordained ministry could be most revealing about Francis's synodality. The most remarkable aspect of his approach to the issue is openness to listening and dialogue with those raising issues that represent a vision of ordained ministry that challenges recent official Church teaching, from the declaration of the Congregation of the Doctrine for the Faith *Inter Insigniores* (1976) to John Paul II's apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994) to the recent (29 May 2018) statement of the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, cardinal Luis Ladaria, SJ, 'In Response to Certain Doubts Regarding the Definitive Character of the Doctrine of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*.'

## Promise and Limits of Francis's Synodality

There are clearly new promises in Francis's vision and practice of synodality compared to the previous pontificates in the post-Vatican II period. Francis represents a moment of renewal in the Catholic ecclesiological tradition about synodality and a new development in comparison to the way papal magisterium addressed the issue since Vatican II.<sup>26</sup> This is made possible by the fundamental ecclesiological orientation of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, which is about the biblical image of the 'people' more than about an institutional

25 The German bishops' conference published its guidelines on intercommunion not as a binding document, but left to the individual bishops: see <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2018-06/german-bishops-inter-denominational-marriage-sharing-eucharist.html>.

26 A good synthesis of the post-conciliar developments in Jean-François Chiron, *Synodalité et ecclésiologie de l'Église universelle*, in 'Recherches de Science Religieuse,' 2018/3 tome 106, pp. 383–401.

ecclesiology articulating the Mystical Body of Christ.<sup>27</sup> This has consequences for the idea and practices of synodality in the Church.

Francis's acknowledgment of the reversal of positions between the *urbs* and the *orbis* in Catholicism has been clear from the very beginning of his pontificate, with his strong emphasis on the *poor* and on *mercy*. The connection between the poor Church and the merciful Church is key for the idea of synodality, also because of the intentional resourcing of Francis to the intentions of John XXIII, as one can see in Francis's frequent quotations of John XXIII's opening speech of the council delivered on 11 October 1962, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*.<sup>28</sup> Francis's understanding of synodality can count on the rejection of an abstract hermeneutic of Vatican II and on the acceptance of an ecclesiology of the relationship between the Church and the world that is of brotherhood and sisterhood.

Synodality in Francis is the result of an embracing of the methodological achievements of *Gaudium et Spes*, with a clear difference from the pontificate of his predecessor.<sup>29</sup> We can see this also from Francis's understanding of some typical problems in ecclesiological reflection—included in the theology of synodality: abstraction, reification, universal vs. local, and de-historicization.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Francis's vision of synodality entails indeed also a new relationship between the church and theology that challenges also the theological academic establishment to reform its rapport with the people of God.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, the achievements for synodality under Pope Francis must be measured not only in terms of an emphasis on a different ecclesiology for the governance of the Church in the documents published during the pontificate. The Bishops' Synods of 2014 and 2015, and the preparations for the Synod on the Youth of 2018 and for the Amazon region of 2019, have been marked by a much more participatory style: in terms of the formation of the agenda and of the openness of the Synods' leadership to real debate in the Synod. Francis made clear his intention to give back to the bodies of the Church created between Vatican II and the early post-Vatican II period the task to express a communion that is not just 'affective' but also 'effective,' as he wrote to cardinal Baldisseri, secretary general of the Bishops' Synod, on 1 April 2014.<sup>32</sup> Synodality for

27 See Luc Forestier, *Le pape François et la synodalité. Evangelii gaudium, nouvelle étape dans la réception de Vatican II*, in 'Nouvelle revue théologique,' tome 137, no. 4, octobre 2015, pp. 597–614.

28 See Ruggieri, *Chiesa sinodale*, 171 and 188. See also Massimo Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis. Moving Toward Global Catholicity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2020).

29 See Carlos Schickendantz, *El teólogo sinodal. Interacción dialéctica de lugares teológicos y sujetos eclesiales*, in 'Cristianesimo nella Storia,' 39 (2018), 441–69.

30 See Joseph A. Komonchak, *Performative Ecclesiology*, in 'Cristianesimo nella Storia,' 39 (2018), 427–41 in the dossier discussing the book Ruggieri, *Chiesa sinodale*.

31 For Francis's view of the relationship between theologians and the Church, see the message to the conference at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina of 3 September 2015 [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/pont-messages/2015/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150903\\_videomessaggio-teologia-buenos-aires.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/pont-messages/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150903_videomessaggio-teologia-buenos-aires.html).

32 Francis, letter to cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, 1 April 2014 [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/letters/2014/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140401\\_cardinale-baldisseri.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/letters/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140401_cardinale-baldisseri.html).



Francis is not just a form of Church government, but a way of being the Church.<sup>33</sup> This was once again stated by Francis on 9 May 2019 in St John Lateran in a speech to the conference organized by the diocese of Rome: ‘And there are many who leave behind the kerygma, inventing synods and counter-synods ... which are not really synods at all, but just ‘fixes.’ Why? Because a synod requires the presence of the Holy Spirit; and the Holy Spirit kicks over the table and starts all over.’<sup>34</sup>

The history of the Bishops’ Synods celebrated under Francis shows clearly that there is at work an idea of synodality that goes beyond the need to develop a consensus backing a decision. In this sense, the experience of *episcopal synodality* must be seen in its differences from the idea of *episcopal collegiality* developed at Vatican II (especially in *Lumen Gentium*, chapter III) and in the magisterium and praxis of the post-Vatican period. Francis has made clear that the *theological* category of synodality includes, but at the same time also transcends the *juridical* principle of collegiality. In this sense, Francis’s pontificate expresses the disappointments of post-Vatican II ecclesiology with the canonical order of institutions of Church governance.<sup>35</sup>

Besides this episcopal synodality, there is also an ecclesial synodality seen in the way Francis envisioned the publication and reception of *Amoris Laetitia*: a synodal reception of a post-synodal papal document. Francis’s pontificate, his theological emphasis, and his experience of synodality is clearly at the beginning of a new path for the Catholic Church which he acknowledged since his first document, *Evangelii Gaudium*, when he wrote about the ‘infallibilitas in credendo’ (EG 119) of the people of God.<sup>36</sup>

There are also some limits and challenges to Pope Francis’s theology of synodality. These limits must be seen in the actual context of the Catholic Church today, which finds itself in an emergency situation. German theologian and longtime editor of the ‘Denzinger,’ Peter Hünemann, has argued recently that synodality is the only chance to find a way out of the crisis of sexual and financial scandals.<sup>37</sup>

Some limits come from the constraints given by the particular ‘Church politics’ of a pontificate governing in some kind of cohabitation with his living predecessor, ‘pope emeritus’ Benedict XVI, whose role for the implementation of the ecclesiology of Vatican II especially in terms of the style of Church governance can hardly be overstated. Referring to the ecclesial and doctrinal politics of (against) synodality in the 30 years preceding Francis’s elections, Giuseppe Ruggieri affirmed that ‘with the election of Pope

33 See Ruggieri, *Chiesa sinodale*, pp. VI–X.

34 Francesco, *Incontro coi partecipanti al convegno della Diocesi di Roma*, San Giovanni in Laterano, 9 maggio 2019  
[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2019/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190509\\_convegno-diocesi-diroma.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2019/may/documents/papa-francesco_20190509_convegno-diocesi-diroma.html) (translation mine).

35 About this, see Antonio Viana, *Sinodalidad y Derecho Canónico. Un seminario organizado por la Secretaría General del Sínodo de los Obispos*, in ‘Estudios Eclesiásticos,’ 92 (2017), no. 363, pp. 683–701.

36 See Enzo Bianchi, *Il futuro della Chiesa è nella sinodalità*, in ‘L’Osservatore Romano,’ 16 maggio 2019.

37 See Peter Hünemann, *Synodalität—Jus Divinum im Jus humanum*, in ‘Cristianesimo nella Storia,’ 39 (2018), 470–76.

Francis things have changed further, but it will take some time for some wounds to be healed.<sup>38</sup>

But there are also limits and open questions in the assessment of Francis's theology and practice of synodality that are part of his interpretation of the ecclesiology of Vatican II. There are limits in Francis's ambivalence about *collegiality* and *synodality*. One issue that will need clarification concerns the relationship between synodality and the Bishops' Synod, given that the Synod created by Paul VI in 1965 is not an expression of the Church's synodality and not an institution of the Church's synodality. Because of both the structure given to it by Paul VI in 1965 and the ecclesiology of the collegiality of Vatican II, the Bishops' Synod is still a form of the exercise of papal primacy extended to include forms of episcopal collegiality. Making the Bishops' Synod an institution of ecclesial synodality would require some structural changes that go much further than the ones decided by Francis as a listening primacy: in terms of membership (not only bishops and some clergy appointed by the pope) and of overcoming the diarchy between pope and Roman Curia when it is about the government of the universal Church. In other words, the limits of Francis's synodality are part of the problem of 'exiting from the universalist perspective of Vatican II.'<sup>39</sup> Is Francis's synodality part of an ecclesiology of the subject local churches (following Jean-Marie Tillard and Hervé Legrand) or is it a synodality rooted in the sacrament of the holy orders (following Eugenio Corecco)?<sup>40</sup>

Francis's unwillingness to create new institutions of synodality must be seen in the context of his references to the Eastern Orthodox Churches—which is how Francis frames the theme in speeches and theology. This is one way to receive the impulses of Vatican II about Church reform which is open to some developments but not to others, for example regarding the participation of lay people and women and the *potestas iurisdictionis* in a synodal Church.<sup>41</sup> The question is ultimately whether the synodal turn of the Catholic Church can take place without a reform of ecclesiastical structure and therefore without a specific contribution of canon law concerning in particular the Bishops' Synod, the bishops' conferences, and the diocesan pastoral councils.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, there are other limits that are rooted in Francis's ecclesiology of the people. In his 2016 article on the *sensus fidei* in Francis, Chiron correctly acknowledged the steps made by Francis's ecclesiology of synodality, rooted in his dynamic use of the *sensus fidei*: 'We can therefore consider the use of *sensus fidei* only within the framework of a dynamic. If the *sensus fidei* is a given, we have access to it, or rather it manifests itself only through an institutionalized process of speech. No doubt it is necessary to take distance from a static understanding of *consensus fidelium*, understood only as a

38 'Con l'elezione di papa Francesco le cose sono ulteriormente cambiate, ma ci vorrà del tempo perchè alcune ferite vengano rimarginate': Ruggieri, *Chiesa sinodale*, 158.

39 Chiron, *Synodalité et ecclésiologie de l'Église universelle*, 401.

40 About this, see Carlo Fantappiè, *Chiesa e sinodalità: per un confronto con Eugenio Corecco*, in 'Ephemerides Iuris Canonici,' n.s. 58 (2018) 2, pp. 461–78.

41 See Serena Noceti, 'Laici e sinodalità: una parola necessaria,' in *La sinodalità nella vita e nella missione della Chiesa*, 93–105.

42 This thesis in Viana, *Sinodalidad y Derecho Canónico*.

unanimity in a given expression of faith.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Chiron cautiously alerted to the limits of Francis's implementation of synodality. On the one side Chiron made clear the need of giving institutional dimension to synodality: 'the culture of encounter needs to find institutional expression.'<sup>44</sup> Chiron also showed the possible constraints for a truly ecclesial-institutional dimension of synodality in the context of an ecclesiology of the *sensus fidei* where the *sensus fidei* is expressed in the popular piety alone.<sup>45</sup>

It is clear that Francis's synodality developed a primacy of listening to the voice of the peripheries of the Church; yet to be seen is the impact of this kind of synodality for the governance of the Church at the central level in the long run. It is also clear that Francis's synodality is not just about the Bishops' Synod or the diocesan synods or even national synods, but it has a much wider importance as a new modality for living the Church. The question is whether this synodality requires new institutions,<sup>46</sup> or if it suffices to make marginal changes in order to render the existing institutions more attentive. The real issue regards the potential of Francis's pontificate for a reform of ecclesiastical institutions in a synodal way. Is it more a revival of episcopal collegiality in the Bishops' Synod and possibly in the bishops' conferences, or a truly synodal reform of the Church?

This question is not just about Francis's intentions, but more about the present conditions of the global Catholic Church. At six years from the beginning of Francis's pontificate, in the Catholic Church we have not seen a new wave of synodality in the Church at local or national levels. There are a few exceptions, such as the Plenary Council of 2020–21 in Australia (whose distant origins precede the election of Francis to the pontificate), the 'synodal process' in Germany under cardinal Marx, the upcoming Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region in Rome, several synods in France, and the upcoming synod in Liverpool and in Limerick. In the summer of 2019 Francis showed particular attention to the preparations for the 'synodal process' in Germany: 'what we need is much more than structural, organizational, or functional changes'.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, in the Church where the bishop of Rome is primate, Italy, Francis's openness to the project of a national synod has been met with reluctance, if not outright opposition, from the local episcopate.

This suggests that any proposal for synodality must consider the need to look at reform not just in the institutional church at three levels—universal or global, continental/national, and local—but must also look at the situation of global Catholicism today. Some of the new forms of Catholic ecclesial communities (the lay movements and new

43 'On ne peut donc envisager le recours au *sensus fidei* que dans le cadre d'une dynamique. Si le *sensus fidei* est bien un donné, on y a accès, ou plutôt il ne se manifeste, que par un processus, processus de parole institutionnalisée. Sans doute faut-il prendre ses distances par rapport à une compréhension statique du *consensus fidelium*, entendu seulement comme une unanimité dans une expression donnée de la foi': Jean-François Chiron, 'Sensus fidei et vision de l'Église chez le Pape François,' *Recherches de Science Religieuses*, 2016/2, tome 104: 187–205, cit. 204.

44 'La culture de la rencontre demande à être institutionnalisée': Ivi, 199.

45 See ivi, 201.

46 About this, see Severino Dianich, 'Dalla teologia della sinodalità alla riforma della normativa canonica,' in *La sinodalità nella vita e nella missione della Chiesa*, 71–82.

47 See the 29 June 2019 'Letter to the journeying people of God in Germany' [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/letters/2019/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190629\\_lettera-fedeligermania.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/letters/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190629_lettera-fedeligermania.html).

ecclesial communities; the split between different liturgical traditions in the Roman rite) have remained impermeable to the ecclesiological discourse on collegiality and synodality, and have developed their own ecclesiology that made them flourish also because of their rejection of the emphasis on institutional reform, and at the same time because of an idea of Christian community that relies more on charisma than on Church leadership legitimized by collegial and synodal practices.

One of the signs of our times is the deep distrust of institutions, including ecclesiastical institutions. Any project for a synodal reform must take into account the real situation: the multi-culturalization of Christianity in the global world takes place at the same time of the crisis of globalization, with a Catholic Church and world both more tribal and polarized than during the early post-Vatican II period. This is one of the major differences between the Catholic Church of Francis's pontificate and when the ecclesiological debate on synodality started, in a different post-Vatican II moment.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Author biography**

Massimo Faggioli is full professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova University (Philadelphia). His most recent publications include the books: *Catholicism and Citizenship: Political Cultures of the Church in the Twenty-First Century* (Liturgical, 2017); *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis: Moving toward Global Catholicity* (Orbis, 2020).