

THEOLOGISCHE REVUE

121. Jahrgang
– Oktober 2025 –

Synodality and papal ministry in the Catholic Church

A review essay

Von Massimo Faggioli

1. Introduction: papal office and synodality in history

The momentum for synodality and a synodal reform is a key moment in the life of the Cath. Church and major part of the legacy of pope Francis' pontificate. Both the ecclesial conversations and the theol. debate on synodality are part of the effort to find a model and spirit of church governance for the third millennium that takes into account but also develops on the foundations of the first and second millennium. Synodality is a way to reconnect with Vatican II and to deal with its long-term trajectories as well as with its limits.¹

There is now available a vast literature on synodality,² and this review essay aims to identify, in recent publications, some major issues and themes that have emerged in the context of the "synodal process" convened by pope Francis in 2021 and that culminated in the two assemblies of the Synod in the Vatican in October 2023 and October 2024 on the theme "For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission".³ This discussion did not end with the Final Document of the 16th General Assembly which is now part of the ordinary Magisterium of the pope: in March 2025 Francis has officially initiated a new phase in the Church's synodal journey by approving a process that will culminate in an Ecclesial Assembly in October 2028.

¹ See "The Legacy and Limits of Vatican II in an Age of Crisis", ed. by Catherine E. CLIFFORD/Kristin COLBERG/Massimo FAGGIOLI/Edward P. HAHNENBERG, Collegeville, MN 2025.

² See the comprehensive bibliographical bulletins edited by Jos Moons, S.J. (KU Leuven, since 2024 a faculty member at Boston College) in five different installments between 2013 and 2024 and available online: <https://www.pastoralis.org/documents-n-17-jos-moons-synodality-and-the-roman-catholic-church-an-academic-bibliography-2013-2024/> (02.09.2025).

³ The books reviewed here: Sergio F. AUMENTA/Roberto INTERLANDI: *La Curia Romana secondo Praedicate evangelium*. Tra storia e riforma, Roma 2023; Carlo FANTAPPIÈ: *Metamorfosi della sinodalità*. Dal Vaticano II a papa Francesco, Venezia 2023; Christoph THEOBALD: *Un concile qui ne dit pas son nom*. Le synode sur la synodalité, voie de pacification et de créativité, Paris 2023; *Sinodalità e riforma*. Una sfida ecclesiale, ed. by Rafael LUCIANI/Serena NOCETI/Carlos SCHICKENDANTZ, Queriniana 2022; Anthony EKPO: *The Roman Curia: History, Theology, and Organization*, 152 pp., Georgetown 2024; Giacomo CANOBBIO: *Un nuovo volto della Chiesa?* Teologia del Sinodo, Morcelliana, 2023; Kristin M. COLBERG/Jos MOONS SJ: *The Future of Synodality*. How We Move Forward from Here, Collegeville, MN 2025.

This essay's specific focus is on the relationship between the theol. of synodality and papal office as a major test case for the implementation of a synodal reform, but first of all for Cath. ecclesiology.

2. The comeback of synodality during Francis' pontificate

In Francis' programmatic apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), which significantly took its cue from the 2012 assembly of the Synod of Bishops on evangelization, there was already, *in nuce*, a new vision of synodality in the papal magisterium. The assertions on the role of the people in the church and the references to *Lumen gentium* paragraph twelve and to the infallibility of the people *in credendo* opened to synodality and a new role for the Synod of Bishops. The only explicit mention of the term synodality was found in a passage on ecumenical dialogue:

To give but one example, in the dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, we Catholics have the opportunity to learn more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and their experience of synodality. Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness. (EG 246)

The choice to make his first programmatic document a post-synodal exhortation (of an assembly of the Synod convened and celebrated by his predecessor Benedict XVI.) and not an encyclical, and the prompt convocation of an assembly on a sensitive topic, such as family and marriage, revealed the centrality of the synodal question for a pope who, as archbishop of Buenos Aires, had risen to prominence in the global Church during the tenth ordinary general assembly on the role of the bishop (30th September–27th October 2001).

Pope Francis raised the theme of synodality explicitly and programmatically starting from the second session of the XIV. Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on “The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World” (2015), with his speech of 17th of October 2015 celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops by Paul VI., at the beginning of the fourth session of Vatican II with the *motu proprio Apostolica sollicitudo* (15th September 1965).⁴ In that speech of October 2015, which can be seen as the *magna charta* of synodality in Francis' pontificate, delivered during the Assembly of the Synod on the family, the pope proposed a perspective of ecclesiological reform in a context of institutional continuity. On the one hand, Francis affirmed that “the world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.” On the other hand, it confirmed the central role of the Synod of Bishops as

the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church's life. The Synod process begins by listening to the people of God, which “shares also in Christ's prophetic office”, according to a principle dear to the Church of the first millennium: “*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet*”. (*Motu proprio Apostolica sollicitudo*, 15th September 1965)

In that same speech, Francis outlined the unique role for the papacy:

⁴ See Massimo FAGGIOLI: “The Synod of Bishops since Vatican II”, in: *The Cambridge History of the Papacy*: vol. II, The Governance of the Church, ed. by Joëlle ROLLO-KOSTER/Robert A. VENTRESCA/Melodie H. EICHBAUER/Miles PATTENDEN, Cambridge 2025, 129–153.

The Synod process culminates in listening to the Bishop of Rome, who is called to speak as “pastor and teacher of all Christians” [Vatican I, const. *Pastor aeternus*, 18 July 1870], not on the basis of his personal convictions but as the supreme witness to the *fides totius Ecclesiae*, “the guarantor of the obedience and the conformity of the Church to the will of God, to the Gospel of Christ, and to the Tradition of the Church.” (Francis, *Address to the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, 18th October 2014)

Not only did the role of papal primacy, as outlined and interpreted by Francis, confirm the balance established by Paul VI. in 1965—in a document that was at the same time one of reception and rejection, or a selective reception, of the wishes of the Council Fathers.⁵ The role of the Synod—still always referred to as the Synod of Bishops—was also confirmed in the institutional framework within which synodality was to develop.

Francis’ vision for a synodal Church, in programmatic and dynamic continuity with the conciliar message and its reception by Paul VI., was offered to the Synod Fathers by Francis in October 2015, that is, in the midst of a turbulent phase in the history of the Synods of Bishops, with very heated discussions and open letters of criticism of the pope published by groups of cardinals.⁶ But it was also placed in a context of Francis’ option for synodality that presented significant elements of novelty compared to previous pontificates: the convocation of a Synod assembly in two sessions, on the same theme (the family in 2014–2015; synodality in 2023–2024); a change in the preparation of the Synod assemblies aimed at extending the phase of consultation of the people of God in the local churches; a series of legislative interventions modifying the structure of the Synod assemblies and the legal value of their final reports (the apostolic constitution *Episcopalis Communio* of September 15th, 2018 and the Instruction on the celebration of synodal assemblies and on the activity of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops published by the office of the Synod in Rome, signed by the General Secretary, cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, on October 1st, 2018).

From the beginning of his pontificate, Francis’ investment in synodality has been expressed in acts of reform, but largely with unchanged norms in canon law except for the ones that define the Synod. The preference was for a change in the style and spirit of the synodal events and moments: during the celebration of the assemblies, Francis participated in the Synod in ways visibly different from his predecessors, leaving room for and encouraging free discussion, even openly critical of the papal magisterium (including the reigning pope) among the members. But there has been a development also at the theol. and magisterial level, as we can see from the report of the International Theol. Commission published in March 2018, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, before the *Final Report* of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod on synodality.⁷

The launch by Pope Francis of the “synodal process” in 2021, aimed at the celebration of two assemblies in the Vatican in October 2023 and October 2024, has seen an evolution by the pope himself

⁵ See Massimo FAGGIOLI: *Il vescovo e il concilio*. Modello episcopale e aggiornamento al Vaticano II, Bologna 2005, esp. 389–438. See also *Commentario ai documenti del Vaticano II*. Vol. 4: Christus Dominus, Optatam Totius, Presbyterorum Ordinis, ed. by Serena NOCETI/Roberto REPOLE, Bologna 2017, 9–36.

⁶ See Austen IVEREIGH: *Wounded Shepherd*. Pope Francis and His Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church, New York, NY 2019, 251–274.

⁷ See International Theological Commission (a body linked to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith): *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, March 2, 2018, available online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html (02.09.2025).

of the application of synodality on the institution of the Synod of Bishops, in the sense of a change in the norms: the appointment of a new type of members that has led to the broad and non-symbolic participation (even if still a minority) of non-bishops (clergy, laity, and women) with the right to vote; a mode of discussion based on spiritual conversation rather than a parliamentary debate; a terminological uncertainty, in the official documents themselves, between “Synod of Bishops” and “Synod” (with bishops, but no longer “of” bishops)—a symptom of an internal dialectic within the Vatican leadership itself, between the Secretariat of the Synod and the Roman Curia, on the future of the institution created by Paul VI. in 1965.

In the *Final Document* of the XVI. assembly of the Synod on synodality (2023–2024), the section titled “The Service of the Bishop of Rome” (paragraphs 130–139) opens with the statement that

Synodality articulates in a symphonic manner the communitarian (all), collegial (some) and personal (one) dimensions of each local Church and of the whole Church.⁸ In the light of this, the Petrine ministry is inherent in the synodal dynamic, as is the communitarian dimension that includes the whole People of God, and the collegial one of the episcopal ministry. (par. 130)

But it leaves open the contours of this affirmation of papal primacy:

The Bishop of Rome, who is the foundation of the Church’s unity (LG 23), is the guarantor of synodality: he is the one who convokes the Church in Synod and presides over it, confirming its results. As the Successor of Peter, he has a unique role in safeguarding the deposit of faith and of morals, ensuring that synodal processes are geared towards unity and witness. Together with the Bishop of Rome, the College of Bishops has an irreplaceable role in shepherding the whole Church (LG 22–23) and in promoting synodality in all the local Churches. (par. 131)

3. Papal office in a synodal Church: the contribution of recent publications

3.1. Different theories of synodality

One of the most important books on synodality published during Francis’ papacy is the one by Italian historian of canon law *Carlo Fantappiè*.⁹ From the beginning, Fantappiè makes clear that synodality must be seen not in the framework of conciliarism or episcopalism but of the ecclesiology of *communio* in the post-Vatican II period (14). He points out the outstanding contribution of Swiss theologian Eugenio Corecco and his “ontological” concept of synodality and outlines the differences between the ecclesiological development in Germany, France, and in the USA, quite different from the Italian and Spanish traditions, more focused on the role of primacy and collegiality (33).

The most important contribution by Fantappiè is in making clear that in the theol. debates surrounding and contributing to the “synodal process” there are different theories of synodality. There are four different theories (esp. 54–56). The first one is a “functional model” in which synodality is part of a theol. of the *communio ecclesiarum* (Eugenio Corecco, Bernard Franck, Louis Bonnet), of the *munus episcopale* (Aymans), of the *munus regendi* of the particular churches (Hervé-Marie Legrand, Gilles Routhier, Pierre Vallin) or its sacramental basis (Georges Chantraine).

⁸ See *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*. Final Report of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod (2024), available online: https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf (02.09.2025).

⁹ See Fantappiè, Carlo: *Metamorfosi della sinodalità*. Dal Vaticano II a papa Francesco. – Venezia: Marcianum 2023. 128 S., kt. € 13,00 ISBN: 978-8865129005 (French translation: *Métamorphoses de la synodalité*. De Vatican II au pape François, Paris 2023).

The second is a “unitary model” (e. g. Salvador Piè y Ninot) in which synodality is “not just one constitutive aspect of the Church but a dimension capable of including all other forms of participation in the governance of the Church” (55). The third is a “plural model” of synodality as a dimension distinct and sometimes separated from other constitutive realities of the Church—communion, collegiality, co-responsibility, conciliarity. Finally, there is a fourth “binary model” in which synodality and collegiality are connected as they are rooted in the particular churches and in the universal church, and the synodal principle is correlated with the hierarchical principle (Alphonse Borras).¹⁰

Fantappiè points out an important development in the thinking of the Church on synodality, especially in its institutional voices, such as the International Theol. Commission which in its 2018 report “adopted without hesitation the perspective of communion and synodality [that] represents the perspective, respectively, the *modus essendi* and the *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church” (57). Pope Francis’ thinking is part of the developments in the thinking of the Church on synodality. Fantappiè sees Francis as changing his own approach to synodality during his pontificate: a first phase marked by an operational concept of synodality applied to Church governance at the beginning, and a second phase (starting in 2018) towards a “pastoral and spiritual” understanding of synodality, also because of the fear of “doctrinal splits on dogmatic issues and of rifts within the Church at the national or continental level” (67). Fantappiè indicates clearly the role of the German synod in this evolution of Francis’ view of synodality, but also the emergences of voices, which he calls “neo-conciliarist”, aiming at a connection between synodality and conciliarist theories coming from the council of Constance and Basel in the 15th century (72).¹¹

Fantappiè identifies a series of risks connected to some theories of synodality or “synodal ideologies”: a unilateral and exclusive ecclesiology of synodality at the expense of the collegial and primatial dimensions; a weakening of the idea of differentiated responsibilities in the Church; an erasure of the relationship between synodality and authority; an “idealistic and romantic” view of synodality which does not take seriously the reality of dissent and conflict in the church; an abstract view of synodality coming from the genesis of the term: “we started from substantives (college, synod) and we took adjectives from them (collegial, synodal), and we finally turn them into abstract substantives (collegiality, synodality)” (85). This carries risks, according to Fantappiè, if synodality is conceptualized in a separation or opposition from the synodal practices of the previous two thousand years. Fantappiè concludes pointing out Francis’ preference, “not contingent but permanent”, between synodality and the Bishops’ Synod: in the end, “the central government of the Church would revolve around the pope and the Bishops’ Synod, entailing a strong marginalization of the college of cardinals and the Roman Curia, also thanks to a decentralization with a devolution of more powers to the national bishops’ conferences (114). Fantappiè concludes by asking the fundamental question:

with this new synodality does pope Francis intend to respond to the current systemic crisis of the Church through a new and more radical reception of Vatican II? Or does he intend to implement the transition from a “hierarchical Church” to a “synodal Church” in a permanent way, thus modifying the structure of governance that in the

¹⁰ For an exhaustive analysis of Fantappiè’s book, see Alphonse BORRAS: “À propos de métamorphoses récentes de la synodalité”, in: *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 54 (2023) 388–397.

¹¹ An important tour d’horizon of the German Synod with comparisons with the two others most important synodal experiences—Latin America and Australia—is given in: *Synode als Chance: Zur Performativität synodaler Ereignisse*, ed. by Julia KNOP et al., Freiburg i. Br. 2024.

last millennium have pivoted around the papacy, the Roman Curia, and the college of cardinals? (117)

This question raised by Fantappiè has become even more relevant since the publication of the reform of the Roman Curia in 2022 and the enlargement and at the same time the *deminutio* of the college of cardinals and of the consistory during his pontificate.

Italian theologian *Giacomo Canobbio* joins Fantappiè in reminding us about the limits of synodality within the ecclesiological framework in which Paul VI instituted the Bishops' Synod in 1965.¹² The Synod was created in connection with episcopal collegiality, but as a function of papal ministry and not as an expression of collegiality (with analogies with the role of the college of cardinals, which also is not an expression of collegiality, 85–92). Canobbio appreciates the novelty in Francis' approach to the Synod of Bishops and synodality, overcoming the previous narrowly conceived idea of that episcopal body as purely "consultative" (101). The author points out the paradox of a pope "who proposes the involvement of all in the mission of the Church, but [...] becomes more and more the almost unique point of reference" (104). At the same time, Canobbio highlights the new phase in Francis' thinking: a collegiality that is no longer just "affective" but also "effective"; the fact that under Francis the reference to Vatican I's constitution *Pastor Aeternus* ("ex sese, non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae") has faded from the list of oppositions to collegiality; the distinction between collegiality and synodality, implying potentially a distinction also between Synod (of Bishops) and synodality (108–109).

The key contribution of Canobbio is his analysis of the real function of the Synod as it developed in the context of Francis' pontificate:

If the celebration of the synod is a form of realization of synodality, the synod itself promotes synodality. In this way the synod is 'liberated', even if not totally, from the perspective from which the relationship between the bishop of Rome and the episcopal college was generated [...]. There is, however, to ask whether the process of 'synodalization'—a neologism that has become pervasive in recent years—does not risk creating a heterogenesis of ends: the Synod of Bishops becomes the point of arrival and departure of ecclesial life, resulting in fact—as some suspect—a new instrument of centralization, in addition to causing inequalities between the churches due to the different organizational and financial means that they can benefit from. (117)

Moreover, Canobbio reminds us of the value of the synodal model in the Eastern Cath. Churches as it is defined in the *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium* (1990). The CCEO recognized "a form of synodality that does not belong to the Latin tradition, and that some would like to become part of the Latin tradition. The question of whether this is possible remains open and concerns, once again, the relationship between history and ecclesiology." (164) It remains to be seen what are the consequences for papal office of synodality "not as a simple rediscovery of practices, but as a rediscovery of *a figure of the Church* that recognizes and confesses the action of the Spirit that creates concord" (172)—but at a time of great discord within global Catholicism.

¹² See *Canobbio, Giacomo: Un nuovo volto della Chiesa? Teologia del Sinodo.* – Brescia: Morcelliana 2023. 192 S., kt. € 18,00 ISBN: 978-8837237127.

3.2. Synodality, collegiality, and conciliarity

A second set of contributions concerns the relationship between synodality and conciliarity, between the institutions of synodality (local synods, Synod of bishops) and of conciliarity (general and plenary councils of bishops).

In a multi-author vol. published in Italian and in Spanish and co-edited by Rafael Luciani, Serena Noceti, and Carlos Schickendantz, two chap.s stand out for addressing that issue.¹³ In her chap., Nathalie Becquart, who has served as an undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops since 2021, states that “it is no longer possible to conceive of [papal] primacy in itself but only within a broader vision of synodality based on the ecclesiology of the people of God” (208–222, cit. 217). Becquart defines Francis’ view of the relationship between primacy and synodality in terms of style:

I propose to define Pope Francis’ style of primacy, which involves a bottom-up approach, as the primacy of listening [...] his primacy is not exercised from above but in a horizontal style based on relationships [...] his primacy of listening, which is a primacy of discernment, implies that he does not yet have all the answers, that he cannot decide alone, that he needs to discern with others, recovering the *sensus fidelium*[.] (219)

It is a shift in mentality, from competition to cooperation:

as a pope he no longer places himself in competition with the bishops or the faithful, but in circularity with them, shaped by a synodal mentality, in support of a global and systemic approach based on the understanding of the Church as an organic unity. And in doing so, Francis moves from a historical model of competition between primacy and collegiality towards a model of cooperation between synodality, collegiality and primacy [...] The synods of bishops that followed one another were therefore concrete exercises, so to speak experiments in the implementation and sharing of this vision of Pope Francis with his way of teaching in words and gestures[.] (220)

In the same vol., Italian ecclesiologist Serena Noceti addressed the issue of the relations between different ecclesial subjects in terms of style focused on modes of communication:

the church in reform, pastoral conversion, renewal, structural transformation, finds in synodality its main path of realization. The change in the form of ecclesial relations involves first of all the promotion of a new communicative model, multidirectional and networked, which allows all ecclesial subjects to offer a specific contribution of words to the *sensus fidei ecclesiae*: a polyphony, animated by the Spirit, vital principle of unity in plurality, in which the symmetry of ministerial functions does not translate into powers or suppression and undervaluation of ecclesial voices but unfolds as a guarantee of agreement, harmony, consensus. This “con-versation”, far from pushing the Church to withdraw into itself, thanks to the contribution of different ecclesial subjects (first of all, the laity), refers to the fulfillment of the mission to be carried out with the same dialogical style that must mark the relations in a synodal church[.]¹⁴

¹³ Nathalie BECQUART: “Papa Francesco e il Sinodo: un nuovo stile di esercizio del primato. Primato, collegialità, sinodalità”, in: *Sinodalità e riforma. Una sfida ecclesiale*, ed. by Rafael LUCIANI/Serena NOCETI/Carlos SCHICKENDANTZ. – Brescia: Queriniana 2022. 432 S., kt. € 50,00 ISBN: 978-88-399-3611-0 (Edition in Spanish: *Sinodalidad y reforma. Un desafío ecclesial*, Madrid 2022.).

¹⁴ Serena NOCETI: “In comunicazione generativa. Conversazione, consensus, conspiratio”, in: *Sinodalità e riforma* (see n. 13), cit. 275. See also the chap. by one of the co-editors, Rafael LUCIANI: “Verso una effettiva ‘sinodalizzazione’ di tutta la chiesa”, in ibid., 91–107. By NOCETI see also *Reforming the Church: A Synodal Way of Proceeding*, Mahwah, NJ 2023.

One of the most significant contributions to the theol. of synodality and its ecclesiological import in relation to Vatican II came from French Jesuit *Christoph Theobald*'s book published right before the beginning of the first assembly (October 2023) of the Synod on synodality.¹⁵ If we admit that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church, "then the ecclesial architecture, in the way it has been set by Vatican I and Vatican II, starts moving" (32). Theobald notes that synodality is still set to operate within the framework of the Vatican II constitution *Lumen gentium*, but reframes ecclesiology in a spiritual orientation that is not present in that constitution. At the same time, synodality opens new spaces for an interpretation of *Lumen gentium*.¹⁶

Theobald points out that "it would be naïve to think that the implementation of synodality of all the baptized would not touch *the manner* in which we exercise and conceive the hierarchical ministry" (47). In the book, he dedicates one section to the passage "from primacy to collegiality and then on to synodality". Theobald sees synodality as part of an ecclesiological change of paradigm consecrated by Vatican II, but also the present moment as a phase of acceleration:

human history is made also of moments of acceleration. This is the case today, without a doubt. At the same time, uncertainty grows concerning the future: we do not know what church and world will "come out" of the present crises[.] (60)

Theobald neither forecasts nor outlines the meaning of synodality for the contours of papal office, but he stresses the tension between the "evenemential" nature of the Synod (the Synod as an event) and at the same time the weakness of institutions of synodality by comparison to the institutions of primacy: synodality is not just a particular event, but must be seen as "a process of institutional and spiritual reform in the middle and long term" (78). This process is part of "the departure from a uniformization that was fruit of the Gregorian period [from the 11th century on] and especially of the colonial period of the 'Latin' Church and the passage to a geographic and cultural differentiation" (78).

Of great import for the future of the papal office is Theobald's note of the difference between the conciliar *modus procedendi* of "disputatio" and the synodal method of the "conversation in the Spirit", with a turn that has not been cemented yet—at least in comparison with the bimillennial conciliar experience—in practice nor in theory (117). In particular, Theobald notes that

the frontier between discernment and decision is porous indeed, because consultation and deliberations are already dotted with by small-scale decisions and the ultimate decision remains in the end suspended until the discernment of all those, being affected by it, are supposed to receive it[.](149)

This directly calls into question the role of the papacy in synodality. The "ongoing synodalization" presupposes an adjustment of an ecclesial form that is different from the one dominating in the second millennium, "a new figure of Christian and Catholic ecclesiality": a Church that "learns to understand what the Spirit tells it" (157.165). Theobald considers the sharp distinction drawn by pope Francis between Synod and parliament, between church and democracy insufficient: "It seemed to be forgotten that the path of the Catholic Church in the last two centuries took place in large part in democratic systems" and that democratic values are a "secularized legacy of Christianity that the Catholic Church has had a hard time reintegrating and realizing within itself":

¹⁵ *Theobald, Christoph: Un concile qui ne dit pas son nom. Le synode sur la synodalité, voie de pacification et de créativité.* – Paris: Salvator 2023. 192 S. (nouvelle édition), kt. € 18,00 ISBN: 978-2706725623.

¹⁶ About this, see also Susan K. WOOD: *A Synodal Church. The Christian Faithful on Pilgrimage*, Lanham, MD 2025.

these [Francis'] negative formulations, perfectly correct in their order, are not sufficient to draw a precise and positive picture of the difference between synodal government of the Church and the one of our parliamentary democracies[.] (172)

3.3. Synodality, papacy, and the Roman Curia

Another cluster of theol. and canonical issues concerns the relationship between synodal reform of the Church and the papal office as head of the Roman Curia. It is important to remember here that, in a sense, the synodal process in the Cath. Church begins before 2021, that is already with the first assembly of the Bishops' Synod celebrated by Francis in two sessions in 2014 and 2015, and that this renewal of the Synod overlaps chronologically with a series of reforms of the Roman Curia. The 2023 apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* is the most important but just one, and not the last, of the many legislative measures taken by Francis for a reset of the Roman Curia.¹⁷ This is a key aspect in light also of the fact that Francis' new emphasis on the Synod and on synodality constitutes a novelty also for the role of the Roman Curia in the organization and participation in the Synod's assemblies, and could change the triangular relationship between the papal office, the Curia, and the Synod in terms of authorities in charge of governing the Cath. Church at the universal level.

An important book analyzing the reform of the Roman Curia is the one by Sergio F. Aumenta and Roberto Interlandi (scholars but also former officials in the Vatican Secretariat of State).¹⁸ Their book does not address the issue of synodality directly, but it is relevant as it reveals some of the trajectories of Francis' culture of central government outlined in *Praedicate Evangelium*. Aumenta and Interlandi cast a light on the issue of the preservation of international relations of the Holy See that should be kept reserved to the Secretariat of State, and of the relations between papacy, Curia, and Vatican City State. The book is a welcome alarm about Francis' (and his canon lawyers') tendency to autonomize the foundations of Vatican City State from theol. and ecclesiological considerations, especially visible in the new constitutional law promulgated in 2023:

On May 13, 2023, Pope Francis issued a new Fundamental Law of the Vatican City State, which came into force on June 7, which makes the separation between the institutions of the Roman Curia and those of the Vatican City State more marked, also calling into question the reservation of the Secretariat of State with regard to the international relations of the Holy See[.]¹⁹

Aumenta and Interlandi also note the new emphasis in *Praedicate Evangelium* in a new understanding of the Roman Curia in a direction that is juxtaposed to the previous one:

The Roman Curia is at the direct and immediate service of the Roman Pontiff in the ordinary exercise of his primatial office as pastor of the universal Church [...] but it is also a service to the bishops. This emphasis represents one of the major innovations of the new constitution, which, however, does not seem to subvert the traditional concept of the Roman Curia. [...] in this regard, "the organic relationship with the college of bishops" (PE I,8) could have been further developed in the direction of conceiving the Roman Curia as at the service of the Supreme authority in the Church

¹⁷ See Massimo FAGGIOLI: *The Apostolic Constitution "Preach the Gospel" – Praedicate Evangelium*. With an Appraisal of Francis's Reform of the Roman Curia, Collegeville, MN 2022.

¹⁸ See F. AUMENTA/Roberto INTERLANDI: *La Curia Romana secondo* (s. note 3).

¹⁹ Ibid., 57. See also Andrea ZAPPULLA: "Disciplinary Law in the Roman Curia and Vatican City State. Comparative Analysis of the Regulations of the Respective Disciplinary Commissions Between Convergences and Divergences," in: *Ius Canonicum* 2022, (Vol. 62, Núm. 123), 219–248.

which is the Roman Pontiff separately and the Roman Pontiff together with all the other bishops who form the episcopal college of which the Pope is the head[.]²⁰

Here the authors note the potential danger of a disconnect, if not an opposition, between collegiality and synodality in the ways in which the ordinary functioning of the central government of the Cath. Church works.

Most importantly, Aumenta and Interlandi raise an issue that has great importance for synodality:

with this provision [at II,5] *Praedicate Evangelium* actually inserts itself, albeit indirectly, into the controversial question of the origin of the power of government—whether sacramental (like the sacramental power of orders), with the consequent exclusion of the laity, or extra-sacramental—opting for the latter thesis [...] This however should not lead to the conclusion that Pope Francis wanted to settle once and for all the vexed question of the origin of the power of government, which remains open to this day[.]²¹

Aumenta and Interlandi make reference here to the problem that once the origin of the power of government is disconnected from the sacramental dimension, it opens the access to government in the Church to the non-ordained, but also touches on a theol. settlement that was reached by Vatican II only sixty years ago first with the “straw votes” of October 31, 1963 and then with the constitution *Lumen gentium*, chap. III.²²

Kristin Colberg (the sole US member of the theol. commission for the Synod on synodality) and Belgian Jesuit Jos Moons (since 2024 faculty member at Boston College) offer interesting reflections on synodality. An important point of reference in this book is the reflection opened by John Paul II's *Ut unum sint* for an ecumenical reform of the papacy, but also the references to monastic (in this particular case, Benedictine) models of leadership. The relationship between synodality and papal office is addressed in the chap. dedicated to “synodalizing structures”. The most important passage is on the role of the papacy in a synodal reform in the sense of service to the unity of the Church and not uniformity, and the authors articulate it in a counter-intuitive move:

Synodalizing the church requires renewal on the level of universal structures. There is often a perception that structures in Rome are bureaucratic or institutional and, ultimately, inimical to the types of reforms demanded by synodality. When people seek to identify effective examples will be ecclesial reform, they most often think of changes that emanated from efforts at the grassroots level. However, while it is true that prophetic voices in local communities feed ecclesial renewal, in a synodal church many of the most effective ecclesial reforms come from the center. Reforms initiated in Rome or within Canon law can bring about quick change and find broad implementation. Reforms originating from the center needn't always be ‘centralizing reforms’ aimed at deemphasizing local authority. Reforms originating at the center can also affect ‘diversifying reforms’ that can make the church more diverse rather than more uniform. Such efforts often stimulate reform by providing space for decisions to be made locally or embracing what is already happening in a local

²⁰ Ibid., 62. See also Massimo DEL POZZO: “La Curia romana y el principio de subsidiariedad”, in: *Ius Canonicum* 2023, (Vol. 63, Núm. 125), 47–97.

²¹ Ibid., 63–64.

²² See Alberto MELLONI: “The Great Ecclesiological Debate,” in: *The Mature Council*. Second Period and Intersession. September 1963–September 1964, ed. by Giuseppe ALBERIGO, English version edited by Joseph A. KOMONCHAK, Maryknoll, NY 2000 (History of Vatican II, 3), 1–115, esp. 98–105.

community. The Synod on Synodality itself is an example of a diversifying reform coming from the universal level.²³

It is true that the synodal process has shown the resources of papal power for church reform in a synodal way:

This massive act of empowering voices at the grassroots level was the product of the decision made at 'the center'. This decision brought about chances for renewal in a faster and more comprehensive way than any local church or group of local churches could have achieved. Further, it allowed the church to listen in a way that was more participatory, dynamic, and diverse than at any other time in its history. Universal structures can catalyze a growth in synodal attitudes, practices, and relationships. They can be powerful instruments for listening and for setting the church 'in motion' in ways that are in sync with the movement of the Spirit. In a synodalization of the church, its universal structures are not forgotten, nor do they lose their essence; instead they find different style of expression.²⁴

In the footsteps of John O'Malley's analysis of Vatican II in terms of style, Colberg and Moons insist on the issue of synodality as the chance to bring forth a new "leadership style", being the synodal process of a response not only to a major crisis/crises such as the revelations of abuse and coverup, but also to the reactions to scandals within the Vatican relating to clerical culture.²⁵ The authors point out the role of Francis' background to understand the synodal process: "Francis' preference for synodality has to do with his character, his experience of politics in Argentina, and his intellectual formation. [...] Pope Francis has been a major catalyst in advancing synodality as a valid (and much needed) contemporary ecclesial way of proceeding".²⁶

Francis' theol. of synodality appears to be in process itself, with its theoretical contours that are still undefined. If it is clear that papal power can have, and under Francis did have, a positive impact on synodality (as with the reforms of Vatican II), the other way around is still less clear, that is, how synodality can and will affect papal power and the forms of its exercise. Both the synodal process and the post-Vatican II ecumenical movement have started an evolution of the papal office that has to deal with an ongoing fragmentation of the partners in dialogue and a growing risk of fragmentation also within the Cath. Church.

One issue that has remained unaddressed both at the Synod and in the scholarly debate is the import of synodality for the form of election of the bishop of Rome and pope of the Cath. Church. It has to be noted that also in this issue there has been, so far, a separation between theol. debate on synodality and canon law, which, in its own field, has revived the discussion on the reform of the conclave and on the legal provisions necessary for the case of "sede impedita" (192).²⁷

An important topic of reflection for the relations between synodality and papal power concerns the tendencies in the exercise of papal power and its conceptualizations during the synodal process and independently from it. An interesting contribution in this sense comes from the book by

²³ Kristin M. COLBERG/Jos MOONS, SJ: *The Future of Synodality*. How We Move Forward from Here, Collegeville, MN 2025, 173–174.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 174.

²⁵ See ibid., pp. 51–53 and 107–110.

²⁶ Ibid., 62 and 66.

²⁷ See, for example, Geraldina BONI: "Prospettive de iure condendo", in: *Papa, non più papa*. La rinuncia pontificia nella storia e nel diritto canonico, ed. by Amedeo Feniello/Mario Prignano. – Roma: Viella 2022. 192 S., kt. € 25,00 ISBN: 979-1254691915, 135–151. See also other studies on this issue authored by BONI in the last few years.

Anthony Ekpo (currently undersecretary of the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Human Development) on the Roman Curia.²⁸ In his book, largely a commentary on the apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, Ekpo delineates, among the principles and criteria of the Curia reform, also synodality which he translates here as “regular meetings of heads of Dicasteries with the pope and regular interdicasterial meetings” (84, see also 92–93). Here the intersection between papal power and Curia reform is articulated in terms of augmented consultation between dicasteries, of the dicasteries with bishops’ conferences and hierarchical structures of the Eastern Cath. Churches, and more cooperation with the General Secretariat of the Synod. It is interesting to note in the book the neglect of the role of the college of cardinals, in a way that is consistent with the style of governing by pope Francis.

Among the innovations of *Praedicate Evangelium*, Ekpo lists the power of governance and the role of laypeople in the Roman Curia. Ekpo evaluates this innovation in a positive way, and he does it accepting the view of the relations between power of governance and sacramentality introduced in papal teaching by Jesuit theologian and canon law theorist Gianfranco Ghirlanda:

the authority of the head of a dicastery does not come from his hierarchical status but by the ordinary vicarious power received from the Roman Pontiff to act in his name [...] The affirmation of this principle confirms that the power of governance in the church does not come from the sacrament of holy orders but from canonical mission based on the baptism of every Christian[.] (83)

Besides the concrete ramifications for the exercise of power of governance by lay people on the Roman Curia, this view must be considered attentively for the implications for the concept of papal power. The perverse result of the new interpretations of the sources of power of governance could be Roman Curia personnel made of lay people but within an ecclesiastical system of allegiance and obedience typical of a more and not less subservient bureaucracy.²⁹ The question is not only whether institutional reforms inspired at synodality are consistent with the ecclesiology of *Lumen gentium*, but also, more immediately, whether synodal-oriented reforms build papal power in ways that are sacramentally and ecumenically problematic.

3.4. Papacy, synodality, and ecumenism

The books reviewed here do not address directly the ecumenical implications of a synodal reform of the Cath. Church. But it is worth referring to recent official documents that have addressed this dimension.

The March 2018 document of the International Theol. Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, addresses the nexus between synodality, primacy, and ecumenism. Synodality is seen as integral part of the post-Vatican II ecumenical commitment:

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 (par. 9).

²⁸ Ekpo, Anthony: *The Roman Curia: History, Theology, and Organization*. – Washington D.C: Georgetown UP 2024. 152 S., geb. € 88,61 ISBN: 978-1647124366. It is worth mentioning that the adjective “synodal” appears in the apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, but the term “synodality” does not.

²⁹ See FAGGIOLI: *The Apostolic Constitution “Preach the Gospel”* (see n. 17), XLIV–XLV.

The ITC outlines some basis for an ecumenical import of the synodal reform, which is noteworthy because it is based on a theol. of revelation more than on an ecclesiological model:

It is possible to go deeper into the theology of synodality on the basis of the doctrine of the *sensus fidei* of the People of God and the sacramental collegiality of the episcopate in hierarchical communion with the Bishop of Rome. This ecclesiological vision invites us to articulate synodal communion in terms of ‘all’, ‘some’ and ‘one’. On different levels and in different forms, as local Churches, regional groupings of local Churches and the universal Church, synodality involves the exercise of the *sensus fidei* of the *universitas fidelium* (all), the ministry of leadership of the college of Bishops, each one with his presbyterium (some), and the ministry of unity of the Bishop of Rome (one). The dynamic of synodality thus joins the communitarian aspect which includes the whole People of God, the collegial dimension that is part of the exercise of episcopal ministry, and the primatial ministry of the Bishop of Rome. This correlation promotes that *singularis conspiratio* between the faithful and their Pastors [reference to *Dei Verbum*, par. 10], which is an icon of the eternal *conspiratio* that is lived within the Trinity. The Church thus ‘constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfilment in her’ [citation of *Dei Verbum*, par. 8] (par. 64).

The recent study document of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, entitled *The Bishop of Rome. Primacy and Synodality in Ecumenical Dialogues and Responses to the Encyclical Ut Unum Sint* (10 June 2024), among the proposals, mentions the reform of the Roman Curia, extraordinary consistories and the novelty of the institution of the “Council of Cardinals” as a possibility for a synodal development of the exercise of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. The question of the role of the Bishop of Rome remains at the center of institutional ecumenical relations:

Theological dialogues on the question of primacy have increasingly demonstrated that primacy and synodality are not two opposing ecclesial dimensions, but rather that they are two mutually constitutive and sustaining realities, and therefore should be addressed together (par. 5).³⁰

The document makes the transition from the mutual interdependence between primacy and conciliarity expressed in the *Ravenna Document* of dialogue between the Roman Cath. Church and the Orthodox Church (2007) to the “mutual interdependency between primacy and synodality” today (par. 112). The document stresses the importance of the prospects for ecumenical dialogue of synodality in the Cath. Church: “Churches and Ecclesial communities in both the East and the West attentively consider the Catholic Church’s modelling of communion and primacy *ad intra* as a blueprint or test-case of its intentions *ad extra* in the ecumenical field” (par. 153).

The issue of the relations between synodality and papal primacy seems paradoxically more clearer in the dialogue between the Cath. Church and other Christian churches and denominations than within Catholicism. Even before being an ecumenical issue, crucial for the unity of the churches, the relationship between synodality and primacy is a Roman Cath. issue, at the center of tensions between different components of a Catholicism in which the conciliar legacy is disputed and unreconciled. The experience of Francis’s pontificate seems to show primacy and synodality

³⁰ Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Bishop of Rome. Primacy and Synodality in Ecumenical Dialogues and Responses to the Encyclical Ut Unum Sint*, 10 June 2024, available online: https://www.christianunity.va/content/dam/unitacristiani/Collezione_Ut_unum_sint/The_Bishop_of_Rome/The_Bishop_of_Rome%20of%20Rome.pdf (02.09.2025).

proceeding on two close but parallel paths. Francis has given synodality an unprecedented boost, opening Catholicism to a theol. of church governance that develops key themes of Vatican II. At the same time, during Francis's pontificate the exercise of papal primacy has been able to count on a structure that is both theol. and institutional, and mediatic and post-institutional that synodality does not currently possess.

4. A few open questions about synodality and papal office

What does this mean for the Church that is still receiving Vatican II? For a Church that has no council like a "Vatican III" in sight, and for which *synodality* might be replacing *conciliarity*, or might be a new form of conciliarity? This is just an initial set of questions that cast a light on the complexity of the relations between synodality and forms of exercise of the papal ministry.

4.1. Collegiality, synodality, and primacy

The complex relationship between synodality and primacy must be understood in the context of the particular ecclesiological moment that Catholicism is experiencing. It is a significant role reversal compared to the first post-conciliar period. In some sense, the synodal process and the debate on synodality are also a way to re-litigate the final shape that episcopal collegiality took in the ecclesiological constitution of Vatican II, *Lumen gentium* and in the post-Vatican II synods (especially under John Paul II.).³¹

But synodality must be understood in a longer historical timeframe for the development of ecclesiastical institutions. During the pontificate of Francis, the contours of synodality emerge on the horizon as a novelty compared to the regimes of the late medieval and early modern consistorial model³², of the Roman Curia as a different possible embodiment of the idea of a European "king's court",³³ and finally Vatican II episcopal collegiality. There is an evolution of the sense of church that begins between Vatican I and Vatican II, and that today is starting to take on different forms in the different local churches that are increasingly assertive of their identity in global Catholicism. The development of synodality during Francis has relied more on policies implemented by the pontificate than on a solid theol. consensus: only since 2021 there has been a significant wave of studies on synodality, but always in the context of an ongoing series of ecclesial gatherings relying heavily for their legitimacy on the firm commitment of the pope to the synodal project.

More uncertain, however, appear to be, on the same ecclesial, ecclesiastical, and ecclesiological horizon, the contours of papal primacy in the synodal church. In the pontificate of Francis, there has been an acceleration of reflection on ecclesial synodality as a horizon of the third millennium that has

³¹ It is noteworthy that in his book, Luciani frames the issue of the relationship between synodality and primacy beginning from "Nota Explicativa Praevia" added to the constitution *Lumen gentium* by Paul VI.: "The doctrine of episcopal collegiality, a great novelty of the Council, was thus born under this cloud, stressing the difference between ecclesial subjects more than the need for respectivity and reciprocity": Rafael LUCIANI: *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church*. Foreword by Peter Hünemann, Mahwah, NJ 2022, 62–69, cit. 63.

³² See, for example, Maria Teresa FATTORI: *Clemente VIII e il Sacro Collegio 1592–1605*. Meccanismi istituzionali ed accentramento di governo, Stuttgart 2004 (Päpste und Papsttum, 33).

³³ See Antonio MENNITI IPPOLITO: *Il governo dei papi nell'età moderna*. Carriere, gerarchie, organizzazione curiale, Roma 2007; Wolfgang REINHARD: *Freunde und Kreaturen: "Verflechtung" als Konzept zur Erforschung historischer Führungsgruppen*. Römische Oligarchie um 1600, Munich 1979; Christoph WEBER: *Senatus divinus*. Verborgene Strukturen in Kardinalskolegium der frühen Neuzeit (1500–1800), Frankfurt a. M. 1996; François JANKOWIAK: *La curie romaine de Pie IX à Pie X*. Le gouvernement central de l'église et la fin des états pontificaux, 1846–1914, Rome 2007.

coincided with a lesser attention to the already existing mechanisms of collegial and consistorial government in the history of the Roman Curia, especially in the period preceding the sixteenth century. Some questions of historiographical importance arise here, which deserve a reflection on the history of the institutions of the government of the Cath. Church during the synod.

4.2. Looking for a new institutional balance

Semantically, in the vocabulary of Cath. magisterium and theol. today, synodality and conciliarity are no longer synonymous or quasi-synonymous. On the contrary, in this particular, synodal phase of the post-Vatican II Church, they represent different conceptions of Church governance—also from the point of view of gender perspectives, since synodality is inclusive of women’s participation in ways that are not possible in conciliarity which limits participation to bishops and to the superiors and general abbots of male religious orders. The 1983 *Code of Canon Law* specifies:

Can. 339 § 1. All the bishops and only the bishops who are members of the college of bishops have the right and duty to take part in an ecumenical council with a deliberative vote. § 2. Moreover, some others who are not bishops can be called to an ecumenical council by the supreme authority of the Church, to whom it belongs to determine their roles in the council[.]

With Pope Francis since 2013, the Synod has become an institution increasingly at the center of ecclesial debate and also used to support the development of papal magisterium. However, it is not clear whether and how the Synod will remain “*of Bishops*,” as conceived by Paul VI. in 1965, an expression of episcopal collegiality, a device of papal primacy, or whether the Synod will become an institution of ecclesial synodality that gives voice and representation to all types of members of the Cath. Church (clergy, male members of religious orders, and lay people including women). This is a fundamental question that will have to be addressed by the ecclesiological debate dealing with the way in which the legacy of Pope Francis on the Synod (of Bishops) as an institution will be received by his successor.

The search for a new institutional balance must deal not only with the ecclesiological vision of Pope Francis, but also with a plurality of theories of synodality. Important questions of overall institutional balance remain open: the role of the Synod Office in Rome and of the synodal assemblies with respect to papal primacy and the Roman Curia; the composition and frequency of the assemblies of the central Synod and its relationship with local, national, and continental synodal assemblies; their relationship with other institutions of episcopal collegiality (episcopal conferences, plenary councils). The key question is ultimately whether the 2021–2024 Synod heralds a transition which failed or delivered something different from what many Catholics expected: from the promises of a *synodality of governance* of the Church (according to the expectations raised by the first years of the pontificate) to a *pastoral and spiritual synodality* (according to a more cautious vision).

Many important questions arise regarding the institutional forms that synodality will take in the celebrations of the Synod assemblies in Rome and the relationships between the Synod of Bishops and the institutional incarnations 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 papacy (of Francis or his successor) will significantly change the formal (legal) and material (experienced) constitution of the Synod created by Paul VI. The key question is whether the Synod will remain central for the Roman papacy to reach the peripheries, or on the contrary whether the Synod, with

the assemblies held in Rome, will no longer have a significant function, if and once Catholicism globally acquires a more “synodal” dimension in the sense of decentralized and less dependent on Rome for decision-making for all local churches in the global Cath. community.

4.3. Papal teaching and synodality

The Synod on Synodality of 2021–2024 has adopted the method of “conversation in the Spirit,” seeking to reach and express the *consensus fidelium*. This, and not only the more diverse membership of the voting participants in the Synod, is different from the decision-making style of ecumenical/general councils and still requires clarification in terms of the relationship between decision making (the somewhat investigative phase that leads to the decision) and decision taking (the decision-making by a small number of members of the synodal process, or above them—the pope in the universal church, the bishop in the local church). The Synod on Synodality has, even if not formally on paper, the task of redefining in practice the relationship between papal primacy, episcopal collegiality, and ecclesial synodality, and all this in a more global Catholicism, that is to say also more fragmented and diversified in its cultures of Church governance.

The path of the Cath. Church in this century presents important differences compared to other synodal moments in previous centuries: it is the attempt at a synodal conversion, within a turbulent process of globalization of Catholicism, in which the papal primacy is pushed to assume a key role of guaranteeing the unity and catholicity of the Church—which are subjected to centrifugal forces from the point of view of doctrine, life, and worship. This was seen during the pontificate of Francis and especially after the publication, a few weeks after the conclusion of the first assembly of the Synod of October 2023, of the declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith “On the pastoral meaning of blessings”, *Fiducia supplicans* (18th December 2023). On the world map of Catholicism today there are not only very different cultures in matters of sexuality, gender, and LGBTQ rights, but also disparate ecclesiologies experienced and very different types of belonging to the Church.

4.4. Synodality and primacy in global Catholicism today

A new page in the redefinition of papal primacy in contemporary Catholicism started with the pontificate of John XXIII., an Italian Catholic with a vision of Rome open to the world and the world church, in ways that were different from his predecessors. The pontificate of Francis presents analogies with respect to that periodizing event, but also significantly different emphases: not only for the interpretation of primacy in ways that are influenced by his experience and spiritual vision as a Jesuit, but for the global characteristics that Catholicism has visibly assumed in the 21st century.³⁴ Catholicism is global today not only because of its geographical extension, but for its attempt to make global Cath. cultures and theologies mutually enrich each other in local contexts, characterized by great diversity that in some cases make them coexist side by side peacefully, but in other cases are alternative and competitive (as in the case of the movement for the return of the pre-conciliar Reformation liturgy or “Latin Mass” especially in Catholicism in the Anglo-American space).

In this sense, synodality today is much more than an attempt to give voice to the people of God: it is an attempt to hold together a Catholicity that must rearticulate its relationship with its

³⁴ See Massimo Faggioli: *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis*. Moving Toward Global Catholicity, Maryknoll, NY 2020.

historical-cultural roots—with Europe and the West but not only. It is not only a question for the local churches but also for the papacy itself: proof of this is the oscillation, over a brief twenty-year period and between two pontificates of the title of “Patriarch of the West” that Benedict XVI. had removed from the *Annuario Pontificio* in 2006 and that Pope Francis restored in 2024. The ecclesial and ecclesiological discussion on synodality takes place in the context of an oscillation in the language of the papal magisterium on the representation of the papacy itself.

4.5. Synodality, primacy, and post-institutionalism

The uncertainties of the relationship between synodality and primacy in Catholicism are also affected by the effects of the crisis of democracies, and in particular by the democratic backsliding that is visible in key countries in the history of Catholicism (Eastern Europe, the United States, Latin America) as well as by the uncertain path of constitutional democracies in the post-colonial world. In the post-Vatican II Church, the reflection on synodality as a form of government of the Church was the fruit of a late encounter with the culture of democracy and participation—made possible by the abrogation by the council of the condemnation of political modernity. The 21st century, as we have seen it so far and as it looms on the horizon, paints a less favorable scenario for the inclusion of representative systems in the ecclesiology of synodality than the years of the first post-Vatican II council: due to the collapse of the culture of participation, if not sometimes due to the frontal and programmatic opposition against constitutional and liberal democracy by anti-liberal Catholicism.

Global Catholicism must relate on the one hand to anti-modern political cultures within ecclesiastical hierarchies, and on the other hand to post-modern versions of the rejection of the liberal representative democratic system that take on populist and ethno-nationalist forms that invoke Catholicism as a central pillar of “cultural Christianity” at the service of an identity threatened by secularism, immigration and multiculturalism. In some contexts, the transition from a clerical system of government to a synodal one open to the participation of the “people of God” exposes itself to the risk of a return of authoritarian political cultures in Catholicism: risks that can easily become an alibi for the defense of the status quo by the contemporary ecclesiastical system and for a rejection of forms of lay participation in the government of the church. With the pontificate of Francis, risks of a different type have emerged, linked to the mechanisms favored by the pope of direct relationship with the people, aimed at bypassing the systems of institutional communication.

The relationship between papal primacy, ecclesial synodality and the situation of democratic cultures and systems cannot ignore the impact of new digital media and social media. Ecclesiological thought that aspires to increase the participation of all the people of God in the government of the church must take into account the phenomenon of the virtualization of religious and ecclesial identities, which also in Catholicism tend to aggregate in online communities. The papal primacy of Francis has guaranteed the coexistence of both systems, clerical and synodal, of church governance. The underlying issue is that synodality, as a transition from clerical to synodal governance, is an instituting type of thought—with multiple synodal models in play—that must deal with a largely post-institutional if not anti-institutional Catholicism both in its way of thinking and in its life lived. Two emerging questions concern the relations between synodality and the institutional dimension. The first is already a lived ecclesiology of the virtual spaces, which upsets or at least modifies the

traditional binary between central and local. The second is the possibility, in a global Cath. Church, to implement synodality under one canon law.³⁵

5. Conclusions. Synodality as continuity and change for the papal office

Historians of the Church and the papacy are not unaware of the fact that the changes in the relationship between primacy and synodality are indicative of an ongoing transformation in the mechanisms of functioning and “representation” (in the three senses: figure-image, vicarious representation, and representation) of the papal office. We do not know what the path of the relationships between the forms and institutions of the exercise of papal primacy and the forms and institutions of synodality will be after the pontificate of Francis. But it can already be said that thirty years after John Paul II.’s proposal for a reform of papal primacy in an ecumenical sense in the encyclical *Ut unum sint* (1995), the pontificate of Francis has taken up that proposal again: on the one hand, accelerating the pace of discussion within the Cath. Church, and on the other hand taking both the post-conciliar ecumenical acquis and the crisis of ecumenism for granted. The main difference lies in the shift, or perhaps a retreat, of the agenda of the reform of the primacy since the time of *Ut unum sint*: from the problem of the ministry of the bishop of Rome as a ministry of unity among Christians, to the problem of how the bishop of Rome can serve the unity of Catholics in a Church in which communion with the successor of Peter is subjected to new tensions due to the globalization and multiculturalization not only *de facto*, but also *de iure* of Catholicism.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* for the second assembly of the Synod on Synodality (October 2024) seemed to indicate the possibility of a paradigm shift, from the universalist model to that of the “ecclesia tota” (par. 88). The *Final Document* of the Synod on synodality, approved by the pope, stated, quoting Lumen gentium 13, that “the primacy of the see of Peter remains intact, which presides over the universal communion of charity and safeguards legitimate differences while taking care that what is particular not only does no harm to unity but rather is conducive to it (LG 13)”.³⁶ It also emphasizes that “the need to find ‘a way of exercising the primacy which [...] is nonetheless open to a new situation’ ([John Paul II] *Ut unum sint*, 95) is a fundamental challenge both for a missionary synodal Church and for Christian unity”.³⁷ Referring to the 2024 document *The Bishop of Rome*, the *Final Document* of the Synod on synodality adopts the roadmap proposed by the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity:

The concrete proposals it contains regarding a rereading or an official commentary on the dogmatic definitions of the First Vatican Council on primacy, a clearer distinction between the different responsibilities of the Pope, the promotion of synodality within the Church and in its relationship with the world and the search for a model of unity based on an ecclesiology of communion offer promising prospects for the ecumenical journey[.]³⁸

It remains to be seen what this means for the forms of exercising the primacy in the Cath. Church. Papal primacy has taken on different forms throughout history, thanks to different combinations of

³⁵ See Massimo FAGGIOLI/Bryan FROEHLE: *Global Catholicism*. Between Disruption and Encounter, Leiden 2024, first vol. of the series “Studies in Global Catholicism” <https://brill.com/display/serial/SGC?language=en>; Judith HAHN: *The Language of Canon Law*, New York, NY 2023.

³⁶ *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* (see n. 8), par. 131.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, par. 137.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, par. 137.

theol.-spiritual elements and institutional elements: the Petrine principle and the legacy of the Roman Empire. To draw a parallel with Roman history, the description of the role of the emperor did not change formally, but changed in substance between Augustus and Constantine, and with the transfer of the Empire from Rome to Constantinople. The debate (and the internal struggle within the institution) around the forms of the relationship between primacy and synodality is at the heart of the history of Francis's pontificate. This theol. and institutional knot is part of a phase of great transformation in global Catholicism, in a reformulation of the relationship between *urbs* and *orbis*. Synodality also potentially means a de-Romanization of Catholicism or at least a very different relationship between Rome and the local churches, and therefore also a new era in the history of the Roman papacy.

The main question concerns the possibilities of a harmonious development of the relationship between synodality, collegiality, and papal primacy in a Cath. Church in which ecclesiology is increasingly marginal in theol. thought and in the canon of theological studies.

Author:

Massimo Faggioli, Dr., Professor für Ekklesiologie, Loyola Institute at Trinity College Dublin
(massimo.faggioli@gmail.com)