


The Holy Spirit as the Protagonist of the Synod: Pope Francis's Creative Reception of the Second Vatican Council

Jos Moons, SJ 
KU Leuven, Belgium

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Abstract

This article argues that Pope Francis's conviction that the Holy Spirit guides the synodal journey represents a creative reception of the Second Vatican Council. By highlighting the Spirit's agency, Francis offers an alternative to *Lumen Gentium's* often ornamental pneumatology. While thus confirming the council's theological rather than institutional understanding of the church, he complements its christocentric focus. Moreover, by imagining synodality as a journey of dialogical listening and discerning, the pope emphasizes the practical dimension of ecclesiology, something that recalls the council's pastoral spirit.

Keywords

ecclesiology, *Geistvergessenheit*, journey, listening, *Lumen Gentium*, pneumatology, Pope Francis, reception, synodality

The synodal ecclesial renewal that Pope Francis is inviting the church to is commonly interpreted as a creative reception of the Second Vatican Council. Just as the council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, spoke about the whole church first and only afterwards about specific roles, namely, the

Corresponding author:

Jos Moons, KU Leuven, Sint-Michielsstraat 4, Box 3100, Leuven 3000, Belgium.
Email: jos.moons@kuleuven.be

hierarchy and the laity, so too did the first phase of the synodal journey consist in listening to all the baptized.¹ Yet while there are grounds for claiming continuity with the council and with previous popes, as Francis does in *Episcopalis Communio*,² synodality in its current form represents renewal too. The International Theological Commission spoke in 2018 of “a momentous and new teaching the Magisterium has offered us on this subject in the wake of Vatican II,” and Myriam Wijlens explained in 2017 that, by highlighting the *sensus fidei fidelium*, the pope relocated collegiality within the people of God.³ Similar changes occur in the area of ecclesial practice, for the virtue of obedience is now complemented by the virtue of speaking out, to mention but one example.⁴ Theologians like Ernesto Cavassa, Carlos Galli, and Rafael Luciani argue that Francis’s synodal vision cannot be understood without considering the Latin American synodal tradition.⁵ Arguably, therefore, Francis’s reception of the council is a creative one.

In this article, I will talk about synodality and the pope’s creative reception of the council with a particular focus, namely, the Holy Spirit. According to Francis, synodality is ultimately a matter of the Spirit, who, as the pope once said, is “always the great ‘protagonist’ of the Church’s life.”⁶ Therefore, the synodal process is about following the Spirit’s guidance and about listening to the Spirit’s voice. This represents a

1. *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (hereafter cited as *LG*). For an authoritative commentary on its structure, see the *Ordinatio totius schematis* in the “Relatio adiuncta de problemate ordinationis materiae,” *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, vol. 3/1 (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1973), 334–35.
2. Francis, “Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio*, on the Synod of Bishops” (September 15, 2018), §§2–7, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html.
3. International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church” (March 2, 2018), §2, see also §5, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html; and Myriam Wijlens, “Reforming the Church by Hitting the Reset Button: Reconfiguring Collegiality within Synodality because of *sensus fidei fidelium*,” *The Canonist* 8, no. 2 (2017): 235–61.
4. See Jos Moons, “A Comprehensive Introduction to Synodality: Reconfiguring Ecclesiology and Ecclesial Practice,” *Annals of Theology (Roczniki Teologiczne)* 69, no. 2 (2022): 73–93, <https://doi.org/10.18290/rt22692.5>.
5. See for example Ernesto Cavassa, “Un Papa en la estela de Aparecida,” *Páginas* no. 230 (2013): 6–13; Carlos María Galli, “Synodalität in der Kirche Lateinamerikas,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 196, no. 1 (2016): 73–96; and Rafael Luciani, “La reforma como conversión pastoral y sinodal. Ecclesiogénesis de una recepción conciliar,” in *Reforma de estructuras y conversión de mentalidades. Retos y desafíos para una Iglesia Sinodal*, ed. Rafael Luciani and Carlos Schickendantz (Madrid: Khaf, 2020), 173–202. For general background, see Ernesto Valiente, “The Reception of Vatican II in Latin America,” *Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (2012): 795–823, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056391207300403>.
6. Francis, “Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome” (September 18, 2021), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html>.

creative reception of the council on various accounts. With what one may call his “bold pneumatology,” Francis offers an alternative to the often-ornamental pneumatology that characterized *Lumen Gentium*. Further, by highlighting the Spirit’s agency, the pope takes up *Lumen Gentium*’s theological rather than institutional perspective, yet with a particular pneumatological focus that complements christocentric understandings of the church. Finally, in a way that recalls the council’s pastoral style, the pope highlights synodality as a practice: a dialogical journey of listening and discerning together that has the Spirit as its deepest foundation. In what follows, I will first present Francis’s view on the Spirit’s role in the synodal journey and then elaborate how it constitutes a creative reception of the council. In the conclusion I will highlight the promise of this perspective—namely, a dynamic church wherein God’s love and guidance are the ultimate reality.

The Spirit’s Active Involvement in the Synod

Pope Francis strongly believes in the Holy Spirit’s active involvement in the synod.⁷ The Spirit speaks, guides, surprises, frees, saves, and so on. These convictions one finds in various key texts on synodality, such as the groundbreaking and often referenced address for the commemoration of the institution of the Synod of Bishops (2015), the pope’s address to the faithful of his home diocese—Rome—prior to the opening of the Synod 2021–2024 (2021), the address for the opening of the synod (2021), the homily at the Eucharist the next day, and the interview book published by Austen Ivereigh in 2020, *Let Us Dream*.⁸

For example, in the September 18, 2021, address—which features about forty references to the Spirit—the pope highlighted listening and related it to the Holy Spirit: “This process was conceived as an exercise in mutual listening. I want to emphasize this. . . . It is not about garnering opinions, not a survey, but a matter of listening to the Holy Spirit.” He explained this with the help of various examples: Elijah, who encountered God in the surprising form of a whisper, which suggests that the listener needs to be open to surprises; and Peter and Paul who, in the Acts of the Apostles, “were disciples of the Holy Spirit, who showed them the geography of salvation, opening doors and windows, breaking down walls, shattering chains and opening frontiers.”⁹ Peter,

7. Pope Francis’s faith in the Holy Spirit is not limited to synodality, yet an exploration of consistencies and specificities in other areas is beyond the scope of this article.

8. Francis, “Address Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops” (October 17, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html; Francis, “Address on the Occasion of the Moment of Reflection for the Beginning of the Synodal Journey” (October 9, 2021), <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/10/09/211009a.html>; Francis, “Homily at the Opening of the Synodal Path” (October 10, 2021), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html>; Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future. Pope Francis in Conversation with Austen Ivereigh* (London: Simon Schuster, 2020); synodality is discussed at 81–94.

9. Francis, “Address to the Faithful.”

Paul, and Cornelius faced various problems and differences of opinion, yet, liberating them and opening their minds, the Spirit showed them the way forward. For Francis, that comes as no surprise, for “that is how the Spirit works. . . . The Spirit is always the great ‘protagonist’ of the Church’s life.”¹⁰

According to the pope, that is true still: the Spirit guides us also in the current synodal process. Yet, he can only do so if we are willing to really listen. Francis concluded by saying, “I came here to encourage you to take this synodal process seriously and to tell you that the Holy Spirit needs you. It is true: the Holy Spirit needs us. Listen to him by listening to each other. Leave no one behind or excluded.”¹¹

From these sources, one may detect various pneumatological convictions. The first is the general, unspecified conviction that the Spirit is actively involved. On various occasions, Francis has called the Spirit the “protagonist” of both the church and the synod.¹² Other general descriptions of the Spirit include phrases like “the working of the Holy Spirit” and “He will always be with us.”¹³ Finally, the pope spoke about the faithful as having been “anointed by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴

Statements like these are not pious abstractions, for they are usually alternated with quite specific descriptions of the Spirit’s actions. The most frequent among these concrete activities is that of the Spirit speaking, which logically coincides with the call to listen. On September 18, 2021, the pope ended a short discussion on the prophet Balaam with the conclusion that “this story teaches us to trust that the Spirit will always make his voice heard We need but rely on the Holy Spirit, who uses all of creation to speak to us.”¹⁵ Francis likes to refer to the text from the book of Revelation: “Whoever has ought to hear what the Spirit says to the church” (Rv 2:7, NABRE). Sometimes he does so explicitly; at other moments, he simply alludes it—for example, by exhorting: “Let the Spirit speak to us.”¹⁶ The Spirit is also said to give the gift of

10. Francis, “Address to the Faithful.” Qualifying the Spirit as the “great” protagonist makes more sense if the English text had followed the original Italian version in which the pope also called the faithful “protagonists,” explaining that all have a part to play.

11. Francis, “Address to the Faithful.”

12. For example, “The Spirit is always the great ‘protagonist’ of the Church’s life,” and “indeed, the final ‘document’ [in Acts 15] presents the Spirit as the protagonist in the process of decision-making” (Francis, “Address to the Faithful”); and “The Synod is an ecclesial event and its protagonist is the Holy Spirit” (Francis, “Beginning of the Synodal Journey”).

13. Francis, “Address to the Faithful.” Some of Francis’s other descriptions of the Spirit include: “The Spirit of truth” (Francis, “Anniversary Synod of Bishops”); “God’s breath of life” (Francis, “Address to the Faithful”); “The ever new breath of God” (Francis, “Beginning of the Synodal Journey”); and “The presence of the Holy Spirit” (Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, 86).

14. Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, 84. The pope does not speak about the Spirit’s indwelling in the faithful, seemingly preferring more dynamic verbs such as the Spirit speaking and listening. See the main text of the article.

15. Francis, “Address to the Faithful.”

16. Francis, “Address to the Faithful.” For explicit references, see Francis, “Anniversary Synod of Bishops,” in addition to other places in his “Address to the Faithful.” Among the more

listening.¹⁷ God's speaking and our listening is one of the key themes in all the pope says and is also related to God in general: "That is how God speaks to us. We need to open our ears to hear that tiny whispering sound, the gentle breeze of God."¹⁸

The second key theme is the Spirit directing or guiding the church. Francis exhorted the faithful in Rome to "journey together: the Spirit will lead you; trust in the Spirit."¹⁹ At the beginning of the synodal journey, the pope reassured the church by pointing out that "the Spirit will guide us and give us the grace to move forward together" and by explaining that the synod is "a grace-filled event, a process of healing guided by the Spirit."²⁰ This includes the Spirit setting things in motion: "Movement is the fruit of docility to the Holy Spirit, who directs this history, in which all have a part to play, in which all are restless, never standing still."²¹

As the Spirit's leadership is real, the Spirit's action may surprise or be new. On October 9, 2021, Francis recalled that "the Holy Spirit guides us where God wants us to be, not to where our own ideas and personal tastes would lead us."²² Therefore, "participating in a Synod means . . . discovering with amazement that the Holy Spirit always surprises us, to suggest fresh paths and new ways of speaking."²³ Words like "surprise" and "change," which are used several times,²⁴ relate to the Spirit's liberating work: "We need the Spirit, the ever new breath of God, who sets us free from every

implicit references are these: "Come, Spirit of love, open our hearts to hear your voice!" and "The church is open to the voice of the Spirit" (Francis, "Beginning of the Synodal Journey"); "Hearing what the Spirit wants to say to the Church" (Francis, "Homily"); "Walking together, listening to what the Spirit has to say to the Church" (Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, 90).

17. See, for example: "For the Synod Fathers we ask the Holy Spirit first of all for the gift of listening" (Francis, "Anniversary Synod of Bishops"); "The Spirit will guide us and give us the grace . . . to listen to one another" (Francis, "Beginning of the Synodal Journey").
18. Francis, "Address to the Faithful."
19. Francis, "Address to the Faithful."
20. Francis, "Beginning of the Synodal Journey," and Francis, "Homily." For other references, see: "The Holy Spirit . . . directs this history," and, "Guided by the Holy Spirit, you will be in constant dialogue among yourselves, but also in dialogue with the Holy Spirit" (Francis, "Address to the Faithful"); and "paths the Spirit is showing us" (Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, 91).
21. Francis, "Address to the Faithful." Cf. the connection being made between "an impulse that drove them," and "They were disciples of the Holy Spirit." See also: "We can see the Spirit driving Peter to go to the house of Cornelius" (Francis, "Address to the Faithful").
22. Francis, "Beginning of the Synodal Journey."
23. Francis, "Beginning of the Synodal Journey."
24. See, for example: "They were disciples of the Holy Spirit . . . This may mean setting out, changing course, leaving behind certain ideas that hold us back and prevent us from setting out and walking together" (Francis, "Address to the Faithful"); "May we be pilgrims in love with the Gospel and open to the surprises of the Holy Spirit" (Francis, "Homily"); and "Ours is a God of Surprises, who is always ahead of us" (Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, 93). The idea of a God who surprises is always spoken about more generally, see: "Thus the prophet Elijah came to realize that God is always a God of surprises, even in the way he passes by and makes himself felt" and "Don't be disheartened; be prepared for surprises" (Francis, "Address to the Faithful").

form of self-absorption, revives what is moribund, loosens shackles and spreads joy.”²⁵ Without such an openness to new perspectives, the church would “keep the Spirit in a cage” and in so doing “demean” the Holy Spirit.²⁶ On October 9, 2021, Francis ended his reflection with a prayer and a wish for renewal: “Come, Holy Spirit! You inspire new tongues and place words of life on our lips: keep us from becoming a ‘museum Church,’ beautiful but mute, with much past and little future,” and concluded with the traditional prayer: “Come, Holy Spirit of holiness, renew the holy and faithful People of God! Come, Creator Spirit, renew the face of the earth! Amen.”²⁷

In *Let Us Dream*, Francis enriches the list of the Spirit’s activities with an inward, spiritual dimension.²⁸ The pope explains that the moments of silence during synod sessions were meant “to allow those in attendance to be better aware of the motions of the Holy Spirit.”²⁹ The Ignatian technical term “motions” refers to one’s interior thoughts and feelings that need sifting, that is, discernment.³⁰ From an Ignatian perspective, synodality can be thought of as a form of communal discernment: discerning together by means of conversation, prayer, and growing clarity about what is of God and what is not.³¹ Indeed, Francis is aware that the “bad spirit” will be present at synods to discourage and to prevent moving forward: “Wherever the Spirit of God is present, so, too, are temptations to silence it or distract from it. (If the Spirit weren’t present, those forces wouldn’t bother.) We saw the bad spirit in some of the ‘noise’ outside the synod hall, as well as within it.”³²

In that context, the Holy Spirit (or “Good Spirit”) acts in two ways.³³ First, the Spirit exposes: “This is one of the gifts of the Spirit in the synod process: to unmask

25. Francis, “Beginning of the Synodal Journey.” See also: “The Spirit overcomes Peter’s resistance and opens a new chapter of missionary history. That is how the Spirit works” (Francis, “Address to the Faithful”).

26. Francis, “Address to the Faithful.”

27. Francis, “Beginning of the Synodal Journey.” Cf. the exhortation earlier in the same address: “For a ‘different Church,’ a Church open to the newness that God wants to suggest, let us with greater fervour and frequency invoke the Holy Spirit and humbly listen to him, journeying together as he, the source of communion and mission, desires: with docility and courage.”

28. For hints elsewhere, see what the pope says on “inner restlessness” (Francis, “Address to the Faithful”), and on discernment, dialogue, and change (Francis, “Homily”).

29. Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, 85.

30. For background, see José García de Castro, “Moción,” in *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana*, vol. 2, ed. Javier Melloni et al. (Bilbao: Mensajero, 2007), 1265–69. For an elaboration of what discernment means for ecclesiology, see Jos Moons, “Synodality and Discernment: The Affective Reconfiguration of the Church,” *Studia Canonica* 56 (2022): 379–93.

31. See Jacques Haers, “A Synodal Process on Synodality: Synodal Missionary Journeying and Common Apostolic Discernment,” *Louvain Studies* 43, no. 3 (2020): 215–38, <https://doi.org/10.2143/LS.43.3.3288705>.

32. Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, 85.

33. For “Good Spirit,” see Ivereigh, 92. The Ignatian tradition distinguishes between a good and a bad angel and a good and a bad spirit. It is common to correlate the good spirit/angel (more or less) with the Holy Spirit.

agendas and hidden ideologies.”³⁴ The Spirit’s second contribution is to show the way forward by creating a breakthrough in the communal discernment. This Francis likes to call “overflow.” Francis explains that true and humble dialogue “causes to pour forth, as if from an overflowing fountain, the answers that formerly the contraposition didn’t let us see.”³⁵ Harmony is another image for the same outcome, which the pope explicitly links with the Spirit: “in the dynamic of a synod, differences are expressed and polished until you reach, if not consensus, a harmony that holds on to the sharp notes of its differences. . . . The one who brings about that harmony is the Holy Spirit.”³⁶ This work of the Spirit is quite real. For example, Francis testifies that when the Synod on the Family was stuck, “The Spirit saved us in the end, in a breakthrough. . . . This was the great breakthrough the Spirit brought us: a better synthesis of truth and mercy in a fresh understanding drawn from within our Tradition.”³⁷

Francis’s Pneumatology and *Lumen Gentium*

The first aspect of Francis’s creative and promising reception of Vatican II has to do with his view of the Spirit in relation to synodality sketched so far. One may qualify that view as a “bold pneumatology,” as the pope imagines the Spirit as prominently and actively involved in the church. Such a bold pneumatology is a creative reception of *Lumen Gentium*, for while the document is usually hailed for its pneumatological renewal, it is, in fact, just the beginning of such a renewal. It occasionally describes the Spirit as actively involved and usually treats the Spirit as somewhat secondary, and, in so doing, it suffers from *Geistvergessenheit*.

The term *Geistvergessenheit* refers to two different phenomena with the shared characteristic of failing to appreciate the Holy Spirit. Otto Dilschneider, who coined the term, explained that either the Spirit is simply not mentioned or the references to the Spirit are embellishments without a real significance for the argument.³⁸ Examples reflecting the latter are soteriologies and ecclesiologies that “add ‘I believe in the Holy Spirit’ as if it were an appendix.”³⁹ Kilian McDonnell criticizes the imbalanced focus on Christ as “the problem of the improper subordination of the Spirit to the Son.”⁴⁰

34. Ivereigh, 86; see also 91. Here the pope criticizes both conservative rigidity and progressive certainty.

35. Ivereigh, 80, explained at 80–83.

36. Ivereigh, 81. For theological elaboration, see Carlos María Galli, “El don desbordante del Espíritu en el pueblo de Dios. La comunión sinodal y misionera en las Iglesias regionales,” in *Sinodalidad y reforma. Un desafío eclesial*, ed. Rafael Luciani, Serena Noceti, and Carlos Schickendantz (Madrid: PPC, 2022), 79–114.

37. Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, 88.

38. Otto Dilschneider, “Die Geistvergessenheit der Theologie. Epilog zur Diskussion über den historischen Jesus und kerygmatischen Christus,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 86, no. 4 (1961): 255–66.

39. Dilschneider, 266.

40. Kilian McDonnell, *The Other Hand of God: The Holy Spirit as the Universal Touch and Goal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 86–90. McDonnell speaks also of the Spirit’s “junior status” and “excessive instrumentalization” (these are general comments that are not specifically related to *Lumen Gentium*).

While *Lumen Gentium* cannot be accused of the first type of *Geistvergesenheit* as it regularly mentions the Spirit, it does suffer from the second type of pneumatological poverty.

A couple of examples may clarify this.⁴¹ In the first place, the council's ecclesiology has a strong christocentric tendency. To mention but one example, *Lumen Gentium*'s trinitarian introduction, which situates the church in the context of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (LG, §§2–4), comes after an earlier, highly christocentric introduction that understands the synod's and the church's mission almost exclusively from Christ (LG, §1). After celebrating Christ as the light of the nations, the text specifies that the council wishes to share Christ's light with all of humanity, that Christ's light shines on the face of the church, and that the church is "in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race," with a minor reference to the Spirit and to the Father (*Deo*).⁴²

Second, the christocentric tendency is also visible in the way *Lumen Gentium* builds up its argument. The argumentative function of the references to the Spirit is usually clarifying and not foundational. They do not belong to the core of the argument and, therefore, can be removed from the text without harm. One might say, they are not "of ultimate concern."⁴³ For example, the council qualified itself in the constitution's opening sentence as "gathered in the Holy Spirit." From an argumentative point of view, the adverbial clause "in the Holy Spirit," which specifies the verb "gathered," is clarifying. It is a side commentary. The real issue here is that Christ is the light of the nations and that the council wants to share that light with humanity.⁴⁴ By contrast, when §12 claims that "the Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the people of God" and specifies that he does so not only by ministries and virtues but also by distributing *charismata*—after which it elaborates the latter—it is clear that the references to the Spirit have a foundational function. They belong to the core of the argument.

The fact that the Spirit's role is usually clarifying rather than foundational is consistent with the "spirit" of the council. The *Acta Synodalia* and testimonies in council diaries all point in the same direction: the Holy Spirit ranked low in the hierarchy of priorities of the council fathers. Chapter 7 on eschatology and the saints, "The Eschatological Character of the Pilgrim Church and Its Unity with the Heavenly

41. For an extensive treatment of *Lumen Gentium*'s pneumatology, see Jos Moons, *The Holy Spirit, the Church, and Pneumatological Renewal: Mystici Corporis, Lumen Gentium and Beyond* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 104–45.

42. Cf. the Latin text: "*Lumen gentium cum sit Christus, haec Sacrosancta Synodus, in Spiritu Sancto congregata, omnes homines claritate Eius, super faciem Ecclesiae resplendentem, illuminare vehementer exoptat, omni creaturae Evangelium annuntiando . . . Cum autem Ecclesia sit in Christo veluti sacramentum seu signum et instrumentum intimae cum Deo unionis totiusque generis humani unitatis.*"

43. For a detailed argumentative analysis of *Lumen Gentium* as a whole, see Moons, *The Holy Spirit, the Church, and Pneumatological Renewal*, 129–34. The examples that follow are drawn from pages 17–18.

44. For context, see the Latin text quoted in note 42.

Church,” may serve as an example. It now features a substantial number of Spirit references, but the first draft of the current text featured only one.⁴⁵ Maronite Archbishop Ignace Ziadé fiercely criticized the text as severely deficient: “The scope of my note is simple: how is it possible to discuss the eschatological dimension of our vocation without ever mentioning the mission of the Holy Spirit?”⁴⁶ Christopher Butler, Abbot of Downside Abbey in England, spoke about the quasi-absence of the Spirit in considerably softer terms as one of the text’s weaknesses, which he considered easy to mend.⁴⁷ They were the only two. Other interventions pleaded for a more communal and cosmic approach that also thematized life on earth, while still others wished for the traditional topics of purgatory and hell to be included. While the Spirit-related comments were heard and led to a substantial number of textual additions, they did not lead to consistency. The additions in which the Spirit was mentioned were inserted into existing text, which resulted in a text marked by the same tension between Christ-focused text fragments and more trinitarian ones as we saw between *Lumen Gentium*, §1 and §§2–4.⁴⁸

Stating that the Holy Spirit was not a major concern for the council fathers is not a reproach. The council fathers dealt with important issues such as an openness to—and solidarity with—the contemporary world, active participation, the people of God, collegiality, ecumenism, and so on. Even a council can only handle so much. It does, however, mean that there is room for improvement. In this regard, most of the Spirit statements by Pope Francis analyzed above are a step forward, for what is being said about the Spirit is often foundational. The Spirit’s presence and actions are decisive for what is being elaborated. Their argumentative function is foundational.

This may be illustrated with the help of the October 9, 2021, address—held on the occasion of the opening of the synodal process—which both opens and concludes with references to the Spirit. The opening lines read:

Thank you for being here for the opening of the Synod. You have come by many different roads and from different Churches, each bearing your own questions and hopes. I am certain the Spirit will guide us and give us the grace to move forward together, to listen to one another and to embark on a discernment of the times in which we are living, in solidarity with the struggles and aspirations of all humanity. I want to say again that the Synod is not a parliament or an opinion poll; the Synod is an ecclesial event and its protagonist is the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit is not present, there will be no Synod.⁴⁹

45. The redaction history of chapter 7 is particularly complex. Here, I refer to the text discussed at the beginning of the Third Period; see *Acta Synodalia* III/1, 336–41, and cf. 341–52. For an overview of the redaction history, see Moons, *The Holy Spirit, the Church, and Pneumatological Renewal*, 270–86.

46. *Acta Synodalia*, III/1, 389–90.

47. *Acta Synodalia*, III/1, 420–21. Cf. the Latin text: “*Textus huius capituli, sicut iacet, in genere placet. Habet autem aliquos defectus, quae per emendationes sanandos duco, et emendationes secretariatus transmittam.*” In the written text, the author specified that mending the defects is “by the way, not difficult” (*ceterum non difficiles*).

48. For example, see the contrast in *LG*, §48, between the opening sentences 1 and 2–3.

49. Francis, “Beginning of the Synodal Journey.”

It is as if, at the beginning of the synodal journey, Francis puts the priorities right. Synodality starts with God, or rather, the Holy Spirit, and is, therefore, different from a parliament. He is the main character—the protagonist—and he guides the process while providing the graces that are needed. Clearly, the Spirit is of ultimate concern. Or, in terms of argumentative function, the references to the Spirit are foundational.

The references to the Spirit in the conclusion of the address have a foundational function too. Here the pope expresses the hope that the synod might be “a true season of the Spirit.” Inviting the faithful to invoke the Spirit and to listen to him, Francis explains that “the Holy Spirit guides us where God wants us to be, not to where our own ideas and personal tastes would lead us.” All of this implies the Spirit’s significance. Without the Spirit, how would we be set free, how would we be guided where God wants us, and how, therefore, would the synodal journey make sense?

One might observe that Francis is not a professional theologian and suggest that, consequently, his imagination of the Holy Spirit is probably intuitive and maybe naïve.⁵⁰ After all, trinitarian theology traditionally recommends being cautious when attributing actions to specific divine persons. The “*ad extra* rule” stipulates that God’s outward salvific actions cannot be separated (*indivisa sunt*). It is complemented by the “appropriation rule,” which states that activities can be attributed to one of the divine persons—as this makes sense to the human mind—but that activities are not proper, unique characteristics by which one may distinguish the persons among themselves. That is different from God’s divine action *ad intra*: only the Father is the origin of the Son and the Spirit.

However, for the past century or so, there has been an intense debate over these two rules, especially in view of how God has actually revealed himself—the *oikonomia*. Reputable theologians like Karl Rahner, Heribert Mühlen, and Catherine Mowry LaCugna have argued for reimagining the above-mentioned *ad extra* and appropriation rules in such a way that they protect not only divine unity but also the divine Trinity.⁵¹ That is especially important for the Spirit, as the Father already has the distinctiveness of the absolute beginning—the *arche* or source—and as the Son is the only one who incarnates. Arguably, therefore, Francis’s somewhat intuitive imagination of the Spirit fits well with (some) modern scholarship.

Moreover, within the Catholic tradition one already finds examples of texts that actually present the Spirit as actor, such as the *Adsumus* prayer, which has been

50. Cf. Victor Codina, “El Espíritu Santo en Francisco,” *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 35, no. 104 (2018): 153–67, <https://doi.org/10.51378/rlt.v35i104.5735>. Codina thematizes the fact that the pope is not a professional theologian at 153–54 and 166–67.

51. Karl Rahner, “Bemerkungen zum dogmatischen Traktat ‘De Trinitate,’” in *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 4 (Einsiedeln: Benzinger, 1960), 103–33, reworked and translated as Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1997); Heribert Mühlen, *Der heilige Geist als Person. Beitrag zur Frage nach der dem heiligen Geiste eigentümlichen Funktion in der Trinität, bei der Inkarnation und im Gnadenbund*, 2nd ed. (Münster: Aschendorff, 1966); Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity & Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

suggested as a particularly fitting prayer for the synodal journey.⁵² The prayer addresses the Spirit directly, requesting, “make Yourself at home in our hearts,” “teach us the way we must go,” “do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path,” and so on. Liturgical scholar Martin Klöckener notes that it is highly unusual for the Latin tradition to address the Spirit in this way but that it is one of the characteristics of the Spanish Visigoth tradition. He concludes that “a Church gathering that opens with this prayer is particularly insistent on the action of the Holy Spirit. From him alone does it expect its help and enlightenment.”⁵³

Some of the current texts on synodality provide further examples of the type of bold pneumatology found in Pope Francis and the *Adsumus* prayer. These include the “Preparatory Document” and the *Vademecum* published by the Secretariat for the Synod, which coordinates the synodal process.⁵⁴ In both documents, the Secretariat formulated one of the key questions in terms of what steps the Spirit is “inviting” the church to take.⁵⁵ And the Preparatory Document explicitly states that the Spirit “prepares surprises,” that the Spirit “has guided the Church’s journey through history and today calls us to be together, witnesses of God’s love,” and that the Spirit “liberally bestows” gifts and charisms for building up the church and humanity.⁵⁶

In a similar spirit, Ormond Rush concludes his article on synodality and Francis’s inverted pyramid with some sentences that speak of the Holy Spirit’s active and foundational involvement. According to Rush, “full implementation of Vatican II’s vision of a truly Trinitarian church would allow the breath of the Holy Spirit to blow through all dimensions of the church’s life. . . . [The *sensus fidei*] is the privileged means through which the Spirit whispers divine guidance to the church regarding the

52. The *Adsumus* Prayer. This is a prayer of invocation to the Holy Spirit for an ecclesial assembly of governance or discernment (thus synodal), <https://www.synod.va/en/what-is-the-synod-21-24/the-adsumus-prayer.html>.

53. Martin Klöckener, “La prière d’ouverture des conciles ‘Adsumus’: de l’Espagne wisigothique à la liturgie Romaine d’après Vatican II,” in *La prière liturgique: Conférences Saint-Serge, 47^e semaine d’études liturgiques, Paris 27–30 Juin 2000*, ed. Achille M. Triacca and Alessandro Pistoia (Rome: Edizione Liturgiche, 2001), 165–98 at 184. See also: “The *Adsumus* prayer is addressed to the Holy Spirit (*Le destinataire . . . est l’Esprit Saint*), which is unusual in the celebrant’s prayers of the Latin liturgy and in most Eastern liturgies, but more common in the Visigothic liturgy” (179).

54. Secretariat to the Synod, “Preparatory Document” (September 7, 2021), <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-preparatory-document.html>, and, “*Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality: Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches” (September 7, 2021), <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html>. The former provides theological foundations, while the latter is a more practical document.

55. “Preparatory Document,” §2, repeated in §26: “A basic question prompts and guides us: How does this ‘journeying together,’ which takes place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?” See also the *Vademecum*, §5.3.

56. “Preparatory Document,” §2.

meaning of the Gospel in an increasingly complex world.”⁵⁷ And Myriam Wijlens likes to tell the story of her conversation with a diocesan bishop on pastoral councils, which he considered a waste of time. Central to the story is her question, “Do you believe that the Holy Spirit is subsequently working in these people to whom you gave the sacrament [of confirmation]?”⁵⁸ That question, too, hints at an active, foundational involvement of the Spirit in the church.

Ecclesiological Tensions

Francis’s bold imagination of the Spirit has ecclesiological implications, especially for the tension within Roman Catholic ecclesiology between an institutional concern that focuses on the church itself, especially its organization, and a theological concern that distinguishes between God and the church, with a radical priority of the former. We have seen that tension very much in action during the twentieth century. In the early twentieth century, various strands of mystical body ecclesiology made an effort to overcome the so-called *societas* ecclesiology, with its typical institutional focus, by imagining the church from a theological perspective, namely as the body of Christ.⁵⁹ As the Belgian Jesuit theologian Émile Mersch states in the opening sentences of his ecclesiological treatise, “The church can be studied by looking at itself: this is the way it is usually studied. But it can also be studied by looking at Christ: that is how it will be studied in these pages.”⁶⁰

The question, however, was how consistent that focus on Christ was. For Mersch, the focus on Christ meant that it only made sense to discuss the church after first having reflected on Christ, the incarnation, salvation, and the Trinity. Moreover, he made a distinction between the church and the body of Christ, considering them “very neighboring realities” but not the same.⁶¹ In its canonized form, however, mystical body ecclesiology remained very much institution focused. In his 1943 encyclical letter *Mystici Corporis*, Pius XII not only explained that the mystical body and the Roman Catholic Church are fully overlapping realities (“To define and describe this true Church of Jesus Christ—which is the Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman

57. Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid,” 325.

58. See Myriam Wijlens, “‘The Church of God Is Convoked in Synod’: Theological and Canonical Challenges concerning the 2021–2023 Synod,” *Centro Pro Unione Semi-Annual Bulletin* 100 (Fall 2021): 86–106, at 106, <https://www.prounione.it/digital-bulletin/100-fall-2021.html#page=1>.

59. For a helpful introduction to the topic, see Edward P. Hahnenberg, “The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology: Historical Parallels,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2005): 3–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002114000507000101>.

60. Émile Mersch, *La théologie du corps mystique*, vol. 2 (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1944), 195; cf. the original French text: “On peut étudier l’Église en la considérant elle-même: c’est ainsi qu’on l’étudie d’ordinaire. Mais on peut aussi l’étudier en considérant le Christ: c’est ainsi qu’on l’étudiera dans ces pages.” There was in fact a variety of approaches to the mystical body, this being the more open-minded one.

61. See Mersch, *La théologie du corps mystique*, 196.

Church—we shall find nothing more noble, more sublime, and more divine than the expression ‘the Mystical Body of Christ’”), but he also stressed the role of the hierarchical dimension of the body—for example, considering it self-evident “that those who exercise sacred power in this Body are its chief members.”⁶²

By contrast, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, prioritized the christological perspective. Instead of correlating the light of the peoples with the church—“*lumen gentium cum sit Ecclesia*,” as an early text version had done—the final text distinguished between these. The words “light of the nations” were linked to Christ, with the church being called to reflect that light.⁶³ In the subsequent paragraphs, it developed this christocentric theological perspective into a trinitarian one (*LG*, §§2–4). The theological priority is also visible in notions such as the church as a sacrament and as a pilgrim people, for they imply that the church’s origin, goal, and endpoint are beyond its institutions and structures, although other text fragments have a much more institutional focus, especially in chapter 3 on the hierarchical dimension of the church.

After the council, we have witnessed an increasingly institution-focused concern, as is evidenced by the stress on the church as a hierarchical communion during the Extraordinary Synod (1985) or the distinction between the Roman Catholic Church and “ecclesial communities” in *Dominus Iesus* (2000). But with synodality in the form that is currently promoted, namely the people of God being on a journey and trying to hear the voice of the Spirit, the pendulum swings back once again to a more theological perspective. The church is supposed to listen to what the Spirit tells it and to go where the Spirit guides it.

These convictions one finds among others in the often-referenced address at the commemoration of the institution of the Synod of Bishops on October 17, 2015. After developing the people of God and the *sensus fidelium*, Francis ended the first part of his reflection by singing the praises of a listening church. Stressing that all are learning and that all are listening, he introduced the Holy Spirit as the one to whom we are ultimately listening. Obviously, the pope did not forget hierarchical leadership, but it should henceforth be understood within a synodal framework: “Synodality, as a constitutive element of the church, offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself.”⁶⁴ Here, we find Francis introducing the

62. Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi* (June 29, 1943), https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi.html. Translation adapted on the basis of the Latin text.

63. For this reading, see the testimony by Gerard Philips, the main editor of *Lumen Gentium*, who also claims that he made the change: “The opening sentence proclaims that it is not the Church, but Christ, who is the light of the world: the Church is only a reflection of him. I have tacitly changed the title by Cardinal Suenens in this manner proposed”; in *Carnets conciliaires de Mgr Gérard Philips, secrétaire adjoint de la Commission Doctrinale. Texte néerlandais avec traduction française et commentaires. Avec une introduction par L. Declerck*, ed. Karim Schelkens (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 98. For background, see Moons, *The Holy Spirit, the Church, and Pneumatological Renewal*, 312–13n6.

64. Francis, “Anniversary Synod of Bishops.”

famous “inverted pyramid” metaphor,⁶⁵ which he connected to listening as a gift of the Holy Spirit: “On the eve of last year’s Synod I stated: ‘For the Synod Fathers we ask the Holy Spirit first of all for the gift of listening: to listen to God, so that with him we may hear the cry of his people; to listen to his people until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us’.”⁶⁶ In both the reflection on the listening church, which highlighted the people of God, and the reflection on the hierarchy, the Spirit is the church’s ultimate reality. As a people, as well as an organized body, the church must follow the Spirit’s guidance—which obviously involves honoring the revelation in Christ. Thus, Pope Francis’s creative reception of *Lumen Gentium* consists in returning to a more theological approach the church with a distinctly pneumatological focus.

Synodality as a Spiritual Practice

A third creative reception of the council has to do with the practice of synodality. Pope Francis consistently speaks about the synod as a journey (*cammino*, *camminare*), a process, or a dynamism (*dinamismo*). For example, in the 2015 address, Francis famously states that “it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”⁶⁷ The original Italian uses the word *cammino* two times: “*Proprio il cammino della sinodalità è il cammino che Dio si aspetta dalla Chiesa del terzo millennio.*” Six years later, the pope opened his address to the diocese of Rome as follows:

As you are aware, we are about to begin a synodal process, a journey on which the whole Church will reflect on the theme: *Towards a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*: those three pillars. Three phases are planned, and will take place between October 2021 and October 2023. This process was conceived as an exercise (*dinamismo*) of mutual listening. I want to emphasize this. It is an exercise (*dinamismo*) of mutual listening, conducted at all levels of the Church and involving the entire People of God.⁶⁸

This journey has a certain “style.”⁶⁹ Characteristics are an open-ended, bottom-up approach,⁷⁰ with mutual listening that includes voices that one may not like.

65. Cf. Ormond Rush’s important essay, “Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church,” *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2017): 299–325, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056391769856>.

66. Francis, “Anniversary Synod of Bishops.” The quote is from his own “Address at the Prayer Vigil for the Synod on the Family” (October 4, 2014).

67. Francis, “Anniversary Synod of Bishops.”

68. Francis, “Address to the Faithful.”

69. “This is how our own journey should be” (Francis, “Address to the Faithful”). Cf. the more powerful original Italian text: “*Questo è lo stile del nostro cammino,*” stated in the context of a discussion on openness versus rigidity. The pope sometimes links the synodal style with “God’s style” of closeness and tenderness (Francis, “Beginning of the Synodal Journey”); and with closeness to where we are and to reality (Francis, “Homily”).

70. “It is important that the Synod be exactly this: a process of becoming; it involves the local Churches, in different phases and from the bottom up, in an exciting and engaging effort that can forge a style of communion and participation directed to mission” (Francis, “Beginning of the Synodal Journey”).

The listening process should be thought of as a dialogue and encounter in the spirit of living in communion, with horizontal, rather than vertical, relations,⁷¹ and with space for diversity and disagreement. The hierarchy—which has its own role to play—should live its ministry as a service and should be close to the people. In all of this, an openness to newness and surprise is an essential requirement for being able to prayerfully discern the Spirit's voice and guidance.

For the current reflection, two things stand out. First, although the pope occasionally mentions important theoretical concepts such as baptism, the people of God, and the *sensus fidelium*, he does not seem too fond of theory. Instead, he prefers to focus on synodality as a practice. "Synodality is not a chapter in an ecclesiology textbook, much less a fad or a slogan to be bandied about in our meetings. Synodality is an expression of the Church's nature, her form, style and mission."⁷²

This may be interpreted as a creative reception of the Second Vatican Council. While postconciliar magisterial teaching and Western theology tend to think of the church primarily as a theory, an ecclesiology, with an occasional strict focus on orthodoxy, Francis prioritizes practice. This makes sense in light of the theological wisdom that the relationship with God and salvation come before reflection, and it is probably related to the Latin American tradition of liberation theology.⁷³ Here, however, it is relevant to observe that this preference for practice takes up a crucial aspect of the Second Vatican Council. I am referring to its spirit and *pastoralità*, which was inspired by Pope John XXIII's opening message for the council, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, and that was taken up by the council fathers.

John O'Malley, in particular, has drawn attention to the council's pastoral style.⁷⁴ In an attempt to describe that style, he listed various types of words, specifying horizontal words like brother and sister; words describing reciprocity such as cooperation, dialogue, and cooperation; relational words like family; and humble words such as

71. "Journeying together tends to be more horizontal than vertical" (Francis, "Address to the Faithful").

72. Francis, "Address to the Faithful."

73. Cf. Codina's assessment: "Francis' theology of the Spirit is not an academic pneumatology, but a prophetic and pastoral theology, elaborated from below, from the poor" (Codina, "El Espíritu Santo en Francisco," 67).

74. John W. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?," *Theological Studies* 67, no. 1 (2006): 3–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390606700101>. For further introduction and background, see Giuseppe Alberigo, "Le ragioni dell'opzione pastorale del Vaticano II," *Synaxis* 20, no. 3 (2002): 489–509; Michael Sievernich, "Die 'Pastoralität' des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils," in *Die großen Metaphern des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils: Ihre Bedeutung für heute*, ed. Mariano Delgado and Michael Sievernich (Freiburg: Herder, 2013), 35–58; and Catherine E. Clifford, "Style Is Substance: Origins of John W. O'Malley's Contribution to the Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 79, no. 4 (2018): 745–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563918801182>. Questions about the consistency of the council's pastoral style, and if "pastoral" is about the Magisterium *teaching* better or about the Magisterium *learning* itself, cannot be discussed here.

servant; words related to development and progress; and finally, interior words such as joy, hope, and heart.⁷⁵ All these words represent a fundamental change, namely:

From commands to invitations, from laws to ideals, from threats to persuasion, from coercion to conscience, from monologue to conversation, from ruling to serving, from withdrawn to integrated, from vertical and top-down to horizontal, from exclusion to inclusion, from hostility to friendship, from static to changing, from passive acceptance to active engagement, from prescriptive to principled, from defined to open-ended, from behavior-modification to conversion of heart, from the dictates of law to the dictates of conscience, from external conformity to the joyful pursuit of holiness.⁷⁶

These style changes come so close to the type of synodality as envisioned by Pope Francis that one is surprised to find that O'Malley published his article in 2006, long before Francis's papacy. According to O'Malley, this style is both descriptive, namely describing the council, and prescriptive, namely outlining a "model of spirituality" for all Catholics to follow.⁷⁷ In other words, it is not limited to documents in the past but involves the whole postconciliar church, just as synodality does.

Second, what makes Francis's reception of the council's style or spirituality unique and creative is its pneumatological underpinning. The pope's conviction that the Spirit is the protagonist of the synod is not merely a theoretical conviction but grounds the above-described practice or style. For example, on September 18, 2021, after recalling the difference between synodality as "an exercise of mutual listening" and a survey, the pope equaled it with "listening to the Holy Spirit."⁷⁸ One can find a similar connection in other texts. On October 9, 2021, Francis linked the notion of a listening church to listening to the Spirit: "The Synod then offers us the opportunity to become a listening church, to break out of our routine and pause from our pastoral concerns in order to stop and listen. To listen to the Spirit in adoration and prayer."⁷⁹ Other aspects of the synodal journey are linked with the Holy Spirit as well. For example, the Holy Spirit is considered "the source of communion and mission,"⁸⁰ the pope relates an inner restlessness and openness to what the Spirit teaches,⁸¹ he speaks about being in dialogue with one another and with the Holy Spirit,⁸² and the Spirit is realizing an open spirit.⁸³

Indeed, a crucially important aspect of the synodal spirituality is openness. In October 2021, Francis exhorted the church: "let us journey together, in order to

75. O'Malley, "Did Anything Happen at Vatican II?," 27–29.

76. O'Malley, 29–30.

77. O'Malley, 29.

78. Francis, "Address to the Faithful."

79. Francis, "Beginning of the Synodal Journey."

80. Francis, "Beginning of the Synodal Journey."

81. Francis, "Address to the Faithful."

82. Francis, "Address to the Faithful."

83. "For we need the Spirit, the ever new breath of God, who sets us free from every form of self-absorption, revives what is moribund, loosens shackles and spreads joy. The Holy Spirit guides us where God wants us to be, not to where our own ideas and personal tastes would lead us" (Francis, "Beginning of the Synodal Journey").

experience a Church that . . . is open to the voice of the Spirit,”⁸⁴ and “may we be pilgrims in love with the Gospel and open to the surprises of the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁵ Both the individual faithful and the whole church need to grow in such openness. “We need but rely on the Holy Spirit, who uses all of creation to speak to us: he only asks us to clean out our ears, to hear better.”⁸⁶ That openness involves “dialogue with the Holy Spirit” as much as a dialogue among ourselves, including differences of opinion and arguments.⁸⁷ For, according to Pope Francis, “arguments are a sign of docility and openness to the Spirit.”⁸⁸

Conclusion

Pope Francis's reception of the council is creative on various accounts. He sets an important step forward, toward a more maturely pneumatological understanding of the church, revisits the theological approach to the church that had characterized most of *Lumen Gentium*, and translates that into a synodal practice or style. One may therefore summarize this article's argument as an effort to complement—and in so doing, reconfigure—the conviction that the church reflects the light of Christ, the *lumen gentium*. A synodal church should both reflect Christ's light and heed the Spirit's voice.

In addition to being creative, Pope Francis's reception of the council is promising. Greater attention to the Holy Spirit helps to make sense of synodality and to live synodality well; for example, in relation to reform. It is obvious that institutional reforms are needed and that synodality should “incarnate” in structures and procedures. Yet Francis's pneumatological approach relocates the aspect of reform within the broader space of the church as a theological reality. It recalls that reforms are not an end in themselves but must always start from the Spirit and that they can never fully capture the Holy Spirit. A pneumatological perspective helps to break out of narrow organizational thinking.

Moreover, greater attention to the Holy Spirit's protagonist role should help both conservative and liberal Catholics to see that the synodal adventure goes beyond our own convictions and views. It is about the Spirit.⁸⁹ Those with conservative

84. Francis, “Beginning of the Synodal Journey.”

85. Francis, “Homily”; see also: “Once the Church stops, she is no longer Church, but a lovely pious association, for she keeps the Holy Spirit in a cage” (Francis, “Address to the Faithful”).

86. Francis, “Address to the Faithful.”

87. Francis, “Address to the Faithful”; see also: “We are not holding a diocesan parliament, examining this or that question, but making a journey of listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit, discussing yes, but discussing with the Holy Spirit, which is a way of praying,” and, “growing in our relationship with the Spirit.”

88. Francis, “Address to the Faithful.”

89. See Austen Ivereigh's comment on “misreadings by both progressive and conservative Catholics” because they overlook Francis's pneumatology; Austen Ivereigh, “Hearing the Spirit in the Assembly of the People: Pope Francis's Vision of Synodality,” *Studium. Rivista bimestrale* 117, no. 3 (2021): 357–70 at 359.

inclinations usually wonder what the point of synodality is, because dialogue undermines the established order of hierarchical leadership and threatens adherence to divinely revealed truths. Those with liberal inclinations feel frustrated about “too little too late,” because synodality is not a quick fix. Their fears and frustrations—and the many underlying “certainties”—make it difficult to be in conversation, let alone to discern. A bold pneumatology that highlights the Spirit’s action contributes to reimagining synodality as a much more open-ended undertaking: it is about listening to the Spirit.

Finally, the fact that the pope’s bold pneumatology goes together with an “interior pneumatology” of discernment sheds new light on synodality—namely, it is primarily a practice. Beyond concepts, synodality is about listening to one another, to oneself, and to the world. Subsequently, one must discern what has been heard. One must pray, wait, hesitate, and sense, until clarity arises. Avoiding a purely intellectual notion of synodality that is prone to polarization, Francis’s spiritual pneumatology contributes to reimagining synodality as a dynamic spiritual journey of listening to the Spirit.

ORCID iD

Jos Moons  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5928-5202>

Author Biography

Jos Moons (PhD, Tilburg University) is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at KU Leuven, Belgium. His earlier research focused on pneumatology, ecclesiology, and Vatican II. Currently he works on synodality. His recent publications include *The Holy Spirit, the Church, and Pneumatological Renewal: Mystici Corporis, Lumen Gentium and Beyond* (Brill, 2022) and *The Art of Spiritual Direction: A Guide to Ignatian Practice* (Paulist Press, 2021).