



EMBARGO UNTIL DELIVERY

General Congregation 12, October 18, 2023

Participation, Responsibility, and Authority: What processes, structures, and institutions in a missionary synodal Church?

Theological Contribution

Rev. Dario VITALI,
Coordinator of expert theologians

1.

“The Church is a sacrament in Christ, that is, a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the human race” (LG 1). I will take this quote as a framework to structure the theological reflection on point B.3, which focuses on “participation, responsibility, and authority”. The first participation emphasised by the Second Vatican Council is not, indeed, that of individuals, but of the entire Church, the People of God on their journey towards the realisation of the Kingdom. Never more than today - and by ‘today’ I mean these dramatic days when peace seems to hang by a thread - does humanity need the strong and convinced testimony of a Church that is a sign and instrument of peace among nations. “A synodal Church”, in the words of Pope Francis, “is like a banner raised among the nations (cf. Is 11,12)... As a Church that ‘walks alongside’ men, participating in the travails of history, we nurture the dream that the rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and the service function of authority may also help civil society to build itself in justice and fraternity, generating a more beautiful and more worthy world for the generations that will come after us”.

A Church that aims to be outward-facing, a “universal sacrament of salvation” for the world (LG 48), is always called to be and think of itself inwardly as “the visible sacrament of this saving unity” (LG 9). But can this category, which certainly explains the dimension of mystery of the Church, be applied to topics such as “participation, responsibility, and authority”? Chapter I already opens significant horizons in this direction. Remember LG 7, which says how “in the building up of Christ’s Body various members and functions have their part to play”.

2.

But it is in Chapter II where the topics of participation acquire a specific physiognomy, starting from the description of the Church as the People of God, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people” (LG 9).

We all know that the chapter on *Populo Dei* represents the ‘Copernican revolution’ of conciliar ecclesiology. The fact of intercalating the chapter before that of the hierarchy breaks the ecclesiological pyramid built over the centuries: before functions is the dignity of the baptised; before differences, which establish hierarchies, is the equality of the children of God.

The greatest title of belonging to the Church is not to be pope, nor bishop, nor priest, nor consecrated, but a child of God. All are sons in the Son, united by kinship bonds that come from the Spirit. Affirming the equal dignity of all does not mean denying differences: the Church is the body of Christ, alive and beautiful because of the variety of gifts, charisms, ministries, and vocations.

The principle that regulates this wealth of gifts, charisms, and ministries in the ecclesial body is expressed by the Council in the relationship between the “common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood” as distinct forms of participation in the priesthood of Christ (LG 10). This passage is ground-breaking because of the choice to overturn the two themes in play: placing the common priesthood before the ministerial priesthood means breaking an asymmetrical relationship of authority-obedience that structured the pyramidal Church. Then, affirming two forms of participation in the priesthood of Christ ordered in relation to each other means recognising their complementary diversity, making them irreducible to each other.

Within this relationship, a very broad space opens up, which the ordained ministers cannot and should not occupy. On the contrary, they serve the holy people of God, who finally become an active subject of ecclesial life.

3.

But saying Church-People of God does not solve the entire issue, nor does it guarantee a painless reform of the Church. This is demonstrated by the heated debate that took place in the period immediately after the Council on the ecclesiology of Vatican II, which confronted charisma and institution, “Church from below and Church from above”, People of God and hierarchy.

This explains, on one hand, the emphasis on the ecclesiology of communion, primarily focused on the side of hierarchical communion, which over time has produced a true ‘centralization’ of the Church; on the other hand, the fear that synodality, understood as the ‘journeying together’ of the People of God, constitutes an alternative to the principle of communion. In reality, synodality is none other than the very communion of the Church as the Holy People of God. Synodality and communion can be identified with one another, as long as we understand the Church as the People of God journeying together.

Within the synodal Church, all dimensions of communion find citizenship: the trinitarian communion, the communion of the faithful, the communion of the Churches, the communion of the saints. Serving this Church are the Pastors, in a hierarchical communion regulated by the service of the unity of the Bishop of Rome, who - in the words of Pope Francis – “is not, by himself, above the Church; but within it as one of the baptised, and within the College of Bishops as a Bishop among Bishops, called at the same time – as Successor of Peter – to lead the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches (Pope Francis, *Address at the Ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*).

It is precisely module B.3, with its themes, that shows the way to begin the renewal of processes, structures, and institutions in a missionary synodal Church, in a progressive reception of the ecclesiological framework designed by Vatican Council II. The close relationship that exists between the People of God, the College of Bishops, and the Bishop of Rome, each with their function, establishes the synodal Church as the “listening Church”: “Faithful people, College of Bishops, Bishop of Rome: one listens to the other; and all listen to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), to know what He “says to the Churches” (*Rev 2:7*)”.

The desire to guarantee the respective functions of these subjects led to the transformation of the Synod from an event to a process. This choice does not deny, but

integrates into a higher unity the body established by Paul VI, with which the pope intended to give the bishops “the possibility to participate in a more evident and more effective way in Our concern for the universal Church” (AS). The next step to take, in line with all the conciliar ecclesiology, was stated by Pope Francis: how “the Synod of Bishops, representing the Catholic episcopate, becomes an expression of *episcopal collegiality* within an entirely synodal Church” (Pope Francis, *Address at the Ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*). This is only possible by recognising all the subjects that structure the ecclesial body. In the synodal process, the People of God, the College of Bishops, and the Bishop of Rome exercise their specific ecclesial functions, composing synodality, collegiality, and primacy in dynamic unity.

5.

This process occurs through a dual dynamic, complementary in its movement: outgoing and incoming.

Outgoing: The synodal process can take place in the Church because the Bishop of Rome calls it to synodal action. This initial movement corresponds to a prerogative of the Bishop of Rome, the “visible principle and foundation of unity” of all the baptised, of all bishops, of all churches. It is He who “presides over the whole assembly of charity and protects legitimate differences, while at the same time assuring that such differences do not hinder unity but rather contribute toward it.” (LG 13). In his service to the Church’s unity, he summons, presides over, and confirms the Synod, similarly to how he summons, presides over, and confirms the ecumenical council (cf. LG 22). He is the one to establish the theme of the Synod, initiate the synodal process, accompany the process through the Secretariat of the Synod, and conclude it.

By virtue of this call, an incoming process starts, involving the entire Church and everyone in the Church, beginning with particular churches. This is based on the ecclesiological principle stated by the Second Vatican Council, which says the Church is the body of the churches, “in and from which churches come into being the one and only Catholic Church” (LG 23).

According to this principle, each Bishop, as a visible principle and foundation of unity for the *portio Populi Dei* entrusted to his care (cf. LG 23), is responsible for initiating the synodal process in his Church. Precisely because it is summoned by the Bishop, the consultation in particular churches is a true consultation to the People of God, the subject of the *sensus fidei*. This was how, in the first phase of the Synod, listening to each *portio Populi Dei* coincided with listening to the entire People of God who live and walk within the churches.

Since there is no consultation of the People of God in particular churches if it is not initiated by their Pastor, bishops have genuinely participated in the synodal process from the beginning, playing an indispensable role. Therefore, it is evident that there is no contradiction between the synodal and hierarchical dimensions of the Church: one guarantees the other and vice versa, with the Church being a “sacrament of unity”, a people gathered and ordered under the guidance of the bishops (cf. SC 26).

6.

The synodal process is, therefore, a privileged place for practicing both synodality and collegiality, as it ensures the effective practice of the *sensus fidei* of the People of God as well as the discernment of the Pastors. Due to the synodal action to which the Bishop of Rome has summoned the whole Church, bishops worldwide have jointly exercised their discernment function at intermediate stages of synodality and collegiality. The discernment of Episcopal Conferences and synodal assemblies, when applied to a manifestation of the *sensus fidei* of the People of God, is not merely pastoral, but is “an expression of *episcopal collegiality* within an entirely synodal Church” (Pope Francis, *Address at the Ceremony commemorating the 50th*

anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops), insofar as the bishops truly express in these acts “the community... among themselves and with the successor of Peter” in the exercise of the discernment function (LG 25).

7.

Thus, we can conclude by reaffirming that the Synod is the privileged ‘place’ and ‘space’ for practicing synodality, which does not emphasise the role of the People of God or the Pastors unilaterally, but that of all subjects - People of God, College of Bishops, Bishop of Rome - articulating synodality, collegiality, and primacy in dynamic unity. Given these unique features, the synodal process can be understood as the most refined exercise of synodality in the Catholic Church.

This is the starting point for rethinking church institutions. This is demonstrated by the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, which rethinks the service of the Roman Curia to the Church in a synodal key. It does this based on the conciliar description of the Church as a “body of churches”, “in which and from which the only Catholic Church exists” (EP 6); the same principle governing the entire synodal process. Instead of indicating individual reforms, criteria for reform should be stated.

The first is theological: to reimagine the Church in a synodal key, so that the entire Church and everything in the Church – life, processes, institutions – is reinterpreted in terms of synodality.

The second is institutional: guarantee the Church the ‘space’ to practice synodality. In the speaker’s opinion, this equates to safeguarding the Synod as an organ serving a constitutionally synodal Church. Without the Synod, the practice of synodality would end up dissolving into a thousand streams, creating a quagmire, slowing down, if not preventing, the ‘walking together’ of the People of God. One can reflect on its institutional form, but there should be no doubt that this institution ensures the Church a genuine exercise of synodality, as the current synodal process amply demonstrates.

A genuine exercise of synodality will allow for thoughtful considerations - with patience and prudence - on the necessary institutional reforms, decision-making processes that involve everyone, and an exercise of authority truly suitable for enabling the growth of a mature and participatory People of God.

In this horizon, I repeat the words of the Bishop who ordained me many years ago and in whose school I learned synodality. In his message to his Church, back in 1990, on the occasion of the opening of the diocesan synod, he wrote words that sound prophetic:

“The People of God, a visible sign of the invisible presence of the Kingdom, listens, dialogues, serves its Lord, the centre of the cosmos and history. It accepts the invitation to walk alongside God, humanity, and creation. [...] The Synod is a declaration of love for the land, this blessed land we walk on, this blessed time that is both fascinating and dramatic. The Synod is an even stronger declaration of love for people, for all people. Preferably for the poorest in all aspects and at all levels. [...] Only love convinces. Only love makes grow, creates novelty. Let us be convinced: the Synod is a time of love. From God to us, from us to Him, among all of us”

(+ Dante Bernini).

Thank you.