

# THE KAIRÓS OF SYNODALITY

## International Theological Commission

1. “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium”[1]: this programmatic commitment was made by Pope Francis at the commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops by Blessed Paul VI. He stressed that, in fact, synodality “is an essential dimension of the Church”, in the sense that “what the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word 'synod’”[2].

## Synod, Council, Synodality

3. “Synod” is an ancient and venerable word in the Tradition of the Church, whose meaning draws on the deepest themes of Revelation. Composed of a preposition συν (with) and the noun ὁδός (path), it indicates the path along which the People of God walk together. Equally, it refers to the Lord Jesus, who presents Himself as “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14,6), and to the fact that Christians, His followers, were originally called “followers of the Way” (cf. Acts 9,2; 19,9.23; 22,4; 24,14.22).

In ecclesiastical Greek it expresses how the disciples of Jesus were called together as an assembly and in some cases it is a synonym for the ecclesial community[3]. Saint John Chrysostom, for example, writes that the Church is a “name standing for ‘walking together’ (σύνοδος)”[4]. He explains that the Church is actually the assembly convoked to give God thanks and glory like a choir, a harmonic reality which holds everything together (σύστημα), since, by their reciprocal and ordered relations, those who compose it converge in ἀγάπη and ὁμονοία (common mind).

4. Since the first centuries, the word “synod” has been applied, with a specific meaning, to the ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels (diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal or universal) to discern, by the light of the Word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by.

The Greek σύνοδος is translated into Latin as *synodus* or *concilium*. *Concilium*, in its profane use, refers to an assembly convoked by some legitimate authority. Although the roots of “synod” and “council” are different, their meanings converge. In fact, “council” enriches the semantic content of “synod” by its reference to the Hebrew קָהָל (*qahal*), the assembly convoked by the Lord, and its translation into Greek as ἐκκλησία, which, in the New Testament, refers to the eschatological convocation of the People of God in Christ Jesus.

In the Catholic Church the distinction between the use of the words “council” and “synod” is a recent one. In Vatican II they are synonymous, both referring to the council session[5]. A precise distinction was introduced by the *Codex Iuris Canonici* of the Latin Church (1983), which distinguishes between a particular (plenary or provincial) Council[6] and an ecumenical Council[7] on the one hand, and a Synod of Bishops[8] and a diocesan Synod[9] on the other hand[10].

5. In the theological, canonical and pastoral literature of recent decades, a neologism has appeared, the noun “synodality”, a correlate of the adjective “synodal”, with both of these deriving from the word “synod”. Thus people speak of synodality as a “constitutive dimension” of the Church or *tout court* of the “synodal Church”. This linguistic novelty, which needs careful theological clarification, is a sign of something new that has been maturing in the ecclesial consciousness starting from the Magisterium of Vatican II, and from the lived experience of local Churches and the universal Church since the last Council until today.

## Communion, synodality, collegiality

6. Although synodality is not explicitly found as a term or as a concept in the teaching of Vatican II, it is fair to say that synodality is at the heart of the work of renewal the Council was encouraging.

The ecclesiology of the People of God stresses the common dignity and mission of all the baptised, in exercising the variety and ordered richness of their charisms, their vocations and their ministries. In this context the concept of communion expresses the profound substance of the mystery and mission of the Church, whose source and summit is the Eucharistic synaxis[11]. This is the *res* of the *Sacramentum Ecclesiae*: union with God the Trinity and unity between human persons, made real through the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus[12].

In this ecclesiological context, synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelising mission.

7. While the concept of synodality refers to the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church, the concept of collegiality defines the theological significance and the form of a) the exercise of the ministry of Bishops in the service of the local Church entrusted to the care of each of them, and b) of the communion between local Churches at the heart of the one universal Church of Christ, brought about by means of the hierarchical communion of the College of Bishops with the Bishop of Rome.

Collegiality is thus the specific form in which ecclesial synodality is manifested and made real through the ministry of Bishops on the level of communion of the local Churches in a region, and on the level of communion of all the Churches in the universal Church. An authentic manifestation of synodality naturally entails the exercise of the collegial ministry of the Bishops.

## A new threshold in the wake of Vatican II

8. The fruits of the renewal promised by Vatican II in its promotion of ecclesial communion, episcopal collegiality and thinking and acting 'synodally' have been rich and precious. There is, however, still a long way to go in the direction mapped out by the Council[13]. In fact, today the drive to find an appropriate form for a synodal Church – although it is widely shared and has been put into practice in positive ways – seems to be in need of clear theological principles and decisive pastoral orientations.

9. Hence the new threshold that Pope Francis invites us to cross. In the wake of Vatican II, following in his predecessors footsteps, he insists that synodality describes the shape of the Church that emerges from the Gospel of Jesus, which is called to become incarnate today in history, in creative fidelity to Tradition.

In conformity with the teaching of Lumen Gentium, Pope Francis remarks in particular that synodality "offers us the most appropriate framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself"[14] and that, based on the doctrine of the *sensus fidei fidelium*[15], all members of the Church are agents of evangelisation[16]. Consequently making a synodal Church a reality is an indispensable precondition for a new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God.

Besides, synodality is at the heart of the ecumenical commitment of Christians: because it represents an invitation to walk together on the path towards full communion and because – when it is understood correctly – it offers a way of understanding and experiencing the Church where legitimate differences find room in the logic of a reciprocal exchange of gifts in the light of truth.

**(Synodality in the life and mission of the church – Introduction – March 2018)**