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# The Synod on Synodality (2021-2024) as an Institution

## Historical-Theological Perspectives and Questions

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### ABSTRACT

The pontificate of pope Francis has brought about a new momentum, an acceleration of the dynamics of the ecclesial conversation, and the Synod on synodality (2021-2024) is the culmination of this acceleration. At the same time, it is not clear yet whether Francis wants to bring this movement to a conclusion or if it will remain open in a process. This article gives some historical-institutional perspectives that are important for comprehending the contours of this question central to Francis' pontificate but also for the Catholic Church in the 21st century.

*Key words:* Synod; Vatican II; Synodality; Collegiality; Conciliarity

**El Sínodo sobre la sinodalidad (2021-2024) como institución**

**Perspectivas e interrogantes histórico-teológicos**

### RESUMEN

El pontificado del Papa Francisco ha dado un nuevo impulso, una aceleración de la dinámica de la conversación eclesial, y el Sínodo sobre la sinodalidad (2021-2024) es la culminación de esta aceleración. Al mismo tiempo, aún no está claro si Francisco quiere llevar este movimiento a una conclusión o si permanecerá abierto en un proceso. Este artículo ofrece algunas perspectivas histórico-institucionales

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que son importantes para comprender los contornos de esta cuestión central para el pontificado de Francisco, pero también para la Iglesia católica en el siglo XXI.

*Palabras clave:* Sínodo; Vaticano II; Sinodalidad; Colegialidad; Conciliaridad

For many in the Catholic Church, synodality may sound like a new word, a neologism, or an abstract concept. But synodality is, rather, a long-forgotten way for the Church to gather, listen, and make decisions in the service of the Gospel mission. It is a moment of *ressourcement* of the tradition of the Church, a reconnection with an important part of its forgotten past. But the present form of the “Synod on synodality” (2021-2024) and the two assemblies of the Synod (October 2023 and October 2024) are, from the point of view of the history of Church institutions, a creative experiment. It is therefore important to reflect on the Synod from an institutional point of view in order to grasp its novelties and challenges and open questions for the future of synodality. Here I will analyze the Synod beginning from three frameworks: the Synod on synodality as an institution, the history of the Bishops’ Synods since 1965, and Vatican II.

## 1. The Synod on Synodality (2021-2024) and its phases

The Synod on Synodality which opened in 2021 was structured as a “process” more than an event.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the phases of the consultation and formation of the agenda acquired a length, shape, and relevance that were longer in duration and intentionally different in their function compared to previous Synods.

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<sup>1</sup> See Joseph A. Komonchak, «Vatican II as an “Event”», in *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?*, ed. David G. Schultenover (New York: Continuum, 2007), 24-51; Francesco Zaccaria, «Synodality and Decision-Making Processes: Towards New Bodies of Participation in the Church», *Religions* 15 (2024), special issue on synodality, eds. Massimo Faggioli and Bryan Froehle doi:10.3390/rel15010054.

The consultation and preparation of the assembly have been unique and very diverse in the sense of a back and forth between the Synod office in Rome and the local Churches at the local, national, and continental level. The relationship between the local churches and the assemblies of the Synod in Rome is intended not only in terms of contribution to the formation of the agenda and of reception, but also, in a second phase, as a *restitutio*, as a “giving back” to the local churches, in a circularity that reshapes the synodal modes of conversation in the Church.<sup>2</sup>

The uniqueness of the preparation of the Synod on synodality is also due to the fact that its sourcing has been twofold. On the one hand, there is pope Francis intuition articulated in his particular way of calling and handling all his Bishops Synods before the one on synodality, beginning with the one on the family and marriage of 2014-2015 followed by the exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* in 2016. On the other hand, different national and continental synodal experiences have contributed to the consultation and formation of the synodal agenda in an original way, and with some degree of autonomy from the leadership of the secretariat of the Synod in Rome and with moments of dialectics with the Roman Curia. In particular, three national/continental synodal experiences have played an important role: the German Synod (2019-2023) the Plenary Council in Australia (2018-2022), and especially the continental reception of the ecclesiology of Vatican II which culminated in the general conferences or the CELAM in Latin America, from Medellin 1968 to Aparecida in 2007.

The Synod was repeatedly warned by pope Francis not to turn into a parliament,<sup>3</sup> but, at the same time, the 450 members (364 with voting rights) of the assembly clearly expressed the need

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2 On the concept of *restitutio*, see Rafael Luciani, «Teología e práctica del *sensus fidei*», // *Regno - documenti*, 7 (2023): 238-249.

3 See, for example, the opening speech of Francis to the 2023 assembly of the Synod, where he repeated the difference between a synod and a parliamentary meeting four times: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2023/october/documents/20231004-apertura-sinodo.html>.



to “represent” the very diverse membership of the 1.3 billion members of the Catholic Church both in terms of geographical localities and of “identities” (clerical status, gender, age). The presence of the same members in the two assemblies (2023 and 2024) ensures continuity of community that is consistent with the nature of the Synod as a spiritual experience and of its need to represent the global Catholic Church. The Synod on synodality is a Synod not *of* bishops, but a Synod *with* bishops.<sup>4</sup> It’s a different kind of Synod, where with the addition of non-episcopal and non-clerical members of the Church -- and for the first time, women -- there is a new kind of membership, more complex than the binary “clergy vs. non-clergy” or “male vs. female”. Among both male clerical, non-male, and non-clerical members of the Synod there are members of different ecclesial and existential backgrounds: members from ecclesiastical-bureaucratic institutions, engaged in pastoral work, of ecclesial and social movements, representatives of the people of God, and theologians-experts. It is a modern or post-modern version of the ecclesiology of representation of the Church in conciliar history.<sup>5</sup>

The 2023 assembly of the Synod looked more like a retreat than a voting assembly. The Synod began on September 30, with the ecumenical prayer vigil in St Peter’s Square orchestrated by the Taizé Community. The peculiar institutional character of the Synod on synodality can be seen from the appointment of Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., the former master of the Dominicans, and Mother Maria Ignazia Angelini, O.S.B., abbess of a Benedictine abbey in Viboldone, near Milan, as “spiritual assistants” to the Synod. As cardinal Michael Czerny, SJ, wrote in those days: «retreating into the Synod».<sup>6</sup> This assembly was

4 To appreciate the difference between the Synod of Bishops before Francis and the Synod on synodality in its legal and institutional structure, see Peter Erdö, «Aspetti giuridici del Sinodo dei Vescovi. Quattro decenni di sviluppo istituzionale», in Nikola Eterović (ed.), *Il Sinodo dei Vescovi. 40 anni di storia 1965-2005* (Città del Vaticano: Lateran University Press, 2005), 39-55.

5 See the work by Hermann Josef Sieben on the idea of council, beginning with *Die Konzils-idee der Alten Kirche* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1979) to *Katholische Konzils-idee im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1993). See also *Repraesentatio: Mapping a Keyword for Churches & Governance*, eds. Massimo Faggioli and Alberto Melloni (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006).

6 Michael Czerny, SJ, «Retreating into the Synod», in October 9, 2023 <https://www.jesuits.global/2023/10/09/retreating-into-the-synod/>

opened, in the days preceding the sessions in Rome (October 1-3), by days of prayer and reflections. The Benedictine Abbess Ignazia Angelini introduced the Gospel at Lauds and before Mass, and Timothy Radcliffe, had the Synod member meditate on the Transfiguration, in the Gospel of Mark chapter 9.

There was a kind of *spiritual leadership* of the Synod that was distinct from the institutional leadership of the pope and the Synod's office with the secretary general of the Synod (cardinal Mario Grech, secretary general of the Secretariat of the Synod) and the cardinal relator general (cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, archbishop of Luxembourg). The *institutional leadership* of the Synod was shared between the pope and the Synod's office in Rome, with a marginal visibility of the Roman Curia both in its individual top leaders (prefects and secretaries of dicasteries) and in its entirety. This marginality was also of the theological experts, whose role was more as secretaries and "notaries" of the synodal conversation in the Spirit than of representatives of theological expertise.

The communication strategy adopted by the Synod and the pope aimed at keeping the conversation as a spiritual experience, a conversation in the Spirit, protected from outside pressure of the media, but also to keep the synodal conversation as a process, not as an event. At the same time, the pope continued to be interacting with the media in the usual way, without abiding by the synodal rules: papal interviews and other interventions that intersected with the synodal conversation.<sup>7</sup> Francis' primatial role in the preparation and celebration of the was visible also through the two responses to the *dubia* on homosexuality and women's ordination to the priesthood published by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith in October and November 2023.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, the interviews with the Argentine news service *Telam* published during the Synod, and also the publication on October 4 of *Laudate Deum*, apostolic exhortation "To all people of good will on the climate crisis".



The institutional, visible results of the 2023 assembly of the Synod were a “Letter to the People of God” and a “Synthesis Report” with the result of the votes of the Synod members. Both documents are preliminary results of a synodal gathering that continues in a second assembly one year later, but also returns to the local churches for an inter-session round of listening sessions whose details are left to the national bishops’ conferences as specified by the Synod office on December 11, 2023.<sup>8</sup> The “Synthesis Report” approved with a vote by the first assembly of 2023 worked almost as a second “Instrumentum Laboris” for a second preparation of the Synod in its second assembly of October 2024.

## 2. The “Synod on synodality” in the history of the Bishops’ Synod

The Synod on synodality is, both in the history of Church institutions and in the history of the tradition, something different from all the previous twenty-nine assemblies (fifteen ordinary assemblies, eleven special assemblies for continents or countries, and three extraordinary assemblies) that the Bishops’ Synods celebrated since 1967, after the creation of the new institution by Paul VI during the last session of Vatican II, on September 15, 1965. It is also a different Synod because it is grounded in a different moment in the history of the theological debate on synodality, especially in the post-1985 *communio* ecclesiology, when it was seen as a dimension in the life of the local churches and the relations between them.<sup>9</sup> The Synod on synodality is a new chapter, or a new book entirely, in the history of post-Vatican II (Bishops’) Synods in Rome: not just for the changes in the kind of membership, in the structure of the preparation, and in the mode of celebration, but for the very purpose of the Synod.

<sup>8</sup> See General Secretariat of the Synod, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, «Towards October 2024», December 11, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> See Carlo Fantappiè, *Metamorfosi della sinodalità. Dal Vaticano II a papa Francesco* (Venezia: Marcianum, 2023), 44.

One of the most interesting theses on the role and nature of the Synod on synodality is the one articulated by French Jesuit Christoph Theobald, one of the theologians appointed members of the Synod among the “experts and facilitators”. In a book published in autumn 2023, Theobald described the Synod as an opportunity for pacification and creativity in the Church: «pacification comme condition *sine qua non*». <sup>10</sup> It’s a reconciliation in the Church, not a revolution. But in this very idea of reconciliation there is still some utopic horizon and awareness that the Catholic Church is one of the last public spaces in which individuality and community are trying to find a visible composition. <sup>11</sup> In this sense, with Francis the Synod on synodality has left the intra-institutional phase that had in the first fifty years of its life, since its creation by Paul VI in 1965, and has entered a new phase.

At the same time, it is impossible to ignore, in pope Francis’ renewal of the Synod and of synodality, echoes of the speech of cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, Scripture scholar and archbishop of Milan (1980-2002), at the Second special assembly of the Bishops’ Synod for Europe on October 7, 1999, and the open questions he posed: the future of ministry; the role of women in the Church; the participation of the laity in ministry; the teaching on sexuality and the discipline of marriage and penance; and the ecumenical hope. <sup>12</sup> This was cardinal Martini’s wish: «May the festive return of the disciples of Emmaus to Jerusalem to meet the apostles become a stimulus to repeat every now and then, over the course of the new century, an experience of universal confrontation between the Bishops that aims to untie some of those disciplinary and doctrinal knots that reappear periodically as hot spots of the European and not only European Churches».

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<sup>10</sup> See Christoph Theobald, *Un concile qui ne dit pas son nom. Le synode sur la synodalité, voie de pacification et de créativité* (Paris: Salvator, 2023), esp. 145-156.

<sup>11</sup> See Olivier Roy, *L’aplatissement du monde. La crise de la culture et l’empire des normes* (Paris: Seuil, 2022), 185.

<sup>12</sup> See Alberto Melloni, «Sognare la realtà. La speranza del cardinal Martini», *Il Mulino*, 6 (1999): 1133-1144. The introduction of Theobald’s book opens with a memory of that speech by cardinal Martini (Christoph Theobald, *Un concile qui ne dit pas son nom...*, 9).

The leaders of the Synod back then did not appreciate Martini's suggestion of discussing «the disciplinary and doctrinal knots» such as the role of women and the teaching on sexuality. This is one of the reasons that makes of Francis' Synods a new phase in the history of the institution. The rediscovery of synodality is pope Francis' most significant initiative that covers the entirety of his pontificate, from the October 2013 announcement of the Synod on family and marriage (in two assemblies, 2014-2015) to the Synod on synodality (2021-2024).

Moreover, in the apostolic constitution *Episcopalis Communio* of 2018, Francis ratified 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 echoed and implicitly or unknowingly accepted a proposal that was made between 1980 and 1983 by cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, and which was rejected back then.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. The “Synod on synodality” and Vatican II

A most important kind of difference between Vatican II and the Synod on synodality is in the *global historical context*: a very different picture and stark difference from the mood of Vatican II in October 1962 and October 1965. Vatican II took place at the height of the Cold War between the Communist world - from East Asia, the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Cuba - and the free world led by the United States, but the council opened and closed with signs of peace-making: from the October 1962 interventions of John XXIII during the Cuba missile crisis to the October 1965 visit of Paul VI to

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<sup>13</sup> Carlo Maria Martini, SJ, archbishop of Milan (1979-2002), made the proposal in his intervention at the plenary session at the Bishops' Synod of 1980 and then again in an intervention 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 *Il Sinodo dei vescovi 1980* (Roma: ed. Giovanni Caprile, 1982), 517.



the UN in New York, with his speech «Jamais plus la guerre, jamais plus la guerre» – no more war, war never again. During the council, in January 1964 Paul VI traveled – the first time for a pope – to the “Holy Land” (he never uttered the word “Israel” in those early days of the turn in Catholic-Jewish and Vatican-Israel relations). In December 1964 he traveled to Bombay, in what was back then a modernizing, democratic India, open to religious diversity. Vatican II opened a new phase in the diplomatic engagement of the Holy See with the USSR and the Communist states in Eastern Europe, the Vatican’s *Ostpolitik* in parallel to the Federal Republic of Germany’s *Ostpolitik*. The parliamentary features of Vatican II emerge more clearly if that council is seen in the context of the Cold War, the ideological confrontation between the liberal-democratic order and Soviet-Union-led Communism.

The Synod on synodality occupies a very different position in global history. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 cast a somber shadow on the local assemblies that took place in Europe, especially the continental one in Prague of February 2023. Even more, the first assembly of the Synod overlapped ominously with the start of the war between Israel and the Palestinians. At dawn on Saturday October 7, 2023, at the end of the first week of the Synod opened by the retreat of October 1-3 and the meditations by Fr. Timothy Radcliffe OP, there was the pogrom-like attacks by Hamas against Israel - the methodical, meticulous, one-by-one killing of 1,400 Israeli soldiers, civilians, men, women, and children, and a kidnapping of more than 200 (many of them also nationals of other countries). Between October 28 and 29, 2023, exactly at the end of the Synod, Israeli armed forces expanded their operations in Gaza, after three weeks of ferocious bombardments that made little distinction between Hamas operatives and Palestinian civilians, men, women, and children. Anti-Semitism is on the rise again, both in its rawest version and in high-brow sophistication. The 1990s American neo-conservative narrative of «the clash of civilizations» seems even restrained today, in light of the ideological separations within the Western world itself.

But the Synod on synodality takes place also in a different *ecclesiological context* compared to Vatican II and the post-Vatican II period until the early 2000s. In an article published in 2005, forty years after the conclusion of Vatican II and shortly after the end of the pontificate of John Paul II, Church historian Alberto Melloni reflected on the essence of conciliarity and asked whether it is «parliament-like conflict or synthesis between liturgical communion and decision-making process».<sup>14</sup> The Synod on synodality takes place almost sixty years since the conclusion of Vatican II and twenty years after the death of John Paul II, the last pope who was a council father at Vatican II, when the question on the parliamentary or liturgical nature of ecclesial decision-making assemblies acquires new relevance.<sup>15</sup> The Synod on synodality is not a “Vatican III”, and in some sense is the reply to the prediction made by Melloni in 2005: «for the future council, the question is not if we will have one, but of time, a time perhaps very long».<sup>16</sup>

As Christoph Theobald already wrote in the title of his book, the Synod on synodality is « the council that dares not speak its name», or a council without a name. Pope Francis’ speech of October 17, 2015 and his intuition on the importance of synodality for the Church in the third millennium can be compared to John XXIII’s calling of Vatican II on January 25, 1959.<sup>17</sup> Among the analogies, the meta-nature of the gathering with its ecclesiological focus, and the continuity between the trajectories opened by Vatican II and the ones the Synod wants to re-open (the legacy of Vatican II itself), keep open (ecumenical dialogue, mission), or open for the first time (women in the Church). Under pope Francis, the Synod on synodal-

14 Alberto Melloni, «Questions historiques pour un concile de demain», *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 93 (2005): 171-194, cit. 173.

15 The nexus between synodality and liturgy had been raised in the early 2000s by a series of studies encouraged by Church historian Giuseppe Alberigo at the Foundation for Religious Studies in Bologna: see Giuseppe Alberigo, «Sinodo come liturgia?», *Cristianesimo nella storia* 28 (2007): 1-40.

16 Melloni, «Questions historiques pour un concile de demain», 181.

17 See Francis, «Ceremony commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops», October 17, 2015. About this, see Christoph Theobald, *Un concile qui ne dit pas son nom...*, 171.



ity is not a council like Vatican I or Vatican II, and does not have the same authority, but it's the closest thing and expresses the global dimension of the Church with its huge diversities and contrasts – the real challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

At the same time, there are relevant ecclesiological differences between Vatican II and the Synod on synodality in the history of the councils. The Synod on synodality is different also because of the position the Synod occupies in the turning points in Catholic history in the last two centuries. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Vatican I (1869-1870) pushed back against liberal modernity and declared papal primacy and papal infallibility. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vatican II (1962-1965) balanced the “new” papacy with episcopal collegiality and did it in a style that was not afraid of looking like a parliament, with debates (theological *disputationes* both in aula and in the commissions) creating majorities and minorities, eventually converging on a quasi-unanimity in the votes on the final documents. In the theological language, there was little difference between synodality and conciliarity.

The Synod on synodality has instead adopted the method of “spiritual conversation”, trying to reach and express the *consensus fidelium*. This, and not just the more diverse membership of the voting participants to the Synod, is different from the style of decision-making of the ecumenical/general councils, and still needs clarification in terms of decision-making and decision-taking. The Synod on synodality has the task to redefine the relationship between papal primacy, episcopal collegiality, and ecclesial synodality, and all this in a more global Catholicism. The Catholic Church's path in this century is not just of a synodal conversion, but of a synodal conversion within a turbulent process of the globalization of Catholicism.<sup>18</sup> This has been very visible during Francis' pontificate and especially since the publication, just a few weeks after the

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<sup>18</sup> See Massimo Faggioli and Bryan Froehle, *Global Catholicism: Between Disruption and Encounter* (Leiden: Brill, 2024), volume 1 of the new series *Studies in Global Catholicism*.



conclusion of the first assembly of the Synod, of the declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith «On the pastoral meaning of blessings», *Fiducia supplicans* (December 18, 2023). On the world map of Catholicism today there are not only very diverse cultures on sexuality, LGBTQ, and gender, but also very uneven lived ecclesiologies and of very different kinds of belonging to the Church today. Synodality calls for a different dynamic of participation of different ecclesial components in the production and reception of Church teaching. The “who is who” of the influential Catholic voices in the US Church is not the same of the Church in Congo or Sweden or Korea: the bishops, the clergy, and the laity (and the Catholic media with a theological-political agenda) play very different roles in different churches.

#### 4. Perspectives and open questions

The Synod on synodality of 2021-2024 is an experiment in the history of institutions of the Catholic Church. Every aspect, in this still developing phase, would need a specific study in comparison with previous Bishops’ Synods and previous general (ecumenical) councils: the modes of convocation, formation of the agenda, membership, presidency, votes, promulgation, application, and reception. In this preliminary survey, the more limited goal is to point out larger overarching issues: models of synodality; synodality and the future of conciliarity; and synodality and the intermediate levels.

##### 4.1. Models of the Synod and synodality

The nature of the Synod on synodality as a “meta-Synod”, that is, a Synod on the Synod itself, poses the question of the institutional nature of the Synod of 2021-2024: is *this kind* of Synod a permanent institution or a transient one? It remains to be seen if the steps taken by Francis in expanding the kind of membership of

the Synod to Catholics in the two assemblies of 2023 and 2024 are a prelude to permanent changes in the structure of the Synod, a limit not to be trespassed, or an experiment limited to the Synod on synodality and not to be kept in other future assemblies of the Synod. The question ultimately is whether and how the terminological ambiguity on display since 2021, and left intentionally unaddressed during the preparation and celebration of the Synod until the first assembly, between “Synod of Bishops” and “Synod” will be solved.

This question on the structure of the Synod has its roots in the model of synodality that will be adopted. As of 2024, the preferential option adopted by Francis seems to be in favor of a *spiritual* model of synodality instead of *bureaucratic* model of church government and that builds incrementally on the institutional status quo, with gradual upgrades of the Synod created by Paul VI. It remains to be seen whether and how synodality will affect the updating of Canon Law and the reform of the Roman Curia with the apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* of 2022.<sup>19</sup> The model of synodality preferred by pope Francis seems to be faithful to Paul VI’s intention to create a Synod able to pre-empt Vatican II from proposing in the fourth session of the council a more democratic-parliamentary institution. At the same time, Francis has updated the Synod in the same pontificate that has created, just four weeks after his election in the conclave, a “council of cardinals” that echoes some proposals at Vatican II for a “Consilium Episcoporum centrale” adopting some elements of the Eastern Catholic and Eastern Orthodox institutions of synodality.<sup>20</sup> It is not clear yet how the new Synod and the C9 work together and how they are going to work together (or survive at all) under pope Francis’ successors.

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19 See *The Apostolic Constitution “Preach the Gospel” - Praedicate Evangelium. With an Appraisal of Francis’s Reform of the Roman Curia* by Massimo Faggioli (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2022).

20 See Massimo Faggioli, *Il vescovo e il concilio: Modello episcopale e aggiornamento al Vaticano II* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005).

Important questions remain unaddressed, such as the role of the Synod's office in Rome and the synodal assemblies vis-à-vis papal primacy and the Roman Curia; the membership and frequency of the assemblies of the Synod; their relationship with other institutions of sinodality (synods at the diocesan and national level). The key question is ultimately whether the Synod of 2021-2024 precludes to a transition from the expectations of a synodality of Church government to a *pastoral and spiritual* synodality, and what kind of anchoring in the Catholic theological and historical tradition this path towards synodality will embody.<sup>21</sup> In other words, what kind of balance the Synod will find between theology and sociology/leadership studies.

There are many important questions moving forward about the institutional forms that synodality will take in the celebrations of the assemblies of the Synod in Rome and the relations between the Bishops' Synod and the institutional embodiments of "synodality" in the local Churches, according to the plan launched by pope Francis for a synodal reform of the Church. It remains to be seen whether the Synod will change significantly its constitution. The key question is where the Synod will remain central for the Roman papacy to reach out to the peripheries, or whether the Synod, with assemblies celebrated in Rome, will no longer have a significant function if and once Catholicism acquires globally a more "synodal" form, meaning more decentralized and less dependent on Rome for decision making for all local churches in the global Catholic community.

#### 4.2. *The "Synod on synodality" and the future of conciliarity*

The Synod of 2021-2024 is not just institutionally different compared to the previous assemblies of the Synod and the previous Secretariats of the Synod in Rome. It is also an institutional ex-

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<sup>21</sup> See Carlo Fantappiè, *Metamorfosi della sinodalità...*, 67 and 90.



pression of a different concept of synodality compared to the early phases of the debates. Whatever happens to the name of the institution created in 1965 as the “Synod of Bishops”, the Synod of 2021-2024 is not a Synod *of* bishops, rather a Synod *with* bishops, where bishops (especially the bishop of Rome) have a particular role. It’s no longer the exact same institution created by Paul VI – unless it goes back to a strictly episcopal body or a body where only the bishops have the right to vote.

The Synod on synodality takes place in a Church that recognizes that it is more divided compared to the times of Vatican II. To this crisis in the sense of the unity of the Church, pope Francis chose to enlarge the membership of the Synod. It’s a Church that needs pacification and this requires the recognition of the pain suffered by marginalized members of the Church – hence the different structure of this Synod geared towards a listening, and not debating, mode. It’s a pacification, and not an institutional or doctrinal revolution.

In the 2023 assembly there was a small representation of all those who would be members of a council like Vatican III (the bishops and superiors of religious orders), enlarged to representatives of other members of the Church: it’s global Catholicism supplementing papal primacy (19<sup>th</sup> century) and episcopal collegiality (20<sup>th</sup> century) with ecclesial synodality. It has not used the method of *disputatio*, but the “spiritual conversation”, trying to grasp the *consensus fidelium*. But whoever takes the decision – the Synod or the pope – on some of these issues there will never be a 100% consensus; there will be a majority and a minority. It’s what happened, for example, when Vatican II decided to reject anti-Semitism or to restore the permanent diaconate, and in the history of all previous councils, from the early centuries to Vatican I and Vatican II.

In the language used by Vatican II in the final documents and in the debates, “Synodus” and “Concilium” largely overlap. But it is clear by now that semantically *synodality* and *conciliarity* are no longer synonyms. With pope Francis since 2013, the Synod became an institution more at the center of the ecclesial debate and also used

in support of the crafting of papal teaching. Yet it is not clear if and how the Bishops' Synod will remain ultimately an expression of *episcopal collegiality* (representing the votes of the bishop only), useful as a device of papal primacy, or if it will become an institution of *ecclesial synodality* giving permanent voice and representation to all kinds of members in the Catholic Church (women, lay people).

The unaddressed question concerns what the Synod on synodality says about the future of conciliarity. What does the Synod on synodality say about the possibility of a future general/ecumenical council? What comes to mind is Severino Dianich's breaking of a taboo on this topic a few years ago: «the problem of representation is, however, also a possible solution to the difficulty the growing number of bishops is posing to the convening and functioning of a future ecumenical Council [...] The prospect rarely envisioned by theologians and canonists that one day there will be seven thousand, ten thousand, fifteen thousand bishops, creates the problem of the concrete possibility of summoning and running an ecumenical council». <sup>22</sup> The new Synod could mark the beginning of the response to the limits in the possibility of calling a council with all members of the college of bishops and to the problem of representation in the Church. This opens a series of canonical and ecclesiological questions that will have to be addressed elsewhere. <sup>23</sup>

At the same time, synodality has the task of embodying the response of the Catholic Church to the crisis of democracy and parliamentarism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a development surprising in comparison to the expectations of Vatican II for the trajectories of the development of political cultures in the global world. This is one of the reasons that the *memento* that “the Synod is not a parliament” cannot bypass in a facile way a larger question, that is, of the rela-

<sup>22</sup> Severino Dianich, «Primacy and Episcopal Collegiality. Problems and Perspectives», in *For a Missionary Reform of the Church. The “Civiltà Cattolica” Seminar*, eds. Antonio Spadaro and Carlos María Galli (New York/Mahwah NJ: Paulist, 2017, original Italian: Brescia: Queriniana, 2016), 291-315, cit. 300.

<sup>23</sup> One example in Matthieu Rougé, «The First session of the Synod on Synodality: a theological rereading», *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 146-1 (2024): 107-124.



tionship between the governance of the Church and the institutions of governance in our post-modern global world.

### *4.3. National, continental and local levels*

An important set of open questions for the future of synodality concerns the consequences of the institutional model of the Synod on other collegial and synodal institutions at the national and local levels (national bishops' conferences, plenary councils), but also on the relationship between the Synod and the Curia. During Francis' Synods, the role of the Roman Curia has been not as central as it was during John Paul II and Benedict XVI, but this change might be reversed if the new Synod does not find an institutional stability. More fundamentally, the uncertainty is whether synodality is a way to change the systems of Church government at all levels (universal, local, and intermediate) or instead a way for the Church to become more pastoral leaving the systems of Church government depending on the clergy unchanged. We have seen since 2015, and we might still see, an evolution in Francis' theology of synodality towards a more pastoral and spiritual, and less institutional, concept.

One significant institutional novelty that followed the 2019 Synod was, in June 2020, the creation of a new "ecclesial conference" for the Amazon region.<sup>24</sup> The creation of the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon followed a proposal in the final document of the Synod of Bishops on the Pan-Amazonian Region for «a permanent and representative bishops' organism that promotes synodality in the Amazon region», created by CELAM (Latin American Episcopal Council) and REPAM (the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network). It is not clear whether this

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24 In October 2021 pope Francis set up the Bishops' Conference of the Amazon (CEAMA) with canonical recognition. The decision was announced by cardinal Marc Ouellet, Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, in a letter addressed to cardinal Claudio Hummes, chairman of CEAMA. The statutes of CEAMA were approved by pope Francis in 2022. The new officially recognized body involves bishops, priests, women and men religious and the lay faithful from the nine countries of the Amazon region, namely Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Suriname, Guiana and French Guiana.



is a local exception or if it will become a model for all or some other continents. Again, the aftermath of the December 2023 declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith « »On the pastoral meaning of blessings», *Fiducia supplicans* has shown the gap between episcopal and synodal reception of a church document. The celebration of synodality in Rome does not automatically translate into a synodal church in different locales of the global Catholic Church.

## Conclusions

There is an evident crisis of governance in all churches, and this expresses itself in our season of declared schisms or *de facto* separations within the Orthodox Churches, the Churches of the Protestant Reformation, and in ecumenical organizations. In our post-institutional culture, Catholicism is now trying to find its own synodality, learning but also different from other models, to find its own way between Orthodoxy and Churches of the Reformation, but also to find its own way proceeding from its own past in the institutions of conciliarity and synodality.

The Synod is important for the healing of intra-Catholic rifts and synodality addresses the question of the relations between ecclesiastical-juridical ecclesiality and lived, spiritual, non-institutional modes of measuring belonging to the Church; between episcopal and prophetic authority in the Church; between ecclesial positivism and the religious experience that precedes institutionality.

In this sense, from the point of view of the ecclesiological relations between primacy, collegiality, and synodality, the Synod might be seen as the opening of something similar, in its own way, to a constitutional moment in which sovereignty belongs to the Spirit. The synodalization of the Church is a real “courageous cultural revolution” which is now looking also for an institutional, Catholic form of expression.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See Christoph Theobald, « La première session de la XVI<sup>e</sup> assemblée générale ordinaire du Synode des évêques. Point d'étape sur un chantier ouvert », *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, 2024/1 (Tome 112): 15-31.

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