

Catalina Cerda-Planas / Nora Kalbarczyk /
Markus Lubert (Eds.)

DOING SYNODALITY

Empirical and Intercultural Perspectives
on the German Synodal Way



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Markus Luber

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Preface

With this volume, KAAD and IWM as two German institutions of Global Church affairs present the results of their intercultural dialogue project on the Synodal Path. The publication fits in well with the current dynamics of Church developments because, despite the ongoing synodal process, additional efforts are needed to reach an understanding in terms of content at various levels as well as to further develop a culture of dialogue. Given the force of the dissonance that worldwide loudly accompany the synodal initiatives, the impression of futility may perhaps arise. In this situation, it is crucial to reject a spirit of despondency while the breadth of the horizon of current ecclesial development is kept in view. Because the magnitude of the task can only be adequately determined in the context of the current transformation of the global community. Since many established orientations are at present up for discussion and fundamental convictions are being put to the test, a Church that sees itself as committed to dialogue with the secular cannot remain untouched by the upheavals. It is about nothing more or less than a new way of being in the world for the Church in the face of the cultural revolution to which Pope Francis repeatedly refers. Against this backdrop, the contributions collected here, most of which emerged from the forum of the international conference, testify to a willingness to engage in conversation that springs from a spirit of courage. The encouragement from this spirit becomes all the stronger the more we realize that these processes are not an end in themselves but are aimed at a Church that has a mission in the world.

My sincere thanks go to Nora Kalbarczyk for taking the initiative for this project, which I associate with the experience of a very successful collaboration between ecclesiastical institutions with a worldwide concern. I am grateful for the inter-ecclesial foresight of the Department for International Church Affairs of the German Bishops' Conference, which has become apparent in the generous support of the project. Very special thanks go to Catalina Cerda-Planas for her willingness to enter this challenging field of synodality because although experienced in empirical research she had to familiarize herself with the issues surrounding the German Synodal Way and its international discussion. I am also grateful for the support of the IWM team in organizing the online conference and producing this volume: Branka Gabric, Markus A. Scholz, Friederike Dillenseger, Leandro Bedin-Fontana, Roman Beck, Santiago Valencia, Marion Waidlein, Silvia Braun. Finally, I would like to thank Jan Schäfer for his proven technical support and Luca John Sabetti for the professional proofreading.

Frankfurt am Main

Markus Lüber S.J.

The Project *Doing Synodality* – Motivation and Guiding Principles

Nora Kalbarczyk, Markus Luber S.J.

In recent years, the image of a Catholic Church in need of renewal and conversion has deepened in the German public arena. The uncovering of complex and shocking power abuse cases in numerous dioceses has led to a deep crisis of credibility.

The so-called Synodal Path, a Church reform process supported by both the laity and the hierarchy, which began in 2019, was intended to identify the structural aspects underlying the power abuse crisis and propose solutions for further development. The debate focused on the issues of clerical power and lifestyle, the separation of powers and participation as well as sexuality and the responsibility of women in the Church.

The Synodal Path, although with the primary goal of developing solutions for the situation in Germany, has not taken place without external influences and references. This is because the Catholic Church does not understand itself as a collection of solitary local churches, but always locates itself in the context of the Global Church and other local churches in different countries and continents.

However, whenever the “Global Church” has been mentioned in the context of local discussions, it has been strongly problematized, as it has often been used as a general obstacle to reform projects. According to individual voices, the German Synodal Path *in toto* should not be pursued without a connection to the Global Church. In other words, the criticism was that the reform issues being discussed in Germany did not play a role for Catholics in the local churches outside Western Europe, as they had other, more urgent problems. Against this background – and especially before Pope Francis initiated the global synodal process – unanswered questions arose: are the concerns and topics of the German Synodal Path really particular or can other local churches also tie in with them?

For the “Global Church” to play a serious argumentative role in the discourse of the German Synodal Path, a differentiation process would first have to take place that does justice to the object of reference: the various local churches in and outside Germany. In other words: in the discourse on the Syn-

odal Path, we have used and continue to use too often a blanket way of talking about the “Global Church”, rarely keeping in mind its polyphony as well as its different levels.

To us – the KAAD and IWM –, as institutions with a Global-Church orientation, it was important to weave Global-Church voices into the German Synodal Path. To do so, the research project “Synodal Way- Global Church Perspectives”, proposed by the KAAD and developed in joint work with IWM, aimed to look at the topics of the Synodal Path from the perspective of other Global Church contexts, and to classify their relevance at the various levels of Church life. By doing so, it was sought to find out which topics (whether the four main topics of the German Synodal Path or others) are relevant to the faithful in other cultural, political, economic, and religious contexts.

To achieve this Global Church perspective, scholarship holders of KAAD, IWM, and ICALA were invited to participate in the study. The Catholic Academic Exchange Service (Katholischer Akademischer Ausländer-Dienst e.V. – KAAD) is the scholarship organization of the Catholic Church in Germany for postgraduates and academics from countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Near and Middle East, and Central and Eastern Europe. Through scholarships, educational events, and personal and spiritual assistance in Germany and the focus countries, it supports its scholarship holders intending to multiply their work in their home countries. This is done in cooperation with partners and associations of former scholarship holders in these countries, to create (scientific) networks and contribute to holistic development. The worldwide KAAD community reflects the Global Church and thus the diversity of local churches and their concerns. Consequently, KAAD can also be described as a “community of prayer, learning and solidarity”, as formulated by the German bishops in the document “Evangelization and Globalization” as a vision for Global Church exchange between the local churches and the faithful. The Institute for the Global Church and Mission (Institut für Weltkirche und Mission – IWM) is an academic institute of the German Bishops’ Conference at the Sankt Georgen School of Philosophy and Theology in Frankfurt am Main. As a place of academic Global Church reflection and intercultural theological exchange, it follows and accompanies the processes of synodal development. In addition, by organizing the Albertus Magnus Scholarship Program, IWM contributes to the training of competent people who can act as intercultural mediators in the synodal process. The program provides postgraduate study scholarships for foreign theology students, especially priests and religious people from countries in the Global South and East, so they can study in Germany. Finally, the Scholarship Agency Latin America-Germany (Stipendienwerk Lateinamerika-Deutschland e.V. – ICALA) is dedicated to international cultural exchange and was founded to promote interdisciplinary cooperation between German and Latin

American academics. The scholarships aim to serve the pastoral work of the Latin American Church.

Scholarship holders and alumni from these three institutions were invited to participate in a study that considered a first, quantitative phase which consisted of a non-representative online survey. In this questionnaire, the participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with certain statements on the debated topics and to indicate the relevance these topics had for them and their own local Church. A second, qualitative study phase with focus groups and individual interviews by region followed, to discuss the quantitative results with a (smaller) group of participants. Both phases were accompanied by conferences, such as the KAAD Annual Academy entitled “Synodal Church – Global Church Perspectives” in April 2022 and the IWM Annual Conference “Doing Synodality in Intercultural Exchange” in March 2023.

The results and reflections shared during this study and the aforementioned conferences are brought together and presented in this volume. In Part I, the design and empirical findings of the research are presented in detail, both by topic and region. Part II consists of the regional analyses done by academics of each of the regions that took part in the research (Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East). The third Part comprises the topological reflections considering contributions from different approaches: from the experience in the USA and the World Synod, from the perspective of other regions on the topics of the German Synodal Path, and from the experience of two members of the German Synodal Path.

As an introduction to this multisided volume, we would like to highlight a few preliminary findings and share some theological reflections that stood behind and motivated the intercultural exchange promoted with this study and developed during the conference informed here.

1. Different Starting Points

The reform project of the Synodal Path was accompanied by the fear that different dynamics and different speeds of reform could lead to a great diversity of Catholic life in the various local churches. However, it should be borne in mind that we already have different starting points in our respective Church lives, depending on the local church context. We must first agree on the respective form of these starting situations before we can assess what is meant in a local church by the approval or rejection of a particular statement or demand related to the topics of the German Synodal Way.

An example: in the first topic area “Power and Separation of Powers in the Church – Joint Participation and Involvement in the Mission”, the statement “It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed” received high approval ratings, which were particularly high among Catholics from Asia. The personal relevance, as well as the relevance for the parish and the local church, is also rated as relatively high, as is the relevance of this topic in the future. This initially surprised us: why are the approval ratings for this statement so high among Catholics from Asia (again, from countries with very different Catholic backgrounds such as Thailand, Pakistan, or Bangladesh)? It then turns out that the emphasis of this statement is more on responsibility than on power – also and initially in a pastoral way. Lay people, it is said, do not have the necessary pastoral training and experience – the aim here is to professionalize the laity and at the same time to separate the areas of responsibility of clergy and laity. The starting situation is, therefore, different from that in Germany, where the training and involvement of lay people, for example with the profession of pastoral advisor, is well established. And we don’t even have to go as far as Asia – a glance at our European neighbors (Italy, for example) is enough to see that it is not the goals, but the respective local church starting situation that can already differ significantly and with far-reaching effects on the respective Church lives.

2. Polyphony of the Local Churches and Their Societies

A further level of differentiation concerns the respective spokesperson or actor: it must be noted that the feedback from other local churches on the reform path of the Church in Germany generally came only from the clergy. In our study, the differentiation was much greater and included lay people and women. It is important to recognize and acknowledge the polyphony of the societies of the local churches as such – the answers may also differ accordingly.

On the third topic “Women in Ministries and Offices in the Church”, for example, the statement “Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes” was rather less agreed upon, while the sentence “In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church” found a higher agreement among the participants. As was to be expected, there were large swings in opinion here. The topic was rated as relevant for the respondents personally, for their parishes, and the local churches; also, as a topic that will become more important in the future. The differences between the genders are interesting: for example, men agreed with the first statement more often than women. The discussions and talks at the KAAD

Annual Academy confirmed this divergence. Especially among women in African countries, this topic seems to be more relevant than some would like to admit. There is a clear call for women to be given a different status in management and decision-making processes. Unsurprisingly, the figures suggest that interest in this topic is particularly high among Latin American Catholics, unlike in Eastern Europe. Maronites, Ethiopian, and Armenian Catholics, on the other hand, show higher approval ratings than Greek Catholics.

Another example: the topic of “Living in Fulfilling Relationships” was given the greatest personal relevance of all the topics but was also rated as extremely relevant at the level of the local communities and the Church. The issues associated with this and perceived as important are diverse (from a re-evaluation of homosexuality to the recognition of polygamy). Here, too, it was important to note that the practice in various local churches deviates in different aspects from the teachings of the Church, in order to counteract the prejudice that the German reform efforts related to these topics could be dismissed as a reaction to particularly decadent conditions. Rather, it is clear that the faithful worldwide are confronted with questions of coherence and credibility, both individually and institutionally, as well as on an ecclesial and societal level.

3. Doing Synodality – Contributing to a New Ecclesial Culture

Against the backdrop of this empirical diversity and plural intercultural reality documented by our study, to us, it was not just important to reflect opinions and calculate values, but also to make an effort to enter into a conversation with each other on an interlocal and intercultural level about the results obtained. Hence, we organized the international conference “Doing Synodality in Intercultural Exchange” to provide a platform of discussion, because we felt that there was a need for further forums for dialogue to overcome misunderstandings and also confront positions directly. Although the starting point of such continued dialogue has been the topics of the Synodal Path in Germany, the intention was to open up a space for the plurality of other church situations worldwide by founding on the results and analysis.

Of course, in the meanwhile, the synodal process had gained momentum. However, that does not mean that other dialogical initiatives are superfluous. Quite the opposite, we felt encouraged by the outline of the proceedings in our conviction that in addition to the official proceedings, further exchange is needed according to the charism of the faithful and the institutions. One channel of dialogue should take place also on an academic level, with a grounding in

pastoral reality. Accordingly, the online meeting held in March 2022 brought together participants and experts from different pastoral and theological fields in a very international composition. Although not all regions of the Global Church have been represented equally, there has been for the first time an extensive transregional exchange on these topics. Additionally, the presentation of pastoral analysis from different situational perspectives contributed to a profound knowledge about the evaluation of crucial issues and provided a solid ground for discussion. Over and above that, the concerted reflection on the empirical findings during the conference has undergone another working phase. Hence, the texts presented in this publication do not only offer the contributions of the speakers but include their reflections in the light of the results of the discussion during the conference.

With this concept, we are very much following the methodological path of the synodal process, which has introduced alternative ways of inner ecclesial communication and deliberation. It is worth taking a closer look at the approach, as a new ecclesial habitus is really being established here. The novum of being a synodal Church in the sense of a new praxis is already evident in the statements made in the summary of the diocesan reports, which provide insight into the spiritual interpretation of the faithful in the face of the experience of being heard (cf. 15–18). Asking for an opinion in a survey is also a way of giving others a voice.

The concern of the Global Church dialogue pursued with this project coincides with another element of the synodal process. With the introduction of a continental phase, a primary interrelatedness of the local churches is expressed. Synodality means not only intensifying the dialogue on the vertical dimension of the Universal Church between the Pope and the local churches, but also the horizontal one between the local churches. This is very much in line with the intention of the Second Vatican Council in the Constitution on the Church, as pointed out in *Lumen Gentium* (LG) 23, where the relation of the Universal Church and particular churches is seen as constitutive interdependence. The background is the preservation of unity while appreciating plurality. However, the *Instrumentum Laboris* (IL) opens up a new dimension when it refers to unity, not just focusing on the individual churches regarding community with Rome alone, but it is particularly about the relationships between the churches, so that Catholicity is defined as the triadic relationship of the characteristics of primacy, collegiality and synodality, while it refers to LG 13 when it speaks of a community of goods to portray the relationship of the (local) churches:

Thus, we were able to touch with our own hands the Catholicity of the Church, which, in the variety of ages, sexes, and social conditions, manifests an extraordinary wealth of charisms and ecclesial vocations, and is the custodian of a treasure trove of differences in language, cultures, liturgical expressions, and theological traditions.

In effect, this rich diversity is the gift of each local Church to all the others (cf. LG 13), and the synodal dynamic is a way to appreciate and enhance this rich diversity without flattening into uniformity (IL 6).

Concerning the synodal process, which aims to do justice to this triadic structure, it is noteworthy that the *Instrumentum Laboris*, in addition to the harmonizing talk of the community of goods in LG 13, is addressing discrepancies and differences in all the ecclesial relations. Moreover, it proposes an openness to a constructive approach that does not only know the Roman decision. In the method of the synodal process, the continental phase was dedicated to the concretization of this concern. The attitude that emerges from this experience is not of interregional significance alone, but contributes again to a new ecclesial habitus:

Similarly, we have discovered that there are shared questions, even if synodality is experienced and understood in a variety of ways in different parts of the world on the basis of a common inheritance of the apostolic Tradition. Part of the challenge of synodality is to discern the level at which it is most appropriate to address each question. Equally shared are certain tensions. We should not be frightened by them, nor attempt at any cost to resolve them, but rather engage in ongoing synodal discernment. Only in this way can these tensions become sources of energy and not lapse into destructive polarisations (IL 6).

In addition to this noteworthy process- and plurality-oriented proposal for problem-solving, the relevant indicators of crisis that represent the driving force behind the German synodal process are also addressed. A commonality in the basic themes can be seen in the way the three characterizations of the synodal process are filled with the keywords “community”, “mission”, and “participation”. It is about inclusion, de-clericalization, and power structures:

The **three priority questions** that will be the focus of the work of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023 are linked to the three words that constitute the theme of the Synod: the question of how to grow in *communion* by welcoming everyone, no one excluded, in fidelity to the Gospel; the question of concrete ways for co-responsibility, recognizing and valuing the contribution of each baptized person given the common *mission*; the identification of structures and dynamics of governance through which to articulate *participation* and authority over time in a missionary Synodal Church.¹

The thesis of the establishment of a new habitus is underlined by the fact that the preparation of the Synodal Assembly based on the *Instrumentum Laboris* introduces methodological innovations. First of all, the role of the document

¹ General Secretariat for the Synod: The Universal Phase, FAQs (2023).

itself is defined anew as “practical aid” (IL 10) and it includes worksheets that intend to ensure the approach and decision-making on the respective subject matter through experience-based contextualization:

Each of these three priorities is developed by five worksheets: these are five different approaches to the same issue, which allow for a better appreciation and consideration in the discernment of the diversity of people and social, cultural, and religious contexts as they emerged during the process.²

These formal aspects should not be dismissed as accidental. They are based on an integral theory of action, which is indicated by the theological cipher discernment. The discernment of spirits never addresses an object in abstractness, but with a focus on living persons in their situatedness, whereby the spiritual approach transcends the individual-cognitive negotiation and addresses the whole human being in its cosmotheandric dimensions. It is not theological or cultural principles that are decisive in the process of spiritual discernment, although they do serve as orientation. The theological place of discernment is the believing person based on their baptismal dignity, not in isolation but communitarian (IL 20). Here, too, the establishment of a new habitus and praxis, which aims at a changed ecclesial culture, becomes tangible.

4. A Reform-Oriented Hermeneutical Matrix

As already mentioned, we consider the project initiated by our institutions as a contribution to the intercultural global synodal dialogue, which depends on a plurality of channels to bring forward a new ecclesial praxis.³ Therefore, pointing at communalities does not intend to promote existing positions as universal solutions, but rather to overcome polarisations based on the claim that German topics are isolated peculiarities, instead of accepting the complexity and plurality of pastoral situations and times of transformation in every region of the world. Claiming this also means being ready to learn about other crucial topics in other situations of the Church. Nevertheless, hermeneutical probity is not a question of indifference, but about disclosing positions and points of departure. Therefore, regarding the evaluation of these topics, we want to make clear that keeping the *status quo* is no option. The vision of synodality is a vision of reform, as already mentioned. We should not lose sight of the fact that the

² Ibid.

³ See also the attention to digital culture: General Secretariat for the Synod: Summary of the Continental Stage – Digital Synod (2023).

motor of intensified reflection on synodality is a moment of crisis triggered by the reality of abuse within the Catholic Church, which calls for reforms given its systemic causes. We identify common ground in this between the German Synodal Path and the worldwide synodal process. If we don't see the painful realities, pastoral lack, injustice, and sin, we will miss understanding at least part of what the driving force behind new synodal dynamics is.

The primacy of a dynamic versus a static conception as a point of departure could be captured with one of the main principles that Pope Francis presents in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (222) “Time is greater than space”. Although formulated for social processes, the principle can also be applied to ecclesiastical developments. It is not in the first place about having total control of processes but rather about being able to envision familiar things anew. It also sometimes means living with a provisional arrangement instead of being paralyzed because there is no ideal solution. The initiative is crucial (223). In this line, choosing pastoral experience as a point of departure doesn't mean we want to promote theological empiricism. That would be a wrong understanding, which sometimes has been labeled as parliamentary democratization of the Church. However, there is a communitarian and egalitarian dimension as far as all the faithful are gifted with the spirit, as we stated already, as common ground highlighting the baptismal dignity, which means that we still must discern. However, it is important not to miss the situational incentives of the spirit in our reflection.

To prepare further ground for discernment, we decided methodologically in our research to let the quantitative survey be followed by a qualitative phase because synodality is not just about the figure but rather about the notion people have in mind regarding a certain issue in a distinct situation and the light of the Gospel. In this regard, the survey is considered an instrument to assist discernment. During the conference, participants emphasized above all that the empirical surveys contribute to an objectification of the discussion and were considered beneficial, given the polemical exchanges between Church frontlines. We are fully aware that the design of the study does not allow any claim to comprehensive representativeness. From the outset, it is made clear that the subjects are (or were) scholarship holders who are supported by German Global Church institutions. At the same time, this limitation of the sample inherits a positive aspect, namely, that they are persons who are familiar with both contexts due to their intercultural experience. Finally, the recognizable heterogeneity of the evaluations, as they emerge in both the quantitative and qualitative phases, indicates that no comprehensive unconditional bias for “German” positions can be assumed.

5. Intercultural and Transcultural Polarity

Another hermeneutical moment is addressed by the intercultural parameters of inner ecclesial dialogue. Even if Catholics theologically stress a long common tradition and sense of belonging to a Universal Church, we are also always located and situated. We exist unescapably in particular social spaces and regional cultures. Hence, cultural sensitiveness is asked. The paradigm of inculturation makes clear that an understanding of mission is misleading if it does not value local culture, language, and customs since the Gospel can never be claimed by a certain cultural tradition. Also, from a diachronic perspective, we see that faith has taken very different forms in its journey through the centuries. Beyond that, we have to realize that people practice not only alternative customs and follow different ways of life, but their way of being is different. We must be aware of ontological differences. Thus, highly secularized societies in Western Europe with a confrontational atmosphere between religious and enlightened mindsets meet with local churches where an “enchanted” way of conceiving reality is prevailing. While a term like “enchantment” is used here, we touch on yet another intercultural aspect, namely finding an appropriate language to address central religious issues and make them comprehensible to each other. We would just like to point, for example, at the way of Pentecostal spirituality in the Global South, whereas in the Global North, there is only a moderate movement to illustrate this. Here, we touch upon complex issues of religious experiences, their articulations, and the triggering function of social, political, and economic factors in a plurality of cultural settings.

Yet, being sensitive to cultural issues is not the same as promoting cultural essentialism, but being aware that there are numerical ratios that affect religious life like, for example, the minority situation of most Christians in Asia. Life in societies with a different outlook in a predominantly Buddhist, Hindu, or Confucian surrounding or facing a communistic political system has an impact on religious praxis and experience. Interculturality is essential for our faith because of its incarnational constituency. Faith subjects are human beings in their corporeality, materiality, situativity, and connectedness, which is reflected in the paradigm of inculturation. Hence, we are confronted not only with an ecclesial centralism associated with theological Eurocentrism, as postcolonial theory is helping to disclose. The same theoretical background is pointing at any cultural centralism based on hegemonical ideas. For example, when numerical proportions become a power argument in the Church. The majorities are not found any more in Europe, while the financial and infrastructural possibilities are still strong. We must realize power relationships among not only center and periphery but also among and within the local churches. Accordingly, not only cultural stereotypes but also regional generalizations render trusting inner ecclesial rela-

tionships impossible. Accordingly, our data show that even in the same region there are divergent opinions. So, it can never be simply the majority or the position of the center as an ultimate guiding principle. As a consequence, the Church has cultivated an awareness of a positive plurality like it is expressed in LG 23, pointing to ancient patriarchates and drawing a line to the episcopal conferences:

Thanks to divine providence, [...] the various churches established in different places by the apostles and their successors have grown together in the course of time into a number of organically connected (organic conjuncture) communities. They enjoy, without prejudice to the unity of the faith and the one divine constitution of the Universal Church, their own discipline, their own liturgical custom, and their own theological and spiritual heritage. [...] This united diversity of local Churches shows in a particularly bright light the catholicity of the undivided Church. In a similar way, in our time the Episcopal Conferences can offer varied and fruitful help in bringing the collegial spirit to concrete realization.

The expression *organic connectedness* deserves attention here, because it helps to identify a notion of plurality associated with indifference in a negative sense. The spirit of synodality is not at work in a simple call for more plurality as a strategy to avoid the effort of dealing with each other. The different reactions to the German Synodal Path have also unearthed the differences between the various ecclesial cultures within the Catholic Church. The lines of conflict do not at all just run between North and South. There are major discrepancies between Western and Eastern Europe, and it is becoming clear that there is no single unit of Western Catholicism. There are gaping differences according to regions and cultures, and most of the time it seems like no bridging is possible.

Nevertheless, pleading for more plurality is no true solution. Plurality points to a normative orientation to transcend an indifferent coexistence. Proposals like: “Let the African Church have polygamous relationships; in exchange, we allow the blessing of same-sex couples in Germany” represent a parody of the synodal idea. In this view, we look for a superficial solution, and we fatally lose sight of the people in favor of cultural considerations. What looks like pastoral wisdom is resulting in injustice. Issues like the baptismal dignity of women in the Church that have to challenge patriarchal cultures, as much as a culture of taboo when it contributes to sexualized violence, need no further explanation in this regard.

At this point, another central human dimension has to be taken into consideration. We need to remind ourselves that human beings can transcend culture, and the mission of the Church is from the very beginning based on experiences of transgression. People owe flexibility, in the positive sense that culture is not viewed as a cage. Therefore, there exists a twofold task: on the one hand, to be

culturally sensitive, because Christians are people of the soil in bodily and material dimensions. And, on the other hand, to recognize them as spirit-filled beings that are not fixed or reduced to a particular culture. The issue of culture is important. It is crucial for the identity of people. But culture cannot have the last word regarding issues of justice and the rights of people. The Gospel can become at home in every culture, but without being completely absorbed into a particular culture. The process of traditioning is informed by the polarity of inculturation and transculturation. A pneumatic-christological reflection can offer us some theological orientation: the spirit, generally speaking, is associated with ecstasy, but this is not primarily about states of emotionally being outside oneself, but about freedom, in the sense that people are not simply social-biological products, but capable of transcendence. Thus, the ability of the human spirit is the basis of human dignity. Since the ecstatic determination is fundamentally open to interpretation, it requires the discernment of spirits.⁴ If we point at the normative relevance of the figure of Jesus Christ in this context, it does not mean that conformity to Christ is to be understood as mere spiritual reproduction, for Christian revelation recognizes a relative autonomy of the spirit:

This representation of Jesus Christ through the Spirit does not take place in the manner of the dead letter but in the manner of freedom. [...] We can also say: through Jesus Christ, the final and unsurpassable newness has arrived; the Spirit makes this newness available to us again and again in its newness; he is the ever-new open space established by God, the ever-new power of the new being.⁵

6. Conversion Criterion

While keeping the two poles imitation of Christ and his renewing spirit, we see conversion as a crucial criterion to guide our discernment. A feature of conversion is its moment of crisis. We are told about this characteristic by our Christian revelation document. The dispute between Peter and Paul in Antiochia, as reported in the letter to the Galatians (2,11–14), is given in our sacred scripture, although it offers an opportunity to attack Christianity because it reveals a division among the leading figures of early Christianity. The author's acceptance of this circumstance, despite the precarious situation of uncertain Christian iden-

⁴ Cf. Kasper: *Die Kirche Jesu Christi. Schriften zur Ekklesiologie I* (2008), 288 f.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 292 f.

tity, highlights its importance. The debate is about a central ritual regulation of practicing circumcision. The delicacy lies in the fact that it touches upon a sacred dimension. It is not simply a matter of an opportunistic adaptation to the Hellenistic culture. Instead, the sacred sphere is defined anew by establishing a new practice that is considered to be in greater harmony with the experience of a new sacred principle. That experience is profoundly connected to God's disclosure in Jesus Christ, which is realized in keeping a trusting relationship with him.

Interestingly, this truth is revealed in the missionary movement only. It is something the spirit is asking out of the situation of attraction of the Christian message by non-Jews. It is an important conversion process Peter is undergoing. The conversion is painful. Regarding our synodal proceeding, it cannot simply be a matter of giving in to every cultural demand or claiming to defend tradition, because in both scenarios the moment of conversion is missing. At the same time, the encounter with a new existential situation can lead to an ever-greater truth, because it uncovers hidden or neglected meanings of the Gospel, like the specific universalism of the Christian truth, which transcends ethnic and ritual boundaries.

A mutual turning towards a foreign ecclesial situation, always to find out what the spirit is telling us by confronting other situations and opinions, always bears a moment of conversion if taken seriously. It is neither striving just for affirmation of my position nor seeking indifferent harmony. Conversion is really a movement.

7. Outlook

What has already happened in terms of movement is that Christians from very different church situations have entered a multidisciplinary and intercultural discussion together with this initiative. With the empirical study presented here, we have not only enabled a well-considered and differentiated discussion on Global Church matters that goes beyond the usual stereotyping, but we have also offered an inspiring theological reflection on the analysis. Altogether, this now provides a solid foundation for all those who realize the value of Catholicity in the current phase of profound transformation of the public sphere on a global scale and are open to new ways of proceeding to better fulfill the mission of the Church in our times. Specifically, we hope that there will be a mutual challenge and encouragement in the plurality of faith spaces around the world for those who believe, like Pope Francis, in the power of sincere encounter and

open debate: “If there is one word that we should never tire of repeating, it is this: dialogue. We are called to promote a culture of dialogue by every possible means”.⁶

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⁶ Francis: Address of his Holiness Pope Francis at the Conferral of the Charlemagne Prize (2016).

Part I:
Research Project “Synodal Way –
Global Church Perspectives”

Research Project “Synodal Way – Global Church Perspectives”

An Empirical Theological Study among KAAD, AMP, and ICALA Scholarship Holders

Catalina Cerda-Planas

1. Introduction

As already explained in the introduction to the volume, with this research, KAAD and IWM sought to bring Global Church perspectives to the discussion on the four main topics of the German Synodal Path. The specific goals were to see if these themes were relevant to other local churches, to identify the opinions, experiences, and expectations regarding these issues, and to identify possible contextual factors that may explain the former. It was also intended to identify other possible topics that may be important and currently under discussion in other places of the world. To achieve these goals, the empirical theological study “Synodal Way, Global Church Perspectives” was developed.

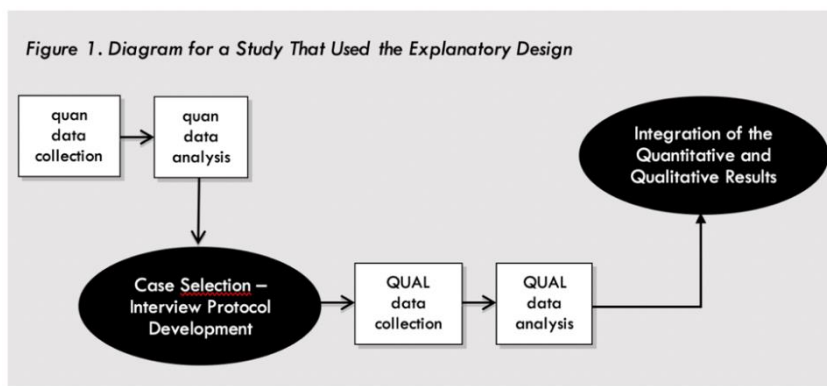
In this first part of the book, the study will be presented, and organized as follows. First, the research design will briefly be explained, i. e., the method, the data collection process, and the characterization of the general samples (quantitative and qualitative) will be presented. Second, the relevance of the four topics for both the general sample and each region will be described. In the third section, the empirical findings by topics and regions will be extensively presented using a double entry. On the one hand, both quantitative and qualitative results for each of the topics studied (power, women, priestly life, and sexuality) will be described, both for the overall sample and for each of the regions considered in the study. Other topics of interest collected through the survey’s open-ended question will be also summarized. On the other hand, the quantitative and qualitative results emerging in each region (Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East) concerning each topic will be described.

The intention behind this double-entry presentation (by topic and by region) is that the reader can quickly find the results either for a particular topic, considering regional differences, or for a particular region, considering all the topics

included in the research. Therefore, the repetition of some elements (particularly regarding the qualitative phase) was unavoidable and tolerated given the above-mentioned purpose.

2. Research Design

To achieve these goals, a “Mixed Explanatory Design” method was used with a first quantitative phase and a second qualitative one (see *Figure 1*).



Source: Creswell, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 121

In the first quantitative phase, scholarship holders and alumni of three German Scholarship Institutions were invited to participate in an online survey to ask them about their opinions on the four main topics discussed in the German Synodal Path. Four groups of questions were asked. Each group consisted of three statements on the respective topic, followed by three questions on the relevance of the topic for the participants personally, their local community, and their local church. Besides, they were also asked about the relevance of the topic in the future. Participants were requested to rank how strongly they agreed with each of the statements, using a response range of 1 (“I totally disagree”) to 5 (“I totally agree”). Besides, a final open question was included, where the participants could mention other topics of interest for them or their local communities. The survey was conducted online in April 2022.

The final sample of the first quantitative phase consisted of 578 respondents from 53 countries organized into five main regions: Africa (28%, N = 162), Asia (12.1%, N = 70), Eastern Europe (22.5%, N = 130), Latin America (30.6%, N = 177) and the Middle East (6.7%, N = 39). Participants ranged in age from 21 to 77 years old: 13.9% were between 21 and 30 years old, 54.9%

between 31 and 45 years old, 26.1% between 46 and 60 years old, and 5.0% were 61 years old or older. A little more than half (56.2%) were male and 43.8% female. More than 8 out of ten (84.3%) were lay people, 11.2% were members of religious communities, and 3.3% were priests.

Table 1: Quantitative Sample (N = 578)

Variable		N	%	Valid %
Age*	Group 1: 21–30 years old	80	13.8	13.9
	Group 2: 31–45 years old	316	54.7	54.9
	Group 3: 46–60 years old	151	26.1	26.1
	Group 4: 61 or more	29	5.0	5.0
	<i>Missing</i>	2	.3	
Gender	Male	325	56.2	56.2
	Female	253	43.8	43.8
Region of origin	Africa	162	28.0	28.0
	Asia	70	12.1	12.1
	Eastern Europe	130	22.5	22.5
	Latin America	177	30.6	30.6
	Middle East	39	6.7	6.7
Lifestyle	Layperson	487	84.3	84.3
	Member of religious congregation	65	11.2	11.2
	Priest	19	3.3	3.3
Confession	Roman Catholic	510	88.2	88.9
	Greek Catholics	18	3.1	3.1
	Maronite	14	2.4	2.4
	Ethiopian Catholic	11	1.9	1.9
	Armenian Catholic	3	.5	.5
	Other	18	3.1	3.1
	<i>Missing</i>	4	.7	
Academic field	Humanities	248	42.9	42.9
	Sports	2	.3	.3
	Law, Economics and Social Sciences	126	21.8	21.8
	Mathematics, Natural Sciences	36	6.2	6.2
	Medicine, Health Sciences	53	9.2	9.2
	Veterinary Medicine	4	.7	.7
	Agricultural, Forestry and Nutritional Sciences	32	5.5	5.5
	Engineering	60	10.4	10.4
	Music and Art Studies	17	2.9	2.9

* Age: M = 41.19

In addition, the largest group consisted of Roman Catholics (88.9%), while other denominations, such as Greek Catholics, Maronites, and Ethiopian Catholics, were represented between 2% and 3% each. Finally, nine disciplines were represented, with humanities (42.9%), social sciences (21.8%), engineering (10.4%), and medical sciences (9.2%) being the most numerous.

These background variables were also used to analyze the possible differences between groups, where the only variable that showed significant differences for all topics was the participant's region of origin. Consequently, the second qualitative phase was designed based on this criterion and the survey's respondents were invited to participate in focus groups by region.

Therefore, group interviews were held with people from each region (in the case of Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America). Because of the difficulties in forming conversation groups in the case of the Middle East (due to the lower number of participants), three (3) individual interviews were held in this case. This second qualitative phase focused on discussing the quantitative results with the participants, to see whether they agreed with them, how they interpreted the findings, and what socio-cultural and religious conditions may (at least, in part) explain the results and the differences between the regions.

The conversations were held via Zoom in Spanish (for Latin America), English (in the case of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East), and German (for Eastern Europe) between September and December 2022. In total, 47 people participated in the conversations: 14 from Africa, 8 from Asia, 11 from Latin America, 11 from Eastern Europe, and 3 from the Middle East. Out of them, 28 were men and 19 were women, most of them lay people, between 24 and 72 years old. The represented countries for each region are detailed in *Table 2*.

Table 2: Qualitative Sample (N = 47)

		N	Women	Men
Region of origin*	Africa	14	3	11
	Asia	8	4	4
	Eastern Europe	11	5	6
	Latin America	11	7	4
	Middle East	3	–	3

* Represented countries by region:

Africa: Ethiopia, South Sudan, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, and the Gambia.

Asia: Philippines, India, Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Indonesia.

Eastern Europe: Bosnia, Slovakia, Latvia, Hungary, Ukraine, and Poland.

Latin America: Peru, Columbia, Mexico, Argentina, and Ecuador.

Middle East: Jordanian, Lebanon, and Syria.

3. Methodological and Hermeneutical Considerations

Before presenting the empirical findings, I would like to share some methodological and hermeneutical considerations that will help to adequately understand and interpret the results. First, a short explanation of the type of data that will

be presented. The first type of tables contains the frequencies and descriptive statistics of the quantitative results and is structured as follows (see, for example, *Table 4*): in the left column, the statements (items) included in the survey are made explicit; in the middle, the frequencies of answers (in percentages) for each level of the scale used (from 1 = “I totally disagree” to 5 = “I totally agree”) are presented. Finally, in the right column, the mean value (M) and the standard deviation (SD) for each item are included.

The mean value is the average answer for the whole sample. Because the scale ranged from one to five, three means there is no clear trend within the sample (which will be labeled as “ambivalent opinion”). Near or over four means the respondents had, in general, a positive opinion; near or below two, the opposite. If the results were slightly over the middle point, these will be labeled as “ambivalently positive”, and slightly under the middle point as “ambivalently negative”.

The standard deviation measures how dispersed the data is in relation to this mean value. A normal distribution of the answers usually has a standard deviation of one. A lower standard deviation means data are clustered around the mean, expressing a higher consensus among the respondents; a higher standard deviation indicates data are more spread out and, therefore, the opinions of the participants are more diverse. Therefore, the standard deviation helps us identify the level of consensus (or lack of it) within the answers.

Moreover, a second type of tables will present the mean values for each region in the middle columns and, once again, on the right side, the mean value and standard deviation for the whole sample (see *Table 3* as an illustration).

It is important to bear in mind that, as in every empirical research – within and outside theology –, the results will show the main trends within the sample and the opinions of the participants, only regarding the (few) aspects of each topic addressed here. Consequently, the findings are neither intended to exhaust the phenomenon under study nor to give a definitive answer to the discussion on these topics. On the contrary, an empirical basis for the subsequent regional and topological analysis of the next chapters will be offered.

Furthermore, when analyzing the differences between regions, it is also important to consider that this should not be understood as some kind of “essentialization” of what it means to be Latin American, Asian, African, etc. Nor should we overlook the internal differences within regions, which were also present. A more detailed approach to the complexity and richness of each world region will be offered in the next chapters, where representatives of Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East share some reflections based on this study and the synodal processes undertaken in the context of the World Synod on Synodality.

Finally, the characterization that will be presented should not be interpreted in terms of any supposed superiority of one cultural or ecclesial system over the other, even less used to judge others. It only seeks to describe the different opinions and contexts that play a role in the synodal dialogue that we are seeking to have as a Global Catholic Church.

4. Relevance of the Topics for the Participants and Their Communities

Bearing this in mind, let us move on to the presentation of the results. We will start by looking at the findings regarding the relevance of the four main topics for the participants and their local communities. As presented in *Table 3*, all topics are considered important. The subject areas ‘sexuality’ and ‘women’ are the most relevant for the participants personally, followed by ‘power’ and ‘priestly existence’. Looking at the significance of the topics for the diocese or Church in their country, the order is slightly different: ‘sexuality’ and ‘priestly existence’ represent the priorities, followed closely by ‘power’. The topic ‘women’ is ranked in the last place.

Nevertheless, significant differences between the respondents were found between the regions. According to the results in *Table 3*, the four topics were especially relevant for the participants from Asia and Africa, who showed the highest levels of agreement about the importance of the topics for them personally and for their local churches. Conversely, participants from Eastern Europe expressed the lowest level of interest in all topics. For the participants from the Middle East, the topics appeared to be important for their future, while in the case of Latin America, the relevance of the issue of women in the Church is highlighted as the most relevant.

Table 3: Descriptives for the Relevance of Each Topic¹ (Total N = 599)

	Results by region ²					Total	
	Africa	Asia	EastEu	LatAm	Mid-East	M	SD
Power and Division of Powers in the Church							
Relevant for me personally.	3.86	3.76	3.17	3.77	3.50	3.66	1.28
Relevant for my local church community/parish.	4.23	4.07	3.01	3.80	3.84	3.79	1.17
Relevant for my diocese and the Church in my country.	4.21	4.21	3.17	3.77	4.00	3.84	1.17

I believe that this topic will become more important for us in the future than it is now.	3.79	4.28	3.60	3.66	4.16	3.81	1.36
Priestly Existence Today							
Relevant for me personally.	3.89	3.79	3.23	3.60	3.47	3.61	1.31
Relevant for my local church community/parish.	4.31	4.13	3.18	3.92	3.82	3.89	1.14
Relevant for my diocese and the Church in my country.	4.34	4.14	3.29	4.01	4.03	3.96	1.13
I believe that this topic will become more important for us in the future than it is now.	3.71	4.13	3.76	3.65	4.08	3.80	1.40
Women in the Ministry of the Church							
Relevant for me personally.	3.96	3.84	3.22	4.13	3.66	3.81	1.31
Relevant for my local church community/parish.	3.98	3.99	2.71	3.96	3.76	3.69	1.30
Relevant for my diocese and the Church in my country.	3.98	3.99	2.80	3.79	4.00	3.67	1.35
I believe that this topic will become more important for us in the future than it is now.	3.65	4.18	3.57	3.95	4.32	3.84	1.36
Sexuality and Partnership							
Relevant for me personally.	4.12	4.29	3.67	4.22	3.89	4.04	1.24
Relevant for my local church community/parish.	4.20	4.34	3.26	4.03	3.63	3.92	1.25
Relevant for my diocese and the Church in my country.	4.20	4.31	3.41	4.04	3.76	3.96	1.24
I believe that this topic will become more important for us in the future than it is now.	3.57	4.18	3.88	4.01	4.19	3.90	1.39

¹ Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

² N Africa = 162; N Asia = 70; N EastEuro = 130; N LatAm = 177; N MidEast = 39.

5. Results by Topics

We move now to the results regarding each topic discussed in the German Synodal Path (i. e., “Power and Division of Powers in the Church”, “Women in the Ministry of the Church”, Priestly Existence”, and “Sexuality and Partnership”), the regional differences that emerged from the analyses, and the regional emergent issues collected through the open question of the survey.

5.1 Power and Division of Powers in the Church

On the topic “Power and Division of Powers in the Church” the following three statements were included in the survey and rated by the participants (see *Table 4*):

Table 4: Frequencies and Descriptives – Topic: Power and Division of Powers in the Church¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Power and Division of Powers in the Church							
(a) Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops.	16.7	14.4	13.9	28.2	26.9	3.34	1.43
(b) It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed.	6.0	7.2	12.0	27.9	46.9	4.03	1.19
(c) Shared participation by lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message.	1.5	2.7	6.7	26.2	62.9	4.46	0.85

¹ N = 599. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

- (a) “Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops”, with a mean value of 3.34 for the whole sample and a standard deviation of 1.43. This means that the participants had an ambivalent positive opinion about this first statement and there were relevant differences between the respondents.
- (b) “It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed”, with a mean value for the whole sample of 4.03 and a standard deviation of 1.19. In this case, respondents rated this item positively, and lower differences were found.
- (c) “Shared participation of lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message” had a mean value of 4.46, the highest within this topic, and a standard deviation of 0.85, showing high consensus among the respondents.

When analyzing the differences between regions (see *Table 5*), it is possible to see that Eastern Europe and the Middle East showed the highest levels of agreement with the first statement (M = 3.59 and 3.69, respectively), while those

from Africa, Asia, and Latin America rated it in an ambivalent way (mean values between 3.11 and 3.35).

For the second item, the regional behavior changes partially. Asia and the Middle East had the highest levels of agreement (M = 4.36 and 4.28, respectively), while Africa and Eastern Europe had the lowest (with mean values of 3.88 and 3.85, respectively). Nevertheless, all regions had positive opinions about it, which expresses a relatively high level of agreement across the whole sample. Moreover, all regions had clearly positive opinions about the third statement, showing a high level of consensus among the participants (all regions had mean values over 4).

Table 5: Descriptives – Topic: Power and Division of Powers – Regional Results¹ (N Total = 599)

	Results by regions ²					Total	
	Africa	Asia	EastEu	LatAm	Mid-East	M	SD
Power and Division of Powers in the Church							
(a) Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops.	3.35	3.17	3.59	3.11	3.69	3.34	1.43
(b) It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed.	3.88	4.36	3.85	4.06	4.28	4.03	1.19
(c) Shared participation by lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message.	4.60	4.59	4.23	4.45	4.49	4.46	0.85

¹ Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

² N Africa = 162; N Asia = 70; N EastEuro = 130; N LatAm = 177; N MidEast = 39.

Besides, no differences between the groups according to other background variables were found.

During the qualitative phase (see *Table 6*), some special features for each region were visible, although not as pronounced as in the case of the other topics. Thus, **Latin American** participants recognized that progress has been made in recent times regarding the participation of the laity. However, they expect more. According to them, power is concentrated in the hierarchy and they believe there is a need to open decision-making processes and structures for the laity in general, and particularly for women. However, they highlighted, this

often depends on the priest in charge and, usually, on the religious community he belongs to, which have very different styles of exercising power and promoting (or not) lay participation.

For **African** participants, power appeared to be the most relevant issue. The concentration of power in the hierarchy was described as an exclusion of the laity and women, who, according to the participants, are the ones who know the local communities best. However, the discussion didn't focus primarily on who may or may not have access to the positions of power in the Church, but more on what power itself means (or should mean) within the Church, how leadership is currently understood and exercised, and how this should develop for a better ecclesial experience.

On the other hand, **Asian** participants suggested that power within the Church should be a topic for discussion, although they consider that it is better to conceptualize it as "responsibility", which would be a more appropriate term for its experience within this institution. Focus group participants tended to agree that priests and bishops exclusively assume decision-making processes and power positions and that this could eventually be modified in the future. However, in order for this to be done adequately, it is necessary to prepare the laity to assume tasks for which they are currently not qualified. Furthermore, the participants emphasized that there are no better or worse roles, that the dignity of all members is the same, and that it is important to recognize and integrate this in current discussions.

Table 6: Overview of the Regional Qualitative Results for "Power and Division of Powers in the Church"

Africa	Asia	Eastern Europe	Latin America	Middle East
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The most relevant issue. -Power concentrated in the hierarchy: exclusion of laity and women. -Focus of discussion: how power and leadership are understood and exercised in the Church. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Concept of responsibility instead of power. -Laity is not yet qualified to assume more responsibilities (need of formation). -Different roles, same dignity. -Hierarchy part of human/social life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Criticism of the concept of power used in the Church. -Different roles, same dignity. -Lay people's mission: other areas of life, other means. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Recognized progress in the last years. -Importance of opening decision-making processes. -Diversity of religious communities and styles of exercising power. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Different, established, and accepted roles between laity and priests. -Small communities, members know each other; this contributes to fluent cooperation.

Something similar emerged in the case of **Eastern Europe**. For them, the concept of power would not be the most appropriate for the Church, and they questioned its meaning and use to approach the topic. Participants agreed that there are different roles for the laity and priests in the Catholic communities, but that the dignity is the same, and in this sense, they do not see any problem. Some currently existent ecclesial structures (such as economic and pastoral councils) are mentioned as possibilities for lay participation, and the different areas of life and ways in which lay people can help and highly engage in the mission of the Church were underlined.

Finally, participants from the **Middle East** also mentioned that both lay people and priests have established roles, which are neither questioned nor cause conflicts. It is the priests who must guide the community and assume its leadership, while the laity is supposed to accompany and commit to pastoral life. Because communities are usually small (due to the minority character of the Catholic Church in the Middle East), fluent cooperation between the members is possible according to the interviewees.

Summary: A transversal consensus about the concentration of power in Church hierarchies, priests, and bishops (leaving other relevant actors, such as lay people and women, out of them), is visible among the different territories. However, this is evaluated differently depending on the region. Thus, in the Middle East, Asia, and Eastern Europe, the distinctions of roles and level of influence in the Church are considered to be adequate, corresponding to the originally desired structure of the Church and the differentiation of roles within it. However, the participants emphasize that this does not mean a disparity in the dignity of the members. Furthermore, in these regions, the use of the concept of “power” within the Church is questioned, as it is considered to be inappropriate for this particular institution. On the other hand, participants from Africa and Latin America are especially critical of the current distribution of power and influence within the Church, despite the fact that some progress may have been made in recent years. The non-inclusion of the laity, and particularly of women, is seen as problematic and unjust, in need of reflection and reforms.

5.2 Women in the Ministry of the Church

The three statements regarding the topic “Women in the Ministry of the Church” and their results were the following (see *Table 7*):

- (a) “Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes” had a mean value of 4.16 for the whole sample, the highest within this theme, and a standard deviation of 1.20, meaning that some differences among respondents were observed.

- (b) “Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes” had a mean value of 2.97 and a standard deviation of 1.38. In this case, respondents had an ambivalent opinion on this item, and the differences between respondents were larger than those related to the previous statement.
- (c) “In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church” had a mean value of 3.57, slightly above the middle point but still ambivalently positive, and a standard deviation of 1.52, showing a wide dispersion of responses.

Table 7: Frequencies and Descriptives – Topic: Women in the Ministry of the Church¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Women in the Ministry of the Church							
(a) Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes.	4.5	9.2	9.8	18.5	57.9	4.16	1.20
(b) Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes.	17.0	27.0	17.2	19.7	19.0	2.97	1.38
(c) In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church.	17.9	7.8	15.0	17.5	41.7	3.57	1.52

¹ N = 599. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

When analyzing the differences between the five regions (see *Table 8*), it was possible to see that African respondents (followed closely by Asians and Latin Americans) rated clearly positively the first item, while those from the Middle East and Eastern Europe rated it in an ambivalently positive way.

In the case of the second item, the regional behavior changes visibly. Asia and Africa appeared as the regions with the highest level of agreement, although ambivalently positive. On the contrary, the Middle East and Latin America showed negative ambivalent opinions.

Finally, the regional differences concerning the third item show that Latin America was the region with the most positive attitudes towards the idea of allowing women to the ordained ministries, followed considerably behind by the Middle East and Asia. Finally, Africa and Eastern Europe showed ambivalent opinions with mean values slightly over the middle point.

Table 8: Descriptives – Topic: Women in the Ministry of the Church – Regional Results¹ (N Total = 599)

	Results by regions ²					Total	
	Africa	Asia	EastEu	LatAm	Mid-East	M	SD
Women in the Ministry of the Church							
(a) Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes.	4.69	4.46	3.48	4.20	3.69	4.16	1.20
(b) Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes.	3.15	3.16	3.01	2.72	2.79	2.97	1.38
(c) In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church.	3.18	3.51	3.05	4.24	3.87	3.57	1.52

¹ Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

² N Africa = 162; N Asia = 70; N EastEuro = 130; N LatAm = 177; N MidEast = 39.

Comparing the results between groups according to other background variables, significant differences between gender, lifestyle, and denomination emerged. For example, male respondents agreed more strongly than female respondents with the second statement, while the opposite was true for the third statement. In addition, Maronite, Ethiopian, and Armenian Catholics among the respondents showed higher agreement and interest in the topic than Greek Catholics.

During the conversations (see *Table 9*) with the **African** participants, the dialogue focused on the little appreciation of women within the Church and that they are rarely considered in the decision-making processes, although they are a numeric majority within Christian communities. Nevertheless, the participants believed that women’s ordination would not be the solution to women’s inclusion in the Church if the issue of ecclesial leadership and power distribution was not tackled.

Something similar emerged in the case of **Latin America**. The participants mentioned that women are often the ones responsible for pastoral life and that they play a relevant religious symbolic role. Nevertheless, they are not part of the decision-making processes, which is understood as problematic and unfair, often related to a Latin American patriarchal cultural framework. However, they were skeptical of whether the women-ordained ministry would ensure a solution to this problem or whether the whole hierarchical structure of the Church should be reconsidered.

Furthermore, divided opinions emerged among the participants of the **Middle East**. On the one hand, the interviewees argued that the role of women is already established and accepted, and there seem to be no major expectations to change that. However, other opinions showed a certain degree of openness to discussing the role of women in the Church and eventually preparing them for leadership within the community.

Table 9: Overview of the Regional Qualitative Results for “Women in the Ministry of the Church”

Africa	Asia	Eastern Europe	Latin America	Middle East
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Little appreciation of women by the Church, rarely considered in the decision-making processes. – Women’s ordination: open to its discussion, but it may not be the solution if ecclesial leadership and power distribution are not problematized. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Women’s pastoral work mainly related to domestic issues. – For some of them, this was no problem. – Others think female leadership in the Church could (and should) be considered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Women have different roles but the same dignity. – Other ways and means for lay/women’s commitment within and outside the Church. – Consequently, this topic was no big issue. – Relevant differences between generations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Female figures play a relevant symbolic role. – However, rarely considered in the decision-making processes, which is seen as problematic. – Ordained ministry would not be the only solution. – Structure, leadership, and the profile of women accepted should be problematized. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Role of women is established and generally accepted as it is. – Biblical arguments are used. – Some openness to the idea of preparing women to assume ecclesial leadership positions.

In **Asia**, a diversity of opinions was expressed during the conversations too. On the one hand, the participants recognized that women’s work is mainly related to the domestic ecclesiastical life and that they are not involved in decision-making processes. For some of them, however, this was not a major problem. Nevertheless, other participants did believe that it was possible to have women as leaders within the Church, since they have assumed leadership positions in different areas outside the Church. However, there were transversal reservations regarding women’s ordination.

Finally, **Eastern European** participants mentioned that women had different roles, but the same dignity, and that the Christian message could be communicated in other ways and by other means besides the ordained ministry (for example, through education, socio-political engagement, and media). Therefore, they said, this topic was no big issue for them and their communities. However, as the conversation developed, the differences between the generations in the way they deal with these issues were made visible. Some decades ago, certain issues were not allowed to be questioned, which is no longer the case for younger generations, who are more critical and demanding answers and changes.

Summary: On the subject of women, there were diverse options in the different regions considered in this study. Thus, Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe are regions where the current role of women (in pastoral and domestic care of the local churches) seems to be adequate and sufficient, considering the diversity of roles proper to every Christian community. However, according to them, this did not mean differences in the dignity and value of women and men. On the other hand, Africa and especially Latin America appeared as regions that were particularly critical of the current situation of women in ecclesial contexts. In these regions, women are expected to have access to more decision-making and influential positions within the Church. However, female ordination did not receive clearly favorable opinions in any region, although Latin America is especially open to the idea. However, both in Latin America and in Africa, there is a need to critically reflect on the very structure of the Church and the way in which power is distributed and exercised. Otherwise, the incorporation of women into ordained ministry may not be the expected solution to their real incorporation into the Church and its leadership.

5.3 Priestly Existence Today

Moving now to the third topic “Priestly Existence Today”, three statements were included in the survey (the results are summarized in *Table 10*):

- (a) “I find the way priests live today, especially their way of life of celibacy, appropriate and correct”, which had a mean value for the whole sample of 2.80 and a standard deviation of 1.39. This means that participants had an ambivalent negative opinion about this first statement, with visible differences between respondents.
- (b) “Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message”, with a mean value of 2.98 for the whole

sample and a standard deviation of 1.52. In this case, all respondents had an ambivalent opinion on this item, but the differences between the participants were significant.

- (c) “In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry” had a mean value of 3.53, the only one above the middle point but still ambivalently positive, and a standard deviation of 1.59, showing a wide dispersion in the responses.

Table 10: Frequencies and Descriptives – Topic: Priestly Existence Today¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Priestly Existence Today							
(a) I find the way priests live today, especially their way of life of celibacy, appropriate and correct.	21.7	26.5	18.9	15.7	17.2	2.80	1.39
(b) Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message.	25.4	16.5	16.9	16.9	24.4	2.98	1.52
(c) In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry.	20.7	7.8	12.7	15.2	43.6	3.53	1.59

¹ N = 599. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

Now, when analyzing the differences between the five regions (see *Table 11*), it is possible to see that only Asia showed rather positive opinions regarding the first item. On the contrary, Latin America had the lowest level of agreement with it, with a clearly negative opinion.

As for the second item, the regional behavior is similar. Asia is the region with the highest level of agreement, this time followed by Africa, which had a positive ambivalent opinion. Once again, Latin America is the only region with a clearly negative opinion about mandatory celibacy.

Table 11: Descriptives – Topic: Priestly Existence Today – Regional Results¹ (N Total = 599)

	Results by regions ²					Total	
	Africa	Asia	EastEu	LatAm	Mid-East	M	SD
Priestly Existence Today							
(a) I find the way priests live today, especially their way of life of celibacy, appropriate and correct.	2.85	3.40	3.03	2.36	2.64	2.80	1.39

(b) Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message.	3.36	3.73	3.01	2.30	2.87	2.98	1.52
(c) In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry.	3.17	2.81	3.45	4.03	4.13	3.53	1.59

¹ Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

² N Africa = 162; N Asia = 70; N EastEuro = 130; N LatAm = 177; N MidEast = 39.

Moreover, the regional analyses show now that Latin America and the Middle East are the regions with the highest levels of agreement regarding the idea of married priests. On the contrary, Asia is the only region with a mean value below the middle point, while African participants had an ambivalent opinion about it.

When analyzing the differences according to other background variables, the results show significant differences between lifestyles (for the first two items) and denominations, where Greek Catholics, Maronites, and Ethiopian Catholics agreed more strongly with the third statement than Roman Catholics.

During the qualitative phase (see *Table 12*), **Asian** participants mentioned celibacy as a key aspect of priesthood and valued it as a particular gift that is given to priests for bearing Christian testimony and, as such, should be safeguarded. In addition, giving priests the possibility to marry would mean that they would not be able to adequately focus on their work in the Christian communities. In this sense, priests’ commitment and absolute dedication to their ecclesial service emerged as a very relevant value that should be protected.

Furthermore, **Eastern European** participants emphasized that these issues’ discussion must be theologically grounded. According to them, practical difficulties, such as a lack of priests or disciplinary problems, would not be a sufficient argument to change an already traditional teaching of the Church. The need to stay faithful to the origins of Christianity and tradition is highlighted as a special value for the participants. Nevertheless, it was also mentioned that celibacy would be a controversial issue for younger generations, who have more critical opinions about it.

Table 12: Overview of the Regional Qualitative Results for “Priestly Existence Today”

Africa	Asia	Eastern Europe	Latin America	Middle East
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Controversial issue: celibacy not essential; cases of priests with partners/children. –Priesthood and social mobility. –Key issue: quality and real vocation of priests. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Celibacy: key aspect of priesthood, particular gift for Christian testimony. –Need to highlight the relevance of Christian families. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Value of remaining faithful to the origins of Christianity and its tradition. –Relevance of theological arguments. –Celibacy: problematic for younger generations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Controversial topic. –Central issue: the understanding of sexuality as affective-sexual dimension of human life. –Cases of priests with partners/children. –Priesthood and social mobility. –Theological arguments of celibacy and 100% dedication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Context characterized by religious plurality. –Eliminating celibacy would not be a problem.

On the other hand, for **African** participants, celibacy seemed to be a controversial issue. For example, specific cases of priests with partners and children, or priesthood as a way of social mobility rather than personal vocation, were suggested. However, the participants were skeptical that the solution could be to simply remove celibacy, since this could bring about other problematic issues (such as polygamy) and might prevent priests from focusing on their service. Therefore, the main issue for them was the quality and the real vocation of those who apply and serve as priests, which should be further discussed and accounted for.

For **Latin Americans**, the discussion about celibacy is intimately connected with the understanding of sexuality as the affective-sexual dimension of human life, which, according to an important group of participants, would not be completely fulfilled in celibate life and would sometimes lead to situations of priests with partners and children. Nevertheless, other participants defended celibacy as a relevant aspect of priestly life, based on theological arguments and because it allows 100% dedication.

Finally, the opinions of **Middle Eastern** participants were related to the context of the region, characterized by a greater religious plurality. There, Catholic communities coexist with other denominations or religions that have married leaders. Therefore, the possibility of discussing celibacy and eventually eliminating it appeared as a non-problematic issue for those who participated in the conversations.

Summary: Within the topic of priestly existence today, celibacy is valued differently according to each region. For some regions, such as Eastern Europe and Asia, celibacy is a key value of priestly life, based on clear theological foundations that explain its existence and why it should continue to exist. It is also mentioned that celibacy allows the total dedication of priests to their mission and ecclesial service. On the other hand, the other continents do not see celibacy as an indispensable aspect of priestly life and are open to the option of married priests, either because they have contact with other religious communities that already have them (the Middle East) or because they have witnessed problematic experiences of non-observance of celibacy by the clergy (Africa and Latin America). Nevertheless, the participants are not totally persuaded that the possibility of marriage for priests ensures the solution to such problems. Due to that, in these last two regions, the need to address the issue of priests’ vocation and the quality of their commitment is also raised as a central aspect of the debate.

5.4 Sexuality and Partnership

On the fourth and final topic “Sexuality and Partnership”, the following three statements were rated by the participants (see *Table 13*):

- (a) “It is right and important that the Church’s teaching deals intensively with the topic of sexuality”, with a mean of 3.97, the highest within this topic, and a standard deviation of 1.24, showing some differences between respondents.
- (b) “It is correct and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church”, with a mean of 3.08 and a standard deviation of 1.56. This means that respondents had an ambivalent opinion on this point and the differences between respondents were big.
- (c) “The Catholic Church should re-assess its stance on homosexuality”, with a mean of 3.24, slightly above the middle point and still ambivalent, and a standard deviation of 1.67, showing a wide dispersion of responses.

Table 13: Frequencies and Descriptives – Topic: Sexuality and Partnership¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Sexuality and Partnership							
(a) It is right and important that the Church's teaching (generally and in our local context) deals so intensively with the topic of sexuality.	6.2	9.2	13.7	23.5	47.4	3.97	1.24
(b) It is correct and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church.	24.2	16.5	13.9	17.5	27.9	3.08	1.56
(c) The Catholic Church should reassess its stance on homosexuality.	28.5	7.5	12.9	13.9	37.2	3.24	1.67

¹ N = 599. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

When analyzing the differences between the five regions (see *Table 14*), it is possible to see that African respondents (followed closely by Latin Americans and Asians) rated clearly positively the first item, while those from the Middle East and Eastern Europe rated it in an ambivalently positive way.

As for the second item, the regional behavior changes visibly. Africa appears as the region with the highest level of agreement, followed closely by Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, all of them with mean values slightly over the middle point. Latin America is the only region with a negative assessment regarding this second statement.

The regional differences regarding the third item show that Latin America was one of the regions that more clearly evaluated positively a new assessment of homosexuality by the Church, followed considerably behind by Asia. Eastern Europe and the Middle East showed ambivalent opinions, while Africa was the only region with a clearly negative opinion regarding this item.

Table 14: Descriptives – Topic: Sexuality and Partnership – Regional Results¹
(N Total = 599)

	Results by regions ²					Total	
	Africa	Asia	EastEu	LatAm	Mid-East	M	SD
Sexuality and Partnership							
(a) It is right and important that the Church’s teaching (generally and in our local context) deals so intensively with the topic of sexuality.	4.20	4.13	3.44	4.16	3.46	3.97	1.24
(b) It is correct and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church.	3.57	3.43	3.24	2.34	3.18	3.08	1.56
(c) The Catholic Church should reassess its stance on homosexuality.	2.03	3.80	3.11	4.20	3.23	3.24	1.67

¹ Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

² N Africa = 162; N Asia = 70; N EastEuro = 130; N LatAm = 177; N MidEast = 39.

When analyzing other possible variations between the groups, significant differences between denominations for all items were also found, while gender differences were only evident for statement three, where women showed higher agreement than men. Finally, age only played a role in the topic’s relevance: the younger the respondents were, the more relevant the topic was to them.

During the qualitative phase (see *Table 15*), this topic was the one that showed the biggest differences between the regions. **Asian** participants mentioned that their cultures were rather traditional, and issues related to sexuality were restricted to private life or even considered taboo. Likewise, homosexuality is culturally forbidden. With this background, there does not seem to be much expectation of increased Church involvement in regard to sexual issues.

A similar situation appears in the case of the **Middle East** and **Eastern Europe**, where sexuality is also treated as an issue of the private sphere and there is no special interest in it, considering other topics as more relevant to the Church’s reflection and teaching. In the **Middle East**, homosexuality is socially and culturally banned, it is not a topic to be discussed in the Church, and, therefore, no major changes are expected in this regard. In **Eastern Europe**, however, participants mentioned that the topic is currently very present in social media and debates, especially visible among younger generations, which calls for a discussion within the Church.

Table 15: Overview of the Regional Qualitative Results for “Sexuality and Partnership”

Africa	Asia	Eastern Europe	Latin America	Middle East
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Homosexuality: culturally banned but present in their contexts (also within the Church). –Topic of sexuality rarely tackled explicitly; need to tackle the topic. –Another relevant topic within sexuality: polygamy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –“Traditional” cultures. –Sexuality: private life (even taboo). –No special expectations on the Church’s involvement. –Church’s teaching on homo-sexuality: no expectations of changes. –Pastoral reflection on their accompaniment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Sexuality: an issue of the private sphere. –No particular relevance. –Presence of the topic (homosexuality, sexual minorities) in social media and debate. –Younger generations demand to discuss the topic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Visible differences of opinions within the region. –Younger participants: requirement of broadening the debate – sexual diversities. –Sexuality: affective-sexual dimension of human life, need to overcome body-soul dualisms still present in the Church’s discourse. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Sexuality: private matter. –Homosexuality is culturally banned. –No expectations regarding possible changes or involvement of the Church in the topic.

According to **African** participants, even though homosexuality is culturally rejected and even talking about it is frowned upon, it is an issue that needs to be discussed and addressed by the Church because it is present also in Christian communities. Moreover, the participants raised another particular contextual issue within sexuality, namely, polygamy among Catholic men. They reported they were excluded from full ecclesial participation, which some of the participants experienced as problematic and contradictory.

Finally, in **Latin America**, depending on age and country of origin, different opinions emerged. Younger participants expected the debate to be broader and go beyond homosexuality, including sexual diversities; likewise, an important group of participants reinforces the need to reaffirm the affective-sexual dimension as a transverse and constitutive element in human life, and the need for the Church to address it by overcoming certain body-soul dualisms still present in ecclesial teaching.

Summary: The former results show that topics such as sexuality (and the role of women in the Church) are among those that generate more controversial opinions, showing relevant cultural differences between regions, but also between countries and age groups within them. As a general overview, it is pos-

sible to state that in Western countries topics such as sexuality are more openly or freely discussed, while in Eastern countries they are part of people’s private lives and, therefore, they are not addressed in the public sphere, nor in the Church or school education. Considering these regional differences, it can be concluded that regional and local contexts are a key clue for the synodal process of discernment and possible decision-making processes in the future, because of the role that cultural differences play in the way pastoral issues are understood and experienced by Catholics.

5.5 Other Topics of Interest

Furthermore, considering the research aims, which included identifying other possible topics of interest for Catholics of non-Western European countries, the survey also included an open question where the participants could mention other issues that may be of interest to their local churches (see *Table 16*).

In the case of the participants from **African** countries, the most mentioned issue was Church finances (27 times), where their concern regarding the financial sustainability of the African Church and the need for financial support were mentioned. Also, the requirement for more financial accountability and for a priestly ascetic life, not only in African countries but all over the world, was highlighted as important. Another often-mentioned topic was the commitment of the Church to socio-political issues like democracy, peace, and environmental care and the role of Catholics in politics (21 times). Thirdly, as already mentioned, the cases of priests with families, their negative consequences especially for their women and children, but also for the credibility of the Church (18 times). Finally, not that often but also worthy of consideration because of its local relevance, were the references to the challenges of religious diversity and the relationship between the Catholic Church and other religious communities, especially Evangelicals and Muslims (4 times).

Responses from **Asian** participants were not very numerous, and no theme emerged as particularly relevant, given the low rate of the answers. However, among the topics mentioned other than those already addressed in the survey, appeared: liturgy and sacraments (3 times), formation of priests (2 times), the situation of single parents (2 times), children and youth pastoral care (2 times), and interreligious dialogue (2 times).

In the case of the participants from **Eastern Europe**, two main general topic areas emerged. On the one side, the role of the Church in society (8 times), its relationship with the State (7 times) and its commitment to freedom (4 times), poverty (3 times), education (3 times), and climate change (3 times) appeared. On the other hand, various internal ecclesial issues were also mentioned:

financial administration (6 times), children and youth pastoral care (6 times), spirituality (5 times), and formation (3 times). Furthermore, in this region, some critical opinions regarding the German Synodal Way also came up (6 times).

Table 16: Overview of the regional results for “Other Topics of Interest”

Africa	Asia	Eastern Europe	Latin America	Middle East
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Church finances (27 times). –Role of Church/Catholics in socio-political issues (21 times). –Cases of priests with families (18 times). –Ecumenical and interreligious dialogue (4 times). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Liturgy and sacraments (3 times). –Formation of priests (2 times). –Situation of single parents (2 times). –Children and youth pastoral care (2 times). –Interreligious dialogue (2 times). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –“Extra” ecclesial topics: role of the Church in society (8), its relationship with the State (7), its commitment to freedom (4), poverty (3), education (3), and climate change (3). –“Intra” ecclesial topics: financial administration (6), children and youth pastoral care (6), spirituality (5), and formation (3). –Critical opinions regarding the German Synodal Way (6). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Cases of (sexual) abuse by Church members (18). –Poverty, inequality, and the “preferential option for the poor” (9). –Commitment of the Church to socio-political life (7). –Protection of the environment and climate change (5). –Sexual diversity (5). –Liturgy (5). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Children and youth pastoral care (3). –Catholic education (3). –Interreligious dialogue, especially with Muslims (3). –Church accountability (financial administration and use of power) (2).

Latin American participants mentioned many other topics. The most frequent one is, without any doubt, the cases of (sexual) abuse committed by Church members (18 times) and the visible negative consequences that these have had for the victims, the communities, and the credibility of the Church. Secondly, there is the topic of poverty, inequality, the commitment of the Church to those most in need, and the “preferential option for the poor” in the Continent (9 times). Moreover, topics such as the commitment of the Church to socio-political life (7 times), protection of the environment and climate change (5 times), sexual diversity (5 times), and liturgy (5 times), among others, were mentioned.

Finally, among the participants of the **Middle East**, four topics appeared as the most often mentioned (with a low frequency because of the few number of participants of this region that answered this question): first, the apprehension regarding the low rate of participation of young people in the Catholic Church and the need to potentiate children and youth pastoral care (3 times). Secondly, the role of Catholic education as a contribution to society (3 times); however,

it is also mentioned that most Catholic schools are private and, therefore, too expensive. Third, the challenge of interreligious dialogue, especially with Muslims (3 times). And finally, Church accountability, both regarding financial administration and the use of power in decision-making processes (2 times).

6. Results by Regions

In the previous section, an overview of the results and the regional differences for each topic of the German Synodal Path were presented, and the regional emergent issues collected through the open question of the survey were mentioned. In what follows, a detailed presentation of the results for each region regarding the four main topics will be offered, to gain a more precise idea of their particularities and internal diversity.

6.1 Africa

Of the 578 total participants in the survey, 162 were Africans, representing 28% of the sample. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 62 years old: 13.6% were between 24 and 30 years old, 64.8% between 31 and 45 years old, 20.4% were between 46 and 60 years old and only 1.2% were 61 or older. Almost two thirds (63.6%) were male and 36.4% female. Eight out of ten (82.1%) were lay people, 12.3% were members of religious communities, and 4.9% were priests. The largest group consisted of Roman Catholics (90.7%), while Ethiopian Catholics made up a 6.8% of the sample. The represented countries (although with different numbers of participants) were Ethiopia, Benin, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Gambia, Ghana, Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe (for more details, see *Table 17*).

Table 17: Quantitative Sample for Africa (N = 162)

Variable		N	%	Valid %
Age	Group 1: 21–30 years old	22	13.6	13.6
	Group 2: 31–45 years old	105	64.8	64.8
	Group 3: 46–60 years old	33	20.4	20.4
	Group 4: 60 or more	2	1.2	1.2
Gender	Male	103	63.6	63.6
	Female	59	36.4	36.4
Country of Origin	Ethiopia	19	11.7	11.7
	Benin	4	2.5	2.5
	Burkina Faso	1	.6	.6

	Democratic Republic of the Congo	3	1.9	1.9
	Eritrea	1	.6	.6
	Gambia	1	.6	.6
	Ghana	47	29.0	29.0
	Cameroon	5	3.1	3.1
	Kenya	38	23.5	23.5
	Nigeria	3	1.9	1.9
	Rwanda	1	.6	.6
	Sierra Leone	1	.6	.6
	Tanzania	7	4.3	4.3
	Togo	1	.6	.6
	Uganda	13	8.0	8.0
	Zambia	1	.6	.6
	Zimbabwe	15	9.3	9.3
Lifestyle	Layperson	133	82.1	82.1
	Member of religious congregation	20	12.3	12.3
	Priest	8	4.9	4.9
Confession	Roman Catholic	147	90.7	90.7
	Greek Catholics	0	0	0
	Maronite	0	0	0
	Ethiopian Catholic	11	6.8	6.8
	Armenian Catholic	0	0	0
	Other	4	2.5	2.5

Among the African focus groups' participants, 11 of them were men and 3 were women, between 27 and 57 years old. The represented countries were Ethiopia, South Sudan, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, and Gambia. During the conversations, the topics were tackled by the participants especially based on their personal experience, while theological arguments, although tangentially mentioned, did not stand out as the main bases of the discussion. The local reality to which the participants belonged provided them with experiences that supported their arguments, for or against the different themes. The conversations were dynamic, respectful of those who thought differently, and needed no major interventions by the moderator, showing a great disposition to openly discussing all kinds of issues.

On the first topic, "Power and Division of Powers in the Church – Joint Participation in the Mission", the following results were found for Africa (see *Table 18*):

- (a) "Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops" had a mean value of 3.35 and a standard deviation of 1.46. This means that African participants had an ambivalent positive opinion about this first statement; however, there were some relevant differences between the respondents.
- (b) "It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed" had a mean value of 3.88 and a

standard deviation of 1.31. In this case, African respondents rated this item positively, although some differences could be noted between them.

- (c) “Shared participation of lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message” had a mean value of 4.60, the highest within this theme, and a standard deviation of 0.74, showing a high consensus among African respondents.

Table 18: Frequencies and Descriptives for Africa – Topic: Power and Division of Powers in the Church¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Power and Division of Powers in the Church							
(a) Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops.	18.5	13.0	9.3	34.0	25.3	3.35	1.45
(b) It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed.	8.6	9.3	11.7	25.9	44.4	3.88	1.31
(c) Shared participation by lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message.	1.2	0.6	5.6	22.2	70.4	4.60	.74

¹ N = 162. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

The results show that, although the survey’s participants from Africa had an ambivalent opinion about power and influence being only in the hands of the bishops, most of them agreed that lay people should have more influence, that power should be better distributed, and that shared participation helps the Church in its mission. Nevertheless, compared to other regions, it is possible to see that African respondents expressed one of the lowest level of expectations regarding laypeople’s influence and better power distribution in the Church (see above *Table 5*).

During the conversations, however, power appeared to be the most relevant issue for the African participants. They kept coming back to this topic, even during the second focus group, which aimed to identify other relevant subjects for them. Power and the distribution of powers in the Church appeared as key issues. The concentration of power in the hierarchy was described as an exclusion of the laity and women, people who, according to the opinions of the participants, are the ones who know the local communities best. However, the discussion didn’t focus primarily on who may or may not have access to the positions of power in the Church, but more on what power itself means (or

should mean) within the Church, how leadership is currently understood and exercised, and how it should develop for a better communitarian experience.

Moreover, the following three statements on the topic “Women in the Ministry of the Church” were included in the survey with the following results among African participants (see *Table 19*):

- (a) “Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes” had a mean value of 4.69, the highest within this theme, and a standard deviation of 0.76, showing a great consensus among respondents.
- (b) “Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes” had a mean value of 3.15 and a standard deviation of 1.37. In this case, respondents had an ambivalent opinion on this item, and some differences between respondents are visible.
- (c) “In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church” had a mean value of 3.18, slightly above the middle point but still ambivalent, and a standard deviation of 1.58, showing a wide dispersion of responses.

Table 19: Frequencies and Descriptives for Africa – Topic: Women in the Ministry of the Church¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Women in the Ministry of the Church							
(a) Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes.	0.6	3.7	3.1	11.1	81.5	4.69	0.76
(b) Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes.	11.7	28.4	16.0	21.0	22.8	3.15	1.37
(c) In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church.	24.1	11.7	19.8	11.1	33.3	3.18	1.58

¹ N = 162. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

This time the findings show that, although African participants had a clearly positive opinion regarding the important role women play in their communities, their responses regarding women’s influence in them and especially those concerning the possibility to admit women to the ministries of the Church seem to be highly controversial. Compared to other regions, Africa showed the highest level of agreement regarding women’s role and influence in their communities, but one of the lowest levels of agreement regarding female ordained ministry in the future (see above *Table 8*).

The conversations during the qualitative phase confirmed this trend: the participants once again stated that, although women were a numeric majority within their communities, they are rarely considered in the decision-making processes. Nevertheless, even though the participants seemed open to discussing women’s ordination, they tended to believe this would not necessarily be the solution to the challenge of women’s inclusion in the Church if the issue of ecclesial leadership and power distribution was not tackled: women could be ordained and anyway remain excluded from the decisions and leadership if the ecclesial structure and culture are not changed.

On the topic of “Priestly Existence Today”, the following results for Africa emerged (see *Table 20*):

- (a) “I find the way priests live today, especially their way of life of celibacy, appropriate and correct” had a mean of 2.85 and a standard deviation of 1.39. This means that African participants had an ambivalent negative opinion about this first statement, with some visible differences between respondents.
- (b) “Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message” had a mean of 3.36 and a standard deviation of 1.49. In this case, African respondents had an ambivalent positive opinion on this item. Nevertheless, the differences between respondents were greater than before.
- (c) “In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry” had a mean of 3.17, slightly above the middle point and, therefore, ambivalently positive, and a standard deviation of 1.69, showing a wide dispersion in the responses.

Table 20: Frequencies and Descriptives for Africa – Topic: Priestly Existence Today¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Priestly Existence Today							
(a) I find the way priests live today, especially their way of life of celibacy, appropriate and correct.	19.8	28.4	16.7	17.9	17.3	2.85	1.39
(b) Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message.	17.9	13.0	16.7	20.4	32.1	3.36	1.49
(c) In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry.	31.5	4.9	14.8	13.0	35.8	3.17	1.69

¹ N = 162. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

As we can see, Africans' opinions regarding celibacy were quite diverse, with mean values slightly over or below the middle point and high standard deviations, which means that the opinions differ very clearly between the respondents. They are, in this regard, a good example of the general sample, with mean values and standard deviations for each statement within the middle range (see above *Table 11*).

During the qualitative phase, celibacy also seemed to be a controversial issue for many reasons. First, celibacy was not considered by the African participants as any kind of special gift or testimony (as was the case of the Asian participants, for example). In fact, cases of priests that do not keep their celibacy vows and have partners or even children were brought up during the conversations. Some participants also mentioned that becoming a priest as a way for social mobility rather than due to a personal vocation was also sometimes the case. However, the participants were skeptical that the solution could be to simply remove celibacy as a condition for the priesthood, since this could bring other issues (such as polygamy, which is socially accepted in many African countries) and may prevent priests from focusing on their ministry. Therefore, the main issue for them was the quality and the real vocation of those who apply and serve as priests, which should be further discussed and accounted for.

Finally, the following three statements on the topic "Sexuality and Partnership" were rated by the African participants as follows (see *Table 21*):

- (a) "It is right and important that the Church's teaching (generally and in our local context) deals intensively with the topic of sexuality" had a mean of 4.20, the highest within this theme, and a standard deviation of 1.24, showing a few differences between respondents.
- (b) "It is right and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church" had a mean of 3.57 and a standard deviation of 1.44. This means that respondents had an ambivalent positive opinion on this issue and the differences between respondents were greater than in the case of the previous statement.
- (c) "The Catholic Church should reassess its stance on homosexuality" had a mean of 2.03, with a clear negative opinion about it, but with a standard deviation of 1.49, showing some differences of opinion among the respondents.

Table 21: Frequencies and Descriptives for Africa – Topic: Sexuality and Partnership¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Sexuality and Partnership							
(a) It is right and important that the Church’s teaching (generally and in our local context) deals so intensively with the topic of sexuality.	8.0	4.3	7.4	20.4	59.9	4.20	1.24
(b) It is correct and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church.	12.3	14.8	15.4	18.5	38.9	3.57	1.44
(c) The Catholic Church should reassess its stance on homosexuality.	60.5	9.9	9.9	5.6	14.2	2.03	1.49

¹ N = 162. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

According to the results, African participants had a positive opinion about the Church’s teaching on sexuality and the highest level of agreement with it compared to other regions, even regarding sexuality’s place only within a Catholic marriage. On the contrary, this region shows the lowest level of acceptance concerning a new assessment of homosexuality, showing a clear negative opinion about it, the only region with a mean level under the middle point (see above *Table 14*).

During the conversations, the discussion regarding sexuality focused mainly on the topic of homosexuality, a complex issue for the region. As the participants informed, African countries do not accept any kind of sexual diversity. Therefore, even though they recognize that homosexuality exists (even among Catholics) and should be discussed, a new assessment of homosexuality would be controversial for the African Church.

Summary: As a general synthesis, it can be observed that for African participants the issues of power and sexuality emerged as the most relevant and, at the same time, controversial. In particular, homosexuality and polygamy appeared as particularly hot topics for discussion. On the other hand, although the participants expressed a high appreciation of the role of women in the Church, they were rather reluctant to the idea of women being accepted in the ordained ministry. Something similar occurs with the issue of celibacy: although not particularly valued and for some of them problematic, its abolition was not uniformly agreed upon by the participants. Finally, issues such as the Church’s

financial management, the role of Catholics in socio-political life, and the problem of priests with families, emerged as topics of particular interest for the region.

6.2 Asia

Of the 578 total participants in the survey, 70 were Asians, representing 12.1% of the sample. Participants ranged from 24 to 76 years old: 20% were between 24 and 30 years old, 55.7% between 31 and 45 years old, 18.6% between 46 and 60 years old, and 5.7% were 61 or older. Just over sixty percent (61.4%) were male and 38.6% female. Eight out of ten (78.6%) were lay people, 15.7% were members of religious communities, and 7.1% were priests. Almost the whole sample consisted of Roman Catholics (98.6%). The represented countries (although with different numbers of participants) were India, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Vietnam (for more details, see *Table 22*).

Table 22: Quantitative Sample for Asia (N = 70)

Variable		N	%	Valid %
Age	Group 1: 21–30 years old	14	20.0	20.0
	Group 2: 31–45 years old	39	55.7	55.7
	Group 3: 46–60 years old	13	18.6	18.6
	Group 4: 61 or more	4	5.7	5.7
Gender	Male	43	61.4	61.4
	Female	27	38.6	38.6
Country of Origin	India	6	8.6	8.6
	Indonesia	21	30.0	30.0
	Myanmar	20	28.6	28.6
	Philippines	16	22.9	22.9
	Vietnam	7	10.0	10.0
Lifestyle	Layperson	55	78.6	78.6
	Member of religious congregation	11	15.7	15.7
	Priest	5	7.1	7.1
Confession	Roman Catholic	68	97.1	98.6
	Greek Catholics	0	0	0
	Maronite	0	0	0
	Ethiopian Catholic	0	0	0
	Armenian Catholic	0	0	0
	Other	1	1.4	1.4
	<i>Missing</i>	1	1.4	

Among the Asian focus groups' participants, 4 were men and 4 were women, between 36 and 72 years old. The represented countries were the Philippines, India, Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The conversations with Asian par-

ticipants were friendly, although less fluid and participatory than in the case of Africa or Latin America. Even though there was the same number of male and female participants, a certain cultural male superiority was perceived during the conversations: women tended to participate relatively less, express their opinions in a less direct way, or even request confirmation about their opinions from their male peers. Besides, participants defined Asia as a “conservative and traditional region” regarding the various topics tackled. Moreover, a certain tension between East and West is visualized, as the latter is considered a negative influence on young people or those who migrate to Western countries, who would suffer the threat of losing their original identity, according to the opinion of the participants.

On the first topic, “Power and Division of Powers in the Church – Joint Participation in the Mission”, the following results for Asia were found (see Table 23):

- (a) “Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops” had a mean of 3.17 and a standard deviation of 1.56. This means that the participants had an ambivalent positive opinion about this first statement and there were relevant differences between the respondents.
- (b) “It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed” had a mean value of 4.36 and a standard deviation of 0.78. In this case, respondents rated this item positively, with a high level of agreement between the participants.
- (c) “Shared participation of lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message” had a mean of 4.59, the highest within this theme, and a standard deviation of 0.67, showing a high consensus among respondents.

Table 23: Frequencies and Descriptives for Asia – Topic: Power and Division of Powers in the Church¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Power and Division of Powers in the Church							
(a) Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops.	22.9	14.3	15.7	17.1	30.0	3.17	1.56
(b) It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed.	0.0	1.4	14.3	31.4	52.9	4.36	0.78

(c) Shared participation by lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message.	0.0	1.4	5.7	25.7	67.1	4.59	0.67
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¹ N = 70. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

Although the survey's participants from Asia had an ambivalent opinion about power and influence being only in the hands of the bishops, most of them agreed that lay people should have more influence, that power should be better distributed, and that shared participation helps the Church in its mission. When compared to other regions, it is possible to see that Asian participants had one of the lowest levels of agreement regarding the first statement but the highest expectations regarding laypeople's influence and better power distribution in the Church (see above *Table 5*).

During the conversations, the Asian participants suggested that power within the Church should be a topic for discussion, although they consider that it is better to conceptualize it as "responsibility", since this would be a more appropriate term for the Church. Focus group participants tend to agree that it is the priests and bishops who assume exclusive decision-making and power positions and that this could eventually be modified in the future. However, in order for this to be done adequately, it is necessary to prepare the laity (through formation), so they become able to assume tasks for which they are not currently qualified. Furthermore, the participants emphasized that there are no better or worse roles, that the dignity of all members is the same, and that it is important to recognize and integrate this in current discussions. According to their perspective, hierarchies are present in different areas of life (such as education or social life), and it is not strange that they also exist in the Church.

Moreover, the three statements on the topic "Women in the Ministry of the Church" had the following results among Asian participants (see *Table 24*):

- (a) "Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes" had a mean value of 4.46, the highest within this theme, and a standard deviation of 0.86, showing a great consensus among respondents.
- (b) "Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes" had a mean value of 3.16, slightly above the middle point but still ambivalent, and a standard deviation of 1.25, showing some differences between the respondents.
- (c) "In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church" had a mean value of 3.51, and a standard deviation of 1.40. In this case, respondents had an ambivalent positive opinion on this item, and important differences between respondents are visible.

Table 24: Frequencies and Descriptives for Asia – Topic: Women in the Ministry of the Church¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Women in the Ministry of the Church							
(a) Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes.	0.0	4.3	11.4	18.6	65.7	4.46	0.86
(b) Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes.	10.0	22.9	25.7	24.3	17.1	3.16	1.25
(c) In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church.	12.9	12.9	17.1	24.3	32.9	3.51	1.40

¹ N = 70. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

Although participants from Asia had a positive opinion regarding the important role women play in their communities, the responses regarding women’s influence on them and especially concerning the possibility of admitting them to the ministries of the Church show a visible diversity among the participants. They are, in this regard, a good example of the general sample, with mean values and standard deviations for each statement within the middle range (see above *Table 8*).

In relation to this topic, a diversity of opinions was also expressed during the conversations. On the one hand, the participants recognized that women’s work is mainly related to the domestic sphere of ecclesiastical life and that they are not involved in decision-making processes. For some of them, however, this is not a major problem. Nonetheless, they also mentioned that perhaps their role could be more empowered. On the other hand, other participants do believe that there is the possibility of having women as leaders within the Church and that this should be an area to work on; it is mentioned that women have been recognized and integrated into leadership positions in different areas outside the Church, so it would not be a problem for this to happen within the Church as well. However, there are transversal reservations regarding the women’s ordination.

On the topic of “Priestly Existence Today”, the three statements considered in the survey had the following results for Asia (see *Table 25*):

- (a) “I find the way priests live today, especially their way of life of celibacy, appropriate and correct” had a mean of 3.40 and a standard deviation of 1.18. This means that participants had an ambivalent positive opinion about this first statement, with some differences between respondents.

- (b) “Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message” had a mean of 3.73 and a standard deviation of 1.31. In this case, respondents had a rather positive opinion on this item, although the differences between respondents were greater than before.
- (c) “In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry” had a mean of 2.81, slightly below the mean value and, therefore, ambivalently negative, and a standard deviation of 1.51, showing a relevant dispersion in the responses.

Table 25: Frequencies and Descriptives for Asia – Topic: Priestly Existence Today¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Priestly Existence Today							
(a) I find the way priests live today, especially their way of life of celibacy, appropriate and correct.	7.1	14.3	31.4	25.7	21.4	3.40	1.18
(b) Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message.	10.0	8.6	15.7	30.0	35.7	3.73	1.31
(c) In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry.	27.1	20.0	18.6	12.9	21.4	2.81	1.51

¹ N = 70. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

As it is possible to see, Asian participants had a rather positive opinion regarding celibacy, its adequacy, and its contribution to the Church’s mission and, therefore, a rather negative (although ambivalent) opinion about the possibility of allowing priests to marry in the future. However, some relevant differences between respondents are visible, especially regarding this last issue. The clear (positive and negative) opinions of Asian participants regarding the different statements are even clearer when compared to other regions: Asia has the highest and lowest levels of agreement in the first two and the last item, respectively (see above *Table 11*).

The conversations during the qualitative phase confirmed these results: celibacy is mentioned as a key aspect and valued as a particular gift that is given for priests’ Christian testimony and, as such, should be safeguarded. In addition, according to the opinions of the participants, giving priests the possibility to marry would mean that they would not be able to adequately focus on their work in the Christian community. In such a case, priests would have to look

after their families and their communities, without being able to commit themselves completely to either of them. In this sense, the commitment and absolute dedication of priests to their ecclesial service emerged as a very relevant value that should be protected, according to their opinion. Moreover, they also mentioned the need to highlight the value of the Christian family as a testimony of faith, different from that of priests, but equally valuable, especially for the present times.

Finally, the following results emerged for the three statements on the topic “Sexuality and Partnership” (see *Table 26*):

- (a) “It is right and important that the Church’s teaching (generally and in our local context) deals intensively with the topic of sexuality” had a mean of 4.13, the highest within this theme, and a standard deviation of 1.06, showing few differences between respondents.
- (b) “It is right and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church” had a mean of 3.43 and a standard deviation of 1.52. This means that respondents had an ambivalent positive opinion on this issue and the differences between respondents were greater than before.
- (c) “The Catholic Church should reassess its stance on homosexuality” had a mean of 3.80, with a rather positive opinion about it, however, with a standard deviation of 1.36, showing some differences of opinion among the respondents.

Table 26: Frequencies and Descriptives for Asia – Topic: Sexuality and Partnership¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Sexuality and Partnership							
(a) It is right and important that the Church’s teaching (generally and in our local context) deals intensively with the topic of sexuality.	1.4	10.0	11.4	28.6	48.6	4.13	1.06
(b) It is correct and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church.	20.0	10.0	8.6	30.0	31.4	3.43	1.52
(c) The Catholic Church should reassess its stance on homosexuality.	10.0	10.0	12.9	24.3	42.9	3.80	1.36

¹ N = 70. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

Asian participants had a positive opinion about the Church's teaching on sexuality and one of the highest levels of evaluation compared to other regions, even regarding sexuality's place only within a Catholic marriage (see above *Table 14*). Nevertheless, this region shows a high level of acceptance concerning a new assessment of homosexuality, although some differences in opinions are visible for the last two issues.

During the conversations, the participants mentioned that sexuality was an issue exclusively of people's private lives. In this regard, they considered Asia to be a region with "traditional cultures" (as they called them), where there would not be greater expectations in relation to the Church addressing this issue or proposing reforms of its current doctrine. In addition, the participants mentioned that homosexuality is culturally rejected in several countries of the region, which does not appear to be problematic and, therefore, they do not see the need for a modification of the Church's doctrine in this regard.

Summary: Asia appeared as a more "traditional" region, as the participants labeled it, where topics such as sexuality are not openly discussed, since they are aspects of private life and, therefore, there are no major expectations regarding the role of the Church in relation to it or possible reforms of its current doctrine. Furthermore, celibacy is seen as an especially valuable Christian testimony and should be safeguarded. On the other hand, Asians' understanding of power and influence within the Church emerges as a particular feature (like the case of Eastern Europe): although both are concentrated in the hierarchy, this does not imply a different or lower dignity of other people in the tasks they perform. Therefore, this does not appear as a particularly problematic issue: the role of the laity and women, although different, would not imply a devaluation, but part of an organization of the different but equally valuable ecclesial roles.

6.3 Eastern Europe

Of the 578 total participants in the survey, 130 were from Eastern European countries, representing 22.5% of the sample. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 77 years old: 9.2% were between 23 and 30 years old, 48.1% between 31 and 45 years old, 36.4% between 46 and 60 years old, and 6.2% were 61 or older. Just over half of the participants (52.3%) were male and 47.7% female. Nine out of ten (92.3%) were lay people, 3.1% were members of religious communities, and 1.5% were priests. The largest group consisted of Roman Catholics (86%), while Greek Catholics made up 10.9% of the sample. The represented countries (although with different numbers of participants) were Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech

Republic, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine (for more details, see *Table 27*).

Table 27: Quantitative Sample for Eastern Europe (N = 130)

Variable		N	%	Valid %
Age	Group 1: 21–30 years old	12	9.2	9.3
	Group 2: 31–45 years old	62	47.7	48.1
	Group 3: 46–60 years old	47	36.2	36.4
	Group 4: 61 or more	8	6.2	6.2
	<i>Missing</i>	1	.8	
Gender	Male	68	52.3	52.3
	Female	62	47.7	47.7
Country of origin	Albania	1	.8	.8
	Armenia	1	.8	.8
	Belarus	1	.8	.8
	Bosnia-Herzegovina	3	2.3	2.3
	Bulgaria	1	.8	.8
	Croatia	5	3.8	3.8
	Czech Republic	9	6.9	6.9
	Georgia	1	.8	.8
	Hungary	14	10.8	10.8
	Latvia	1	.8	.8
	Lithuania	5	3.8	3.8
	North Macedonia	1	.8	.8
	Poland	53	40.8	40.8
	Romania	9	6.9	6.9
	Russia	4	3.1	3.1
	Slovakia	9	6.9	6.9
Slovenia	2	1.5	1.5	
Ukraine	9	6.9	6.9	
<i>Missing</i>	1	.8	.8	
Lifestyle	Layperson	120	92.3	92.3
	Member of religious congregation	4	3.1	3.1
	Priest	2	1.5	1.5
Confession	Roman Catholic	111	85.4	86.0
	Greek Catholics	14	10.8	10.9
	Maronite	0	0	0
	Ethiopian Catholic	0	0	0
	Armenian Catholic	1	.8	.8
	Other	3	2.3	2.3
<i>Missing</i>	1	.8		

Among the Eastern European focus groups' participants, 6 were men, and 5 were women, between 24 and 54 years old. The represented countries were Bosnia, Slovakia, Latvia, Hungary, Ukraine, and Poland. In general, the conversations were a little less fluid and there was a bigger need to moderate the dialogue and introduce complementary questions in order to move forward in the

discussion. In this region, the importance for the participants of knowing and relying on theological arguments in order to adequately address the discussion of the topics, rather than their own experience as believers or the possible reflections of their communities, stands out. On the other hand, the generational perspective appears as a particular viewpoint for the analysis of the differences of opinions on the various topics: according to the participants, there would be a considerable difference in experiences and the way of understanding things between the adult generations and the younger ones, due to a greater freedom to raise questions, and critically reflect on various issues.

On the first topic, “Power and Division of Powers in the Church – Joint Participation in the Mission”, the following results for Eastern Europe were found (see *Table 28*):

- (a) “Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops” had a mean value of 3.59 and a standard deviation of 1.21. This means that the participants had an ambivalent positive opinion about this first statement and there were some visible differences between the respondents.
- (b) “It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed” had a mean value of 3.85 and a standard deviation of 1.25. In this case, respondents rated this item positively, but the difference in opinions between the respondents is similar to the former statement.
- (c) “Shared participation of lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message” had a mean value of 4.23, the highest within this topic, and a standard deviation of 1.06, showing a higher consensus among respondents.

Table 28: Frequencies and Descriptives for Eastern Europe – Topic: Power and Division of Powers in the Church¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Power and Division of Powers in the Church							
(a) Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops.	5.4	17.7	16.2	33.8	26.9	3.59	1.21
(b) It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed.	8.5	6.9	14.6	30.8	39.2	3.85	1.25

(c) Shared participation by lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message.	3.1	6.2	10.0	26.2	54.6	4.23	1.06
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¹ N = 130. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

Although the survey’s participants from Eastern Europe tended to agree that power and influence in the Church were only in the hands of the bishops, having the highest level for this item compared to other regions (see above *Table 5*), the expectations about lay people’s influence and a better distribution of power were not as high as in other regions, being Eastern Europe the region with the lowest level in this item. This shows that, for Eastern European participants, the way power and roles are currently distributed in the Church is not particularly problematic.

These findings were confirmed during the conversations. According to the participants, the concept of power would not be the most appropriate term for the Church, and they questioned its meaning and use to approach the topic. Participants agreed that there are different roles for the laity and priests in the Church, but that the dignity is the same, and in this sense, they do not see this as a major problem. Some currently existent ecclesial structures are mentioned as possibilities for lay participation (economic and pastoral councils, for example). Moreover, they underlined the different areas of life and ways in which lay people can help and highly engage in the mission of the Church (education, socio-political engagement, social media, etc.).

Moreover, the following three statements on the topic “Women in the Ministry of the Church” were assessed by Eastern European participants as follows (see *Table 29*):

- (a) “Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes” had a mean value of 3.48 and a standard deviation of 1.37, showing an ambivalent positive opinion regarding this first item, although some differences between respondents are visible.
- (b) “Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes” had a mean value of 3.01 and a standard deviation of 1.41. In this case, respondents had altogether no clear opinion on this item, and the differences in opinion were similar to the former ones.
- (c) “In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church” had a mean value of 3.05 and a standard deviation of 1.59, showing a wide dispersion of responses. This means that the respondents had, in general, an ambivalent opinion regarding this statement, and relevant differences between the participants were found.

Table 29: Frequencies and Descriptives for Eastern Europe – Topic: Women in the Ministry of the Church¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Women in the Ministry of the Church							
(a) Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes.	10.8	16.9	16.2	25.4	30.8	3.48	1.37
(b) Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes.	19.2	21.5	17.7	22.3	19.2	3.01	1.41
(c) In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church.	27.7	11.5	17.7	14.6	28.5	3.05	1.59

¹ N = 130. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

As in the former topic, the opinions of the participants of Eastern Europe regarding women's role in the Church are very diverse. No clear positive or negative trend for either of the three statements is visible, and the dispersion in the answers shows the internal diversity in opinions. Nevertheless, compared to other regions, Eastern Europe appears as the region with the lowest levels of agreement regarding the relevance of women and their influence in local communities. Moreover, Eastern Europe is the region with the lowest level of agreement regarding the possibility of women being admitted to ordained ministries of the Church (see *Table 8*).

In the conversations during the qualitative phase, a similar argument is proposed, as in the case of power and lay participation. It is mentioned that women have different roles in the Church, but that the dignity is the same and that the Christian message can be communicated in other ways and by other means besides the ordained ministry (for example, through education, socio-political engagement, and media). Therefore, they said, this topic is no big issue for them and their communities. However, as the conversation developed, the differences between the generations in how they deal with these issues were pointed out. The adult generations grew up in a context where certain issues were not allowed to be questioned; today, the younger generations live in a context where it is possible to ask questions, discuss, and critically reflect on various issues.

On the topic of "Priestly Existence Today", the three statements considered in the survey had the following results for Eastern Europe (see *Table 30*):

- (a) “I find the way priests live today, especially their way of life of celibacy, appropriate and correct” had a mean value of 3.03 and a standard deviation of 1.47. This means that the participants had an ambivalent opinion about this first statement, and there was no consensus between the participants’ opinions.
- (b) “Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message” had a mean value of 3.01 and a standard deviation of 1.52. Once again, the respondents’ opinions were altogether ambivalent and the differences between respondents were even greater than before.
- (c) “In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry” had a mean of 3.45, showing an ambivalent positive opinion on the statement, but had a standard deviation of 1.60, which shows big differences between the respondents.

Table 30: Frequencies and Descriptives for Eastern Europe – Topic: Priestly Existence Today¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Priestly Existence Today							
(a) I find the way priests live today, especially their way of life of celibacy, appropriate and correct.	21.5	18.5	18.5	18.5	23.1	3.03	1.47
(b) Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message.	26.2	11.5	21.5	16.9	23.8	3.01	1.52
(c) In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry.	21.5	7.7	16.2	13.1	41.5	3.45	1.60

¹ N = 130. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

As we can see, Eastern European participants’ opinions regarding priestly existence today were very dissimilar. Significant differences were visible for the three statements, which expresses a high diversity in the opinions of the participants not only compared to other regions but also within the same region. Due to that, the mean values of the region for this topic remained near the middle point of the scale and show no particular positive or negative trend compared to other regions (see *Table 11*).

During the conversations, the participants’ statements once again emphasized that the discussion of these issues must be theologically grounded. Practical difficulties (such as the lack of priests or disciplinary problems) would not

be a sufficient argument to change an already traditional teaching of the Church. However, one of the participants recalled that celibacy was introduced relatively late in the Church, so if this was not always the case, a change could be considered. Therefore, the need to stay faithful to the origins of Christianity and tradition stands out as a special value for the participants. Nevertheless, it was also mentioned that celibacy would be an important issue for the younger generations, who are more critical of it being a requirement for the priesthood since it seems to them to contradict human nature.

Finally, the following three statements on the topic “Sexuality and Partnership” were rated by participants from Eastern Europe as follows (see *Table 31*):

- (a) “It is right and important that the Church’s teaching (generally and in our local context) deals intensively with the topic of sexuality” had a mean value of 3.44, which shows an ambivalent positive opinion, and a standard deviation of 1.25, showing some important differences between respondents.
- (b) “It is right and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church” had a mean of 3.24, slightly over the middle point, and a standard deviation of 1.60. This means that there was no consensus among the participants regarding this topic, which seems to be controversial.
- (c) “The Catholic Church should reassess its stance on homosexuality” had a mean value of 3.11, meaning participants had an ambivalent opinion about it, with a standard deviation of 1.64, showing even higher differences among the respondents than before.

Table 31: Frequencies and Descriptives for Eastern Europe – Topic: Sexuality and Partnership¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Sexuality and Partnership							
(a) It is right and important that the Church’s teaching (generally and in our local context) deals so intensively with the topic of sexuality.	6.9	17.7	26.2	23.1	26.2	3.44	1.25
(b) It is correct and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church.	21.5	18.5	9.2	16.2	34.6	3.24	1.60
(c) The Catholic Church should reassess its stance on homosexuality.	28.5	10.8	15.4	12.3	33.1	3.11	1.64

¹ N = 130. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

As we can see, sexuality appeared as a controversial topic among participants from Eastern Europe, where important differences are visible regarding the three statements included in this topic. This is expressed in mean values slightly over the middle point and high standard deviations for all of them. The region shows the lowest level of agreement with the first statement, which expresses their low interest regarding the topic and the Church intensively dealing with it (see *Table 14*).

During the conversations, the general opinion that this is not a topic of particular interest and that there are more relevant topics for the communities is confirmed. Furthermore, it is mentioned that sexuality is a matter of private life and, therefore, there were no particular expectations regarding the Church dealing with this subject. However, it is acknowledged that the topic is currently very present in social media, which exerts a big influence, especially in young people’s lives, and is part of the social debate (e.g., regarding the rights of sexual minorities). Nevertheless, sexuality is still a taboo subject, even in the family context, and is, consequently, scarcely addressed in open dialogue. Finally, the issue of sexual abuse and its negative consequences emerged as a highly relevant issue, particularly in the case of Poland.

Summary: According to the participants, structural issues in the Church would not require major changes because they see that, although there are diverse roles in the Church, there is no difference in the dignity of the members. Issues such as the elimination of celibacy in priestly life, the ordination of women or dealing with sexuality do not seem to be relevant for the region. Nevertheless, it is also acknowledged that this could be changing in the view of younger generations. Furthermore, the relevance of theological arguments over experiential ones is one of the characteristics of the conversations with Eastern European participants. Finally, for this region other topics seem to be more relevant, both internal (such as catechesis or spirituality) and external issues (social commitment of the Church).

6.4 Latin America

Of the 578 total participants in the survey, 177 were from Latin America, representing 30.6% of the sample. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 73 years old: 6.8% were between 27 and 30 years old, 57.6% between 31 and 45 years old, 27.7% between 46 and 60 years old, and 7.9% were 61 or older. Just less than half of them (49.7%) were male and 50.3% female. A little more than eight out of ten (84.7%) were lay people, 13% were members of religious communities, and 2.3% were priests. Almost the whole sample consisted of Roman Catholics (94.9%). The represented countries (although with different numbers

of participants) were Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru (for more details, see *Table 32*).

Table 32: Quantitative Sample for Eastern Europe (N = 177)

Variable		N	%	Valid %
Age	Group 1: 21–30 years old	12	6.8	6.8
	Group 2: 31–45 years old	102	57.6	57.6
	Group 3: 46–60 years old	49	27.7	27.7
	Group 4: 61 or more	14	7.9	7.9
Gender	Male	88	49.7	49.7
	Female	89	50.3	50.3
Country of origin	Argentina	12	6.8	6.8
	Bolivia	14	7.9	7.9
	Brazil	35	19.8	19.8
	Chile	7	4.0	4.0
	Ecuador	15	8.5	8.5
	Guatemala	17	9.6	9.6
	Colombia	37	20.9	20.9
	Mexico	13	7.3	7.3
	Peru	27	15.3	15.3
Lifestyle	Layperson	150	84.7	84.7
	Member of religious congregation	23	13.0	13.0
	Priest	4	2.3	2.3
Confession	Roman Catholic	167	94.4	94.9
	Greek Catholics	0	0	0
	Maronite	1	.6	.6
	Ethiopian Catholic	0	0	0
	Armenian Catholic	0	0	0
	Other	8	4.5	4.5
	<i>Missing</i>	1	.6	

Among the Latin American focus groups' participants, 4 were men, and 7 were women, between 27 and 64 years old. The represented countries were Peru, Colombia, Mexico, Argentina, and Ecuador. While there were participants who were open to discussing all the topics, interested and expectant of future changes, and even demanding to go beyond what is addressed by the German Synodal Way, another group of participants was more reticent, alluding to certain theological arguments that would support maintaining the current positions of the Church. Besides, the diversity of the same region is highlighted, alluding to the very different realities even in the same country. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the concept "signs of the times" was mentioned as relevant to the discernment and decision-making processes in the Continent.

On the first topic, "Power and Separation of Powers in the Church – Joint Participating in the Mission", the following results were found for Latin America (see *Table 33*):

- (a) “Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops” had a mean value of 3.11 and a standard deviation of 1.49. This means that the participants had an ambivalent opinion about this first statement and there were relevant differences between the respondents.
- (b) “It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed” had a mean value of 4.06 and a standard deviation of 1.17. In this case, respondents rated this item positively, and the differences of opinion between respondents were smaller than before.
- (c) “Shared participation of lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message” had a mean value of 4.45, the highest within this topic and clearly positive, and a standard deviation of 0.85, showing a high consensus among respondents.

Table 33: Frequencies and Descriptives for Latin America – Topic: Power and Division of Powers in the Church¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Power and Division of Powers in the Church							
(a) Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops.	22.6	14.7	15.3	24.3	23.2	3.11	1.49
(b) It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed.	6.2	5.6	11.3	29.9	46.9	4.06	1.17
(c) Shared participation by lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message.	1.7	2.3	6.8	28.2	61.0	4.45	0.85

¹ N = 177. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

Participants from Latin America had an ambivalent opinion about power and influence being only in the hands of the bishops, which still seems to be a disputed issue. However, Latin America had the lowest level of agreement regarding this first statement compared to other regions (see *Table 5*). Still, they clearly agreed that lay people should have more influence, that power should be better distributed, and that shared participation helps the Church in its mission, with mean values over 4.

During the conversations, it is recognized that progress has been made in recent times regarding lay participation. However, they expect more. According to them, power is concentrated in the hierarchy and they believe there is a need to open decision-making processes and structures for the laity in general, and particularly for women. However, they comment that this often depends on the local reality and the priest in charge of the community, and is, therefore, not solved (only) with changes regarding the structure of the Church. In this context, they mentioned the diversity of religious congregations present in the continent, which have very diverse styles of exercising power and promoting (or not) ecclesial participation.

Moreover, the three statements on the topic “Women in the Ministry of the Church” were assessed by the Latino participants as follows (see *Table 34*):

- (a) “Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes” had a mean value of 4.20 and a standard deviation of 1.18, showing a positive opinion with relatively small differences between the respondents.
- (b) “Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes” had a mean value of 2.72 and a standard deviation of 1.47. In this case, respondents had an ambivalent negative opinion on this item, and some differences between respondents were visible.
- (c) “In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church” had a mean value of 4.24 and a standard deviation of 1.20, which expresses a clearly positive opinion about the idea with relatively small differences between the respondents.

Table 34: Frequencies and Descriptives for Latin America – Topic: Women in the Ministry of the Church¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Women in the Ministry of the Church							
(a) Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes.	5.1	7.9	7.3	20.9	58.8	4.20	1.18
(b) Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes.	26.0	28.2	11.9	15.3	18.6	2.72	1.47
(c) In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church.	7.9	2.3	8.5	20.9	60.5	4.24	1.20

¹ N = 177. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

Also for this third topic, Latin American participants showed a clear opinion regarding the current situation of women in the Church. Although they are considered very important for the local communities, Latinos are the most critical ones regarding their current real influence in the Church and the ones that most clearly agree with the idea of letting them be admitted into the ministries of the Church, compared to other regions (see *Table 8*).

During the conversations, the participants mentioned that women are very active in the communities, often the ones who are responsible for the pastoral life; likewise, the female figure (exemplified in the Virgen, but also in the role of mothers in religious socialization) plays a relevant symbolic role in the Latin American faith; nevertheless, they are not part of the decision-making process. This is understood as problematic and unfair, often related to a Latin American cultural framework that is sexist and patriarchal. In this sense, the issue is related to a better distribution of power in the Church. However, it is questioned whether the access of women to the ordained ministry is the only way to solve this problem of power inequality or whether the whole hierarchical structure of the Church should be reconsidered. The mere incorporation of women does not ensure a solution. In the case of accepting them into the ministry, it would be necessary to problematize which profile of women would do so, taking care not to replicate patriarchal imaginaries.

On the topic of “Priestly existence today”, the following results were found for Latin America (see *Table 35*):

- (a) “I find the way priests live today, especially their way of life of celibacy, appropriate and correct” had a mean value of 2.36 and a standard deviation of 1.29. This means that participants had a negative opinion about this first statement with relatively low differences of opinion between respondents.
- (b) “Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message” had a mean of 2.30 and a standard deviation of 1.36. In this case, respondents had a clearly negative opinion on this item. The differences between respondents were slightly bigger than before.
- (c) “In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry” had a mean value of 4.03 and, therefore, clearly positive, and a standard deviation of 1.38, showing some differences between respondents.

Table 35: Frequencies and Descriptives for Latin America – Topic: Priestly Existence Today¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Priestly Existence Today							
(a) I find the way priests live today, especially their way of life of celibacy, appropriate and correct.	29.4	36.2	14.7	8.5	11.3	2.36	1.29
(b) Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message.	37.3	28.2	13.6	9.0	11.9	2.30	1.36
(c) In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry.	11.3	6.2	6.8	19.2	56.5	4.03	1.38

¹ N = 177. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

Latin America is a region where the current way priests live, and particularly celibacy, is not especially valued; therefore, the participants agreed with the idea of letting them choose their lifestyles. Latino respondents showed, in fact, the most critical opinions regarding the first two statements and one of the highest levels of agreement about the third one, compared to other regions (see *Table 11*).

The conversations helped identify that for Latino participants the discussion about celibacy is intimately connected with the understanding of sexuality as the affective-sexual dimension of human life, which would not be completely fulfilled with celibacy, according to their viewpoints. For this reason, celibacy appears, for some of them, as problematic. Furthermore, according to the participants, the sacralization of celibacy and a misunderstanding of sexuality sometimes lead to problems or irregular situations (priests with partners and children). However, other participants mentioned that there are theological arguments to defend celibacy as a relevant aspect of priests' life. It also allows 100% dedication in their work with the communities. On the other hand, as in the African case, social mobility (rather than vocation) appears to still be a frequent reason for opting for the priesthood, at least in some parts of the Continent, which could be the basis of later problematic situations.

Finally, the following three statements on the topic "Sexuality and Partnership" were assessed by the Latin American participants as follows (see *Table 36*):

- (a) "It is right and important that the Church's teaching (generally and in our local context) deals intensively with the topic of sexuality" had a mean value of 4.16, with a clearly positive opinion about it, and a standard deviation of 1.14, showing only some few differences between respondents.

- (b) “It is right and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church” had a mean value of 2.34 and a standard deviation of 1.40. This means that respondents had a clearly negative opinion on this issue. However, the differences were bigger than before.
- (c) “The Catholic Church should reassess its stance on homosexuality” had a mean value of 4.20, the highest within this topic, and a standard deviation of 1.27, showing some small differences of opinion among the respondents.

Table 36: Frequencies and Descriptives for Latin America – Topic: Sexuality and Partnership¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Sexuality and Partnership							
(a) It is right and important that the Church’s teaching (generally and in our local context) deals so intensively with the topic of sexuality.	5.1	5.1	11.9	24.9	53.1	4.16	1.14
(b) It is correct and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church.	39.0	22.6	15.8	10.2	12.4	2.34	1.40
(c) The Catholic Church should reassess its stance on homosexuality.	9.0	3.4	7.3	19.2	61.0	4.20	1.27

¹ N = 177. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

Latin American participants had a very clear opinion on this final topic. Although they highly agreed that the Church should intensively deal with sexuality, they had clearly negative opinions about the idea of sexuality limited only to Catholic marriage, the only region with a mean value under the middle point (see *Table 14*). Likewise, Latin America is the region with the highest level of agreement about a new assessment of homosexuality by the Church, the only one with a mean value over 4.

The topic of sexuality and its understanding appears to be a key issue in this region during the conversations. The participants emphasized that sexuality is a central aspect of people’s lives, and that it is not possible to understand human beings without their affective-sexual dimension. For this reason, celibacy does not appear as something especially valued (as in the Asian case, for example), but rather in need of justification and adequate accompaniment so that it does not lead to an unhealthy experience of sexuality. They also commented that

celibacy has often been overvalued (as the highest expression of the sacred); that as a condition for the ministry it questions the candidate's freedom of choice; and that it often ends up not being respected and that irregular situations of priests with partners or families end up being covered up. In this sense, they mentioned that a change in this disciplinary rule could help the Church in its credibility. Finally, they also stated that in some countries such as Colombia or Mexico, priesthood is still a path for social mobility and is not always a vocational option.

Summary: The quantitative results show some clear trends for Latin America regarding most of the topics: high expectations regarding a better distribution of power, greater female participation, critical opinions on celibacy and the Church's current sexual teaching. However, during the conversations, a clear diversity of experiences and opinions (sometimes even controversial) on these issues was visible. Likewise, there is no clear acceptance of female ordination. Moreover, a topic that appears as a novelty in comparison with other regions is the emergence of the issue of sexual diversity, with the demand to open the discussion beyond homosexuality. Finally, among the other topics mentioned, the issue of sexual abuse scandals and their negative consequences emerges as a highly relevant topic, both in the survey and in the group conversations.

6.5 Middle East

Of the 578 total participants in the survey, 39 were from the Middle East, representing 6.7% of the sample. Participants ranged from 21 to 68 years old: 52.6% were between 21 and 30 years old, 21.2% between 31 and 45 years old, 23.7% between 46 and 60 years old, and 2.6% were 61 or older. Almost six out of ten (59%) were male and 41% female. Three-quarters (74.4%) were lay people, 17.9% were members of religious communities, and no priests participated in the study. The largest group consisted of Roman Catholics (44.7%), followed by Maronites (34.2%) and Greek Catholics (10.5%). The represented countries were Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria (for more details, see *Table 37*).

Table 37: Quantitative Sample for Eastern Europe (N = 39)

Variable		N	%	Valid %
Age	Group 1: 21–30 years old	20	51.3	52.6
	Group 2: 31–45 years old	8	20.5	21.1
	Group 3: 46–60 years old	9	23.1	23.7
	Group 4: 61 or more	1	2.6	2.6
	Missing	1	2.6	
Gender	Male	23	59.0	59.0
	Female	16	41.0	41.0
Country of origin	Jordan	8	20.5	20.5
	Lebanon	18	46.2	46.2
	Palestine	5	12.8	12.8
	Syria	8	20.5	20.5
Lifestyle	Layperson	29	74.4	74.4
	Member of religious congregation	7	17.9	17.9
	Priest	0	0	0
Confession	Roman Catholic	17	43.6	44.7
	Greek Catholics	4	10.3	10.5
	Maronite	13	33.3	34.2
	Ethiopian Catholic	0	0	0
	Armenian Catholic	2	5.1	5.3
	Other	2	5.1	5.3
	Missing	1	2.6	

The participants of the individual interviews were all men, between 31 and 40 years old. The represented countries were Jordanian, Lebanon, and Syria. The individual interviews were conducted following a similar dynamic to the first regional focus group: the results of the survey for the region were presented, followed by a dialogue on the interviewee’s interpretation of them. The conversations were, in general, dynamic and it was possible to deepen the analysis of the particular situation of the Church in the respective countries and the local challenges it faces.

On the first topic, “Power and Division of Powers in the Church – Joint Participation in the Mission”, the three statements included in the survey had the following results for the Middle East (see *Table 38*):

- (a) “Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops” had a mean value of 3.69 and a standard deviation of 1.36. This means that the participants had a rather positive opinion about this first statement but there were some differences between the respondents.
- (b) “It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed” had a mean value of 4.28 and a standard deviation of 1.08. In this case, respondents rated this item positively, and the difference in opinions between the respondents was relatively low.

- (c) “Shared participation of lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message” had a mean of 4.49, the highest within this topic, and a standard deviation of 0.72, showing a high consensus among respondents.

Table 38: Frequencies and Descriptives for the Middle East – Topic: Power and Division of Powers in the Church¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Power and Division of Powers in the Church							
(a) Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops.	12.8	5.1	17.9	28.2	35.9	3.69	1.36
(b) It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed.	0.0	12.8	7.7	17.9	61.5	4.28	1.08
(c) Shared participation by lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message.	0.0	2.6	5.1	33.3	59.0	4.49	0.72

¹ N = 39. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

Although the survey’s participants from the Middle East tended to agree that power and influence in the Church were only in the hands of the bishops, having the highest level for this item compared to other regions (see *Table 5*), most of them agreed that lay people should have more influence, that power should be better distributed, and that shared participation helps the Church in its mission. The Middle East was, in fact, one of the regions with the highest levels of expectations regarding laypeople’s role in the Church.

Nevertheless, during the individual conversations, the interviewees mentioned that both laity and priests have established roles that are not questioned or cause any conflict. It is the priests who must guide the community and assume its leadership, dealing with the different ecclesial issues that arise. The laity would have different but also important roles and are supposed to accompany and commit to the pastoral life of the Christian communities. Because the Catholic Church is a minority in Middle Eastern countries, the communities are usually small and the members know each other very well, which would help a fluent cooperation between them, according to the participants.

Moreover, the following three statements on the topic “Women in the Ministry of the Church” had the following results among participants of the Middle East (see *Table 39*):

- (a) “Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes” had a mean value of 3.69, and a standard deviation of 1.24, showing a rather positive opinion regarding this first item, although some differences between respondents are visible.
- (b) “Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes” had a mean value of 2.79 and a standard deviation of 1.11. In this case, respondents had an ambivalent negative opinion on this item, and the differences in opinion were smaller than before.
- (c) “In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church” had a mean value of 3.87, and a standard deviation of 1.42, showing a wide dispersion of responses. This means that the respondents had, in general, a positive opinion regarding this statement, although some important differences between the participants were found.

Table 39: Frequencies and Descriptives for the Middle East – Topic: Women in the Ministry of the Church¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Women in the Ministry of the Church							
(a) Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes.	2.6	17.9	25.6	15.4	38.5	3.69	1.24
(b) Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes.	7.7	41.0	23.1	20.5	7.7	2.79	1.11
(c) In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church.	15.4	0.0	12.8	25.6	46.2	3.87	1.42

¹ N = 39. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

The opinion of the participants of the Middle East regarding women’s role in their communities, although over the middle point, is not as clearly positive as in the case of other regions. They showed (with Eastern Europe respondents) the lowest level of agreement regarding this first item. However, they are one of the most critical regions (with Latin America) regarding the current influence of women in the Church. Moreover, the participants showed a relatively high level of openness to the idea of women being accepted in ordained ministries when compared to other regions (see *Table 8*).

On the topic of women, divided opinions emerged during the conversations. On the one hand, the interviewees argued that the role of women is already established and accepted, and there seem to be no major expectations to change it. It is argued that, at the time of Jesus, women were important in accompanying his work, without being chosen among the apostles, and not for that reason they had a less important role. However, other opinions showed some kind of openness to discuss the role of women in the Church, and eventually prepare them for this service within the community.

On the topic of “Priestly Existence Today”, three statements were assessed by the Middle Eastern participants as follows (see *Table 40*):

- (a) “I find the way priests live today, especially their way of life of celibacy, appropriate and correct” had a mean value of 2.64 and a standard deviation of 1.25. This means that participants had an ambivalent negative opinion about this first statement, with some differences between respondents.
- (b) “Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message” had a mean value of 2.87 and a standard deviation of 1.51. In this case, respondents had an ambivalent negative opinion on this item. The differences between respondents were greater than before.
- (c) “In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry” had a mean value of 4.13, showing a clear positive opinion on the statement, with, however, a standard deviation of 1.32, which shows some visible differences between the respondents.

Table 40: Frequencies and Descriptives for the Middle East – Topic: Priestly Existence Today¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Priestly Existence Today							
(a) I find the way priests live today, especially their way of life of celibacy, appropriate and correct.	20.5	28.2	28.2	12.8	10.3	2.64	1.25
(b) Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message.	28.2	12.8	23.1	15.4	20.5	2.87	1.51
(c) In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry.	7.7	7.7	10.3	12.8	61.5	4.13	1.32

¹ N = 39. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

As we can see, the Middle Eastern participants’ opinions regarding priestly existence today and particularly about celibacy tended to be negative, although some relevant differences in opinions are visible. Moreover, this is the only region (with Latin America) where the contribution of celibacy to the credibility and mission of the Church is rated under the middle point, even though not as clearly negatively as done by Latin Americans (see *Table 11*). Consistently, these two regions are the ones that more clearly agree with giving priests the possibility to choose if they want to marry or not.

During the individual interviews, it was possible to identify that these opinions were related to the particular religious context of the Middle East, characterized by a greater religious plurality. There, Catholic communities coexist with other denominations or religions that have married leaders. Therefore, the possibility of discussing celibacy and eventually eliminating it as a requirement for the priesthood would not be problematic. According to the interviewees, they witness that religious leaders can have families and, at the same time, adequately accompany their communities.

Finally, the following three statements on the topic “Sexuality and Partnership” were rated by participants of the Middle East as follows (see *Table 41*):

- (a) “It is right and important that the Church’s teaching (generally and in our local context) deals intensively with the topic of sexuality” had a mean value of 3.46, which shows an ambivalent positive opinion, and a standard deviation of 1.41, showing some important differences between respondents.
- (b) “It is right and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church” had a mean value of 3.18, slightly over the middle point, and a standard deviation of 1.41. This means that there was no consensus among the participants regarding this topic, which seems to be controversial.
- (c) “The Catholic Church should reassess its stance on homosexuality” had a mean of 3.23, and therefore, an ambivalent opinion about it, with a standard deviation of 1.51, showing relevant differences among the respondents.

Table 41: Frequencies and Descriptives for the Middle East – Topic: Sexuality and Partnership¹

	Frequencies (in %)					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Sexuality and Partnership							
(a) It is right and important that the Church's teaching (generally and in our local context) deals so intensively with the topic of sexuality.	12.8	15.4	15.4	25.6	30.8	3.46	1.41
(b) It is correct and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church.	20.5	7.7	25.6	25.6	20.5	3.18	1.41
(c) The Catholic Church should reassess its stance on homosexuality.	23.1	2.6	33.3	10.3	30.8	3.23	1.51

¹ N = 39. Scale: 1 = I do not agree, 5 = I agree.

As we can see, sexuality appeared as a controversial topic among participants of the Middle East, where important differences are visible regarding the three statements included in this topic. This is expressed in mean values slightly over the middle point and high standard deviations for all of them. The region achieves similar values for statements two and three compared to the mean value of the whole sample. However, in the case of the first statement regarding the Church dealing intensively with the topic of sexuality, the Middle East appeared, with Eastern Europe, as the most critical region (see *Table 14*).

During the conversations, the interviewees mentioned that sexuality is a private issue, which is scarcely addressed by the Church and its leaders. This would explain the low valuation regarding the Church dealing intensively with this topic. However, certain opinions mentioned the possibility of expanding sex education in Catholic schools. On the other hand, the interviewees mentioned that homosexuality is culturally rejected and is, therefore, a difficult subject for the communities to address. In this sense, the interviewees did not have high expectations of the Church modifying its teaching on the topic.

Summary: The Middle East showed opinions that vary depending on the topic but, in general, tradition plays an important role (distribution of roles in the Church, the place of women, and lay participation). Moreover, sexuality is not a topic to talk about in public spheres, but in private life, and homosexuality is not culturally accepted in Middle Eastern countries. Therefore, talking about these issues in an open way does not seem to be so easy in the region. A topic

that emerged as relevant, beyond the four main ones, is interreligious dialogue, particularly with Muslims, a dialogue that should be a priority for the Church since, as mentioned by the participants, they coexist daily and on topics not only related to faith but also to other aspects of life.

7. Final remarks

Before concluding, a final theological remark. The diversity presented here can be read from different perspectives: either, as a threat to the unity and the universality of the Church, as an impediment to reaching consensus in the context of the synodal dialogues currently underway; or as an expression of the diversity proper to a Church that is by definition Catholic, universal, not in the sense of uniformity, but of composition based on diversity.

If in God himself the diversity does not threaten his unity, even less should the diversity within the Catholic Church be perceived as a threat. On the contrary, it can be understood as an expression of *theo-logical* diversity and a condition of possibility for a true experience of unity, not based on uniformity but on mutual self-giving and the true encounter with the *other*. I really hope that this research and the articles included in this volume may be an opportunity to experience this.

Part II:
Local Voices and Regional Analyses

Interpretation of the Results and Analysis: Africa

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator S.J.

1. Introduction

I would like to start by making two sets of general comments in my response to this project. The first set of comments concerns the overall purpose of the project, and the first comment is that I personally consider this research project an excellent model of what I would call “evidence-based theological study”. This is unlike other projects in this field; oftentimes I am used to studies that are purely speculative, and theoretical, which make an abstraction of the lived reality of the People of God. Therefore, this is a positive aspect of this kind of project.

The second comment I wanted to make is that, from my perspective, it is important that we understand whose questions we are dealing with. My understanding is that these questions concern and emerged from the four topics of the German reform debate on synodality. These are not necessarily questions that other local churches are asking. So, whose questions are they? These are questions from the German Synodality Reform Debate. Whose response is it? The response relates to the relevance of these questions for the faithful in other cultural, political, economic, and religious contexts. These are the parameters that I am working with.

The other set of comments that I wanted to make is that I was struck by the title of the report I am responding to, which was called “Report for Africa”. And the thing that struck me first was the sample participants, whose ages ranged from twenty-one years to eighty years old. Now, if we are talking about Africa, depending on which data or estimates we are using, the median age of Africans ranges between 14,8 and 18,8 years. This means that half the total population of over a billion is younger and half is older. I think it is important to have this perspective: in this study we do not capture a significant demographic element in Africa.

The second thing that struck me, and I will come back to this in my substantive comment, is that the qualitative part of this study included eleven men and three women from six African countries. Now, leave aside the fact that

there are 54 countries in Africa. However, the anecdotal evidence that I am working with is that women are the majority in the Church, so it is striking that only three of the fourteen participants were women.

The third point I want to make, as a reaction to this study, is that it is very difficult to talk about Africa because it is not a homogeneous entity. The diversity of context, demographics, cultures, and political situations is just amazing.

These are the things I took into consideration as I made my comment on this study and my contribution to our discussion during this conference. Again, what I want to emphasize is the fact that this is an important, and I would say excellent, model of doing theological study that is based on empirical evidence which is not just merely speculative.

Looking at the report for Africa, it is worth noting that across the four areas of focus, the words plurality and diversity, whether negatively or positively, come up repeatedly in the description of the results. I think that is interesting and should not surprise us, because, as I just said, Africa is anything but a monolithic, homogeneous, or static reality. It is a bundle of diversity, however you look at the continent. I think that is what has been partly reflected in some of the results of the study.

2. Analysis of the Report's Topics

The first area, which concerns power and the division of powers in the Church, I found quite interesting because nobody needs such a sophisticated study to understand that the Church in Africa is predominantly clerical and episcopal. In other words, as the results validate, this means that power, authority, and influence are concentrated in the hands of a few ordained people. I think this is an important perspective for reading the outcomes of this research project. The ideal of shared or equal distribution of power, authority, and influence in the context of Africa – this is my personal opinion – is wishful thinking, or rather is a receding distant reality. The same is true in society as it is true in the Church. People all over the world do not readily give up power, influence, privileges, and entitlements; neither do those that are associated with ordination and ordained ministry. This is not different in the Church in Africa, so in my view that is an important perspective for reading the outcomes of this project regarding the first topic “Power and Distribution of Powers”.

Let me move on to the second theme “Priestly Existence”. In reading this study, I think it is very important to avoid what I would call “confirmation bias”. If we read the results out of context, we may conclude, as the description of the data suggests, that celibacy carries no value, that clergy and priests who

have children is the norm, and social mobility is the overriding motivation for seeking priestly ordination. I think it is important to avoid this kind of general view or statement, because priestly life is not only linked to clergy, it is also linked to religious life. Therefore, it is important to take all of that into account when assessing the authenticity or genuineness of celibacy in the context of the Church in Africa.

The second thing I would add is that all of these areas the report points out are issues and challenges to be addressed, not simply assumptions that we harden into stereotypes. Nevertheless, what I find particularly encouraging in this study on this topic is the emphasis it places on the quality and authenticity of priestly and religious vocation. That is where the emphasis should be. How do we enhance the quality?

How do we guarantee the authenticity of the religious life today? I think this is not only a challenge for Africa, but also a question for the universal Church.

The next comment I want to make relates to “Women in Ministries”, and I think here is where I would like to spend more time. When you look at the questions concerning the role, voice, influence, and ministry of women in the Church, there is a consensus on the first statement, and there is ambivalence, controversy, and disagreement about the second and the third.

As I mentioned earlier, across Africa, women are clearly a majority in the Church. However, it is also true, anecdotally but also factually, that they do not take an active role in decision-making processes. When you look at the document for the Continental Stage of the Synod, this is the same thing that is underlined:

Women remain the majority of those who attend liturgy and participate in activities, men are a minority; yet most decision-making and governance roles are held by men.¹

I think that in order to keep things in perspective it is important not to confuse this question of decision-making with participation in ecclesial activities. The participation of African women, when it comes to all kinds of Church activities, is heroic, is phenomenal. The fidelity and commitment to Church activities are edifying, but that does not mean that they exercise influence or that their voices are taken into consideration in equal measure. Therefore, you have an important demographic that is committed to the Church and yet, in many ways, plays a minimal role when it comes to shaping the direction, decisions, and orientations of this Church.

¹ General Secretariat for the Synod: “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent”, Working Document for the Continental Stage (2022), no. 61.

I would also say that coming from the perspective of Africa, the literature would confirm this study's findings. In a way, perhaps women's ordination is not a solution, if we do not make the structural changes necessary to transform the way that power is understood and the way that power and authority are exercised in the Church.

To conclude my comments on this subject, I think it is absolutely important that we do not impersonate the voices of women on such matters concerning the quest or the desire for ordained ministries. I believe that, in this debate, African women, wherever they are, are perfectly capable of speaking for themselves. Yet, this study raises a very critical question that needs to be answered, not only by this small sample but by most African women who are, to quote the Document of the African Synodal Continental Assembly, the "backbone of the Church".²

Finally, I share my comments on "Sexuality and partnership", and I want to focus on its expression in homosexuality. As I can see from this study, there is an extremely low level of acceptance of homosexuality among Africans. When you look at the narrative from the perspective of Africa, it ranges from an outright denial – saying it is not present in Africa – to a qualified acceptance to say: "Well, it is not a priority for us".

Something that the report says caught my attention; it says that homosexuality is a "scarcely addressed issue in the region". It also says there is no explicit discussion on this subject. I beg to disagree. Have you heard the news from Africa lately concerning homosexuality? The question is not if the issue is addressed. Rather, the question is how it is addressed and discussed. It has definitely been discussed. It has definitely been addressed. But, as the study suggests, only, exclusively, or predominantly in the negative. Consequently, we must place this negative response, which this study underlined, within the wider context and perspective of African society.

And what is happening in this society? Not only does it oppose alternative sexual orientations, but it also vehemently criminalizes them. In Africa, same-sex relations are banned in about thirty countries. Remember there are fifty-four countries, so more than half of them ban or criminalize same-sex relationships. My point is that, in reading this study, it is important to remember that in the wider context of Africa, sexuality has become weaponized and criminalized. I will give two examples: Uganda and Ghana. Uganda, as we speak, is passing one of the world's harshest anti-gay laws. If anybody as much as identifies as gay, that person can go to jail for twenty years. If I know of a family member who is engaged in same-sex relations, I am compelled by law to report

² Cf. Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar: Document of the African Synodal Continental Assembly (2023).

that to authorities. And there is even provision on death penalty for aggravated homosexual relationships. That is one of the harshest provisions you can find anywhere in the world. Or think of Ghana, where the same thing is happening. There is criminalization of any kind of attempt to advocate for gay rights, and jail time for people who engage in it.

Therefore, in a way, the issue has been addressed. This conversation is happening, but it is always or predominantly in the negative. Sexuality has become a geo-political issue in Africa, because many of the people who push these harsh laws believe that Western governments, working as investors, are orchestrating an agenda to impose gay rights on Africans. Moreover, you can also see that there is a complete alliance between the African Church and political authorities. The African Church would mostly talk about religious values and the politicians would talk about cultural values; on this basis, I would say they are institutionalizing discrimination against sexual minorities.

Finally, I also want to clarify the fact that the study places homosexuality and polygamy almost at the same level as what it calls “hot topics”. That may be true, but look at how each one is being addressed: when it comes to homosexuality, there is no equivalence between them. When it comes to homosexuality, it is rejected, it is criminalized. When it comes to polygamy, the conversation or the narrative is about how to find a pastoral response. Therefore, there is no equivalence between them.

3. Final Remarks

This study offers a fair assessment of the relevance of the topics of the German reform debate in other cultural or geographical contexts, and it is a good basis for ongoing conversations about how we talk about challenging issues in the context of synodality. I believe that it confirms the importance of the Synodal Path not only for Germany but for the Global Church, even if the approaches will be different. Africa is also on its own synodal path. The outcome will not be the same as the German Synodal Path, but some of the elements identified in this study as open questions have also been items on the agenda of the African synodal path, especially at the last synodal assembly in Addis Ababa in early March of 2023. Therefore, this study offers the readers a good approach to Africans’ opinions on the main four topics discussed in Germany and a first idea of other issues that are also relevant to our continent.

References

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Intercultural Synodality: Engaging the Asian Church

Francis-Vincent Anthony

1. Introduction

The long-drawn synodal process is truly innovative and strenuous in many ways. It has unfolded how lived Christianity, i. e., lived faith of Christian communities and local churches, is being moulded by the local religio-cultural, socio-political, and eco-economic environment. In other words, both prospects and challenges of building up local churches and the universal Church are contextually conditioned. It implies that journeying together with other local churches with the view to becoming an ever more eloquent universal sacrament of salvation rests on the task of yet deeper inculturation of the local churches and continuous interculturalization among them. The historical expansion of Christianity from Jerusalem to Samaria and to the ends of the earth during the past two millennia witnesses a diachronic and centrifugal intercultural process. On the other hand, the cultural situation of the Christian communities spread the world over solicits a synchronic and centripetal intercultural process. We cannot deny that the Christian faith of Semitic origin, which had its highest point of development in the Greek-Roman-European cultures, is today adhered to and celebrated more in the southern hemisphere, namely, in the African, Asiatic, and Latin-American cultures. Comprehending the lived Christian faith then would necessitate that we refer not only to the diachronic development of our faith but also to the synchronic reality of the local churches around the world. Moreover, the mystery of Christ being inexhaustible, every new culture that the Church encounters in her pilgrimage through time and space is a key to moving towards the fuller comprehension of the Truth and truly becoming a *glocal* (global-local) universal Church.¹

The organizers of the conference “Doing Synodality in Intercultural Exchange” (Frankfurt, 29–31 March 2023) and the present publication that follows from it, should be commended for highlighting interculturality, insofar as the German synodal process itself has been attentive to it. Before we take up

¹ Cf. Anthony: *Intercultura: Prospettiva Teologico-Pratica* (2012), 159–186.

the synodal interculturality with reference to the German and Asian churches, it is opportune to clarify the pertinent features of the two ecclesial-societal contexts and the relevance of empirical-theological methodology for the task at hand.

1.1 Contextual Contrasts Between German and Asian Churches

Without going into the complex religio-cultural and socioeconomic context of the German (European) church, we briefly highlight the religious sector that interests us. As can be gleaned from history, with the Reformation in the early 16th century, many Catholics became Protestant, mainly Lutheran and Calvinist. In the 17th and 18th centuries, German cities also contributed to the spread of secular thinking about morality across Europe – reflected in the German Synodal Way – giving rise to the current situation: 50% Christians, 8.5% Muslims, 2.5% adherents of other religions, and 35.9% non-religious. Taken as a whole, the German population of over 84 million is divided between Christians and non-religious.²

Although all contemporary world religions, including Christianity, are of Asian origin, yet Christianity with its 298 million followers (Christians 6.5%; Catholics 3.3%) out of a population of over 4.8 billion is a minority religion in most Asian countries: for example, in Myanmar (6.2%), India (2.3%), Mongolia (2.1%), Pakistan (1.5%), Thailand (1.2%) and Bangladesh (0.3%), with the exception of Singapore (18.9%), South Korea (29.2%), the Philippines (88.7%), and Timor-Leste (98%).³ Christianity's minority status, in spite of the missionary efforts already at its origin, can raise questions about its survival or reduction to a ghetto.

In contrast to the secular European context, religious diversity in Asia is closely associated with cultural diversity, as religion and culture are bound to each other in an *advaitic* (non-dual) bond, as the soul to the body.⁴ In effect, Asian religious pluralism is marked by a conglomeration of ethnicities, cultures, and languages. Paradoxically, the diversity of Asian socio-political and eco-economic systems has resulted in fast-developing societies amidst widespread poverty and ecological crisis: currently about one billion people are under the

² Cf. Müke et al.: Die religiöse Landschaft in Deutschland – eine Bestandsaufnahme (2023).

³ Cf. Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), no. 1.

⁴ Cf. Panikkar: Indic Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism from the Perspective of Interculturation (1991).

poverty line of \$ 2.15 per day, with 320 million extremely poor.⁵ This explains why in the synodal process of the Asian national and regional bishops' conferences, three transversal urgencies shape their deliberations, namely, dialogue with cultures, religions, and the poor, as already identified by the first assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC I) in 1974. In other words, inculturizing, interreligious, and humanizing urgencies emerge as the Asian way to nourish deeper communion, fuller participation, and fruitful mission.⁶

While engaging the Asian synodal process with reference to the German Synodal Way, we shall take stock of the sixteen Synthesis Reports of the Synod of Bishops (2021–2023) and the Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality.⁷ The urgencies, namely, inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and humanization, emerging in the Asian synodal process will also serve – as we shall see in Section Three – to solicit intercultural engagement on the part of the German and other local churches.

1.2 Empirical-theological Approach to the Synodal Process

If synodal praxis is a lived ecclesiology of the baptized, then empirical-theological research is indispensable for diagnosing the state of such a praxis. The significance of empirical-theological researches for the synodal process derives from the fact that these are based on the lived experience of Christians as *locus theologicus*.⁸ If synodality is a community endeavour and if community provides the criteria of authenticity and success, then empirical-theological research seems ideal for monitoring such a process, as empirical methodology offers a way of concretizing the notion of *sensus fidelium* and *consensus fidelium* for moving forward theologically.⁹ Empirical research similar to the ones undertaken in the German and Asian synodal way, referred to below, can make native Christians more conscious of the process in which they are involved as agent-subjects and become more competent to monitor its progress.

⁵ Cf. Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 3–8.

⁶ Cf. Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission. Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality (2021).

⁷ Cf. Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023).

⁸ Cf. Wijlens: La Chiesa Di Dio è Convocata in Sinodo. Sfide Teologiche e Canoniche Sul Sinodo 2021–2023 (2022), 155.

⁹ Cf. van der Ven: Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach (1993).

It is remarkable that in countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, the Philippines and Thailand, empirical methods were employed in the synodal process: survey questionnaires (printed or online), tiered consultations, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and drawings for children. Among participants of the survey in Central Asia, foreign parishioners were also included.¹⁰ A separate online survey was undertaken among members of other Christian denominations and people of other faiths in Brunei.¹¹ In the Syro-Malabar Church, the Pastoral Animation Research and Outreach Centre (PAROC) supported the synodal structure through interdisciplinary research in general and psycho-social and pastoral-theological in particular.¹² Moreover, enormous effort has been made in translating materials for the synodal process into local languages, given the importance of linguistic nuances and cultural sensitivity.¹³ The diversity of opinions emerging in the Asian synodal process can be attributed to the diversity of ethnicities, cultures, languages and differing stages of faith.

In order to place what has emerged in the Asian synodal process – already intercultural in many ways – in wider intercultural engagement, we shall refer to the results of the empirical-theological research “Synodal Way – Global Church Perspectives” undertaken by Catholic Academic Exchange Service (Katholischer Akademischer Ausländer-Dienst – KAAD) and Institute for the Global Church and Mission (Institut für Weltkirche und Mission – IWM) to solicit the views of Asians (besides respondents from other continents) on some basic themes of the German Synodal Assemblies held between 2021 and 2023. As already presented before, the quantitative online research undertaken from 1–17 April 2022, involved 599 respondents from 67 countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. The sample was equally divided between men (56.6%) and women (43.4%); almost nine-tenths of them being lay people (88.3%) and Roman Catholics (89.2%). With reference to the Asian context, 70 respondents (13.5% of the total) participated in quantitative research. On the qualitative side, two group interviews were held with people from each region (Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America). In total, 47 people participated in the conversations: of the eight from Asia, four were men and four were women, aged between 36 to 72 and hailing from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

¹⁰ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Central Asia: Synthesis for Synodal Process (2022), 26.

¹¹ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei: Synod Synthesis Report (2022), 14.

¹² Cf. Syro-Malabar Church: Synod of Bishops Synthesis Report (2022), 68 f.

¹³ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Central Asia: Synthesis for Synodal Process (2022), 25 f.

2. Intercultural Opportunity and Challenge for the Asian Church

Intercultural exchange was empirically explored in the above-mentioned research “Synodal Way – Global Church Perspectives” soliciting the view of Asians (besides respondents from other continents) on four questions, central to the German synodal debate. The questions taken up for empirical research focused on power and participation in the Church, on women’s ministry, on priestly existence, and on sexuality and partnership. Along with the Asian responses to these issues, we shall also consider what has actually emerged in the Asian synodal process concerning these questions, and how it may refocus or invigorate the four themes of the German synodal forums.

2.1 Question of Power and Participation

The first area of reflection was that of power-sharing in the Church. Views were sought with regard to power and influence in the Church being exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops. Would it be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed? Perhaps shared participation of the laity and clergy in the mission of the Church can be helpful in proclaiming the message? Overall (see above, Part I, Research Project “Synodal Way – Global Church Perspectives”, *Table 3*), Asian (and African) respondents agree that the question of power-sharing is relevant to them personally and to their local communities. Asians also manifest strong agreement to power-sharing as relevant to their dioceses and national church, and that this topic would become more important as we move into the future.

The survey results (see above, Part I, *Table 23*) suggest that Asian respondents are equally divided between agreement and disagreement (a weak positive ambivalent opinion) about power and influence being only in the hands of priests and bishops. Yet, they strongly agree that lay people should have more influence and that power should be better distributed. But their highest agreement tendency concerns the view that shared participation helps the Church in her mission. Such tendencies among the Asian respondents probably derive from their lived experience amidst other religious traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, etc.), which are basically religions of the people, i. e., people consider them as their own, with priests called in to do the temple service. Besides, there are no territorial divisions with priests heading them. It is left to the responsibility of the individuals or families to choose to attend one or the other temple or sect. This also explains the Asian respondents’ emphasis on the

greater influence and power-sharing by the laity as conducive to the mission. Comparatively, in the Asian multireligious context, Christianity seems to be highjacked by the hierarchy (priests and bishops) depending excessively on foreign or Western ecclesial power centers.

This trend is further confirmed in the comparative analysis. Compared to other regions (see above, Part I, *Table 5*), Asian (and Latin American) respondents manifest weak ambivalent agreement regarding power and influence being only in the hands of priests and bishops, but their highest agreement (as in the case of Middle Eastern respondents) concerns lay people's influence and the need for better power distribution in the Church. Asian (and African) respondents' highest agreement refers to the view that shared participation helps the Church in its mission. This suggests that the Asian context shares some typical trends of the non-European or southern hemisphere with regard to power and participation.

In the qualitative research (see above, Part I, *Table 6*), the Asian participants suggested that power within the Church should be a topic for discussion, although according to them it is better to conceptualize it as "responsibility", a more appropriate term in the ecclesial milieu. We could interpret it as follows: while power and human rights are debated in the political and civil sectors, Asian religions generally prefer to speak of responsibility. Focus group participants tend to agree that generally priests and bishops assume exclusive decision-making and power positions and that this could eventually be modified in the future. However, in order for this to occur, it is necessary that the laity be formed to assume tasks for which they are not currently qualified. Furthermore, the participants emphasized that there are no better or worse roles in the Church, all roles having the same dignity, and that it is important to recognize and integrate this understanding in the current discussion. In their view, hierarchies are present in different areas of life (as in educational and social sectors) and it is not surprising that they exist also in the Church.

Contextualizing the question of power and participation, the Asian synodal process – as we shall sum up below – brought up three intersecting viewpoints: with reference to priests and religious people, the laity and youth, and the type of leadership. Ministerial priests are supposed to inspire and form the baptismal priests, namely, the laity, in becoming full, active and conscious participants in the Church governance and liturgical celebrations.¹⁴ Instead, some priests and religious people in the Asian context tend to be busy with administration of institutions and fail to engage in meaningful encounters and dialogues. There have been cases of priests becoming too secular, hooked on vices, engaged in business, owning vast properties, and misusing parish funds. In other words,

¹⁴ Cf. Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Conference: Synod of Bishops Synthesis Report (2022), 50.

some priests have been involved in monetary, verbal, and sexual abuses.¹⁵ An unhealthy relationship between the clergy and the faithful, a discriminatory approach, and a poor leadership have had a negative impact on Christian communities. Authoritarian leaderships and patriarchal attitudes of the clergy and the blind obedience and naive reliance on their opinions on the part of the laity have led to the problem of clericalism in Asia.¹⁶

As regards the participation of the laity and youth, the Asian synodal process brings to light some specific viewpoints. The history of the Church in Korea and Japan illustrates the crucial role played by the laity in introducing, preserving and sharing Christian faith for hundreds of years.¹⁷ Today, although the youth form a significant part of the Asian population (about 65%) they are largely absent in the life of the Church, whereas the youth who frequent the Church stand in need of faith formation and to be included in leadership positions and in the decision-making process.¹⁸ Given that the contemporary youth are tech-savvy, a greater investment in media and communication is necessary to involve them in the ecclesial sphere and educate them to a critical use of the social media.¹⁹

In the Indian context, it was suggested that the parish community should make place for the expertise of the faithful, men and women, particularly the youth, by creating an inventory of human resources available in the community.²⁰ Christians taking up responsibilities for society and the nation, namely, involving themselves as administrators in the public sphere of social, political, and community services creates awareness – as in Indonesia – that these are integral aspects of the mission of the Church.²¹ It follows that professionals

¹⁵ Cf. Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 42; Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines: Synodal Report (2022), 59, 62; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 34; Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 63; 93 f.

¹⁶ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar: National Synthesis for a Synodal Church (2022), 28; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 34; Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), 90–92; 112–115.

¹⁷ Cf. Quevedo: FABC – The Church in Asia: Evangelization, Vision, Future Directions (2022).

¹⁸ Cf. Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 98, 137 f.

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, nos. 102, 139.

²⁰ Cf. Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 48.

²¹ Cf. Konferensi Walifereja Indonesia: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 8.

among the faithful are to be engaged when the Church seeks to address social issues.²²

Underlying the participation of priests, laity, the youth, and women (the latter to be taken up in the next section) in the ecclesial life, there is the question of leadership, implying certain power. Both within the Church and in society, the position of power has to be decentralized and made collaborative, encouraging communal discernment and decision-making, with a transformational and empowering model of ‘servant’ leadership.²³ In resolving conflicts, greater involvement of traditional leaders, religious leaders, and government officials should be ensured. While lay leadership is particularly vital in small communities, building cooperation and dialogue with religious leaders is indispensable for overcoming politicization of religious issues and promoting religious moderation in society. The presence of traditional cultural values like respect and obedience to elder/leaders can encourage lay people to play their leadership role.²⁴

The foregoing reflection on the question of power and participation has included a wide range of issues both within the ecclesial and societal arena, which can serve as an intercultural sounding board for the German and the other churches. To some extent, the question on women’s ministry that we consider below is an extension of the power and participation conundrum.

2.2 Question of Women’s Ministry

Focusing on a specific category of faithful, namely, women, the German empirical research seeks to verify the role women play in the Catholic communities and parishes, whether they have enough voice and influence in the Catholic communities, and whether in the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries in the Church. When asked about the relevance of these questions on women’s ministry (see above, Part I, *Table 3*), the Asian respondents manifest clear agreement with the relevance of these for themselves per-

²² Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Korea: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 40.

²³ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei: Synod Synthesis Report (2022), 16 f.; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines: Synodal Report (2022), 73; Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 86 f., 164.

²⁴ Cf. Quevedo: FABC – The Church in Asia: Evangelization, Vision, Future Directions (2022); Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 47, 49; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Thailand: National Synthesis Document of the Pre-Synodal Meeting (2022), 31, 33; Konferensi Walifereja Indonesia: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 10, 15.

sonally, for their local community, diocese and national church, with the possibility of these becoming more important topics in the future than now.

The quantitative empirical research (see above, Part I, *Table 8*) brings to light that Asians strongly agree – second only to the stance of African respondents – on the important role women play in their communities. Yet, they manifest only positive ambivalence regarding women’s influence on communities and parishes. They also manifest some agreement with the possibility of admitting women to ministries in the Church. Descriptive analyses with regard to the last two questions reveal a visible contrasting stance among the participants, between agreement and disagreement tendencies. The responses seem to reflect the divergence between the traditional and the emerging sensibilities concerning the role and identity of women in the Church and in society.

In relation to this issue, varied opinions were expressed during the focus group conversation (see above, Part I, *Table 9*). On the one hand, the Asian participants recognized that women’s work is mainly restricted to the domestic sphere of ecclesiastical life, and that they are not involved in the decision-making processes. For some of them, this is not a major setback. Nonetheless, they are of the view that women should be empowered to play a more appropriate role in the community. In this vein, other participants hold that there is the possibility of having women as leaders within the Church and that this should be an area to work on. If women have been recognized and integrated into leadership positions in different societal spheres, it should not be a problem for this to happen within the Church. However, there are transversal reservations regarding the ordination of women.

The discussion that emerged in the Asian synodal process reflects some of these views. It is felt that greater space needs to be made for women in ministries.²⁵ Religious women, in particular, feel left out in the decision-making process within the Church.²⁶ It is felt that both in the social and ecclesial sphere, women are often marginalized as homemakers, domestic workers, and working women.²⁷ In this vein, a range of problems related to women need to be attended to in the Church and society: women considered inferior, victims of a dowry system, forced marriage, wife-beating, prostitution, systematic destruction of female foetuses, abortion, contraceptive mentality, etc.²⁸

²⁵ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei: Synod Synthesis Report (2022), 7, 17; Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 95–97.

²⁶ Cf. Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 41; Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 65 f.

²⁷ Cf. Pakistan Catholic Bishops’ Conference: Synod of Bishops Synthesis Report (2022), 40.

²⁸ Cf. Quevedo: FABC – The Church in Asia: Evangelization, Vision, Future Directions (2022).

Although the Asian churches would favour the empowerment of women in their ecclesial role, with the possibility of admitting women to some ministries in the Church, they would have reservations regarding the ordination of women. This could be an important theme for intercultural theological discernment at the macro phase of the synodal process. It is noteworthy that, as announced in *L'Osservatore Romano* (26 April 2023), the 70 participants, including the youth (equally divided between men and women) and comprising priests, deacons, religious people, and the laity from local churches participating at the General Assembly of the synodal event in Rome, will have the right to vote the proposals discussed. In the updated information, out of the 364 members who can vote, which includes the pope, 54 are women – either lay or religious.

2.3 Question of Priestly Existence

Based on the German synodal debate, questions were raised about the way priests live today, especially their celibate life: whether it is appropriate and correct, whether mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message, and whether in the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or marry. When asked about the relevance of these questions on the priestly existence (see above, Part I, *Table 3*), the Asian respondents manifest clear agreement with regard to the relevance of these for them personally, for their local community, diocese and national church, with the possibility of these issues becoming more important in the future than now.

Descriptive analysis (see above, Part I, *Table 11*) shows that Asian participants have a positive view of priest's lives, particularly regarding their celibacy, and agree with its adequacy and its contribution to the Church's mission. The diverging (positive and negative) stance of Asian participants regarding these statements stands out when compared to other regions. When asked "if in future diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry", the Asian respondents manifest the lowest agreement tendency with regard to the possibility of married priests. This is in contrast with the fact that one of the Asian synodal suggestions was that married priests could understand better the situation of families.²⁹ Instead, when compared to respondents of other regions, Asia has the highest levels of agreement with regard to "the actuality and adequacy of priestly celibacy". The impact of the Asian religious heritage may be perceived here: although married priests are common among other religions, yet Asians have a deep respect for

²⁹ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Central Asia: Synthesis for Synodal Process (2022), 30.

celibate monks and ascetics. Catholic secular and religious priests enjoy the esteem of the local people, even of non-Christians, for their total dedication to the divine manifested in the choice of celibacy.

The conversations during the qualitative phase confirmed these results (see above, Part I, *Table 12*): celibacy is mentioned as a key aspect and valued as a particular gift that is given for priests' Christian witness and, as such, should be safeguarded. In addition, according to the focus-group participants, giving priests the possibility to marry would mean that they would have to look after both their families and their communities, without being able to commit themselves fully to either of them. For these reasons, the commitment and absolute dedication of priests to their ecclesial service emerged as a very relevant value that should be protected. They also mentioned the need to highlight the value of the Christian family as a witness to faith, different from that of priests, but equally valuable, especially for the present times.

The Asian synodal process, in its turn, lays bare that there is a sharp decline in the vocation to the priesthood and religious life, as in other parts of the world. Besides, there is a lack of adequate formation courses and programmes for the clergy, religious people, and laity to deepen their specific identity. The Indian context advanced the suggestion that, for a more apt formation, religious women and lay faithful could be appointed in major and minor seminaries as formators, spiritual guides, counsellors, and professors.³⁰ In the Myanmar Church, it was felt that those who have distanced themselves from the Church, like ex-seminarians, former priests, and religious, could be rehabilitated in the course of the current ecclesial journey.³¹

In underscoring the value of celibacy, its value for evangelization, and the need for adequate formation, the Asian Synodal process presents an intercultural challenge for the discernment of the priestly identity in the German and other regional churches.

2.4 Question of Sexuality and Partnership

The German synodal process also raised some questions on the theme of sexuality and partnership: whether it is right and important that the Church's teaching deal intensively with the topic of sexuality; whether it is correct and should remain so that sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed

³⁰ Cf. Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 48.

³¹ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar: National Synthesis for a Synodal Church (2022), 22.

by the Church; and given the new emerging trend, whether the Catholic Church should re-assess its stance on homosexuality. When asked about the relevance of these questions on sexuality and partnership (see above, Part I, *Table 3*), the Asian respondents manifest strong agreement with regard to their relevance for themselves personally, for their local community, diocese, and national church, with the possibility of these becoming more important in the future than now.

As brought to light in the descriptive analysis (see above, Part I, *Table 14*), Asian participants clearly agree with the importance of the Church's teaching on sexuality and with sexuality's place only within a Catholic marriage. The diverging stance that we note in the latter case may be due to the fact that the validity of marriage within the area of other religious traditions cannot be questioned. In these, they come close to the higher agreement stance of African respondents. Nevertheless, unlike the African region, which manifests clear disagreement, the Asian region shows a high level of acceptance concerning a new assessment of homosexuality. In the Asian context, this may depend on the general socio-religious pragmatic approach to the phenomenon. Reference to homosexuality in the local religious mythology might also make it more tolerable.

During the conversations (see above, Part I, *Table 15*), the participants mentioned that sexuality was an issue exclusively of people's private lives. In this regard, they branded Asia as a region of "traditional cultures", with little or no expectations by way of the Church addressing the issue of homosexuality or proposing reforms to its current doctrine. In addition, the participants mentioned that homosexuality is culturally rejected in several Asian countries, which does not appear to be problematic and, therefore, they do not see the need for modification of the Church's doctrine in this regard.

Considering the reflections emerging in the Asian synodal process, we find that the area of sexuality and partnership is viewed in connection with family, the domestic church, the first *locus* of communion, comprising the spouses, children and elderly relatives of the household.³² Yet the growing reality in Central Asia, India, Malaysia, Myanmar, Laos, etc. is that of wounded and broken families, with separated, divorced and remarried couples; single parents, live-ins, and polygamous partners; orphans and homeless children of dysfunctional families and with anti-social personalities; victims of domestic violence, incest, honour killing, etc.³³ What's more, in the Indian context, young men and women

³² Cf. Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 6, 9 f.; Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), no. 142.

³³ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei: Synod Synthesis Report (2022), 7; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh: Synthesis Report on the Synodal

show reluctance to married life, viewing it as obsolete and leading to bondage, overly conditioned by internet addiction, pornography, mental stress, etc.³⁴ Such a state of affairs raises the fear of erosion of the basic Christian doctrines on family and morality.³⁵

In the Indonesian and Indian contexts, there are mixed or interfaith marriages, in which the first difficulty experienced, among others, is the need to overcome differences in ratifying these marriage ties. On the positive side, interfaith marriage ties create an occasion for exercising interfaith dialogue and collaboration.³⁶ In Laos, mixed couples tend to practice two religions at the same time and bring up the question of double belonging: is it necessary to give up one's religion in such situations?³⁷ Evidently, as in the context of Thailand, Catholics married to persons of other faiths require proper formation – seminars and conferences – to instil faith, devotion and unity in the family, and to grow in mutual understanding and respect for differences, as the family is a place of lived witness.³⁸ Against the backdrop of poverty, repression, exploitation and degradation, divisions and conflicts, a “civilization of love” should start from the family.³⁹ In this vein, new lay movements, such as Home Mission, Judith Forum Movement (for widows), and Missionary Couples of Christ, could be valued as contributing to the empowerment of family and social relationships.⁴⁰ Evidently, the area of family life and moral dimension of sexuality emerge as an intricate area for synodal intercultural engagement for the Asian, German, and other churches.

Journey (2022), 12 f.; Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 38; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Laos and Cambodia: Synthesis Report for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 60; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar: National Synthesis for a Synodal Church (2022), 22; Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 141, 155 f., 169.

³⁴ Cf. Syro-Malabar Church: Synod of Bishops Synthesis Report (2022), 73, 76; Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 139 f.

³⁵ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Central Asia: Synthesis for Synodal Process (2022), 31 f.

³⁶ Cf. Konferensi Walifereja Indonesia: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 9 f.; Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 38; Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 123–126, 143.

³⁷ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Laos and Cambodia: Synthesis Report for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 48, 50, 60.

³⁸ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand: National Synthesis Document of the Pre-Synodal Meeting (2022), 31.

³⁹ Cf. Quevedo: FABC – The Church in Asia: Evangelization, Vision, Future Directions (2022).

⁴⁰ Cf. Syro-Malabar Church: Synod of Bishops Synthesis Report (2022), 69.

Among the four questions taken up in the German synodal way, the reflection on power and participation, including the question of women's participation, emerges as an elaborate area in the Asian synodal reflection, given that participation was one of the intersecting perspectives for the synodal discernment. The questions on sexuality and partnership have to some extent emerged in the Asian synodal debate in connection with the theme of communion in the domestic church, i. e., the family, whereas the question of priest's celibacy in the Asian synodal process seems to be more linked to witnessing in the mission of the Church. As we shall expound below, it is the reflection on the third synodal perspective of evangelization or mission that has been the main thrust of Asian churches, which in a way poses an intercultural opportunity and challenge to the German and other churches.

3. Intercultural Opportunity and Challenge from the Asian Church

In spite of being native to Asia, Christianity's image of being a foreign import results from the fact that Asian churches are more the outcome of later *ad gentes* missionary activities originating in Europe. As it emerged in the Asian synodal process, the missionary enterprise was at its height during the colonial and imperialistic expansion of Western powers in several Asian countries, as in Myanmar.⁴¹ Ecclesial power, in fact, is viewed as based on the imperial colonial past with its hidden superiority complex. Evangelization in the Asian context, then, would necessitate a decolonial perspective, a decolonial theologizing, as Christians are, at times, ashamed or fear to declare themselves to be members of the Church. On account of the abusive comments and discrimination faced time and again in the sectors of education, employment, etc., and treated as second-class citizens, Christians tend to hide their identity and pretend to be Buddhists or followers of other religious traditions, for example in Laos.⁴²

Proclaiming the Gospel in a credible way springs from the real-life experiences of individual Catholics and communities.⁴³ As education, health care, and social development offered by Catholic institutions are appreciated by members

⁴¹ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar: National Synthesis for a Synodal Church (2022), 37.

⁴² Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Laos and Cambodia: Synthesis Report for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 52 f.

⁴³ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand: National Synthesis Document of the Pre-Synodal Meeting (2022), 35.

of other faiths, these qualified services can serve as witness to our faith.⁴⁴ In effect, the lived faith of believers in their respective contexts is already a proclamation of the good news, though this requires adequate formation of lay people as evangelizers.⁴⁵ Families, parish communities, and Catholic educational institutions in Asia can serve as *locus* of evangelization among people of different faiths, cultures, and economic status,⁴⁶ if attention is paid to inculturation and interculturalism, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, liberation and humanization, as we shall recapitulate below.

3.1 Urgency of Inculturation and Interculturalism

Various languages and cultural groups in Asia represent different ways of perceiving the world, the Church, and human reality.⁴⁷ Overcoming the dichotomy between cultural identities and Christian life poses the challenge of inculturation. It also denotes challenging the cultural elements that dehumanize people.⁴⁸ Likewise, lack of critical inculturation can lead to unacceptable levels of religious syncretism.⁴⁹

Although already in practice to some extent, more space has to be made for vernacular languages, cultural musical instruments, regional music, local style of liturgical vestments, etc. The challenge in the Asian context is that of integration and inclusion of many cultures in liturgy in an intercultural perspective.⁵⁰ In other words, inculturation in the local cultural context is a necessary condition to initiate mutual enrichment or interculturalism between churches. Such cultural differences can be incorporated as a sign of ecclesial unity in diversity both *ad intra* and *ad extra*. In effect, ethnic Christian communities have their own

⁴⁴ Cf. Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 44.

⁴⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 42, 48.

⁴⁶ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand: National Synthesis Document of the Pre-Synodal Meeting (2022), 29.

⁴⁷ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei: Synod Synthesis Report (2022), 3.

⁴⁸ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar: National Synthesis for a Synodal Church (2022), 30.

⁴⁹ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Timor-Leste: Synthesis for Synodal Process (2022), 41.

⁵⁰ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar: National Synthesis for a Synodal Church (2022), 27; Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 43; Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 117 f.

diverse lifestyles, customs, cultures and languages, and they can coexist peacefully and work for the common good.⁵¹

Likewise, dialogue with God's creation – according to the Thai and Laos churches – can be ensured by incorporating valuable local cultural elements into local liturgies to make the celebration meaningful: forest rituals, the blessing of rice fields, watersheds and fish; the custom of *basi* – watering of the statues of saints during the New year – and offering food during liturgies, etc.⁵² Evangelization can be undertaken – as in the Cambodian context – through Khmer Art (Yeeke, Ba-Sak, Lakhon Khol, and other forms of performances) in local languages.⁵³

On the contrary, foreign priests, with linguistic and cultural barriers, become to some extent an obstacle to building up the local community. It means that parish priests who are foreign nationals need proficiency in the local language and to be familiar with the local culture. If not, the local people become indifferent to faith, turn to other religions, or practice two religions, indulging in superstitious beliefs or divination.⁵⁴ Moreover, insufficient pastoral care paves the way for other religious fundamentalists to proselytize the Catholic faithful easily on account of their poverty and ignorance.⁵⁵ For these reasons, addressing the ethnic culture of Christians through trained catechists is an urgent imperative.⁵⁶

Because of the fact that Christian faith has, through the centuries, saturated the Western cultural context, it may appear that inculturation is pertinent only for the churches of the southern hemisphere. Instead, as would be clear from the Asian synodal discussion and views on the German synodal priorities, the churches in the Western world also have to face the challenge of inculturation in the context of secular culture and enrich themselves interculturally from the fresh developments in the younger churches.

⁵¹ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand: National Synthesis Document of the Pre-Synodal Meeting (2022), 39; Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 120 f.

⁵² Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand: National Synthesis Document of the Pre-Synodal Meeting (2022), 30; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Laos and Cambodia: Synthesis Report for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 52 f., 59.

⁵³ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Laos and Cambodia: Synthesis Report for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 60, 66.

⁵⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 48–50; Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference: Synodal Synthesis (2022), 17.

⁵⁵ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar: National Synthesis for a Synodal Church (2022), 34.

⁵⁶ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand: National Synthesis Document of the Pre-Synodal Meeting (2022), 30.

3.2 Urgency of Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue

Being small minorities, living and operating within multicultural and multireligious societies, Christians in Myanmar, China and in the rest of Asia face the challenge of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Christians have a special responsibility to develop new forms of living together with brothers and sisters of other religious traditions. In this endeavour, divisions within Christianity are obstacles to giving a credible witness to the Gospel. In fact, denominationally divided missionary enterprise rooted in the Western churches causes further divisions.⁵⁷ Yet, the local churches in some Asian contexts do not seem prepared for dialogue with other Christian denominations and other religions, such as Islam, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.⁵⁸ Living in villages with different religious denominations – as in the context of Laos – can be both a challenge and an opportunity for Catholics to witness their faith. As the faith of many Christians is still impregnated with Buddhist or superstitious practices, it could help or hinder the integration of local traditions and culture: for example, participating in Buddhist feast days, offering food to the monks for transmitting merits to the dead, and seeking auspicious days for weddings or building houses.⁵⁹

In the context, for example, of Indian and Thai parish communities, Basic Christian/Ecclesial Communities emerge as a new way of being Church. In this vein, the Asian phenomenon of Basic Human Communities includes members of other religious traditions living in the same neighbourhood to promote justice and the common good.⁶⁰ Likewise, *Khrista-Bhaktas* (Devotees of Christ) exemplify new communities emerging in some Indian dioceses, constituted by people who love and worship Christ, without wishing to receive baptism for

⁵⁷ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar: National Synthesis for a Synodal Church (2022), 33, 37; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Central Asia: Synthesis for Synodal Process (2022), 29; Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference: Synodal Synthesis (2022), 18 f.; Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 75–77.

⁵⁸ Cf. Konferensi Walifereja Indonesia: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 11; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 38 f.; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Timor-Leste: Synthesis for Synodal Process (2022), 48.

⁵⁹ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Laos and Cambodia: Synthesis Report for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 54, 57.

⁶⁰ Cf. Quevedo: FABC – The Church in Asia: Evangelization, Vision, Future Directions (2022); Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 47, 49; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand: National Synthesis Document of the Pre-Synodal Meeting (2022), 31; Konferensi Walifereja Indonesia: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 14; Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 136, 150.

social and political exigencies. With their deep faith and personal relationship to Christ, they offer convincing witness to other Christian communities.⁶¹ The emergence of *Kbrista-Bhaktas*, mixed marriages, etc., brings up the question if different phases or levels of ecclesial belonging can be envisaged.⁶²

Living in a multicultural society necessitates intercultural engagement for sharing ideas and acknowledging differences with the intent of developing a deeper understanding of diverse traditions and practices. Such an inclusive outlook needs to be fostered to overcome disbelief or mistrust among the ethnic tribes that have suffered trauma or wounds inflicted in the past. In this regard, the Myanmar church augurs bridge-building amidst a plurality of cultural, ethnic and religious traditions. It entails capacity building of lay people for the specific tasks of dialoguing with people of other faiths, mediating in conflictive situations, and pro-actively contributing to organizations in civil society.⁶³ Likewise, parish boundaries could be redefined – according to the Syro-Malankara Church – to include also non-Catholics and non-Christians of that area.⁶⁴

The push for Islamization and policies restricting religious freedom in some parts of Asia, like Malaysia, can make the young vulnerable to the temptation of interfaith conversion.⁶⁵ As a minority community in an Islamic country, Christians face the challenge of forced conversion, misuse of blasphemy laws, forced and underage marriages, discrimination at the workplace and in education, inaccurate census of Christians, attacks on Churches and Christian colonies, mob/suicide attacks, bomb blasts, etc. In such situations, Christian communities live under a state of fear and face new forms of ‘martyrdom’.⁶⁶ These threats and lack of adequate pastoral care force the faithful either to join other denominations or convert to other religions.⁶⁷ Religious fundamentalism, fanaticism and anti-conversion laws seriously sully the attempts to dialogue in coun-

⁶¹ Cf. Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 38; Syro-Malabar Church: Synod of Bishops Synthesis Report (2022), 58.

⁶² Cf. van Leeuwen: Searching for an Indian Ecclesiology. The Statement, Papers and the Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Indian Theological Association, Nagpur (October 21–23, 1983) (1984).

⁶³ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Myanmar: National Synthesis for a Synodal Church (2022), 20 f., 31.

⁶⁴ Cf. Syro-Malankara Catholic Major Archbishopial Church: An Overview of the Synodal Experience (2022), 74.

⁶⁵ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei: Synod Synthesis Report (2022), 7 f.

⁶⁶ Cf. Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 61 f., 109–111, 130.

⁶⁷ Cf. Pakistan Catholic Bishops’ Conference: Synod of Bishops Synthesis Report (2022), 44, 48.

tries like India and Japan. Moreover, the alleged ‘foreign’ trait of Christianity hinders dialogue with the civil society.⁶⁸

Although intra- and interfaith harmony is being promoted in terms of participation in festivals, devotions, praying with non-believers, civic movements and ecological initiatives,⁶⁹ yet it is feared that such interactions with other religions could easily degenerate to the detriment of Christian community, if the faithful are not formed well.⁷⁰ For this reason, the formation of the young requires that it be based on Church teachings on interfaith relationships and advocate community development for the underprivileged.⁷¹ In this vein, the ongoing exposure of non-Christian faculty and staff members, students and patrons of Christian institutions to the Gospel message and its values is deemed opportune.⁷² An example of a positive experience in this regard is the encounter between Catholics and Buddhist monks and lay Cambodian Buddhists that “creates a new culture”. Although differing in religious affiliations, there is the conviction that all can contribute to the common good.⁷³ Similarly, there are also positive experiences of joining other denominations to celebrate some feasts like Christmas Day, Elder’s Day, International Human Rights Day, and networks for environmental conservation.⁷⁴

As the traditionally Christian Western world is becoming multireligious through the migration of people from other continents colonized by them and through Western Christians adopting other religious traditions, the experience of Asian churches’ engagement with ecumenism and interreligious dialogue can mutually involve the Western and other churches in the synodal discernment.

⁶⁸ Cf. Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 45; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 22; Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), no. 146.

⁶⁹ Cf. Pakistan Catholic Bishops’ Conference: Synod of Bishops Synthesis Report (2022), 42; Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 44; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 23.

⁷⁰ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Thailand: National Synthesis Document of the Pre-Synodal Meeting (2022), 38.

⁷¹ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei: Synod Synthesis Report (2022), 8.

⁷² Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 25.

⁷³ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Laos and Cambodia: Synthesis Report for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 64.

⁷⁴ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Thailand: National Synthesis Document of the Pre-Synodal Meeting (2022), 32; Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 44 f.; Syro-Malabar Church: Synod of Bishops Synthesis Report (2022), 59, 67.

3.3 Urgency of Liberation and Humanization

Evangelization requires that the Church dialogue with the poor and deal with their unjust and oppressive situation, promoting justice, protecting human rights, preventing human trafficking and caring for creation. In other words, we need to humanize the society at large by addressing human rights issues associated with freedom of religion, socioeconomic rights, civil rights, right to life, environmental rights, etc.⁷⁵ It means that the Church should be willing to walk with the civil society, political establishment, cultural realm, and the business world.⁷⁶ More concretely, the Church should facilitate the dialogue on political issues such as election fraud, vote buying, cultural bias, and stereotyping.⁷⁷ The ecological crisis, in its turn, solicits dialogue also with nature and culture for the protection of ecosystems; it calls for creative conversations about our common home, i. e., how we live, learn and work in dialogue with nature.⁷⁸

There is a growing conviction that lay faithful require adequate formation to be able to participate in public life, dialogue with civil authorities and collaborate with the state in matters of common concern: catering to the marginalized, immigrants, unemployed, street children, refugees, displaced people, etc.⁷⁹ That is to say, the laity should be capacitated and encouraged to involve themselves in the existential peripheries of the stigmatized and marginalized in society: *Orang Asal* and *Asli* (indigenous populations), *Dalits* (the “untouchables” in the Indian caste system), LGBTQIA+ people, drug addicts, gangsters, etc.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Korea: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 32, 37; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Thailand: National Synthesis Document of the Pre-Synodal Meeting (2022), 26, 29–31; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Central Asia: Synthesis for Synodal Process (2022), 30; Chinese Regional Bishops’ Conference: Synodal Synthesis (2022), 18; Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 70, 151.

⁷⁶ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Timor-Leste: Synthesis for Synodal Process (2022), 47; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Central Asia: Synthesis for Synodal Process (2022), 29.

⁷⁷ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines: Synodal Report (2022), 66.

⁷⁸ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Myanmar: National Synthesis for a Synodal Church (2022), 33; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Korea: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 45; Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 133 f., 178 f.

⁷⁹ Cf. Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 45 f.; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan: National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops (2022), 18; Chinese Regional Bishops’ Conference: Synodal Synthesis (2022), 13 f.; Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 103–107, 151.

⁸⁰ Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei: Synod Synthesis Report (2022), 3; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines: Synodal Report (2022), 61, 66; Pakistan Catholic Bishops’ Conference: Synod of Bishops Synthesis Report (2022), 50; Cath-

Discrimination based on caste, language, ethnicity, and economic, academic and social status is not uncommon also within the Christian communities. The Indian communities are of the view that diversity within the Church and society must become a place for celebration, by eradicating all sorts of discrimination and poverty.⁸¹ This would imply a proper representation of *Dalit* faithful and of other emarginated groups in the ecclesial and civil structures.⁸² In the Philippines context, it is felt that the Church and *barangay* (village) should denounce the conflicts arising among tribes, between military and armed groups among people, etc.⁸³

The fact that socioeconomic injustice and discrimination are the priorities taken up in the mission of humanization in Asia, and that the predicament of the stigmatized and marginalized for their sexual orientation is a dominant issue in the Western world, can provide opportunities for intercultural synodal discernment from the perspectives of Asian, European and other continental churches.

4. Conclusion: *Inter Gentes* Thinking, Speaking and Discerning

The foregoing analysis shows that although Asians view the questions emerging in the German synodal way as relevant, with the possibility of these becoming more so in the future, they differ in the priority accorded to them. We find that there are some commonly shared views in the two synodal processes, yet there are some differing and unique views as well. In this way, the synodal discernment as an *inter gentes* process can be mutually enriching and reciprocally challenging, opening up new avenues of communion, participation and mission. In

olic Bishops' Conference of Thailand: National Synthesis Document of the Pre-Synodal Meeting (2022), 31; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Timor-Leste: Synthesis for Synodal Process (2022), 42; Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 43; Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 67–69, 108, 148, 169.

⁸¹ Cf. Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 38; Syro-Malankara Catholic Major Archiepiscopal Church: An Overview of the Synodal Experience (2022), 79; Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality (2023), nos. 128 f., 144 f.

⁸² Cf. Conference of Catholic Bishops of India: National Synthesis of the Synodal Consultation (2022), 42; Syro-Malabar Church: Synod of Bishops Synthesis Report (2022), 54.

⁸³ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines: Synodal Report (2022), 63.

this sense, the synodal process can be viewed as *Communio, Participatio et Missio inter gentes*.⁸⁴

A worldwide *inter gentes* discernment process requires that we be aware of the three types of thinking implicated in it: the *postulational* (conceptual) that aims at defining, the *psychical* that lays emphasis on intuition, and the *relational* that deciphers mutual presence. The first is said to be typical of the Western mind, the second of the Eastern mind, and the third of the African and Chinese mind.⁸⁵ Though thinking postulational, psychically and relationally is basic to all processes of knowing, we might say that in the postulational type the focus is on the object known. Being grounded on the principle of non-contradiction, it tends to be disjunctive, i. e., a thinking characterized by an *either-or* logic. In this sense, the Western mind is essentially involved in exclusive or analytic thinking. In the psychical type, the focus is on the knowing subject. Being founded on the principle of identity, it is characterized by a conjunctive logic, i. e., a *both-and* logic. In this sense, the Eastern mind is basically involved in what we may call an inclusive or synthetic thinking.⁸⁶ In the relational type, the focus is on the rapport between the knowing subject and the known object, and the thinking tends to be what we can call pluralistic or analogical, based on a *like-unlike* logic. With regard to the latter, the consistent use of the metaphors of ‘Church as tent’, ‘bridge-building’ and ‘taking off the shoes’ in the Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality is a case in point.⁸⁷

Insofar as the cognitive dynamics of interpreting and evaluating are closely bound to spoken and written languages, their specific nuances should not be watered down or lost in translation, mostly into European languages (limited to Latin alphabets, with the exception of Greek). In this regard, the great sophistication, wealth and merit of the Asian languages – over 2300 being spoken⁸⁸ with over 280 writing systems – in nurturing religious acumen cannot be ignored. There is no gainsaying that the origin and development of Asian religions are intrinsically associated with the flourishing of multiple linguistic traditions. The languages – codes – we use play a significant role in the way we perceive the world, the insights we have and the decision we make; they serve as tools

⁸⁴ Cf. Anthony: *Intercultural Lived Ecclesiology: The Asian Synodal Praxis of Communio, Participatio et Missio Inter Gentes* (2023).

⁸⁵ Cf. Hesselgrave: *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (1978), 204–209; Hesselgrave/Rommen: *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (1989), 205 f.

⁸⁶ Cf. Irudayaraj: *Interiority and Liberation* (1992), 117; Wilfred: *Sunset in the East? Asian Challenges and Christian Involvement* (1991), 156–160; Wilfred: *From the Dusty Soil. Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity* (1995), 186 f.

⁸⁷ Cf. Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences: *The Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality* (2023), nos. 36–38, 110, 152, 154, 173, 180–185.

⁸⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 1.

for organizing, processing and structuring our thinking.⁸⁹ For these reasons, we need to take stock of the local languages along with types of thinking in the *inter gentes* discernment of values and visions present in the local cultures.⁹⁰

Fostering participation means enabling those who hold different views based on different modes of thinking to express themselves. Dialogue involves coming together of diverse views, without excluding anyone, even if those who force us to consider new aspects seem to be counter current. Allowing persons to speak out with authentic courage and honesty (*parrhesia*) is indispensable for the discernment process. Humility in listening, openness to newness and conversion (*metanoia*) or to a paradigm shift are vital to rise above prejudices, stereotypes, self-sufficiency, and hidden ideologies, and contribute to the unceasing process of *ecclesiogenesis*, of constantly building up the Church.⁹¹ In this endeavour, the macro phase of the first synodal assembly (4–29 October 2023) that brings over 450 participants from various continental churches to Rome marks a crucial moment of *Communio, Participatio et Missio inter gentes*.

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⁸⁹ Cf. Marian: *The Power of Language. How the Codes We Use to Think, Speak, and Live Transform Our Minds* (2023).

⁹⁰ Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines: *Synodal Report* (2022), 71–73.

⁹¹ Cf. Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops: *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission. Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality* (2021), no. 2.2; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea: *National Synthesis for the Synod of Bishops* (2022), 34; Syro-Malabar Church: *Synod of Bishops Synthesis Report* (2022), 76; Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Conference: *Synod of Bishops Synthesis Report* (2022), 44; International Theological Commission: *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), nos. 105, 120; Luciani: *L'emergere Di Un'ecclesialità Sinodale. "Una Definizione Più Completa Della Chiesa"* (2022), 34, 39, 98, 108–112; Quevedo: *FABC – The Church in Asia: Evangelization, Vision, Future Directions* (2022), 6.

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Interpretation of the Results and Analysis: Eastern Europe

Miloš Lichner S.J.

In this conference, *Doing Synodality in Intertextual Exchange*, we wish to reflect on the ways of supporting the process of a sincere viewing of the Church and the search for possible paths toward healing, in accordance with the invitation of the prophet Jeremiah: “Thus says the Lord: Stand by the earliest roads, ask the pathways of old, ‘Which is the way to good?’ and walk it.” (Jeremiah 6:16).

1. Introduction: Initial Contextualization

During the synodal consultation processes held in Eastern Europe, 16 reports from 19 countries (CEICEM 4 countries: former Yugoslavia) were available. They were written in two languages (10 in Italian and 6 in English, of which 1 was only a summary in the original language). Most of the English texts were not proofread by a native speaker, and various Internet translation tools were used. The predominance of Italian localizes Italy and Rome as the fundamental formation place for clergy working in the Eastern European countries. At the same time, only one report mentions the participation of seminarians, which suggests the possibility that they did not participate in the synodal journey. The reports are marked by national and language plurality.

The synodal reports are mostly of Roman Catholic provenience, and they have been supplemented by the plurality of Eastern Churches united with Rome (reports from Belarus and Ukraine are missing). Therefore, they are based on data provided by local Roman Catholic churches that either represent the majority or live as a minority in the mostly Orthodox or Muslim worlds; Protestant churches have only a minor share of believers in these parts of Europe. Lacking the approach of churches of Byzantine rite united with Rome results in a certain impoverishment regarding the overall results. Not all the reports include information about the percentage of believers’ participation. Based on the available data, we can talk about 40–45 % participation.

Each of the elaborated syntheses consists of 40,000–45,000 characters, which means 22–25 standard pages on average. The quality and depth of the texts vary from open, clear, and concrete reports through descriptive-phenomenological materials to homiletical and parenetic-catechetical perceptions of the issue. The rather frequent repetition of topics in the texts associated with phenomenological enumeration points out the lack of sufficiently prepared moderators and facilitators, who can grasp and formulate thoughts in a structured way without repetition.

2. Factors that Influence Synodality

Among the external influences that marked the beginning and course of the synodal process, around two-thirds of the texts mention the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the war heritage in the countries of former Yugoslavia, sexual and financial scandals, as well as economic, political, and social migration within Europe. All of this speeded up many processes (in both positive and negative ways), and any simplifying response would mean an expression of disrespect for the life of the Church as a complex reality and the way we would like to see it.¹

Perhaps the most significant thing clearly emerging from all the reports is the effort of participants not to stand still in one place. In the era of deep communism, a leading Slovak theologian, Emil Krapka S.J., wrote a study entitled “The Lord’s Passover (Theological Reflections on the Situation of our Church)”. It was based on the event from the Gospel of Luke 4:16–30, where the preaching of Jesus in Nazareth is described, including the effort of his contemporaries to hurl him down from the hill on which their town had been built and his passing through the midst of them and going away. Emil Krapka emphasized that this Gospel event reveals the person and mission of Jesus: some people agreed with his words, while others harshly rejected them. Christ, however, calmly and firmly passed among people with various attitudes toward his message of salvation and kept on walking. According to Emil Krapka, this mystery of the Lord’s Passover has been imprinted in the history of the Church: places, times, languages, and circumstances of the scene may change, but the Passover remains the same.² Christ keeps walking through the history of his Church experiencing both acceptance and rejection, and we are invited to fol-

¹ Cf. Lichner et al.: *The Change of System in 1989 and Its Impact on the Catholic Church in Slovakia. Challenges and Chances of European Catholic Theology* (2020).

² Cf. Krapka/Pánov: *Teologické úvahy o situácii našej Cirkvi* (1991).

low him and carry his word of salvation in the environment of kind words or strong disapproval because it is the Lord's Passover within our Church. When Emil Krapka wrote this study, some people decided to wait for better times with an excuse that this era was not the right time. However, he and other religious persons, as well as people involved in activities of the underground Church in Slovakia, decided to keep walking with the Lord, which contributed to the creation of extraordinary work within the underground Church.

Christ passes over, and we should avoid the danger of dwelling in a prefabricated past with no element of life dynamism, because the Church as a living organism keeps moving, and its knowledge keeps growing too. This coincides with primordial consciousness, just like genetic information coincides with the information of a primordial undifferentiated cell of a newly conceived human being.

Thinking about the situation of the Church, we may feel tempted to dwell in an artificially created image of the past – to stagnate. One-third of the overall number of reports see the problem in a tendency to stop, draw the line between the Church and the outer world, and look for refuge in a fictitious past (mainly in the field of liturgy) – which is supported by both clergy and laity – or wait for some sort of “better time” that will never come and thus creates artificial assurances. This may cause Christ to pass over, and we will remain without him. According to *Gaudium et Spes* 4, we are invited to scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them so that we can respond pertinently to the perennial questions asked by every generation. The role of the Church is to resist the temptation to perceive any image of the Church, any state of society, and any condition of religious, philosophical, or scientific knowledge as ultimate and perfect.

3. The Need for Synodality and Reform

All the outputs accentuate the surprise and joy of the involved persons over the fact that, for the first time ever, the Church wanted to know their opinion. They expressed the wish to continue in this direction within the Church as an open and friendly family. The reports show awareness that the Church has been going through a major crisis and needs long-term reform that would consider the necessity of thorough discernment on various levels. History, however, reminds us that this is not the first crisis, and it will not be the last one.³ Our past testifies about the expressions of deep faith and Gospel love, but also the expressions

³ Cf. Lichner: *Pohľad sv. Augustína na škandály v Cirkvi* (2013).

of deep human weakness and sinfulness. The phenomena of crisis that we witness can thus become God's impulse for *reformatio*, the reform which Yves Congar understood as a typical sign of the Church.⁴ And the history of the Church confirms it.

The results of all the syntheses clearly emphasize the will to live synodality as an essential element of the life of the Church. However, it is necessary to underline serious worries regarding the synodality mentioned in two-thirds of all the reports. It is true that synodality disappeared from the life of the Church after the Investiture Controversy in medieval times had started, which resulted in a particular form of a centralized and degressive image of Church management. One-third of the reports expressed strong concerns about the synodal journey, with a particular reference to the German synodal way as an effort to bring about changes in the area of *fides et mores*.

Synodality is always about a universal Church or – if we want to express it in terms of the early Church – about a Catholicity that includes the perception of the unity that we have been searching for. Around 80% of all reports appreciated current efforts in the field of ecumenism or evoked ecology and charity as a certain kind of ecumenical spirituality, which resonates mostly among young people. However, it is necessary to underline the need to specify the identity of the Catholic community and thus avoid a non-reflexive imitation of other Church communities, as Vincent Miller warned in his work “Consuming Religion”.⁵ One-third of the reports show the necessity of theological treatment of topics like ecclesiology and the sacramental theology of mixed marriages.

All the reports show awareness of the lack of pastoral care for those who have been placed on the margins of the Church for a variety of reasons: divorced and remarried persons, victims of moral failures of clergy, and LGBTI+ persons. All the reports, however, are limited to a mere definition of the phenomena.

4. Eastern Europe Becoming a Missionary Territory

In 1943, Henri Godin and Yvan Daniel published a book with a rather provocative title: “La France pays de mission?”. Today, we see that the religiously more traditional eastern part of Europe which co-creates a Christian continent is no longer true. I think we can and should say that it has become a missionary con-

⁴ The word “reform” comes from Latin *reformatio*, and we find this word in every medieval council texts. Cf. Congar: *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église* (1969).

⁵ Cf. Miller: *Consuming Religion. Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (2004).

tinent, and therefore the presence of the Church needs to be missionary as well.⁶ Serious warnings of several representatives of local Churches in the West addressed to representatives of the Churches in the East after the fall of communism were consciously overlooked with the remark that “we know better, it will be enough if you help us financially.” A severe decline in the number of priestly and religious vocations, a huge wave of secularisation, a growing number of people leaving the Church, a lack of understanding of the Church in the area of *fides*, and rejection in the area of *mores* – all this testifies to the gravity of the situation. Four of the sixteen reports mentioned the question of the ordination of *virī probati*.⁷

We can say that we are not standing face-to-face with a well-formed Christian whose passions are internally subordinated to reason, who lives in a society that facilitates or at least does not obstruct the correct perception of values and moral goods. We are standing face-to-face with people full of pain, many of whom were baptized but have never experienced proper evangelisation or catechisation. Nominal religiosity and a purely cultural dimension of faith prevail. They may feel the magic of faith, but the Christian formation of their personality is often missing or is very casual. Many of them can be described as baptized atheists. Synodality offers an opportunity to confess this pain of believers, strengthened by the fact that certain representatives of the Church refused to see this reality or searched for solutions in a pre-council image of the Church. The weak presence of the youth in the synodal process, which also has a growing tendency in the life of the Church, is a cause for general concern. Men and women, religious as well as lay apostolic movements, often remain inconspicuously or openly on the margins of diocesan dynamics.

5. Awareness of Participation – Our Church

All the reports underline the problem of alienation of the laity in the Church. The possessive adjective “our” is missing when it comes to a description of the Church. Sociological inquiry, unfortunately, confirms that common believers see the Church as a mere institution that has nothing to do with them. They do not feel like living members of their community. They feel that the possessive adjective “our” does not relate to them. We know that the centuries of the Investiture Controversy, i. e., the struggle for the freedom of the Church from the

⁶ Cf. Godin/Daniel: *La France pays de mission?* (1943).

⁷ Cf. Raczyński-Rożek: *Virī probati and Presiding Over the Eucharist According to Edward Schillebeeckx* (2018).

influence of oligarchs, resulted in a certain kind of ecclesiology focused on hierarchy, where a juridical point of view prevails and where a lack of community processes of listening and discernment supports authoritative or even autocratic decision-making.

The feeling of joint participation and responsibility for the life of the Church is missing. St. Augustine's battle with the Donatists in the fourth century underlined two things: the baptismal equality of all believers (e. g., in his 58th sermon dedicated to catechumens he affirmed that both the emperor and the slave call God their father)⁸ and the Catholicity of the Church, which is not limited to any regions or nations. Augustine of Hippo repeated tirelessly that the Church is either *Catholica* (for everyone) or there is no Church at all.⁹ Paraphrasing Prosper of Aquitaine, we can say that the Church is here always and for everyone who shows interest and that it does not know any national, linguistic, social, political, economic, or territorial limitations.¹⁰

The absence of the possessive adjective "our" is a sad reminder of post-Tridentine theology, where the Church was not seen primarily as the people of God and only afterward as laity and clergy, as the Second Vatican Council recalls. In the first part of this paper, I said that it was important to see not only what the texts say but also what they do not say. An allusion to early Christian awareness of the Catholicity of the Church leads us to the statement that two-thirds of the texts mention the negativity of the fact that young people are migrating from poorer to richer parts of Europe, but no attention is paid to the migration of Christians from the countries outside Europe, where the language and ethnic character of the Church is stronger than the awareness of the Catholicity of the Church. The others are seen through the prism of different ethnicities, languages, etc., which is misused by populists who provoke anti-migration sentiments by pretending to be safeguarding Christianity. This is the instrumentalization of religion, a misuse of Christian symbology by political, economic, or social powers that do not see a human being as a creation in the image and likeness of God but only as a mere number.¹¹ Groups that use religion as a tool for the pursuit of their own goals often contribute to xenophobia and particularly to antisemitism. There is no strong awareness of the fact that those who seek refuge in our region are part of the same body of Christ as we are, members of the same Church. This is why we can perceive the current refugee

⁸ Cf. Augustinus: s. 58, 2, EcOr 1, p. 120; s. 56, 5, RB 68, p. 29; s. 57, 2, *Homo Spiritualis*. Festgabe für Luc Verheijen OSA zu seinem 70. Geburtstag, p. 415; s. 59, 2, SC 116, p. 188.

⁹ Cf. Schindler: *Catholicus*, -a (1986).

¹⁰ Cf. Prosperus Aquitanus: *Ad Gall* 2,8, PL 51, 172.

¹¹ Cf. Lichner: *Povaha a riziká fundamentalizmu* (2013).

crisis as God's blessing for the demographic winter in Europe that we have been experiencing.¹²

6. Old and New Image of the Church

Synodal reports remind us of the absence of an ecclesiology that would offer the image of the Church to contemporary society. The practical ecclesiology "Christ and His People", written by Protestant theologian Jozef Smolík,¹³ presents certain dominant images of the Church: the bride of Christ, the body of Christ, *sancta romana ecclesia*, the Church of the Word, *sacramentum mundi*. He points out that the image of the Church as the body of Christ prevailed in the first millennium and it was renewed within Catholic theology not only in the period between the two world wars of the twentieth century, but it also emerged as significant from all the synodal reports.

A renewed theology of the Church as the body of Christ thus appears to be useful for rediscovering the importance of every member of the Church, their particular charisma, and their contribution to the functioning of the whole body of Christ. This enables us to emphasize the aspect of the development of the Church as a living organism that rejects stagnation of growth and communicates and cooperates *ad intra* to take care of every member of the body, who can feel like a part of this living organism. Let me briefly recall two rules regarding dogma left to us by fifth-century author Vincent of Lérins and his work "Commonitorium". The first rule, often interpreted in the history of theology, underlines the necessity of static adhesion to everything that has been believed always, everywhere, and by everyone.¹⁴ The second rule, much less often interpreted, puts emphasis on growth and motion. Vincent offers the image of a man who transformed from a child into an adult person.¹⁵ Growth, however, may awaken fear. One-third of all the reports clearly define the fear of the Church regarding possible changes and the secular world. In some countries, populists proclaim to be the defenders of Christianity, which is paradoxical,

¹² Cf. Polak: Hope for Europe: Catastrophes as Learning Spaces for a Spiritual Virtue? A Practical-theological Approach (2020). See also: Cyrulnik: Quand un enfant se donne "la mort". Attachement et sociétés. Rapport remis a Madame Jeanette Bougrab secrétaire d'État chargée de la jeunesse et de la Vie associative (2011).

¹³ Cf. Smolík: Kristus a jeho lid. Praktická eklesologie (1997).

¹⁴ Cf. Lichner: Commonitorium-Pripomenutie I, vol. 5–6 (2021); Lichner: Teológia tradície Vincenta z Lerina (2013).

¹⁵ Cf. Lichner: Commonitorium-Pripomenutie I, vol. 5–6 (2021); Horka: Ekleziologické paradigmy Matúšovej reči podobenstiev u cirkevných otcov (2021).

because, in reality, they are the enemies of those to whom we are sent by Christ to proclaim the Gospel. The populists insist that we should close and protect ourselves from them instead of preaching the Word of salvation.

The Church needs to be a field hospital for all of them, where hard work is often done without any tools and facilities for providing the necessary care, and where “doctors” are invited to make difficult decisions with high risk. There was a time when such problems were only faced in missionary territories.¹⁶

In this regard, the concept of graduality can be theologically reconsidered, which is not new, because many thoughts were already suggested by Augustine in *De baptismo*.

7. Participation of the Laity and Formation

The Church has always walked through history and the modern perception of the synodal journey, and the active participation of the laity in the life of the Church, in particular, points out a brand-new context. Although all the reports mention the absence of lay people in the life of the Church, the results show that the perception of their participation and responsibilities in economically and socially stable countries differs from the perception in the countries where members of the Church are forced to have several jobs to be able to support their families. Thus, enthusiasm and activity are confronted with a sad economic reality. There is another difference that emerges from the reports: the proclamation of faith and participation of the laity in the life of the Church in rural and agricultural environments marked by an outflow of inhabitants to cities is different from towns, where work effort and a growing level of education among lay people create a new space for their presence and activity within the Church. Half of the reports draw attention to a serious problem with so-called “work tourism”, when people are forced to travel for work. This phenomenon has a destructive impact not only on their families but also on the lives of local communities. Half of the reports mention the migration of young people motivated by financial, political, or social reasons, which has a negative impact on any possible effort to systematically build parishes with active lay people. The parishes become desolate, and these European migrants are usually not capable of adhering to local Churches in other parts of Europe.¹⁷

¹⁶ Cf. Buttiglione: Risposte (amichevoli) ai critici di *Amoris laetitia* (2017).

¹⁷ Cf. Šmidová: *Príprava dobrovoľníkov pôsobiacich v oblasti pomáhajúcich profesii pre prácu s rodinami v záťažových situáciách* (2016).

More than two-thirds of the reports specified the role of the laity in relation to the role and position of women in the Church, not only in its liturgical but also in its structural space.

According to two-thirds of the reports, the active participation of lay people is undesired and received with mistrust by the clergy; there is a significant unwillingness to share their duties and rights with the laity. All the reports highlight the topic of more active participation of lay people in the life of the Church. However, it is worth mentioning that they focus mostly on local participation in the life of parish communities, especially in two principal lines: parish councils of economic or pastoral type and liturgy. Most reports point out absent or insufficient parish and pastoral councils that do not represent institutional places of inclusion, dialogue, transparency, discernment, evaluation, and strengthening of the position of all participants. The excessive orientation of lay people toward strengthening their participation in liturgy is positive, but it can also be understood as a residue of communist pressure, which used to punish severely any pastoral activities apart from the liturgy (activities outside churches). There is an absence of the missionary character of Christian vocation *ad extra*: living one's faith in marriage and at work at the expense of growing activism in churches.

Most of the synodal outputs emphasize the lack of quality of the catechesis for various groups of believers. However, we must admit that the integration of parish catechesis into the educational process at schools, mainly in towns where the geographic distance between schools and parishes is usually bigger, has contributed to the growth of school communities at the expense of parish ones. A new concept of contextual evangelisation and catechisation thus needs to be elaborated.

8. Clericalism and the Formation of Clergy

One of the least heard voices within the synodal syntheses are the voices of priests and bishops who would speak about themselves and their experience of common peregrination. All the outputs unambiguously describe clericalism as one of the most negative tendencies, with a variety of its forms and scandals associated with sexual, psychological, economic and spiritual abuse in the Church,¹⁸ mostly the abuse and exploitation of the weakest and most vulnera-

¹⁸ Cf. Thiel: L'Église catholiques face aux abus sexuels sur mineurs (2019).

ble.¹⁹ They also mention the cold self-sufficiency and rigid institutionalism associated with power (understood in a too legalistic way) and the enforcement of authority. This results in a lack of assertive communication and a culture of dialogue. Clericalism is rooted among certain groups of believers, too. One-third of the outputs draws attention to a serious problem regarding preservation of a model of pre-conciliar liturgy and pastoral care which does not distinguish between *sanctum* (sanctity) and *sacrum* (sacredness). This model is supported by both clergy and laity and often results in the rejection of the outcomes of the Second Vatican Council. The sacraments have become the aim instead of being the means, and the life of parish communities has been reduced to administering and receiving of the sacraments. The sacraments of Christian initiation are understood as a single act of devotion with an entry in the parish register; it does not mean integration into the living parish community as a family of God's children.

Allow me to recall Augustine's term *libido dominandi*, which was forgotten in the past centuries. Augustine does not know the term power abuse; he rather speaks about the lust for power, *libido*, which contains latent egoism, an implicit pride that dwells at the level of the body, pride as a consequence of Adam's sin in Paradise. We should adjust our view of *libido* as mere disordered sexuality,²⁰ and see clericalism as a clear expression of *libido dominandi*, as an expression of what we traditionally call *infirmetas* – spiritual infirmity that remains within us after receiving the sacrament of baptism. This justifies the call for declericalization of the Church.

There is also another impulse emerging from the reports: the need for renewal of the priestly formation, not so much from an intellectual or spiritual point of view, but from the point of view of emotional and sexual maturation of candidates for the priesthood.²¹ It looks like the time has come for a transformation of the way of priestly education. It requires adjustment in accordance with current situations and conditions, because the currently implemented model has no capacity to meet the requirements regarding personal attributes of future priests.

¹⁹ Cf. Plante: Clericalism Contributes to Religious, Spiritual, and Behavioral Struggles among Catholic Priests (2020); Sipe: Sex, Priests, and Power: Anatomy of a Crisis (1995).

²⁰ Cf. Bonner: God's Decree and Man's Destiny. Studies on the Thought of Augustine of Hippo (1987); Kulisz et al.: Return of the Encyclical Fratelli Tutti to the Patristic Roots of Christian Social Tradition (2021).

²¹ Cf. McGlone/Sperry: The Inner Life of Priests (2012); Congregation for Catholic Education: Guidelines for the use of psychology in the admission and formation of candidates for the priesthood (2008).

All the texts underline the urgent need for improvement of so-called “soft skills,” mainly “active listening.”²² Similarly, the culture of dialogue should not be reduced only to an apologetic dialogue with useless arguments. It should be a dialogue of life and solidarity. Not listening leads to misunderstandings and marginalising or to enforcement of opinions on the basis of power. This is visible not only in relations between clergy and laity, but also within parishes marked by generational, ethnic or language differences.

All the reports need to be considered to draw a brand-new image of a priest. Believers in most countries of Eastern Europe saw a good priest as someone who worked with the youth and took care of the seniors, which resulted in a lack of pastoral care for adults between 25–40/45 years of age. Young people disappear from the pastoral view of the Church after graduation and return after 15–20 years because of marriage or the baptism of their children. The problem that was not spoken about concerns the fact that the opportunity to study abroad was given to priests favoured by their bishops or those who fell in love and needed a change of environment, instead of those who were really needed at faculties.

We can say that all the reports underline the life testimony of priests as an essential aspect of evangelisation.

9. What the Texts Do Not Say

Let me mention a phenomenon that is not mentioned in the texts at all, but which I consider to be absolutely crucial for any further work within the synodal process. Therefore, I decided to integrate a few words on this matter into this academic discourse. Local churches in Eastern Europe experienced 40 years of the cruel rage of communism. The number of martyrs and confessors would be long, as well as the number of those who failed. In spite of this immense pressure, the Church not only survived; it also grew and developed, not only in quantity but also in quality. This experience can be called a new *locus theologicus*: a positive experience with the Church as a source of work of theologians.²³ On the other hand, religious communities of the post-communist part of Europe still face a great challenge not to see the world as an enemy, to identify them-

²² Cf. Trebski: *Comunicazione e counseling. Aspetti propedeutici* (2017).

²³ Cf. Csontos, L.: *The River from the Temple: The forms of retreats that helped to preserve the presence of the Jesuits in Slovakia during communist persecution*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Collegium Bobolanum, 2019.

selves as co-creators of culture, who search primarily for the partnership in the process of its formation.²⁴

In spite of all this, I note with shame that there is not even the slightest hint of reflection regarding the strengths and weaknesses associated with this period of time, which could – in my opinion – significantly enrich the ongoing debate about the synodal journey.

10. Conclusion

The analysis of the outputs in the context of history and theology urges us to move away from a moralising Christianity to a therapeutical Christianity, the way we find it in the tradition of the early Church. For example, Augustine understood the Church as a *locus misericordiae et tolerantiae*, as a place of mercy and patient mutual coexistence.²⁵ This is the Church that will take care of the wounded; this is the Church that instead of the Roman *si vis pacem, para bellum* (if you want peace, prepare for war), emphasises *si vis pacem, para iustitiam* (if you want peace, prepare for justice). Only in this way may the following words of Psalm 85:11 come true: “Love and truth will meet; justice and peace will kiss.” Because God will never get tired of forgiving. Instead of the Roman saying *divide et impera* (divide and rule), the Church needs to follow the edict *servi et adunare* (serve and unite). Only in this way can it become a new leaven of European society, a new source of life in its hopelessness.

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²⁴ Cf. Porov.: Žuffa, J.: Požiadavka otvorenej diskusie v cirkevných komunitách, in: Jeník, L., Karaba, M., Žuffa, J.: Veda, spoločnosť a náboženstvo v dialógu (monografia), Teologická fakulta Trnavskej univerzity 2021, 114.

²⁵ Cf. Lichner, M.: Vers une ecclésiologie de la “tolerantia”. Recherche sur saint Augustin. Ed. Sensus Fidei Fidelium 4. L’Harmattan Kiadó, Sapientia Szerzetesi Hittudományi Főiskola: Budapest, 2014.

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Analysis of the Results in the Middle East

Theological Remarks

Ziad Fahed

1. Introduction

“The path of synodality is the path that God expects from the Church of the third millennium”¹. With this prophetic statement made by Pope Francis, I want to start this contribution. Synodality is an invitation to walk together. It is a choice where the baptized start together. They start together because, as we all know, it is a journey that we begin together but it is also a journey that will never be achieved, it is always “under construction”. The teachings of Vatican II are very clear: in the Church, nobody is a mere “recipient”; we all have something to give and to receive.

In order to analyze the findings of this section of the survey that reflect the voice of the Middle Eastern participants and in order to organize my remarks, I will be inspired by the disciples of Emmaus, who will guide my reflections.

The journey of the disciples of Emmaus is a privileged reference for being a Church that is meaningful today and that is walking its journey while dialoguing with the Lord and with each other. Three main moments of this dialogue are relevant to us and can help us to reflect on the main findings we have within this survey: while Jesus was waking with the two disciples of Emmaus, He was listening to them gently and letting them express themselves from their confused hearts; despite their confusion and their fear, He explains them the Scriptures and breaks the bread, redirecting their lives to the center of what the pillar and foundation of the Church is, which is Jesus’ complete and eternal self-giving; and after listening to Jesus and sharing the Eucharist with Him, the disciples of Emmaus – who are, in a way or another, each one of us – overcome their fear and limitations, leave their comfort zone and go to testify, share and announce the good news of their encounter with Jesus. Today, this is the history of the Church, of the Church in the Middle East and of every community:

¹ Francis: Ceremony commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (2015).

listening, breaking the bread and refocusing our lives toward the Alpha and the Omega, sharing the good news all over the world. He is alive, He is here with us.

2. About the Survey Reporting the Voice of the Participants of the Middle East

As previously described (see Part I), the survey was conducted in April 2022 and consisted of 599 respondents from 67 countries organized into five main regions. The region that had the lowest percentage of participants is the Middle East, with only 6.7% (a total of 39 participants out of 599), while the other regions had at least twice that percentage of participants. It is important to mention that we don't have the full academic and pastoral backgrounds of the participants in this survey, e.g., if they are all active members of the Church, if they are all Catholics, etc. Having this information could help us not to jump to conclusions and generalize while reading and commenting on the findings. In this regard, we also need to mention that due to the "difficulties to form conversation groups in the case of the Middle East (due to the lower number of participants)", as informed by the authors of this study, only three individual interviews were held. In this phase, the interviews focused on discussing the quantitative results with the three participants, in order to see if they agreed with the organizers on how they interpreted the findings, and what socio-cultural and religious conditions may, at least in part, explain the results and the differences between the regions. Within these discussions, the three interviews helped to identify other possible topics that may be relevant to the local communities.

However, despite these limitations, we are aware of the voices raised by the participants within this survey and we have a lot to learn from these interviews. On a personal note, I can even say that I will not be very surprised to see, in case we increase the number of participants in the survey or in the interviews, that the findings may not change radically. In order to be at peace with my last statement and to check if the comments that I will share with you are solid enough, I allowed myself to ask my 65 university students (18 to 25 years old – more than 95% of them Christian Maronites) the same questions, so I can add their voices when appropriate and when their voice is adding new elements, in order to consolidate the findings and remarks that I will be sharing.

3. Power and Division of Powers

While going to Emmaus, “they were talking with each other about everything that had happened ... but they were kept from recognizing him” (Luke 24:14–16)

On the topic of “Power and Division of Powers in the Church and Joint Participation in the Mission”, it was clear that the participants of the Middle East agreed that the “power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops”, with a mean value of 3.69. This makes the Middle East among the regions that have a very high score in this section, compared to the other four regions. Regarding this same point, 50% of my students totally agreed.

Before commenting on this, I wish to make an observation regarding the use of the word “power” in this section. I am not sure that everybody would feel comfortable with the use of the word “power” within a Church context. In addition, I do believe that, within a Christian ecclesial pastoral context, probably the word “service” instead of “power” could fit better and could express a deeper pastoral commitment of the priests and the bishops. In the Church, it is all about “*diakonia*”, which is the “responsible service of the gospel by deeds and by words performed by Christians in response to the needs of people”. *Diakonia* is rooted in and modeled on Christ’s service and teachings. The prophetic *diakonia* allows the “building of the social ethos based on fraternity, solidarity, and inclusion”². It is worth considering whether this may have affected some of the answers of the participants.

Furthermore, for the item related to the influence of the laity on the Church and a better distribution of power, we observed a mean value of 4.28. This answer shows continuity with the precedent one because once someone expresses his/her criticism toward the “power” given to the priests and bishops, it is normal to seek and request more space and shared responsibility within this existing system. It is also clear that even those who were not obviously criticizing the power of the priests and the bishops agreed to request more influence and seek better distribution of power. This is very clearly expressed through the increase in the result from 3.69 to 4.28. My young Lebanese university students also totally agreed with this point, with similar values.

Within this category, we can also mention the very high value of 4.49 for the item regarding the shared participation of lay and clergy in the mission of the Church. This helps to proclaim the message. Again, it is obvious that those who took part in the survey are aware of their role in sharing participation within the

² International Theological Commission: Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church (2017), 103.

mission of the Church. A very clear percentage of 67% of the young Lebanese university students totally agreed with this question, which is a slightly higher percentage than the one obtained in the survey.

Main lessons learned and remarks:

- In line with the teaching of the Church, we can read in *Lumen Gentium* (LG) in paragraph 27 that “bishops, as vicars and ambassadors of Christ, govern the particular churches entrusted to them by their counsel, exhortations, example, etc. for the edification of their flock in truth and holiness”. Priests and bishops must keep before their eyes the example of the Good Shepherd, who came not to be ministered unto but to minister to serve. LG continues by pointing out that ordained ministers are called to lay down their life for their community. They should be able to “have compassion”, “listen”, “exhort”, “cooperate”, “lead by model”, etc. The views expressed in this section of the survey showed that the participants are extremely dissatisfied with the way priests and bishops are managing their responsibilities within the Church. It is clear that the participants are asking for synodality, more participation, and more influence on the decisions taken within the Church.
- The authors of the document “We Choose Abundant Life” (2021), who elaborated on the role of Christians in the Middle East, wrote in paragraph 65 that the churches in the Middle East “are facing the challenges of a transition from the concept of sectarianism to the concept of the Church”. The understanding of the Church, in this regard, would be a *koinonia* (communion), which brings the members of the Church together (Acts 2:42 – Phil 2:2). It is through this *koinonia* that we can understand the mystery of the Church.
- On another note, the encyclical letter *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) reminds us that all the baptized, “whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients” (120). Once again, we observed through the voices of the lay people in this survey that they are requesting a more effective role and responsibility within the Church. Based on the study we have here, we can confirm that the lay who took part in this survey want to be “missionary disciples” (Matt 28:19). Here, I allow myself to make reference to the disciples of Emmaus who, after encountering Jesus, went back to announce the good news (Luke 24:13–35). Once their eyes were opened and they recognized Him, they returned at

once to Jerusalem, telling everyone what had happened on the way and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread. The Samaritan woman became a missionary immediately after speaking with Jesus (John 4:39). So too, Saint Paul, after his encounter with Jesus Christ, “immediately proclaimed Jesus” (Acts 9:20; cf. 22:6–21). So, what are we waiting for?

4. Priestly Existence Today and Priesthood Celibacy

Among the points raised within this survey are the findings related to how the participants reflect on and assess the way priests live today, especially their celibacy. Is this life “appropriate and correct”? While we know that, in the Middle East, married men can be ordained priests, when we know the different types of financial, social, demographic, geopolitical, and existential challenges that the local Christian communities either in Lebanon, Jordan, or Syria are facing, a very impressive percentage of the participants in this survey shared their concerns by expressing the opinion that the way priests live their celibacy today is not “appropriate and correct” enough. An important value of 2.64 shows a rather negative opinion (very close to the Latin American Region, which gets a score of 2.36). For this question, only 20% of my Lebanese students find the lives of priests today, especially their celibacy, appropriate and correct (10% in the survey).

However, before commenting more on this point, it is important to ask the following question: do we all have the same understanding of what is “appropriate and correct”, mainly when it comes to the life of celibacy? Having been active in the Church in Europe and in the Middle East for the last 30 years, I would not be surprised to see that many may not expect to see a priest enjoying some quality time with a female friend. Here, I guess the Middle Eastern culture would play a very strategic role in explaining the responses we have, as if they would expect a priest to abandon absolutely everything and consecrate his life inside a church, which I am not sure is really in line with the pastoral priorities and the needs of the people of God in today’s life.

Regarding the statement “Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message”, with a mean value of 2.87 and a standard deviation of 1.51, ambivalent opinions were expressed. Despite the fact that in Lebanon and in the Middle East, both within the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, married men can be ordained priests and an important percentage of the priests today are married, the participants in this survey showed a relatively liberal understanding of the emotional needs of the priests. Apparently, the participants in this survey are admitting how hard it is

to face a lonely life while you are serving the people of God. It is also true that the presence of the families, relatives and social life surrounding the priests in the Middle East is very important and might be more active than in other parts of the world; still, it can be hard to find a balance and satisfy one's emotional needs. For this same question, 21% of participants totally agreed with the fact that "Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message", and 13,5% of Lebanese university students also totally agreed. It is worth considering the possibility that the presence of married priests in the Middle East may have something to do with these results.

Finally, concerning the point related to whether in the future "diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry", we had a positive value of 4.13, showing a clearly positive opinion, with, however, a standard deviation of 1.32, which shows some visible differences between the respondents. On this point, we observe great respect from the participants with regard to how they admit and respect the freedom of choice of the priests concerning their possibility to decide what type of life they would like to choose. In the survey, 62% of the participants totally agreed with this question, and 70% of the Lebanese university students gave the same answer.

As we can see, the Middle East participants tended to be negative concerning the celibacy of the priests, although some relevant differences in opinions are visible. Moreover, and as mentioned in the study's report, this is the only region (with Latin America) where the contribution of celibacy to the credibility and mission of the Church is rated under the middle point, even though not as negatively scored as by Latin American participants. Consistently, these two regions are the ones that more clearly agree with giving priests the possibility to choose if they want to marry or not.

Main lessons learned and remarks:

- The teaching of *Ad Gentes* (AG) focuses on the importance of the fact that the "pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father" (1). The point we would like to raise is how believers can see the "pilgrim Church" in action while they question the "way the priests live today", have concerns regarding the way of life of celibacy, and do not find it "appropriate and correct" enough. This allows me to say that some of the messages spread by the local Church in this part of the world are not necessarily in favor of promoting and spreading the beauty of the Good News. Instead of testimony, we are probably witnessing the spreading of a counter testimony (as we say in

French: *Contre témoignage*). The fact of having a number of married priests in the Middle East and seeing such low results of satisfaction concerning the life of celibacy of the priests brings me to say that the marriage of priests or the ordination of married men could be part of the solution for the emotional stability, but for sure marriage alone cannot be the solution. Emotional stability and emotional needs could be a long journey that needs to be taken very seriously.

- Synodality is about re-energizing and re-visiting the life and the evangelizing mission of the Church, in union with and under the guidance of the Lord Jesus, who promised: “Where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them” (Matt 18:20); however, the synodal renewal of the Church can’t start without re-building the trust with the local community and among the different members of the Church, so that the synodal structures can be fully active and the People of God can journey through history towards the fulfillment of the Kingdom. At that time, we will be creating the right environment to allow our eyes to open, similarly to the disciples of Emmaus, so we will “recognize Him” and we will recognize His presence among us; we will not regret not seeing Him through the people of God in the Church of our time, and we will be able to have the same experience as the disciples of Emmaus, allowing our hearts to burn while they talk with us “on the road” or, if you prefer, on the synodal way.

5. Women in the Ministry of the Church

On the point of women and the understanding of their ministry, we have observed a mean value of 3.69 related to the statement “Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes”, which shows a rather positive opinion regarding this first item, although some differences between respondents are visible. This same result was also confirmed by the students (March 2023).

The participants had a very negative opinion concerning the point of “Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes”, with a mean value of 2.79 and a standard deviation of 1.11, meaning that the respondents had a rather negative opinion. The young students who were asked the same question clearly disagreed with this statement, with a percentage of 65%.

Concerning the statement “In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church”, we have a mean value of 3.87, and

a standard deviation of 1.42, showing a wide dispersion of responses. This means that the respondents had, in general, a positive opinion regarding this statement. Only 15% of the young students who were asked to react to this statement totally disagreed.

Main lessons learned and remarks:

- “Male and female He created them” with the mission to partner in taking care of the creation, “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1). With this perspective, Adam and Eve are called to take care of the creation together, and what is applicable to the creation is also applicable to the Church. Synodality means that the whole Church is a subject and that everyone in the Church is an active member and has active roles in sharing the one priesthood of Christ, and is meant to receive the various charisms given by the Holy Spirit in view of the common good. The words of the authors of “We Choose Abundant Life” were even clearer when they wrote that the position of women in our churches requires “radical changes of mentality and practice, taking seriously the dignity of women and the full equality of women and men”³. They continue and add in the same paragraph that a patriarchal masculinized system has imposed viewpoints in our churches that contradict the position God wants for women.
- The entire People of God hold the *sensus fidei*, with which all the faithful are endowed, the discernment carried out at the various levels on which synodality works, and the authority of those who exercise the pastoral ministry of unity and governance. Ensuring that every voice will be heard properly and have the proper “influence” would create the right dynamic of synodality in conformity with the *depositum fidei*.⁴ Hearing the voice of the ones who constitute a very important part (and probably the biggest community) of the body of Christ is a condition *sine qua non* for being a Church in the world of today. Based on the opinions expressed in the survey, only 8% of the participants believe that women “have enough voice and influence” (12% in the case of my students). Therefore, there is no doubt that these extremely low results show how much still needs to be done in order to make women’s voice heard within the Church.
- On another note, 46% of this study’s participants say that they totally agree with having women “admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church”

³ We Choose Abundant Life Group: We Choose Abundant Life. Christians in the Middle East: Towards Renewed Theological, Social, and Political Choices (2021), 69.

⁴ Cf. International Theological Commission: Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church (2017), 72.

(65% in the case of the Lebanese students). These are very promising results. Will the prophetic voice expressed in this survey be heard properly and adequately? In the coming years, we will have our answer.

6. Sexuality and Partnership

The Middle Eastern participants in this survey agreed that it is “right and important that the Church’s teaching deal intensively with the topic of sexuality”, with a mean value of 3.46, which is a positive opinion. A non-negotiable 31% of the participants totally agreed that this topic must be reviewed, and 27% of the young university students also totally agreed on this topic.

Concerning the question if it is “right and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church”, there was a mean value of 3.18, slightly over the middle point, and a standard deviation of 1.41. On this point, it seems that there was no consensus among the participants’ opinions, which seems to be controversial. Twenty-one percent of the participants totally agreed with this point, and 27% of the young Lebanese students also totally agreed.

Finally, the respondents agreed that the “Catholic Church should re-assess its stance on homosexuality”, with a mean value of 3.23 and, therefore, an ambivalent opinion about it, with a standard deviation of 1.51, showing relevant differences among the respondents. Thirty-one percent of the respondents agreed with this statement, and 40% of the Lebanese university students expressed the same opinion.

Main lessons learned and remarks:

- ♦ In this section, the participants agreed that sexuality is a private issue that is not necessarily addressed properly by Church leaders. This is why we have seen small differences regarding the Church dealing with this point. We should bear in mind that many Christian churches in the Middle East hold conservative views on sexuality, partnership, and homosexuality, so the views expressed in this survey should be taken into account with this understanding. For some of the participants, homosexuality is culturally rejected, which is complicating the possibility of addressing the topic properly within the Church.
- ♦ Humans are made for relationship, for communion, and they are called to love. Each and every one is created in the image of God and therefore has great dignity, a divine and inalienable dignity. Given that human beings are

a unity of body and soul, human bodies, including sexuality, are an integral part of God's plan and design, and essential to being made in the image of God. In *Laudato si'* (LS) we read the following statement: "Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology" (155). Therefore, a serious effort must be done to reconcile and to free the Middle Eastern Christian community from any taboo that could affect and damage human dignity and impede a positive and clear understanding of this topic.

7. Conclusion

Synodality is not simply a working procedure, but the particular form in which the Church lives its own call. "Synodality is seeking to actualize the Gospel in the reality of life"⁵, it is the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the daily journey of the People of God, despite all types of challenges, difficulties, and persecutions. The Church in the Middle East, while hearing the call of the Lord, taking any opportunity to be in an open dialogue with its own family and carrying out its mission, is called for a constant renewal (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 6). This cannot be achieved without a real understanding of togetherness and the search for contemporary forms of joint actions⁶. Nothing would be possible without launching a deep mutual collaboration within the Church family, in order to express together their deep faith in the *sensus fidei*.

Is it the right moment to free the churches in the Middle East from teachings, structures, and practices that reduce women to second-class beings, contrary to the spirit of the Gospel (Gal 3:28)?⁷ Is it the right moment for churches in the Middle East to promote better togetherness and more collegiality? As the disciples of Emmaus, who got up and returned at once to Jerusalem, we should return to our communities, find those who are awaiting the Good News and together we will say, "It is true! The Lord has risen" (Luke 24:34).

⁵ We Choose Abundant Life Group: We Choose Abundant Life. Christians in the Middle East: Towards Renewed Theological, Social, and Political Choices (2021), 67.

⁶ Cf. We Choose Abundant Life Group: We Choose Abundant Life. Christians in the Middle East: Towards Renewed Theological, Social, and Political Choices (2021), 67.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 69.

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The Synodal Path in Latin America

An Ecclesial Process from an Intersectional Perspective

Carolina Bacher Martínez

This theological-pastoral reflection focuses on the synodal meanings and practices being developed in Latin America due to the synodal process of the Global Church, and the convergent regional processes expressed in the Ecclesial Assembly of Latin America and the Caribbean. In this way, it seeks to contribute from a Latin American perspective to the multicultural conversation proposed by the conference *Doing Synodality in Intercultural Exchange*.

The analysis of the documents of Latin America and the Caribbean linked to these synodal processes shows that the synodal reflection in the continent is carried out considering diverse intersectionalities.¹ This perspective is sensitive to the differences between the concrete communities; it pays attention to the multiple dimensions that go across them and how these converge structuring the concrete experiences; and, therefore, which variables need to be considered in a pastoral proposal that seeks to influence the reality for its transformation.²

The intersectional perspective also gives us elements to put into perspective the profiles of those who have participated, both in the international survey this conference is drawn upon, as well as in the instances of reflection that preceded the Latin American documents consulted. This allows us to identify that: (a) while the participants of this research were scholarship holders with academic training, the members of the assembly had different formative paths; (b) while

¹ In response to the request of the Latin American bishops to hold a VI Episcopal Conference, Pope Francis proposed holding an Ecclesial Assembly of Latin America, which was accepted by the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Council (CELAM). This synodal process included multiple consultations that were expressed in the *Síntesis Narrativa de la Asamblea Eclesial* (2021). After the regional processes and the final Assembly, the *Conclusive Document Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida hacia las periferias* (2023) was published. Convergently, instances of consultation and participation were developed for the Synod 2021–2023, which resulted in the *Document Síntesis de la Fase Continental del Sínodo de la Sinodalidad en América Latina y el Caribe* (2023). This text considers these three publications mentioned before.

² Crenshaw: *Cartografiando los márgenes. Interseccionalidad, políticas identitarias, y violencia contra las mujeres de color* (2012).

in the survey lay men and women predominated (88.3%), in the Assembly, ordained ministers (whether priests, bishops or cardinals) were the majority (46%); c) while in the survey the majority of the respondents were between 31 and 45 years old (54.5%), in the Assembly most participants were between 41 and 60 years old (54%); d) while in the survey 56.6% of the participants were men, in the Assembly this percentage rose to 68%. Although we do not have similar information on the synodal process of the continental phase, we do know that of the 415 persons who participated, 65 were bishops, 70 priests, 61 members of religious communities, 16 deacons and 194 were lay men and women.³ We consider as a guiding hypothesis that the diversity of the profiles of each instance has influenced the emphases present in the reports.

In order to organize the presentation, the text is divided into four topics corresponding to the main topics of the survey (power, priestly existence, women, and sexuality). Finally, a fifth section is included, which considers the topics proposed by the Latin American participants during the study (see above, Part I, Research Project “Synodal Way – Global Church Perspectives”, *Table 16*).

1. Sharing Spaces and Responsibilities as an Expression of Synodal Conversion in the Exercise of Power

The Latin American results related to the exercise of power have a peculiarity: only 47% of Latino respondents agreed that power and influence in the Church was exclusively in the hands of priests and bishops, the lowest percentage among the regions. However, Latin America highly agreed with the necessity for the laity to have more influence and for power to be better distributed (77%). At the same time, the region postulates the need for shared participation between clergy and laity to help the mission of the Church (89%). How can these statements be understood?

If we focus on the categories used in the survey and compare them with those used in the documents of the synodal processes in Latin America, we find notable differences. In the first place, the category “power” has ambiguous connotations in the local texts. In the *Documento Final de la Asamblea Eclesial*, this category refers, above all, to the exercise of political and economic power, together with power struggles and their despotic use in these areas, including drug trafficking. It is affirmed that the exercise of power needs to be reviewed and Christians, and among them, especially the laity, are required to influence the

³ Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): Síntesis de la Fase Continental del Sínodo de la Sinodalidad en América Latina y el Caribe (2023), 7.

exercise of civil power. In the ecclesial framework, clericalism implies understanding ministry as power and not as service, having a disordered affection for pastoral decision-making power. Moreover, the exercise of power is opposed to Jesus' exercise of authority as service; only once, the concept is used positively in reference to Jesus' healing power. This is why power needs to be revised and converted into service. The creation of new ministries is associated with lay people, women, and consecrated persons having power in decision-making.⁴ The concept is not very present in the *Síntesis de la Fase Continental*: it is used once to allude to the Church's fear of losing power, and twice it is associated with power abuse, one of which refers to the deformation of ministerial service.⁵

We note that the category of power is present in an ambiguous way in contemporary Latin American theological-pastoral language and that it generally has a negative connotation, associated with civil power, and is not normally used to describe intra-ecclesial dynamics⁶. This could be influencing the low percentage in the survey assigned to its exercise by the hierarchy.

On the other hand, although with nuances according to the local churches, an ecclesiology that assumes that the Church is the People of God and that all the baptized are missionary disciples is quite widespread in the Latin American Church. Since the time after the Second Vatican Council, a choice has been made for the *Pastoral de Conjunto*, energizing participatory processes, especially through Participative Pastoral Planning, a planning technique that opened space for community participation both in discerning reality and in the elaboration of proposals. In addition, there have been experiences of *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* (Basic Ecclesial Communities), popular pastoral approaches, and popular reading of the Bible. This could explain why those consulted responded from a conception that does not agree with the concentration of power and the exclusive influence of ordained ministers.

Secondly, I consider that some categories used in the formulation of the survey may have had a positive symbolic resonance, which would influence an affirmative response, because of their sense of horizontality and non-confrontational reciprocity. Such is the case of the family of words associated with "sharing", since they are present and have positive connotations both in the

⁴ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida hacia las periferias* (2023), 54, 55, 96, 118, 120, 122, 201, 244, 299, 334, 340, 346, 353, 355.

⁵ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Síntesis de la Fase Continental del Sínodo de la Sinodalidad en América Latina y el Caribe* (2023), 54, 55, 56, 80, 87.

⁶ As an example, see Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida hacia las periferias* (2023), 54, 55, 96, 201, 340, 346.

magisterium and in local pastoral ministry, and evoke the conciliar style of discourse.⁷

Specifically, the *Documento Final de la Asamblea Eclesial* has thirty-two contributions linked to this conceptual root. Some refer to the action of God, who chose a people with whom to share his plan;⁸ others to Jesus' behavior, who had the capacity to share.⁹ Others mention the ecclesial horizon of the first Christian communities, which shared goods, prayer, the Word, the Eucharist, baptism, and the calling to follow Jesus' paschal cross.¹⁰ It is affirmed that Christians are asked to share with others the pains and hopes of the people, the vulnerability with the smallest brothers and sisters, to be a Samaritan Church that shares life and its table with everyone without exclusions, and to share the search for full life with social movements.¹¹

From the preceding worldview, the Church is called to share spaces of responsibility, decision-making and formation in order to overcome clericalism, as, for example, in the shared synodal processes.¹² In this regard, the *Síntesis de la Fase Continental* refers both to the fact that the resulting texts are the outcome of shared discernments to which we are called to be faithful, and that the mission must be configured as a shared mission.¹³

During the focus groups, the region recognizes that progress has been made in lay participation and, at the same time, there is an expectation of having more participatory structures, also for decision-taking, recognizing that at present it depends on the style of leadership and the specific religious communities in charge of the local churches.

This structural axis is present in the *Documento Final de la Asamblea Eclesial*. For example, placing the structural debate in the horizon of reform, requesting the abandonment of outdated structures, and the creation of new ones. It is also proposed: "To reform the structures, within the framework of ecclesial conversion, in order to have an organic and holistic pastoral care, seeking a complementary reciprocity between women and men".¹⁴

⁷ Cf. O'Malley: ¿Qué pasó en el Vaticano II? (2012).

⁸ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida hacia las periferias* (2023), 179.

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 175.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 18, 19, 22, 170, 177, 179, 183, 192, 195, 201.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 9, 139, 216, 292, 303.

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, 22, 200, 260, 308.

¹³ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Síntesis de la Fase Continental del Sínodo de la Sinodalidad en América Latina y el Caribe* (2023), 20, 38, 52; 30, 68, 93.

¹⁴ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida hacia las periferias* (2023), 315.

The *Síntesis de la Fase Continental* dedicates the sixth section to the synodal conversion and structural changes, recovering the institutional dimension and its necessary transformation, especially mediated by the constitution of Councils promoted by Vatican II: a structural conversion carried out in an articulated manner, including mentality transformation, personal and communitarian conversion, with emphasis on formation and a culture of transparency, and a special focus on prevention, reparation, and justice for the victims of all types of abuse in the Church and in society.¹⁵

An example of this path of structural participation is the one carried out by the Argentina-Paraguay Province of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, who have Juan Bautista de La Salle as the inspirational figure. Since 1975, the laity have shared positions of responsibility and, since 1999, they have been incorporated as members of the Argentinean Education Association. As such, they are represented in the District Assembly, a structure that discerns the pastoral progress and prepares the pastoral guidelines document, which is assumed by the Chapter of Brothers, adding only the specific articles for the internal life of the religious communities or of the general organization. Currently, the work is expanding, since it is receiving many schools that leave other religious orders or associations of Christian inspiration. We can see here a link between more participative communities, the decision-making role of the collectives integrated by religious and lay people, and the increase of the capacity of the Church to give an organic response to its mission.¹⁶

2. Demanding Presence of the Clergy's Agenda in the Synodal Reflection in Latin America

The consultation within the Latin American scholarship holders showed a 65% of disagreement in relation to the current life of priests, especially related to celibacy and its link with the spread of the Gospel; 76% considered that celibacy could remain optional for future generations of priests.

The topic of optional celibacy appears in the *Síntesis Narrativa de la Asamblea Eclesial* prior to the Ecclesial Assembly, together with the request for the inclusion of married priests in pastoral ministry.¹⁷ The topic of celibacy only appears in the *Documento Final de la Asamblea Eclesial* linked to the need for an integral

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 73–81.

¹⁶ Bacher Martínez: Entrevista a Santiago Rodríguez Mancini (2022).

¹⁷ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Síntesis Narrativa de la Asamblea Eclesial* (2021), 120 f. and Forum 67.

formation, and to correct a “weak configuration of celibate life”, since otherwise “it can lead to double life behaviors and abuse, not only sexual, but also to manipulation of conscience and a despotic exercise of power”.¹⁸

The topics specifically referring to priests are practically absent in the Documento *Final de la Asamblea Eclesial*, being mentioned only three times and in reference to the percentage present in the assembly, to the required pastoral conversion together with the rest of the People of God, and to mention that the structures of participation do not depend on them.¹⁹

In the *Síntesis de la Fase Continental*, they are also mentioned a few times, in reference to the number of priests who participated, and twice to propose processes of pastoral inclusion of priests who have left the ministry because they are married.²⁰ The reflection referred to the necessary conversion of clericalism and machismo of priests, and the need to think and live the articulation between the ordained and baptismal priesthood.²¹ This document calls for an open dialogue on the link between the ministerial priesthood and celibacy, the priestly ordination of permanent deacons, and the pastoral inclusion of married priests and members of consecrated life who have left their institutes.²²

Now, it is necessary to bring to the conversation a notable omission in the regional reflections, although not exclusively in them. The Working Document for the Continental Stage indicated that “perhaps one of the least evident voices in the syntheses is precisely the one of priests and bishops speaking of themselves and their experience of walking together”.²³ That is to say, it is necessary to reflect on synodal conversion in the interactions between ordained ministers, particularly between bishops and priests or deacons, and to do so from their experience. Issues such as the financial support of diocesan priests, shared decision-making on pastoral destinies, the suffering that loneliness entails and the challenges involved in the relationship between generations are part of this necessary agenda, without being sufficiently expressed in the regional syntheses.²⁴

Pedro Trigo reflected on the significance of the commitment assumed by the bishops for the reception of the Second Vatican Council in Latin America. The Latin American and Caribbean bishops affirmed in the Final Documents of Medellín that they wanted to make only those decisions to which they were

¹⁸ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida hacia las periferias* (2023), 117 f.

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 5, 7, 65, 91.

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 7, 65, 91.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 87.

²² Cf. *ibid.*, 91.

²³ General Secretariat for the Synod: “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent”, Working Document for the Continental Stage (2022), 34.

²⁴ Cf. Bacher Martínez: *Hacia una sinodalidad responsable entre ministros ordenados* (2023).

willing to commit themselves personally. Trigo links the pastoral fruits to this fundamental choice, which implied that episcopal authority rested not only on their representativeness but on the fact that they told others what they had committed themselves to doing in the first place. This made their proposals accountable.²⁵ It is urgent to give a focused voice to priests in synodal hearings and to strengthen synodality among ordained ministers as an unavoidable horizon in the required ecclesial transformation.

3. Reflection on Women in the Church and in Society

80% of the survey's respondents from Latin America agreed that women play an important role in their communities and parishes, and only 34% recognized the influence of their voices in the communities. Finally, 82% agreed on the future admission of women to ordained ministries. In the focus groups, Latinos reported that women's opinions are not considered much, but they do not consider ministerial ordination as the unique or most appropriate way to tackle this problem.

The *Síntesis Narrativa de la Asamblea Eclesial* presented split opinions on the diaconate of women.²⁶ The *Documento Final de la Asamblea Eclesial* has a section dedicated to this axis: "The Leading Role of Women in the Church and Society". The section recognizes that, in the Church, inequality still exists due to machismo, the lack of recognition and empowerment of women, and that some authorities do not fully accept the access of women to leadership or leading roles in a Church governed by men.²⁷

The proposals include taking steps for the integration of women in the Church and in society, encouraging the development of charisms and ministries accessible to women, and the emergence of new lay ministries, such as the ministry of catechists. In the message to the People of God, the promotion of the active participation of women in the ministries and in the spaces of discernment and ecclesial decision-making is proposed.²⁸

The *Síntesis de la Fase Continental* values the role of women in the transmission of faith, as evangelizers and catechists, calls them to be present in the formation

²⁵ Cf. Trigo: Medellín (2018).

²⁶ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Síntesis Narrativa de la Asamblea Eclesial* (2021), 184.

²⁷ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida hacia las periferias* (2023), 311–315.

²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 246, 313, 315, 317, and Message to the People of God.

of seminaries, and reflects on the relationship between men and women in the Church, denouncing both male chauvinism and clericalism.²⁹ It is requested that the synodal assembly of October 2023 deepen the topic of women's leadership, their contribution to theological reflection, their role in accompanying the communities, and how to include them in the areas of elaboration and decision-making.³⁰ It is also requested the creation of new ministries for women, considering especially urgent the institution of the female diaconate, a practice already experienced in many communities.³¹

The theological reflection on women's leadership challenges us to think of the necessary interdisciplinary mediations in dialogue with management theories. In this respect, Sandra Arenas proposes the framework of distributed leadership to favor the synodal conversion of the Church. The approach facilitates the recognition of the members of a community as co-responsible in the design and implementation of the mission based on their specific gifts and services, which reduces the exclusion of those involved.³²

As Elisa Estévez López and Nurya Martínez Gayol Fernández affirm, a synodal Church has the challenge of listening attentively to today's women in order to consider the diverse spaces of intersection that shape their identities.³³ In the synodal reflections of Latin America and the Caribbean, it is noted that the situation of many women is linked to inequity, violence and mistreatment since, among the poor faces, there are women, peasant and indigenous women who have much harder living conditions than their male counterparts. For this reason, it is necessary to "admit and reject the triple discrimination experienced by women in these groups: for being women, poor, indigenous or African descendants".³⁴

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that feminicide was not included in the reflection, an omission that seems important to highlight. As Virginia Azcuy points out, it constitutes a sign of extreme violence and a true cry for life that challenges the listening and response of Christian communities.³⁵ In the synodal

²⁹ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Síntesis de la Fase Continental del Sínodo de la Sinodalidad en América Latina y el Caribe (2023)*, 38, 62, 75, 87.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 36, 87.

³¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 86.

³² Cf. Arenas: *Sin exclusiones (2020)*.

³³ Cf. Estévez López/Martínez-Gayol Fernández: «Escuchar, dialogar y discernir» con las mujeres (2022).

³⁴ Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida hacia las periferias (2023)*, 359. Cf. *ibid.*, 50; Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Síntesis de la Fase Continental del Sínodo de la Sinodalidad en América Latina y el Caribe (2023)*, 65 f.

³⁵ Cf. Azcuy: *El feminicidio y su clamor por la vida. Reflexiones con el magisterio católico y las teologías hechas por mujeres (2023)*.

processes, not only is it important that women be heard, but that the truth about their lives and their suffering be heard.

4. The Option for the Pastoral Inclusion of Diverse Persons and Families

78% of Latinos who responded to the survey agreed on the importance of the Church discussing the topic of sexuality, while 62% disagreed that it should continue to be proposed only within the framework of a Catholic marriage. The suggestion that the Church review its position on homosexuality stands out with 80% agreement among Latin American participants, one of the highest percentages compared to other regions.

Although this last topic (homosexuality) is not widespread in the proposals of the Ecclesial Assembly, it appears strongly in its formulation, in which it is noted that, rather than the revision of a topic, the focus is centered on the inclusion of sexually-diverse subjectivities, for example, members of LGTBIQ+ groups who “expressed their desire to be recognized as Christians committed to their faith and to be treated equally, in accordance with the dignity received with baptism”.³⁶ The same can be said of the priority of inclusive pastoral care of the different family constellations and the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel to them today.³⁷

But these new configurations express only one of the aspects mentioned, since the texts also refer to other situations that generate disintegration in families: migration, human trafficking, and different forms of violence.³⁸ The *Síntesis de la Fase Continental* does not expand on these issues, but offers an option for the LGTBIQ+ communities.³⁹

It is important to highlight that the topic of abuse was a theme that was brought into the conversation by the Latin American focus groups’ participants. The *Documento Final de la Asamblea Eclesial* also has a specific section on the subject.⁴⁰ However, the document recognizes that the topic of abuses is treated

³⁶ Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida hacia las periferias* (2023), 99.

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 369.

³⁸ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida hacia las periferias* (2023).

³⁹ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Síntesis de la Fase Continental del Sínodo de la Sinodalidad en América Latina y el Caribe* (2023), 65.

⁴⁰ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida hacia las periferias* (2023), 120–124.

with different sensitivities, in accordance with the different Latin American countries; moreover, the topic is placed in the more general framework of abuses in society: sexual violence, sexual abuse in intra-family dynamics, and sexual discrimination.⁴¹

In our contexts, these issues challenge daily pastoral practice and reflection. However, even today, they are still being dealt with in silence and there are few alternative pastoral experiences that favor inclusion. Andrea Sánchez Ruiz and Juan Bautista Duhau affirm that it is necessary to educate those responsible with updated and scientific information and knowledge, in order to generate adequate communication skills to face silence regarding sexual diversity, seeking the well-being of people who are in search of their identity, considering a processual perspective.⁴² Carolina Montero's reflections on human and situational vulnerability frame the reflection on abuses of power, conscience, and sexual abuse, and offer guidelines for the necessary pastoral conversion.⁴³ It is necessary, for theological disciplines, to continue deepening these reflections on these emerging issues, in dialogue with the protagonists of these epochal transformations.

5. Issues Brought Up by the Latin American Participants

Of the topics that emerged during the focus groups, I will comment on two of them: the use of the concept "Signs of the Times" and the centrality of the poorest and most suffering.

The concept "Signs of the Times" is considered relevant for discernment and pastoral decision-making processes in Latin America. This perspective was strongly ratified by the *Documento Final de la Asamblea Eclesial*, which dedicates its first part to analyzing those signs that challenge and encourage Christians, mentioning the great inequities in the continent, the fragility of Latin American democracies, the common home in danger, the migrants, the faith of the peoples, the protagonist faces of the youth, women, families, and the native and afro-descendant peoples.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 67, 81, 92.

⁴² Cf. Sánchez Ruiz Welch/Duhau: Integrar la diversidad sexual en nuestros ambientes educativos y pastorales. Un intento de comenzar una reflexión demorada (2020).

⁴³ Cf. Montero, Carolina: Vulnerabilidad. Hacia una ética más humana (2022).

⁴⁴ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida hacia las periferias (2023), 38–93.

Only after describing the griefs and joys, the contemporary anxieties and hopes of our peoples (GS 1), the text opens to the description of the ecclesial situation: the People of God are called to overcome clericalism, to strengthen the formation and participation of the laity. The text mentions again the protagonist faces of youth, women, families, and native people, but now refers to the baptized among them. The document adds the topic of formation in religious life and in seminaries, abuses in the Church and proclamation as an encounter with Christ.

The *Síntesis de la Fase Continental* also proposes listening to each other among Christians and discerning the signs of the times, a process that is connected to the constitution of discernment structures, decision-making and the response that the Church can give regarding the ministries based on this discernment. The text recognizes the mutual enrichment that has occurred by articulating the method of “see, judge, and act” with the approach of spiritual conversation, and proposes to the ecclesial assembly of October 2023 to deepen this methodological reflection.⁴⁵

I believe that one of the great challenges to be dealt with in the Latin American Church and that, at the same time, constitutes one of its most significant contributions for the 2023–24 synodal process, consists in understanding and experiencing that this *journey together* refers both to the internal life of the local churches and to the journey that as Christians we make together with the peoples, especially with the poorest and most suffering. In this way, the synodal practice updates the reception of conciliar ecclesiology, integrating the contributions of both *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. In this theoretical and vital articulation, it is possible for the synodal processes to constitute a sign and instrument of the project of universal fraternity.

In the Latin American tradition, the articulation of the above-mentioned constitutions and the priority of *Gaudium et Spes* over *Lumen Gentium* occurred in the historical process between the Second General Conference in Medellín and the Third General Conference in Puebla, and is taken up by Pope Francis in chapter 4 of *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG). There he develops the pastoral conversion of the Christian community based on historical commitment, especially with the poorest and most suffering.

From this discernment, attentive to the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel, emerges the second outstanding aspect, which refers to the priority of listening to and committing to the poorest and most suffering. This is expressed in the issues of poverty, inequality, and the Church’s commitment to the needy, together with environmental protection and climate change as relevant issues

⁴⁵ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Síntesis de la Fase Continental del Sínodo de la Sinodalidad en América Latina y el Caribe* (2023), 20, 45, 81, 85.

for Christians in Latin America and the Caribbean. This aspect is ratified by the very title of the *Documento Final de la Asamblea Eclesial*, “Towards a Synodal Church going out to the peripheries”, and by the explicitness of its options: “The Assembly confirms its option for the last ones and strengthens the leading role of the discarded [...]. A Church that expands the Kingdom of God in history, working together with other people and institutions so that the poor may be the subjects of their development and destiny”.⁴⁶

At this point, a different emphasis is perceived in relation to the German Synodal Path since, although the topics dealt with in the latter arose from a discernment of the signs of the times, their formulation was presented only from an intra-ecclesial perspective. The emphasis of the Latin American pastoral tradition questions the exercise of power in society, its economic and political axes, in *glocal* (global + local) scenarios, and it is considered urgent, in this epochal transformation, to find new forms of power distribution, with particular emphasis on women and their specific agenda: informal work, the feminization of poverty, and the growing awareness of domestic violence. The processes of identity subjectivation in a gender perspective constitute a reality that emerges strongly in the new generations and configures new family bonds, and their inclusion is a challenge for society as a whole, beyond the communitarian and sacramental dynamics of the Church. The *Síntesis de la Fase Continental* dedicates chapter five to synodality as a socio-environmental commitment in a fragmented world, which places the Church as a companion on the road of the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean, renewing the preferential option for the poor and the social dimension of evangelization.⁴⁷

In any case, the reflections of the synodal processes in Latin America question to what extent and how the advances of the ecclesial community in these issues influence socio-cultural dynamics. Such is the case of many Latin American theologians, who understand that their incidence cannot be limited to ecclesiastical plots but implies a vital and urgent sisterhood with the causes of the most impoverished and violated women of our societies, for the dignified life of women, especially the poorest and those who suffer violence. Among them, baptized women constitute a priority in their academic work, which considers other intra-ecclesial issues, also necessary, as a secondary priority and articulated with the above.

⁴⁶ Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida hacia las periferias* (2023), 216.

⁴⁷ Cf. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): *Síntesis de la Fase Continental del Sínodo de la Sinodalidad en América Latina y el Caribe* (2023), 63–72.

6. Conclusion

The topics of the German Synodal Path are also relevant for and present in the Latin American discussion. However, they do not have the same priority in Latin American synodal processes as in the German ones, since in each of these axes, priority is given to the analysis of how they are present in society, to then move on to the ecclesial dynamics, indicating the interconnection between ecclesial commitment to social transformation and pastoral conversion. In many cases, an intersectional approach is used for the presentation of the topics, as a mediation for a more concrete and situated reflection. In this way, a model of synodality is configured, going out to the peripheries and at the service of Global fraternity and sisterhood.

On the other hand, the reflection on situated synodality questions us about research practices, placing them in a *glocal* perspective. A first challenge consists in being attentive to the challenges posed by symbolic imagination posed by the nuances of language in research practices in different contexts. The question arises of how to maintain conceptual variables and adapt the language so that the thematic axes can be more situationally expressed. Furthermore, it is necessary to promote synodal processes that are capable of articulating the voices that have not yet emerged, expressing their particular needs and searches. In the Latin American synodal processes, we hear some questions, not yet answered, about how to give more space in these participatory processes to the simplest people, that is, how to configure the consultative and deliberative processes so that everyone can *really* express themselves. In some cases, the need to use symbolic languages and spatial-corporal dynamics in the consultation and deliberation processes is considered.

Everything said up to this point challenges the synodal method and methodologies, which have been enriched by the contribution of the spiritual conversation, but which cannot be limited to it. A synodal method requires taking up again aspects of the method of *Gaudium et Spes* and of the practice of the communities, of Latin American theologians and pastoral teaching that knew how to find in the contemplative observation of history and its evangelical discernment a path of pastoral renewal and significant ecclesial commitment. This way it could be possible to try out ways for popular reflection to be articulated with the instances of institutional and academic reflection.

In the words of Pope Francis, synodality is what the Lord expects from the Church of the 21st century. We are only at the beginning of this new stage of reception of the Second Vatican Council. The novelty of the Council cannot be reduced to what is said of each ecclesial subject in itself, but requires recognizing that each one is being co-constituted in a process of reciprocal giving and receiving, and of bringing about the communitarian and structural transfor-

mations that this perspective implies.⁴⁸ Similarly, neither can it be reduced to what the Church is, but it is necessary to recognize that it is being constituted in a reciprocal giving and receiving with the peoples, concretizing a multicultural synodality going out to the peripheries and at the service of universal fraternity and sorority. In the words of Pedro Trigo:

The first reference to Christian fraternity is, therefore, its universality, because Jesus carries us all in his heart. It is a matter of moving towards a true family of peoples, in which we are all authentically brothers and sisters and help each other as such in a constant synergy, transcended by emulation. Synodality, therefore, supposes synergy, the confluence of efforts. It is a synergy towards a goal that does not yet exist, the family of peoples, but it is not something capricious. It involves doing justice to reality, making it give of itself in a surpassing way. It is, therefore, a joint path, in which each one gives the best of himself, constructively and creatively.⁴⁹

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⁴⁸ Cf. Luciani: Hacia una vinculación co-constituyente de todos los christifideles (2022).

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Part III:
Topological Reflections

Moving to a Context-Sensitive Church

Learning from U.S. and Universal Perspectives

Kristin Colberg

1. Introduction

Engaging in context-sensitive dialogue is of the utmost importance to the Catholic Church today, as it engages in a global process of moving towards greater synodality. Throughout the world, the People of God want to know how the Church can become more context-sensitive in its thinking and its acting. Additionally, the eyes of the faithful across the globe look to Germany and its Synodal Path wondering what the developments there say about synodality and the future of Catholicism. It is wonderful that experts from so many fields and nations have gathered here to reflect on these topics and listen to one another in order to help the Church proceed on the Synodal Path.

This paper will proceed in three parts. First, I will begin by looking at the context of the United States and how it informs the U.S. Church's approach to, and experience of, the synodal process. Second, I will convey some of the perspectives that I have gained from serving on the synod's theological commission, working as one of the three North American representatives helping to write the Document for the Continental Stage ("Enlarge the Space of Your Tent") and from participating in the diocesan, national and continental levels of the U.S./North American process.¹

Third and finally, I will offer some systematic reflections on synodality and concrete steps towards a "synodalization" of the whole Church.

¹ General Secretariat for the Synod: "Enlarge the Space of Your Tent", Working Document for the Continental Stage (2022).

2. The U.S. Context

Some people will recall that the most famous theologian from the United States at Vatican II was John Courtney Murray, S.J. Murray famously said that the “issue under the issues” at Vatican II was the development of doctrine.² Murray’s point was that while Vatican II’s documents cover an amazingly broad range of topics – a breadth of subjects far more extensive than those considered by previous councils – all of these texts are united by questions about the development of doctrine. Put another way, the central question beneath all of the particular debates at the council was this: can the Church change? This question raised a host of other questions: if the Church can change, when can it change? On what levels and regarding which subjects can it change? If the Church is capable of changing, how can it do so without sacrificing tradition and calling into question its claim to be a reliable interpreter of divine revelation? At Vatican II, change was “the issue under the issues” and it exerted a determinative influence on all of the conciliar deliberations.

I would like to argue that change is also “the issue under the issues” in the Church in the United States today. The U.S. Church is polarized in many ways and much of what divides it is rooted in the question of change. There is a growing chasm between people who desperately believe that the Catholic Church must change in order to preserve any last shred of relevance that it may have, and those who fear that change is precisely the problem because it threatens to erode the Church’s identity. In the U.S. today, how Catholics view change is closely correlated to how they assess the success of the Second Vatican Council. Massimo Faggioli, a leading scholar in the U.S., captures this well by noting that in the United States there is a division between those who see Vatican II as “too modern to be Catholic” and those who see it as “too Catholic to be modern.”³ Those who think that Vatican II is “too modern to be Catholic” cling to the idea that the Church cannot change. They do not like what is happening in the world and believe that the Church should distance itself from these changes by clinging to its tradition. Rather than dialoguing with the secular realm about why it embraces certain developments, they seek to present the Church as an alternative to the world with a distinctive identity rooted in clear, precise, and timeless statements of truth. This group believes that Vatican II, in many ways, betrayed the Church. Those who think that Vatican II is “too Catholic to be modern” are adamant that the Catholic Church absolutely must change, and must change soon. They worry that the Church remains woefully

² Murray: *This Matter of Religious Freedom* (1965), 43.

³ Faggioli: *The Opposition to Francis is Rooted in a Rejection of Vatican II*, Keynote Address at Conference with and for Bishops at Loyola University of Chicago (2022).

and dangerously behind the times on topics related to women, authority, the LBGTQIA+ community, and racial and economic justice. These people worry that the Catholic Church continues to be “the caboose of the present,” to borrow a phrase from Gustavo Gutierrez.⁴

Both of these groups – the “too Catholic to be modern” camp and the “too modern to be Catholic” camp – have been in the U.S. for decades, but growing polarization in the political sphere has hardened divisions between them. In the wake of the 2016 and 2020 presidential cycles, we see a growing acceptance of the existence of “alternate facts,” “fake news,” and a “stolen election.” It used to be the case in the United States that we would debate how to solve problems, now we cannot even agree on which facts to accept as facts. This makes it hard for people who disagree to talk to each other. This situation impacts not only how people see politics, but all areas of life. Questions about what constitutes a fact have filtered into the ecclesial sphere and have exacerbated existing divides. This context has led some Catholics to question the legitimacy of Vatican II – not only particular conciliar teachings, but the Council itself. In the decades after Vatican II, there have been on-going debates about how to interpret certain texts, but now the debate has reached the meta-question of whether the Council has validity. Further, this line of reasoning has led to sharp criticisms of Pope Francis – not just of particular positions, but questions about his legitimacy as pope.

It is important to note that both of these camps – the one that is more open to change and the one that is more likely to oppose it – are largely motivated by fear. Those who want to avoid change are afraid of what is happening in the world, and potentially in the Church, and this fear is expressed as anger. They are angry about the erosion of traditional practices that they hold dear and consider fundamental, and about what they perceive to be the loss of clarity and distinctiveness in their faith. Similarly, those who want to see a change in the Church are motivated by fear as well, which also manifests itself as anger: anger about sexual and financial scandals, anger about the Church being unresponsive to, and sometimes complicit in, systemic injustice and sinful behavior, and anger about the disconnect between the Church (and Church leaders) and the everyday experience of the faithful. Given this polarized climate in the U.S. Church, many Americans were nervous about the synodal process. Those who oppose change (the “too modern to be Catholic” group) are concerned that the synodal process would go beyond the bounds of what was appropriate. They worried that Pope Francis is staging an “open mic night” in the Catholic Church without sufficient guard rails to guarantee that the deposit of faith would be protected. Those who want to see change fear that the synodal process would not go far

⁴ Nickoloff (ed.): Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings (1996), 34.

enough, that the bishops would filter out the most important concerns voiced by the faithful and that not everyone would be heard. This group worries that the synod would have the effect of allowing the Church to say that it listened so that people would be placated but that, in the end, nothing would change.

Yet, to the surprise of many, the synodal process in the U.S. has yielded real fruit and is a source of hope. Given the situation described above, it seemed quite possible (and, in fact, likely) that in the divided context of the U.S. Church, the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops would not be able to produce a document that was meaningful and had a sense of authenticity. However, in fact, was. The National Synthesis of the People of God in the United States represents a beautiful moment of healing and hope. It is a clear demonstration of the fact that listening to one another is really the only real possibility for the future. This hope and a vision of a way forward is captured in this quote from that document:

The rediscovery of listening as a basic posture of the Church called to ongoing conversion is one of the most valuable gifts of the synodal process. The synodal consultations report that hearing the joys and witnessing the wounds that others have experienced, with an inclined heart, has opened a way forward for the Church in the United States to better experience and express its communion as a people united in a common faith.⁵

3. Experiences at the Universal, National and Local Levels

I was fortunate enough to be chosen as a member of the writing team that traveled to Frascati, Italy, to compose the Document for the Continental Stage that synthesized the 112 national reports produced after the synodal consultations at the local and national levels. This document was published with the title “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent.” Our goal for this text was not to merely repeat back what the 112 reports said. Further, our goal was not to engage in “problem-solving” or “theologizing” what was shared in these reports. Instead, our goal was to hold up for the Universal Church what the People of God said during this time of listening. We wanted to say to the faithful around the world: “This is what we heard you say.” It asks the People of God: “Do you hear your voice in this text?” If not, it asks: “Where are the absences, where are the errors, where is the tone wrong?” The great shock to me in this whole process was that, amidst tremendous diversity of lived experience, there is astounding simi-

⁵ United States Catholic Conference of Bishops: U.S. National Synthesis Synod 2021–23 (2022), 12.

larity in what the People of God around the world report about what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Across these texts we consistently hear a desire for the Church to be more inclusive and welcoming, a desire to rethink ecclesial decision-making, a desire for better liturgies and more vibrant homilies and a desire for new styles of leadership and greater closeness among members. If I had to identify the one theme that I saw most clearly and strongly in these documents, it was a desire for more and better formation in the Church. People are crying out for greater formation, more formation of priests in a synodal style of leadership and more formation for the laity who are capable of contributing more gifts to the Church. In these documents, there is a clear sense that synodality is the path of the future and that there is no going back.

“Enlarge the Space of Your Tent” was offered to each of the continents as a tool for discernment. Each of the seven continental assemblies structured their discernment in a unique fashion. It is important to note that there have never been continental-level gatherings, simultaneously among all the continents, before. Accordingly, there is no precedent, no one established way of proceeding. In the U.S. we often say that “necessity is the mother of invention” – this synodal moment is stimulating invention in the form of new models of regional-, national- and continental-level discernment. Drawing from the business world and the world of social science, we can also say that the synod is a “disruptor,” it catalyzes massive change quickly by introducing an innovation. The United States and Canada worked together as “North America,” and this was the only group that opted to hold its assemblies virtually. North America held twelve virtual assemblies, seven held in English, three in Spanish, and two in French. The reason for meeting virtually was that it allowed the greatest opportunities for participation: over nine hundred delegates participated, and over a hundred and fifty bishops. I served as one of the official note takers for these assemblies, and what I heard in these sessions was that the People of God in North America did, largely, feel that the Document for the Continental Stage (“Enlarge the Space of Your Tent”) reflected their voice. One of the comments that I heard most clearly and consistently was that people loved the image of the tent from Isaiah. Countless people noted that this image helps capture the vision of the Church that they seek to realize. The imagery of tent flaps and tent poles, the need to adjust tension in tent ropes to meet the needs of the environment, the fact that a tent is mobile and that tents often appear in the bible as places of welcome, can all be usefully employed to communicate how the community understands the Church’s journey of walking together. In the first years of the synod, we have seen how various levels of the Church – local, regional, and universal – can work together to enhance decision-making and discern the voice of the Spirit.

4. Systematic Reflections

In this last part, we turn to some systematic reflections which might shed light on the question of how we can become a more context-sensitive Church. When Pope Francis directed a message to the members of the theological commission, he asked us to probe the ecclesiology of the People of God from Vatican II. Pope Francis sees Vatican II's ecclesiology as the engine that is driving the efforts to greater synodality. Rafael Luciani in his book, "Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church", captures this perfectly when he notes that Pope Francis wants to use the People of God theology in *Lumen Gentium* (LG) as the measuring stick for the Church's understanding of authority, its communicative structures, its style of leadership, and its decision making.⁶ What would the Church look like if we let this theology transform all the Church's ways of proceeding and we had a "synodalization" of the whole Church? Karl Rahner famously argued that councils must be seen as both an end and a beginning. Specifically, in honor of the 1500th anniversary of Chalcedon he wrote: "Yet while this formula is an end, an acquisition and a victory, which allows us to enjoy clarity and security as well as ease in instruction, if this victory is to be a true one the end must also be a beginning."⁷ Vatican II achieved many great things, but it was also a beginning. I believe that Pope Francis recognizes that the vision of Vatican II has not yet been fully realized. The synod, in many ways, is his effort to actualize the transformation that Vatican II envisioned more completely.

I want to offer one clear example of how the synod is rooted in the theology of Vatican II and is an effort to receive the council's theology more deeply. One of the most important decisions of the entire council occurred during the development of LG. Over the course of multiple drafts, it was decided to move what had been the third chapter on the People of God, which affirmed the baptismal dignity and equality of all the faithful, ahead of what had been the second chapter detailing the authority of the hierarchy. Inverting these chapters made a powerful theological statement: namely, it affirmed that what unites us as baptized members of the body of Christ is more important than the different roles that we play in the Church. Therefore, the theology of the People of God – the reality of our baptismal dignity and co-responsibility – is the horizon, the foundation, and the theological reality that provides shape and meaning to all understandings of authority and hierarchy. While the renewed ordering of these chapters marked a huge advance, the transformation of these two chapters in

⁶ Luciani: *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (2022), 70. On this topic, see his seventh chapter entitled: "Ecclesio-genesis" (pages 70–86).

⁷ Rahner: *Current Problems in Christology* (1961), 149.

light of this place was not achieved in the text itself. In other words, what we see in LG is that chapter two on the People of God and chapter three on the hierarchy are juxtaposed, but that the theological horizon of the second chapter has not yet fully transformed our understanding of the third chapter. Achieving this integration is a key part of the synod's work, and along with establishing the hermeneutical priority of *Lumen Gentium's* chapter two, it is a key foundation to the "synodalization" of the Church. In this way, at the heart of the synod is a deeper reception of Vatican II's teachings.

To conclude, let us reflect on the question: "What would a 'synodalization' of the Church look like?" Here I will highlight four elements. The first is that a "synodalized" Church would have greater structures and practices that promote decision-making at regional and local levels. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) 34, Pope Francis notes that Vatican II had a desire to gain a better understanding of episcopal collegiality and the role of episcopal conferences, but that this desire "has not yet been fully realized." We need to explore the authority of episcopal conferences and their ability to make binding decisions. There have been many debates in the Catholic Church about the authority of – and even the existence of – a regional tier of authority. Yet, a listening Church that wants to reduce the distance between the center and the peripheries needs to think about the possibilities for greater subsidiarity – or more decisions being made by communities closer to the level of reality. The process of the synod has shown the value of regional and continental structures and pioneered these structures in important ways. In the synod, we have a world-wide consultation that makes important use of national and continental structures and which seeks to promote dynamic interplay between the local, regional and universal levels. Thus, the necessity of the synod is giving birth to fundamental and authentic structures in the Church.

Second, a Church that seeks "synodalization" needs to form people in methods of communal discernment. There is a significant difference between democratic voting and parliamentary processes and communal discernment. Yet, many people think that democratic and parliamentary structures are the only forms of participatory governance. Engaging in communal discernment necessitates that individuals enter the decision-making process not with the goal that their voice will carry the day, but with the goal that the community as a whole will come to a deeper understanding of the will of the Spirit. Much has been made at the synod of the difference between decision-making and decision-taking. Oftentimes, people in the Church lament that their voice does not matter because they are not the ones making the final decision. However, we need to help people see that decision-making is a complex process with many features and that all of the stakeholders have authority. Decision-making involves those who know the community's history, those who research the options that

exist, those who think through the logistical considerations, those who will execute the decision and those who come together to discern the will of the Spirit. Decision-taking is the final important step in this process, but the decision-taker is not the only person with authority. To achieve “synodalization” we need more formation in communal discernment and a more diffuse sense of the authorities involved in decision-making. Looking at the example of the United States, in my country the deep polarization makes listening and communal discernment extremely difficult but, at the same time, it is precisely the thing that can heal us. It would be tempting to say that we must wait to begin the practice of communal discernment, wait until we are united and healthy as a body because then the process would be easier; however, we have to do the hard and uncomfortable work of listening and practicing communal discernment now, so we can be who we want to become.

Third, realizing the lasting reforms that we desire in the Church’s life requires a transformation of canon law. For the transformation of structures, the renewed notions of authority, the effective modes of communication and decision-making that we desire to take full effect, they have to be translated into the canon law. Like perhaps many of us, for many years I thought canon law had a very small (and boring) role to play in the Church. However, my opinion has been changed by the synodal process. There are many canon lawyers working in the synod because the Secretariat for the Synod realizes the critical role of this field in transforming the Church. Currently, in canon law, it is often the case that the choice to consult the faithful is recommended for certain situations, but ultimately the decision is left to the discretion of the bishop. However, in a more fully synodal Church, such matters should not be left to the discretion of the ordinary, but should be mandated by canon law so that there are more places where consultation is a normal, regular, expected, predictable part of the Catholic Church’s life. Thus, to be a synodal Church, we need a “synodalization” of canon law.

Fourth and finally, a “synodalization” of the Church requires a renewal of seminary training. A synodal Church recognizes that authoritarian attitudes and clericalism are obstacles on the path to full participation. Addressing the problem of clericalism requires forming seminarians in synodal styles of leadership. Seminarians need training in consultative processes, in communal discernment, and effective communication. A synodal Church must transcend the unhelpful distinction between a “teaching Church” and a “learning Church.” Instead, we see the entire People of God as both teachers and learners. Throughout the synod, we often hear people say that “the bishops need to listen to the People of God” or “priests need to listen to the People of God.” Yet, such statements are in themselves problematic because we are all the People of God before we

play any other role – and this includes members of the hierarchy. We need to review seminary formation for the synodal Church of the future.

We are living in an exciting, radical and unprecedented time in the Church. A time when the Church seeks to be more context-sensitive and more universal at the same time. What is clear is that synodality and synodal listening allow us to achieve both. Conferences like this are an important part of this listening and the work that each of us does makes synodality not just an idea, but a reality.

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Overcoming Supremacy: Classes and Territories in the Church

Sandra Arenas

In Germany, the “Synodal Path” has been understood as a process of ecclesial reform supported by both the laity and the official Church to identify structural aspects underlying the power abuse and develop possible solutions. This path has been proposed to discuss especially issues such as power, power sharing and participation, priestly life, sexuality, and the role of women in the Church.

However, is the so-called “German Reform Debate” really unique? In what sense is it so and in what sense is it not? It is worth asking about the paths – perhaps different, or longer, less direct, sectorized, fragmented – that other local churches have followed in this whole program of ecclesial reform, to which the abuse crisis in the Church has led us (in some local churches more than in others, we believe). For this reason, it is also pertinent to ask ourselves about the spirit of ecclesial reform that exists in some local churches where the crisis of abuse in the Church has not yet become visible (e.g., Africa, Asia, or Eastern Europe). What are the questions that have emerged in these churches in the last five years?

A review of the reports issued by the robust study “The Synodal Way – Global Church Perspectives”¹ reveals that there are indeed transversal themes and concerns, almost always with nuances, and there are also differences that deserve attention and deepening from different angles. The study is an effort that will serve as a basis for exploring these urgencies, diagnoses, findings, problems, and intuitions. A thread that I pick up by putting this study in conversation with previous research and experiences, is that we find it very difficult to listen to each other, to open spaces for consultation, to include others in decision-making processes, to integrate differences and even dissidence, to transform our culture of relationships. Why is it so difficult? There are several answers, and they involve multifactorial analyses, but I believe that to a great extent it is due to the fact that we are wrapped up in an institutional model that has been transformed into an ecclesial culture, with several supremacies that

¹ Cf. Institut für Weltkirche und Mission: Synodaler Weg – Weltkirchliche Perspektiven.

affect the relationships of the ecclesial membership at the individual level and of the local churches among themselves: adultcentrism, androcentrism, Europeancentrism, etc.

I would like to offer some open reflections on two other supremacies that seem to be constantly latent in the entire synodal process and hinder the generation of a new ecclesial culture that will sustain the possible reforms that this process initiates. In the first place, for this process to have the expected depth and scope, it is necessary to admit and assume the dual class system that still survives and the conception of power that emerges from it: power and authority linked to a sacrament (the offices in the Church). Who has the power to *channel* the territorial discernments with their decisions and *transform them into new ecclesial structures* according to their demands? Secondly, I will address the question of the catholicity of the Church starting from the relationship between the local churches and the Global Church, the permanent virtuous tension between the territories and the universal. Or, in other words, between the life of the communities of Jesus scattered throughout the world, anchored in their contexts in their inalienable link to the entire ecclesial globe. What unity of the Church? What *oekumene*?

What is said about these two matters will directly inform a certain model of the Church, an understanding of participation in it, and, therefore, of inclusion/exclusion of the membership in its deliberative, consultative, and decision-making processes.

1. Dual Class Structure: Laity – Ordained Ministers

From the ecclesiology of the people of God, it has often been established that the Second Vatican Council adopted a completely new theological-doctrinal position regarding the laity, thus initiating a so-called “era of the laity”. The hierarchy was then to be conceived primarily as “people” (*pueblo*) and the laity properly as the Church, although the Second Vatican Council also clearly states that the office of the laity does not refer to participation in the hierarchical function of the clergy, but in the threefold priestly, prophetic, and royal ministry of Christ. This in no way changes the fact that the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood are, from the conciliar point of view, essentially different, and this maintains a double structure of the Church. The equality of all its members, affirmed by the Council, refers only to the “common dignity” of the Christian faithful (LG 32) conferred by baptism, and has not been sufficient to

put an end to the gulf opened for centuries between ordained ministers and laity; on the contrary, a doctrinal juxtaposition has been created².

Theological conversations often ask how to deal with and adjust the abyss between the two classes, but not how to overcome it by deepening fundamental equality. Not even in the ecclesologies of liberation developed by the most prominent liberation theologians has it been recognized that, if not the central problem of the Church, one of the most relevant ones lies precisely in the distinct dual class system³; or it has simply been overlooked. And this system has several consequences when we think of the synodal Church model that touches on several spheres of relationships, one of which is precisely the question of teaching authority: who teaches in the Church?

The question of teaching authority also implies the question of the listening community. Vatican II made a conscious effort to change the methodology of how to “forge doctrine” by involving listening to as many different ecclesial voices as possible throughout the entire conciliar event (the universal consultation, theologians, non-Catholic observers, some – few – women, etc.), yet it did not problematize inclusive internal relationships, as it did with the Church-world relationship. This has created self-centered models of power relations that have gone into crisis, with this strong explosion of abuses committed by some (so many!) ministers. While Vatican II assigned the laity their own identity and outlined their mission in the *saeculum*, it also held that those who receive the ministerial priesthood are “separated” from the people of God and “mediate” the presence of Christ acting *in persona Christi capiti*. They are, moreover, those who hold the teaching function in the Church and, consequently, are removed from the hearing community.

The relationship between the ministerial priesthood and the baptismal priesthood, in this context, was not resolved with the evangelical theoretical axis of “service”, given that the aforementioned separation perpetuated a very asymmetrical way of exercising internal relationships. The ministers/bishops have the role of parents and teachers, they must “listen” to the laity and “allow” them to act. For their part, the laity were “thrown” into the world and thus their role

² Cf. for example Rush: Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles (2004), 27–43, 49.

³ It may be due to the poor reception of Gratian’s decree on the declaration “Duo sunt genera Christianorum”. Cf. Friedberg: *Decretum Magistri Gratiani* (1879). Later canonists will often use this text as a basis for pointing out that in the Church there are two classes – two states – of persons because of authority. However, this does not seem to be the original meaning of the text but rather reflects the medieval thought according to which the *duo genera christianorum* refers not to the organization of the Church by which some – the *presbyters* – regulate and others – the laity – obey, but to the *duae vitae*, that is, to the two ways of living the one Christian message in the civic-religious unity that has been called *Christianitas*.

in the public sphere was delineated and nuanced; however, their role within the Church was not so well delineated and thus, very unprotected⁴.

For example, the Latin American theology of the Church focused its attention on contextually redefining the radical insertion of the Church in history, with all the socio-political commitment that this implied. But not even the project of the Basic Ecclesial Communities (*Comunidades Eclesiales de Base*), which were instituted in a large part across the continental Church, succeeded in generating different styles of exercising ecclesiastical power and community leadership. Proof of this is that this ecclesial praxis did not translate into substantive changes in the formation of the laity, the diaconate or the presbyterate that could prevent abuses of power, or the crisis produced by them in the region. In other words, in the context of the abuse crisis in the ecclesial context, this Latin American ecclesiology did not make in the praxis a great difference with respect to the European one⁵.

The faithful exercise of the prophetic function contributes to a growth in the intelligence of the transmission of the faith and, therefore, to the exercise of the *munus docendi* in the Church. This implies that the laity is in some effective way included as the subject of this office, instead of being only its object. For this, it is not enough to simply praise and promote the awakening of a sense of faith among the faithful without seriously confronting the dual class system that is a breeding ground for a clerical understanding of the teaching office.

This theme touches on the historical revelation of God, which unfolds in time and space, challenging any magisterial and theological production that claims to be absolute. Its welcoming implies that the members of the local church are not a passive mass, but active subjects who have received the anointing of the Spirit and possess the sense of faith⁶.

If the beginning of the process is situated in the prophetic function of the people of God, we should ask ourselves: What does the *prophetic* office imply? And the first thing to say is that it has undergone an evolution starting from the conciliar teaching. When we cross the teaching of LG with that of DV, we observe that both the people of God and the hierarchy are considered active subjects. It is not only a question of what has been called “bipolar circularity” between ministers and laity, but of a tripolar circularity, as the Australian theologian Ormond Rush has rightly pointed out: magisterium, theologians and faith-

⁴ Indeterminate or blurred in Duquoc’s words. Cf. Duquoc: *Creo en la iglesia: precariedad institucional y reino de Dios* (2001), 65.

⁵ The question about the incidence that the theologies of the Church have on the magisterium and pastoral life is a topic of debate. Unfortunately, it is not possible to address it in this paper.

⁶ Francis’ teaching has tirelessly repeated this argument. Cf. Francisco: *Carta del Santo Padre Francisco al Pueblo de Dios que peregrina en Chile* (2018), nos. 1 and 5.

ful constitute a single teaching office, the ecclesial prophetic role. Who exercises the *sensus fidei*, who the magisterium, and who transmits divine revelation? For Rush there are three authorities within a *single teaching office* in the whole Church⁷, where the *universitas fidelium* would be involved, the teaching authority of the whole Church as the primary recipient of divine revelation. That is to say, the people of God, who participate, together with the magisterium, in the prophetic office, in the teaching office of the Church (LG 12). Within these coordinates, the possibilities of participatory ecclesial designs are nourished, sustained, and expanded, also towards those spheres of the teaching exercise in the Church that have been restricted to a specific ministry.

Indeed, the current form of Church government does not necessarily represent a homogeneous development of an original essence. It is possible to identify a centralizing process that was replicated from the macro to the micro: from a primacy of honor to one of jurisdiction (*effective* jurisdiction over local churches) extending the authority with excessive personalization, it also went through conciliarism, and this resulted in a mimicry with the modern States and their bureaucratic forms. This occurred from the top down, with an inexcusable forgetfulness of the voice of the *rest of the faithful people* (because the Pope and the bishops are part of it). To a large extent, the current demands for ecclesial membership participation are linked to the rejection of this historical centralization movement, which, to be overcome, requires a distinction of three functions and their effects: the one as Bishop of Rome, the regional one as patriarchate of the West and the universal one of the “primacy”. By identifying these functions – which are distinct – the autonomy of the local and regional churches has been weakened and, as a result, the sphere of responsibility of the various *magisteria* and the faithful in the management of the Church has been blurred.

The theological proposal of the one teaching office is based on a comprehensive rereading of the conciliar teaching and the hermeneutical keys it inculcates. In the redactional process of the conciliar documents, an evolution in the reflection on the Church that teaches and the Church that learns – the hearing community – can be observed. Even the outline of the Theological Commission (pre-conciliar phase) does not speak of authentic magisterium exercised only by the Pope and the bishops; it also refers to auxiliary organs of the office of authoritative teaching, the task of theologians and of those who assist in the teaching office in their pastoral role; even to all the faithful in the teaching office

⁷ Cf. Rush: *The Eyes of Faith. The Sense of the Faithful and the Church’s Reception of Revelation* (2016), 60. Rush achieves a magnificent synthesis about the prophetic office in his most recent comprehensive conciliar work: *Rush: The Vision of Vatican II: Its Fundamental Principles* (2019).

of the Church⁸. On the other hand, the relationship between the baptismal and ministerial priesthood is problematized, extending the discussion of the *tria munera*⁹ to lay participation in the royal and prophetic office. Authority is referred to Christ, as the only one who has the authoritative power, exercised from the dynamics of service¹⁰.

The Council's awareness that the laity and ordained ministers participate in the threefold ministry of Christ (LG 34–36) was gradual, and various actors intervened. For example, the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, in its corresponding vow, emphasizes that the whole people of God actively participate in the understanding of doctrine and that priests should encourage the laity to develop theological interest and to pronounce judgments of faith¹¹. The Secretariat is at the basis of the conciliar teaching on the *tria munera* of the laity. It underlies a pneumatological principle, namely, that the Spirit maintains the whole Church in the truth, expressing judgments of faith (LG 12), infallible teaching (LG 25) and maintaining, practicing and witnessing to the inheritance of faith (DV 10), deploying a unique *conspiratio*¹². Although it is true that this *conspiratio* was not developed or even juxtaposed to the conciliar thesis on the teaching office, it was included, waiting for its later theological, doctrinal, and pastoral development.

According to Rush, it is precisely synodality that resolves this tension in a new synthesis that is mediated by listening to the people's sense of faith, not as an option or an annex to the exercise of the magisterium, but as an intrinsic requirement, to be exercised at all levels of the Church¹³. Laity and ordained ministers complement each other; the active collaboration of the whole people of God is required to exercise the prophetic office in the Church (notwithstanding the tension that LG 10 maintains¹⁴). Moreover, in the same passages, the interrelation of all the subjects involved in understanding and articulating the faith and its hierarchical relationships is underlined. The original intention of

⁸ Cf. AS I/4, 51–53, numbers 31–34.

⁹ The “non gradu tantum, sed etiam essential” comes from Pius XII (1954) and was questioned, defended by the conciliar minority, and finally maintained.

¹⁰ Cf. AS I/4, 60.

¹¹ Cf. Velati: Dialogo e Rinnovamento. Verbali e Testi del Segretariato per l'unità dei Cristiani nella Preparazione del Concilio (2011), 366.

¹² Cf. Rush: The Eyes of Faith. The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation (2016), 183. The same position is defended by Anthony Ekpo: “[...] this theological discrepancy and lack of integration seem to project the understanding that the church is divided into two aspects, namely, the ecclesia docens and the ecclesia discens” (Ekpo: The Sensus Fidelium and the Threefold Office of Christ: A Reinterpretation of Lumen Gentium No. 12 [2015], 341).

¹³ Cf. Rush: Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church (2017).

¹⁴ Cf. Coffey: The Common and the Ordained Priesthood (1997).

LG 25–27 was to focus on how local bishops concretely apply the *tria munera* in their local churches¹⁵.

2. The Glocal Church: The Virtuous Tension Between Territories and the Global Church

The Catholicity of the Church is given in its local and contextual concreteness rather than in its universal idealizations. Catholicity is not only a universal and static characteristic of the Church, and allows us to face the effects of globalization through a discernment of the Christian mandate by the *oikoumene*, this means, the unity of humanity and creation as a whole, proper to the sacramental mission of the Church.

In the pre-Vatican II period – we are talking about no more than sixty years ago – the qualitative elements of Catholicity were almost completely bypassed. There was a tendency to identify Catholicity with universality, to equate continuity with immutability, and to equate universality with uniformity, which resulted in a narrow understanding of Catholicity. This quantitative approach is qualified by the recovery of a Catholic vision of the Church beyond institutional boundaries, which was initiated by the Council and which, more than sixty years later, Francis is strongly taking up again. And it is precisely in his social teaching that he echoes the Council's teaching, which gradually recovers a more qualitative view, beyond that of geographical extension – typical of the Catholic Counter-Reformation of the 16th century.

Global Catholicism, then, far from disregarding the theological consistency of the local churches, reassigns them meaning as places where the fullness of faith is lived out and Catholicity is fulfilled. The quality of the local community to achieve cohesion is complemented by geographical extension, with the quality of adapting to all cultures and to all people. How to recover the qualitative aspects of the Church? By revisiting the relationship between the Catholicity of the Church and its unity, and between the Catholicity of the Church and history.

By revisiting these relationships, identification without further ado is problematized, warning that this identification entails an anthropological pessimism where cultures and their transforming potential are blurred. In this way, diversities, localities, and contexts appear as an essential component of the unity of

¹⁵ Cf. Dianich: *Primacy and Episcopal Collegiality: Problems and Perspectives* (2017). I would argue that, within a sacramental ecclesiology, participation in *tria munera* is rooted in a different sacramental basis for the laity – also for priests and bishops when they are not engaged in activities that presuppose ordination – and for the ordained.

the Church. Each locality becomes a potential bearer of the fullness of the whole Church, as well as of the aspects that require correction and conversion. The territories, where the local church is configured, appear as a realization of the unity of the Church rather than a threat to it.

The Church has a liminal nature, that is, it does not seek to perpetuate itself but to serve as mediation for the creation of something new. The local churches, on the one hand, must be able to integrate, receive, or permanently assume the integrality of the Gospel to become fully Church. On the other hand, the universal Church must be able to include and adapt to the richness shared by all the local churches (from their territoriality) and to the elements of life and truth that the particular churches (regional or diocesan, for example, but also other churches or ecclesial communities) have developed and preserved better.

Catholicity links unity and totality, conceived as fullness and integrating variety; it implies diversification of ecclesial communion. The Spirit is the principle of unity and communion, also of Catholicity. This Catholic unity or Catholicity is neither a fact nor an abstraction. It is not exhausted in any conceptualization, it is dynamic, it is always under construction because it requires the unavoidable assistance of history, which is always changing; and in this sense, we speak of Catholicity of a qualitative order, because it has all the breadth and scope given by the historical becoming. Thus, the synodal Church is a Church that listens to the Spirit in history, so it is supposed to integrate the *provisionality* of the definitions and also of the ecclesial designs.

Catholic unity is broken by exclusion of any kind, whether internal or external. The sense of Catholicity is damaged by not recognizing the provisional nature of the unity that is achieved, and even more by ignoring the diversity with concrete faces, names, stories, and specific demands. Everything that is inserted in the logic of homogenizing domination attempts against Catholicity, such as the colonization of the Global South, the ecumenism of return, and the manifestations of Eurocentric white supremacy (among many others). All these have contributed to the wounds that damage the Catholicity of the one Church of Christ.

The communion among all local churches must be expressed in one place, from theological and human *humus*. This communion must turn ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and historical diversity into a contextualized expression of the common witness to be given to the risen Lord. The synodal model of the Church has its own internal orientation but also a foreign external one, that is, to open the senses to the movements of history: listening must progress in both directions, in order to facilitate a fruitful exchange among all the baptized faithful. This synodal model is rooted in a dynamic theology of the local churches and the basic consideration of the sense of faith of the believing people, that is to say, in the fundamental importance of assisting all the baptized faithful not only

through listening but also through consultation and integration in institutional deliberative and decision-making spaces. Both the fruitful exchange between Christian churches and the attention to the sense of faith of the faithful people are theological assets that provide a good platform for the progress of synodal structures.

The conversion towards a consultative, deliberative, and decisional Church, inclusive of diverse voices, refers to the active search for that instinct that is expressed in the form of diverse opinions of the baptized, also in dissidence. It is about the “sense of smell” regarding styles of government, development of doctrine, valuing of diverse spiritualities, teaching, celebratory models, and pastoral designs. The nature of the Church is expressed in movements towards consultation, in some cases called synodality, and in others, community discernment. The recent document of the International Theological Commission also endorses a path that broadens our gaze toward synodality in inter-Christian relations, affirming that the Catholic Church needs to be attentive to what the Spirit is saying to it through believers in churches and ecclesial communities that are not in full communion with it¹⁶. Also in this sense, the synodal model of the Church reforms institutions, because it implies being traversed by the consultation and integration of voices where the sense of faith of believers is expressed in many different ways, both in popular piety, as in the liturgy/liturgies, in the organization of the apostolate, in the discernment of the mission, or the structures of leadership.

From the prophetic function of Christ, each member of the baptized people of God with their particular charisms contributes to the discernment of where and how God acts, of how we can read this salvific action, of what this historical presence calls us to locally and globally. No member of the Church has a privilege in this sense. The churches are the first subjects of the Word and the Spirit; the sense of faith is anchored here and also the reception or the interpretation of the decisions and the so-called authoritative texts. This reception is a first-order element of doctrinal and pastoral authority, for the infallibility of the sense of faith of all members.

If the Word of God is prior to any particular definition, that definition must be pronounced after a long maturation and, thus, already represent the faith of the Church. This would imply that the Spirit was heard by the believing people and, therefore, the distance between definition and reception would be shortened to a minimum. This implies a real appreciation for one’s own, for the context, for the local and regional. What we have been saying is that the hermeneutics of listening (in Latin *auscultare/auris-clino*: to incline to hear; *auris*, ear)

¹⁶ Cf. International Theological Commission: Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church (2018), no. 117.

is not enough in this process; we must arrive at the hermeneutics of active and effective consultation (in Latin *consultare/consulere*: to ask for advice, to deliberate together, to judge well) so that this exchange is reflected in the decisions, in the structures and modes of organization and government. However, since the ongoing synodal process that has deployed spaces of active consultation in some regional churches, many members of the Church are skeptical about what will be done with this consultation: how will these voices be channeled? What decisions will be made? Will these differences be reflected in the formal decisional spaces? Will these decisional spaces be diversified? How do we decentralize? The recent incorporation of a good group of lay people in the Synod of Bishops on Synodality is certainly good news in this direction, echoing some of these questions.

The fear generated by closed community styles, materially exclusive and with coercive spiritualities, also weighs heavily. We have multiple examples. The Church should be a master in the inclusion and generation of freedom spaces for its members. Anything different would be something else, except the Church of Christ. Above all, the experience of history weighs heavily, which shows not few censures, corrections made “within four walls”, or arbitrary decisions, together with the scarce transfer to ecclesial structures that sustain these processes and project them in time.

Thus, for example, if the Church wants to avoid an error of faith, decisions should not seek to block the plurality of interpretations but rather to reposition them in the abscissa of the faith that saves and liberates; living faith expresses itself in so many ways. This also concerns theology.

How can this decentralization be implemented concretely? First, by listening to, consulting, and promoting local initiatives, the so-called “centrifugal forces of the Church”. Francis has merit in this direction. In his writings, documents written by regional episcopal organisms are referenced and he maintains a permanent and conscious attention towards *the other* that is not usually on the immediate radar of those in the government of the Church. He has the ability to look at the small and distant. This is a style that must be developed with more determination in the local churches too. Secondly, by giving attention to the theological debates with all the clues they open in the intelligence of faith. Thirdly, by being part of the grassroots movements. Fourth, by rejecting and eliminating the pastoral styles, the spiritual and ritual accents that fragment the ecclesial community and produce ghettos. And, of course, by broadening and deepening the theological formation of all ecclesial community members¹⁷.

¹⁷ In a good interview with the at the time Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, he argues: “To do theology is to be taken back to the strangeness of being in this new Christian

3. Brief Concluding Remarks

The ecclesial conversation about the Synodal Church is broad and remains open, offering many possibilities for deepening. It is a process that implies a commitment to generate a transformation of the ecclesial culture capable of supporting, sustaining, and deploying over time the participatory community channels that we are witnessing.

On this route, it is also convenient to take a pause and revisit traditional aspects of our ecclesial culture, from as many angles as possible. This work crosses two of these aspects, without pretending to end the conversation, but rather to contribute to a more holistic approach to the issues that the process of synodalization of the Church puts on the table.

Throughout the history of the Church, and especially in the recent history of the centuries before the Second Vatican Council, the Church experienced an excessive centralization that necessarily placed some local churches above others. In this way, not only vast territories of ecclesial life were blurred, but the understanding of the Catholicity of the Church tended to be restrictively delimited. This has been changing gradually, but very slowly, transitioning to a Global Church that permanently integrates contextual difference, in all its processes and discernments. Many theological works have addressed the tension between the universal Church and local churches, studies that must be taken up again when we think of the Synodal Church; as we imagine it, it is a model of the Church that integrates these contextual particularities, offering community spaces that are in tune with the questions, the searches, and the lives of those who inhabit these territories. This territorial decentralization follows the path opened by the Second Vatican Council, which Pope Francis has resolutely welcomed and expanded.

In this work, it was also intended to briefly review an aspect considered crucial at the moment of propitiating a model of synodal Church, which is that participation considers not only listening but also effective, active, permanent consultation, capable of engaging inclusive, deliberative and decisional spaces. The deepening of the conciliar teaching in this context, noticing its possibilities and limitations, allows us to identify a dual system of classes in the Church which can be problematized from different angles, one of them being the exercise of the prophetic office of the people of God as a whole. The theologies of the Church, in dialogue with local cultures and ecclesial fabrics, have a long way to go in this regard.

framework”, linking the topic to the urgency of the democratization of theological education. Cf. Williams: *Theological Education Is for Everyone* (2020).

These two areas invite us to seek to overcome at least two supremacies that stand in the way of striving for a Church that truly moves toward the inclusion of the diverse voices that configure it. The conversation is still open, and we are all invited to join it.

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An African Insight into European Debates about Power in the Church

Josée Ngalula RSA

1. Introduction

At the most basic level, power is about the ability to do something or get something done. In human life, there are different types of power and many ways of exercising it¹; some of them are related to domination, others not. There are three meanings of power that are not automatically related to domination:

- Firstly, the “power-within”: it is a potential, the person’s sense of self-worth and self-knowledge, using inner energies. It enhances the sense of self-identity, confidence, and awareness that is a precondition for action. The power-within empowers people to overcome challenges in their lives, fight for their human rights and exercise them².
- Secondly, the “power-to”: it refers to the unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and the world. In all societies, this kind of power is generally developed through education, to valorize, strengthen and multiply capacities, skills, and knowledge in persons and groups. It is an important potential for individual fulfillment and social development³.
- And thirdly, the “power-with”: it refers to the collective power wielded on a basis of common ground, to strengthen collective action. It is based on mutual support, solidarity, and collaboration. It can emerge or be developed through processes of collective action and alliance building. It is generally developed to avoid social violence between groups in society, by developing collaboration⁴.

¹ See, for example: LeRoy J.: *The Identification and Classification of Power Types in Work Organizations* (1977).

² See, for example: Butterworth: *The Power Within* (1969); Evatt: *Peace, Power, and Presence. A Guide to Self-Empowerment, Inner Peace, and Spiritual Enlightenment* (2008).

³ See, for example: Majer: *Power to Transform. Your New Future Awaits* (2019).

⁴ See, for example: Wartenberg: *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation* (1990).

There is one meaning of power that is highly related to control and domination: it is the “power-over”.

- The “power-over” means the power that one person or group uses to control another person or group. It consists of the ability of those in positions of social authority, of any kind of physical or psycho-social force, to give orders, direct actions, and influence thoughts of those under control. When this kind of power reinforces the privileges of certain people in the hierarchy, or social categories in society, it opens the door to different kinds of manipulation, abuse of authority, and violence⁵.
- One can note that, sometimes, the “power-with” can be used as a means for one social group to take control of another one: in this case, it is used as a “power-over” of a group over another.

In many parts of the world, there is a debate about power inside religious institutions, because the way to use power has a forcibly good or bad impact on the lives of individuals and on the whole society. The public scandals about spiritual, sexual, and financial abuse in many European countries have generated public debates around power in the Church. What is the analysis of African theologians in these debates? I will answer this question by beginning to recall how power is used in religious institutions, especially in the Church; after that, I will analyze the “Report on the Topic of Power and Division of Powers” of the survey led by the Research Project “Synodal Way – Global Church Perspectives”.

2. The Use and Exercise of Power in the Church

In Christian life and the Church’s institutions, all four kinds of power exist: “power-within”, “power-to”, “power-with” and “power-over”. Indeed, on the one hand, believing in God as organized inside the Church’s structures can develop “power-within” and “power-to” both in individuals and collectivities, by empowering their confidence in themselves and in their capacity to overcome challenges in their life and history⁶. On the other hand, leadership inside religious institutions as “power-over” consists either of the power of decision-making (to have the last word during the process of making decisions)⁷, or the

⁵ Cf. Greene: *Power, les 48 lois du pouvoir* (2014).

⁶ Cf. DeCenso/Johnson/Clark: *Amazed by the Power of God* (2011); *Bridges: The Transforming Power of the Gospel* (2022).

⁷ See, for example: Barker: *The Power of Decision: A Step-by-Step Program to Overcome Indecision and Live Without Failure Forever* (2011).

power of spiritual guidance (for example, priests as spiritual fathers)⁸, or power as a hierarchical position (e. g., the parish priest has more power than his vicar or the deacon)⁹, or power as capacity of representation of the institution in the society (e.g., a bishop represents his diocese and no-one else)¹⁰.

Structures and use of power are generally presented as being “spiritual”, coming from God and at the service of human salvation¹¹. But, unfortunately, many scandals inside the Church’s structures that have occurred all over the world demonstrate that, inside the Church, there can be, and there actually is, misuse and even perversion of “power-on” through many kinds of abuse of power in spiritual contexts, which disempower the individual’s and the collective’s “power-within”, “power-to” and “power-with”¹², even in the private sexual life of people trusting the Church¹³.

That is why many voices are calling for ethics in the use of power inside the Church, and in all religious institutions¹⁴. In this context, some groups or categories of people inside the Church can develop perverse “power-with” dynamics, enabling them to use the “power-over” ability they have to treat other categories as meaningless, with a low level of dignity and ontologically subaltern. This is the case when the clerics set themselves apart as having “sacred power”, as a way to diminish others by considering the laity in the Church as inferior in dignity: ordained ministers in the Church become a kind of “clerical club”, not journeying together in the Church “with” the laity as their brothers and sisters based on the same baptism, but rather feeling “above” laity¹⁵. That is what Pope Francis has called the “disease of clericalism”: it is a misuse of clerical “power-on”, which is a perversion because it distorts the clergy itself, distancing them from the people and leading to many sorts of abuse in the Church¹⁶.

To heal the Church from misuse and perversion of power inside its structures, and in evangelizing the world, at least two basic solutions are proposed

⁸ See, for example: Alan: *Spirituality & Leadership: Harnessing the Wisdom, Guidance, and Power of the Soul* (2002).

⁹ See, for example: Joullié/Spillane: *Philosophy of Leadership. The Power of Authority* (2015).

¹⁰ See, for example: Martyn: *Power and the Church: Ecclesiology in an Age of Transition* (1998).

¹¹ Cf. Wiersbe/Wiersbe: *10 Power Principles for Christian Service* (2010).

¹² Cf. Becka/Caero Bustillos/Vila-Chã (eds.): *Politics, Theology and the Meaning of Power* (2021).

¹³ Cf. Robinson: *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus* (2008).

¹⁴ Cf. Johnson/Van Vonderen: *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church* (2005); Langberg: *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (2020).

¹⁵ Cf. Crothers: *The Clergy Club* (2018).

¹⁶ McElwee/Wooden (eds.): *A Pope Francis Lexicon* (2018). See also: Higgins/Letson: *Power and Peril: The Catholic Church at the Crossroads* (2002).

nowadays. Firstly, to develop Synodality: the Synodal Way is a conversion process toward a “power-with” mentality and organization that enhances a co-responsible and participatory Church that recognizes laity as full subjects in the Church. It decreases clericalism and increases collegiality in a way that makes clerics, laity and all categories inside the Church walk together, listening to each other with respect and collaborating in a way that recognizes the equal dignity of the members of the People of God¹⁷. A second solution is to combat clericalism, both in mentalities and structures¹⁸.

The research project “Synodal Way – Global Church Perspectives”, undergone by the Institute for Global Church and Mission, is situated in this context of looking for ways to stop distortions, misuse, and abuse of power in the Church, by listening to the people of God through a survey.

3. Analysis of the Report on the Topic “Power and Divisions of Powers” in the Church

The research project “*Synodal Way – Global Church Perspectives*” has dealt with many topics, and I limit my analysis to the topic “Power and Division of Powers”. In this particular part of the survey, the research team is focused on the “power-over”, especially at the level of decision-making in the Church: how does it work regarding the ideal of “power-with”? From this perspective, the creators of the survey found that the majority of responders of all the regions complained that the concentration of decision-making in the Church is in the hierarchy (priests and bishops), who leave lay people who are active in the Church out of the process of decision-making. From this point of view, I suggest that we go a bit further, by analyzing a bit more in depth the quantitative and the qualitative responses to raise some issues for our debate today.

Firstly, the highest mean value within this topic shows the highest consensus among the respondents: it is statement three, about shared participation in the mission of the Church as a Gospel testimony. As we can see in the research report (see above, Part I, Research Project “Synodal Way – Global Church Perspectives”, *Table 4*), 62.9% of the participants totally agree and 26.2% agree that shared participation by laity and clergy in the mission of the Church helps

¹⁷ Cf. Luciani: *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (2022); Francis: *Walking Together: The Way of Synodality* (2023).

¹⁸ Cf. Heasley: *Call No One Father: Countering Clericalism in the Catholic Tradition* (2019); Ngalula: *Combatting Clericalism and Patriarchy as Instruments of Abuse in Church and Society* (2021), 19–28; Cuff: *Priesthood for All Believers: Clericalism and How to Avoid It* (2022).

in proclaiming the message. The regional analyses show that Africa and Asia had the highest levels of agreement (mean values of 4.60 and 4.59, respectively), while Eastern Europe is the region with the lowest, with a mean value of 4.23, which still expresses a positive opinion about it (see above, Part I, *Table 5*). It is interesting to see that the largest consensus appears when the question of power is presented as a testimony of the Gospel, where only 1,5 % disagree.

It means that the desire to see lay people participating more in the power in the Church, whatever definition of power you give, is not for them a matter of competition between clergy and laity, but rather a matter of fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The key concept here is “participation”: the power in the Church belongs primarily to God, in Jesus Christ; and the whole Church participates to it as “Body of Christ”¹⁹, in Synodality²⁰.

Secondly, the middle mean value in the case of the second statement, about the influence or not of lay people in the Church, globally shows that 46.9 % of responders totally agree and 27,9 % agree that it would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed (see above, Part I, *Table 4*). The regional behavior shows that the whole sample expresses a relatively high level of consensus. Although Asia and the Middle East had the highest levels of agreement, while Africa and Eastern Europe had the lowest, all regions agree that there is more to do. Latin American and African participants of focus groups stressed that there is more to do not only for the laity in general but particularly for women.

Thirdly, the lowest mean value can be found regarding the first statement, about the detention of power in the Church by a group. This globally shows that 26.9 % of responders totally agree and 28.2 % agree that power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops (see above, Part I, *Table 4*). The participants had an ambivalent opinion about this statement and there were relevant differences (see above, Part I, *Table 5*). Eastern Europe and the Middle East showed the highest levels of agreement with this statement (with mean values of 3.59 and 3.69, respectively). Those from Africa, Asia, and Latin America rated it at a lower mean value (between 3.11 and 3.35). This is understandable because in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Small Christian Communities are very developed: their structure offers lay people many opportunities to have responsibilities and be involved in decision-making in the Church²¹.

¹⁹ See, for example: Millet (ed.): *By what Authority?: The Vital Question of Religious Authority in Christianity* (2010).

²⁰ Cf. Francis: *Walking Together: The Way of Synodality* (2023).

²¹ Cf. Nerney/Taussig: *Re-imagining Life Together in America: A New Gospel of Community* (2002); Fraser: *Many Cells, One Body. Stories from Small Christian Communities* (2003); Healey/Hinton: *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment* (2011).

In addition, I would like to highlight the following topics emerging from the debates in regional focus groups in this survey:

1. The importance to have a precise definition of “power” in the Church: in the regional focus groups, the Eastern Europe participants suggested that the concept of power would not be the most appropriate term for the Church, and they questioned its meaning and use to approach the topic. The African participants focused more on what power itself means (or should mean) within the Church, how leadership is currently understood and exercised, and how this should develop for a better ecclesial experience. The Asian participants consider that it is better to conceptualize it as “responsibility”, since this would be a more appropriate term for the Church.
2. The importance of defining more precisely the objective of looking for more participatory decision-making in the Church: for example, during the regional focus group, the African participants said that because the laity and women are the ones who know the local communities best, the concentration of power in the hierarchy cannot be a good thing. What is stressed here as the objective of a better distribution is the success of the mission of the Church: it is very important and useful to involve the people who know very well the underground realities, that is, the lay people committed to the Christian communities.
3. The importance of taking into account the disparity within the Church: in the same country or even in the same diocese, there can exist a variety of experiences of participation to decision-making. That is why it is important not to quickly generalize the answers of surveys. For example, the Latin American focus groups highlighted the fact that, between one priest in charge of the community and another, or between one religious congregation and another, there are very diverse styles of exercising power and promoting (or not) lay participation.
4. The importance of competency: the Asian focus group found it is necessary to prepare the laity (through formation) to be able to assume tasks for which they are not currently qualified.

4. Conclusion

From an African point of view, influenced by the experience of grassroots Small Christian Communities on the African continent since the 1970s, I highly appreciate the initiative to listen to the laity, instead of limiting thinking to the-

ologians and clerics. This Synodal Way has, from my point of view, highlighted at least two fundamental questions theologians have forgotten: first, are we sure that we must continue to use the concept of “power”, since the public and hidden scandals of abuse of power have shown its capacity to destroy the “power-with” nature of Christian life and structures? And second, even if we change or clarify the concepts and structures of leadership inside the Church, are we sure that it will automatically “destroy” the clericalism inside the hearts of all the Catholics?

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Ministries and Offices of Women in the Church in the Context of the Synodal Journey

Paula Depalma

1. The Ministeriality of Women: A Priority for the Synodal Journey

Among the priorities that were reflected on in the preparatory phase documents of the Continental Stage of the Synod 2021–2024 are the recognition of women’s leadership in the Church, the strengthening and revision of the ministries exercised by women, and the creation of institutional ways for their fuller participation. Here are some examples.

The General Secretariat of the Synod indicates that “The groups who feel a sense of exile are diverse, beginning with many women and young people who do not feel their gifts and abilities are recognised”¹. In Amazonia, following what was already requested at the Synod of 2019, the creation of an instituted ministry of the “Woman leader of the community”² (*mujer dirigente de la comunidad*) was proposed, also highlighting that “in a high number of such consultations, the permanent diaconate for women was requested”³. The Spanish Episcopal Conference points out as a specific priority “to definitively recognize the role of women in the Church and to promote their full and equal participation at all levels of ecclesial life and, in particular, in the governance of institutions”⁴.

¹ General Secretariat for the Synod: “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent”, Working Document for the Continental Stage (2022), no. 38.

² Asamblea Especial para la Región Panamazónica: Amazonía: Nuevos Caminos para la Iglesia y para una Ecología Integral (2019), no. 102.

³ Ibid., no. 103. It is important to highlight that although the priorities of the Latin American context refer more to the structures of poverty, to the missionary and evangelizing dimension, and to the structuring of the People of God, there is an explicit awareness of the feminization of poverty, and of the struggle of women for the defense of the land of the native peoples. See Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): Síntesis de la Fase Continental del Sínodo de la Sinodalidad en América Latina y el Caribe (2023); Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano y Caribeño (CELAM): Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida hacia las periferias (2023).

⁴ Conferencia Episcopal Española: Síntesis para la Etapa Continental Europea (2023), 7.

Evidently, this is a complex issue and one that is mostly debated and stressed⁵ but, for this very reason, it has the capacity to be a driving force for the transformation of the ecclesial organization.

These syntheses – a reflection of the consultations coming from the different contexts in their synodal journey – do not have as their starting point a merely theoretical analysis, but rather respond to a long process of shaping women as ecclesial subjects. If we take a quick look back, it is easy to see a greater participation of women in Church leadership and a limited but growing recognition of the importance of their contribution, roles, and offices. In many dioceses and parishes, they play key roles as pastoral agents, in lay ministries and in the field of education. The increase of women with theological training has facilitated their presence in universities, as well as in various formative fields including scientific publications, coordination of conferences, seminars and courses, leadership of retreats, prayer groups and biblical studies. Many Christian women are involved in social justice activities, as well as in supporting community organizations and services and social and political issues. Many Catholic women have also become involved in interfaith dialogue, working to build bridges between different religious communities and to promote understanding and cooperation. They are found in local and international collectives advocating for greater inclusion of women in leadership roles within the Church.

Therefore, we can assume that the ministeriality of women, especially regarding instituted and ordained ministries, constitutes a touchstone, a core of tension, which will have to be addressed in the synodal debate. It is a theological and sacramental core that goes back to the post-conciliar years and remains in a gradual tension. There are local and international groups, explicitly expressive even with public demonstrations in temples, cathedrals, and other public spaces, which accompany theological and historical studies that offer diverse and even contradictory results. Pope Francis, for his part, has convened several study commissions – for example, to discern the female diaconate – but still, no agreement has been achieved; there are studies that are clearly favorable and others that are clearly not. It is a complex issue and yet it is an intra-ecclesial voice that cries out loud.

In this article, we will point out some challenges and possible ways to deepen the dialogue on the theme of women's ministry in the Church. For this purpose, the contribution is divided into three parts. In the first, we will point out the need for recognition of women as a collective ecclesial subject with a voice and a desire to participate in common discernment. In the second, we will analyze possible ways in which this discernment – which is a direct consequence of personal responsibility – can favor an ecclesial dialogue that is capable of gen-

⁵ Cf. Eckholt: *Sensus fidelium. La sinodalidad y el devenir sujeto del laicado* (2022).

erating ways of welcoming diversity and giving it expressive channels. Finally, in the third part, we will analyze how the analysis of ministeriality is intertwined with other theological topics such as sacramental theology and liturgical structuring, among others. In the conclusion, we will point out that ecclesial communion arises precisely as a consequence of this discernment and of these common actions that are indispensable foundations of ecclesial unity and shared mission.

2. The Recognition of Women as Ecclesial Subjects: A Pending Matter

Synodality is defined as the process of mutual listening and participation of each and every baptized. A first methodological difficulty regarding the synodal process is that there are people who, as the General Secretariat of the Synod affirms, “felt that their participation in the synod process was unwelcome”⁶. To be a part does not mean to be listened to passively (as Pope Francis rightly points out when he refers to a mutual listening prior to a common word⁷), but rather it implies being an integral part of the process that goes from *decision making* to *decision taking*⁸. It means that the various positions are considered and that they produce a considerable change in the institutions or even in the general structure. It is not a matter of each voice being directly executed, but of all voices becoming part of the active dynamics of ecclesial transformation. Although they have been welcomed in the synodal secretariats and have even manifested themselves in an activist way in different contexts and continents at the same time, the issue of women in terms of ministeriality – instituted and ordained – is a tense topic that can generate novelties in the current organizational and sacramental systems if it is considered as an ecclesial sign. It will be necessary to continue deepening the causes, the consequences, and above all the pos-

⁶ General Secretariat for the Synod: “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent”, Working Document for the Continental Stage (2022), no. 38.

⁷ Cf. Francisco: “Escuchar con los oídos del corazón”. Mensaje del Santo Padre Francisco para la 56a Jornada Mundial de las Comunicaciones Sociales (2022). In his words: “In many of our dialogues we do not communicate at all. We are simply waiting for the other to finish speaking in order to impose our point of view. In these situations, as the philosopher Abraham Kaplan points out, the dialogue is a ‘duálogo’, a monologue in two voices. In true communication, on the other hand, both the ‘you’ and the ‘I’ are ‘on the way out’, tending towards each other. Listening is, therefore, the first and indispensable ingredient of dialogue and good communication”.

⁸ Cf. Luciani: Hacia una efectiva sinodalización de toda la Iglesia (2022).

sibilities of inclusion and forms of visibilization and participation of these voices in the current synodal journey. The voices that demand the revision of the ministries, offices, and functions of women must feel that they constitute an ecclesial political subject.

3. Addressing Issues in Tension: A Complex Challenge

The questions raised – especially in this area of women’s ministry – refer to a background of crisis that can make broader participation possible. It is a complex process of pluralization. The Church, which is *semper reformanda*, always enjoys newness. Novelty can only emerge from a crisis. Stillness is part of the dynamics of life to generate stability; but novelty arises from differentiation, which is in many cases conflictive and which demands movement, change, and transformation.

As a social dynamism, it is important to remember that certain issues that produce discomfort and, above all, pain and suffering in groups or collectives generate for those who experience them a radicality that knows no turning back. Sociologically, women’s groups can be considered movements that have generated and continue to forge social transformations. It is these groups that generate struggles – even revolts – prior to significant social change. Synodality, understood as a process of fruitful dialogue between diverse ecclesial subjects, can give time and space to this momentary stage until a new equilibrium is reached, where the positions that were initially opposed or even apparently discordant, are precisely – although seen from a later stage – the driving force for renewal and improvement.

For all these reasons, addressing those issues on which there are no previous agreements is a difficult but inescapable challenge for a synodal determination whose purpose is to hear and make visible all the members of the People of God, that is to say, to attend to and give space to the *sensus omnium fidelium*.

This process of attention to dissonant issues may encounter some obstacles that prevent addressing them. One of these obstacles consists of delaying or waiting too long before taking integrative action, given the difficulty involved. The permanence of the *status quo* is chosen over a unilateral option that has not been sufficiently discerned, and this delay is often induced by the fear that the unity of the Church will be undermined. This position has a pro and a con. The pro is that important decisions require the time of discernment necessary to construct and elaborate alternatives that are viable both theologically and practically. The negative point is the postponement in addressing the issue where those who brought it up do not feel sufficiently addressed. Evidently, there is

a procrastination in addressing the topic and no change has been made; in this way the explicit claim does not lead to a structural transformation, or not in an adequate time. The same working document for the Continental Stage of the General Secretariat of the Synod refers, as we already pointed out, to groups of “excluded” and baptized persons: those who “feel a sense of exile are diverse, beginning with many women and young people who do not feel their gifts and abilities are recognised”⁹. This feeling of exclusion or exile of many women and young people is a symptom that reflects and is a direct consequence of the fact that their approaches are not considered sufficiently or in a timely manner.

This procrastination can be a paralyzing mechanism not only in the decision-making process, which indeed may require long periods of time, but above all in terms of approaching the topic in a dialogical way. Most of the time, it is not a matter of changing immediately, but of allowing tension, crisis, and collective discernment to accompany individual discernment.

Evidently, the issue of women’s ministeriality is a point of crisis that cannot be turned back, because the voices that demand it have already demonstrated that they will not change their minds. To address it, it will be important to consider some key points that we will describe in what follows, such as baptismal responsibility as a prior point to reciprocal dialogue and forms of discernment and agreement that could speed up the processes towards a praxis more welcoming of diversity.

3.1 Baptismal and Vocational Responsibility

The ever-deepening awareness of the local and global responsibility of every baptized requires attention. Baptism is a call to a vocation and a mission in the Church and, therefore, every believer is responsible for its development; in fact, for personal fulfillment to develop, all human capacities come into play along with taking charge of the whole of creation – always as part of it – in a profound awareness of belonging to a global and decisively ecclesial ecological ecosystem. This concrete and defined mission, if not developed, remains unexplored.

As J. Butler would say, “We are responsible not only for the purity of our soul but for the forms of the world we inhabit”¹⁰. How do we assume our responsibility in the ministerial and liturgical configuration? What concrete ways do we find or even create? Ministeriality is precisely this collective recognition

⁹ General Secretariat for the Synod: “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent”, Working Document for the Continental Stage (2022), no. 38.

¹⁰ Butler: *Dar cuenta de sí mismo. Violencia ética y responsabilidad* (2005), 35.

of charisms and vocations and is one of the forms of their viability within communities. As Pope Francis affirms,

The Spirit of the Lord Jesus, the perennial source of the Church's life and mission, distributes to the members of the People of God the gifts that enable each one, in a different way, to contribute to the edification of the Church and to the proclamation of the Gospel. These charisms, called ministries because they are publicly recognized and instituted by the Church, are made available to the community and to her mission in a stable form.¹¹

It is the Spirit of God who distributes the gifts and charisms, and it is up to the Church to recognize them and make them viable. The approach to this topic of ministeriality demands attention to the charisms and gifts of the Spirit for a later recognition.

3.2 Conversation Between Subjects: From Reciprocity to Agreement

Synodal dialogue, as we have been pointing out, is possible between autonomous subjects. The baptized in the Church have the potential to be subjects, both individually and in an organized manner. As ecclesial subjects, it is a matter of entering into dialogue (not only as a passive voice) and that their voice has a practical impact – as an active or performative voice¹².

The specific case of women's ministeriality does not refer only to particular or individual identity or vocational challenges and proposals. They are collective claims and worldviews that yearn for structural transformation. What then is the "political subject" of this issue? The political subject that seeks to discern this issue is not uniform, but is a set of voices coming from diverse sectors. Feminist theory proposes a new relational paradigm fundamentally characterized by reciprocity, circularity, and a non-hierarchical vision of the world. There are also other groups of women – not necessarily feminists – who yearn for fuller participation in ministries together with a revision of ministerial delimitations. To this must be added the growing social awareness of women's participation in society. There are believers who have social and political incidence and involvement in society who promote more active models of participation, and there is a set of intra-ecclesial voices, both theological and from *praxis*, and the desire for greater participation, which also demand that the issue be addressed as formally as possible.

¹¹ Francis: "Motu Proprio" *Spiritus Domini* (2021), para. 1.

¹² For further development see Estévez/Depalma (eds.): *Ventanas a la sinodalidad* (2023).

3.3 Discern Forms of Agreement That Expedite the Processes

The intermediate time between the generally assumed normality and the change promoted by the dissonant voices should be occupied precisely by the synodal debates where the different positions take place. But, if this does not happen, one of the highest costs that the Church has experienced in recent years may occur, which has been the massive abandonment of the ecclesial sphere by the laity.

Let us give an example. In the case of the debate about the possibility or not of the diaconate for women, it can be seen in various local preparatory documents that, although the topic appeared repeatedly in the consultations, since it was presented as an issue that was not solved, but rather it had antagonistic perspectives, the topic was simply not reflected in the document. This is a hindrance to the development of the dynamic of reciprocal listening and dialogue, since conflictive issues cannot be eliminated from the work agenda but are precisely the drivers of transformation. This does not mean that unilateral measures should be adopted, but rather that a serious approach to the issue can lead to different results. If the issue of the ordained ministry claims is addressed, not only do gender understandings come into play, but also sacramental life, its forms, its rites, its ministers, and its relationship with the mechanisms of power, authority, and ecclesial representation. These are the tips of the iceberg of interconnected, much broader issues that also reflect the misappropriation by certain sectors of the sacramental world that undoubtedly belongs to all the People of God.

The use of the category of agreement or consensus, of representation, or even of binding decisions in relation to agreements, can tend to give a theological interpretation of each legal or normative institute, with the result of making it difficult to modify. Under this profile, we can observe the emergence of a device that we could call confusion between general regulations and concrete forms of development. Ministerial truth, if reduced to ritual conformity or juridical statics, forgets that there is always not only a ministerial reform but also a *lex condenda* (codified norms) distinct from the *lex condita* (normative foundations) or founding law¹³. It is true that the traditional world lives precisely in this confusion: it does not perceive a substantial difference between the orders we are considering here. However, the reuse of this confusion in the contemporary world is a paralyzing strategy. The recovery of a prophecy of law, as well

¹³ Cf. Borrás: ¿Qué hay que cambiar en el derecho canónico para una auténtica sinodalidad? (2022).

as of rite and sacrament, constitutes a necessary horizon¹⁴. In this sense, it is perhaps not up to the universal Church to discern every feature of ministeriality, but to provide a framework that allows for the diversity of the local churches.

How can a consensus be achieved? How can agreements be reached? Are the decisions that emerge from the consultations with the People of God in this context binding for the local Church? How can the great diversity of the *sensus omnium fidelium* be determined and concretized in a few lines? These are some of the questions that arise after the exercise of consulting the People of God.

As Rafael Luciani recalls, the decisions must integrate the consensus of the people, as well as the advice of theologians, among other factors. Quoting St. Cyprian, “*Nihil sine consilio vestro et sine consensu plebis mea privatim sententia gerere*”¹⁵: he assures that listening to the advice of priests and theologians, as well as building the consensus of the people, are requisites to maintain communion. Communion is lived by consensus, by attentive listening to diverse voices, because authority is a vehicle for the potentiation of capacities and gifts. It is an unrealistic and illusory communion the one that does not listen to these voices. The synodal structure must ensure that all voices are heard and that they are part of the dialogue that makes the overall proposal fruitful. Mutual listening is the first step in a Church that walks together. It is not possible to arrive at general conclusions that represent the *sensus fidei* without embracing the diversity of the *sensus omnium fidelium*.

3.4 Respect and Welcome Diversity

Diversity is a gift of the Spirit. The whole of creation is populated by all kinds of diversities and differences and “God saw that it was very good” (cf. Gen 1:31). Differences are good. The problem that arises here – especially in the case of the structural and organic consolidation of any institution – is in the constructions, ideologies, and forms of organizations generated from these differences. That is, what is socially constructed based on these differences. In the Church, there are evidently many gifts, charisms, and “people of every nation, race, tribe and language” (cf. Rev. 7:9). The question is how this diversity is consolidated into ministries and how it occupies a visible place within the Church in the form of ministries or organic institutionalization. Quoting Fran-

¹⁴ For an interesting study on the topic see Grillo/Horak: *Le istituzioni ecclesiali alla prova del genere. Liturgia, sacramenti e diritto* (2019).

¹⁵ “Never without the advice of the presbyters and the consensus of the people, never the private management of ecclesial government, never the bishop isolated in the exercise of his authority” quoted in Luciani: *Hacia una efectiva sinodalización de toda la Iglesia* (2022), 127.

cis again, “These charisms, called ministries because they are publicly recognized and instituted by the Church, are made available to the community and to her mission in a stable form”¹⁶.

The current Canon Law indicates sacramental and ministerial structures as a form of organization, differentiated according to the 22 churches *sui iuris* that compose the Catholic Church at present. The norms regulate different forms of authority, representation, functions and participation. In this way, the established social construction is a starting point that authorizes, encourages, or limits participation and the visibility of the charisms, gifts, and functions present in the People of God.

The structuring of Catholicism is thus composed of diversity at the level of the structuring of local churches too. This situation raises the question of the possibility of configuring the particular churches with their own face, including a joint ministerial discernment for the specific context. The analysis of these configurations constitutes a critical starting point for ecclesial relations and, in particular, for the analysis of women’s ministry in the churches.

4. Sacramental Analysis and Liturgical-Ministerial Structuring

The relationship between sacramental understanding and the structuring of power, authority, and ecclesial and theological representation is a topic that requires, given the synodal determination to reform, a serious and profound analysis. The complexity of the subject, which in some concrete respects could be solved by canonical modification (as has been demonstrated in relation to the modified diaconate with the *motu proprio Ministeria quaedam* of Paul VI in 1972), entails, however, an immense debate of a theological-systematic nature that has taken place since the post-conciliar period and that continues to open paths of reflection.

Deepening intersubjective dialogue is a central issue, as is the institutional or sacramental consolidation of ministry; this can be an arduous way that requires interdisciplinary theological reflection.

While, on the one hand, the tense situation regarding the elimination of sex as a differentiating category in the assignment of the ordained ministry is quite clear, on the other hand, the sacramental situation does find more unified echoes regarding the reformulation of the ministry in its triple sacramental degree in other necessary matters. Let us look in more detail at the *praxis* and the determination of the functions assigned according to the degrees of the order.

¹⁶ Francis: “Motu Proprio” *Spiritus Domini* (2021), para. 1.

The diaconate, the first degree of the ordained ministry, does not distinguish – as for the permanent diaconate – between celibacy and family life. The functions properly assigned to deacons, according to tradition and the magisterium, have to do with the exercise of charity, the care of the sick, and those most in need in the community. However, if one observes the general *praxis*, one finds the great majority of their functions rather associated or linked to the altar, in close relationship with the presbyter, or assisting in liturgical celebrations. Certainly, assisting at baptism, reading at the celebration, exposition and blessing with the Blessed Sacrament are among their important occupations. However, it is significant to remember that the link to worship corresponds to their primary function of making the Church “diaconal”, that is, attentive to concrete needs and offering a publicly merciful face. Paul VI’s modification in the 1972 *motu proprio Ministeria quaedam* has led to an innovation in the understanding of the Church itself as advocated by conciliar theology. The diaconate and minor orders were considered prior to this *motu proprio* as preceding steps to priestly ordination and, therefore, assistance in worship was a primary part of their functions, and other more specific roles of the diaconate were left with less importance, accentuating a hierarchical and worship-centered understanding of the Church. Making the diaconate an “autonomous” degree offers the whole Church a new accent that is more charitable, merciful and attentive to vulnerable people, and this also directly affects the celebrations in which it participates.

The second degree of the order, the presbyterate, as the Second Vatican Council affirms, responds to the continuity with the priestly action of Christ, which is present in the sacramental celebrations where his passion and resurrection are recalled. Its place in worship is evident. However, because of the current hierarchical structure determined by the Canon Law Code in force, many other functions – beyond those properly liturgical – are fixed to be exercised by ordained ministers. But these functions, which respond to a useful and necessary canonical organization, do not find immediate foundations in a theological, historical, or sacramental analysis. For example, the structuring and delimited jurisdiction in parishes, the study and explanation of the magisterium and questions proper to the faith, and the interpretation and teaching of the Word in the various celebrations and institutions do not necessarily have to be exclusive functions of the second degree of the ordained ministry, although they correspond to it. A much clearer delimitation of the functions from sacramental theology becomes very important to differentiate those functions and offices that manifest the organizational and pastoral *praxis* proper to a context and a period, but which are not necessarily theologically founded and, therefore, are susceptible to adaptation and the structural reforms demanded by the current synodal process.

Thirdly, the episcopal functions, given the synodal dynamics, must directly attend to the decisional forms proper to the synodal path that calls for communitarian styles and where consultation is accepted in a binding or, at least, indicative way, and where the *sensus omnium fidelium* is conveyed and facilitated in its realization.

Given the above, we can affirm that a sacramental theological study is urgently needed to accompany the current process of ecclesial restructuring based on the change of mentality generated by the synodal process promoted by Pope Francis.

The issue raised by women's leadership, ministries, offices, and actions, in particular, is the tip of an iceberg that points to a whole interrelated world of personal relationships, structures, and communicative dynamics within and on the margins of the churches.

We have pointed out that there is a generalized confusion regarding the assignment of the functions that correspond to the ordained ministry that leads to associating many of these functions unilaterally to them, while excluding other members of the People of God. Another important issue to specify has to do with those delimitations of access to the ordained ministry that are assumed to be juridically specified, but that do not respond directly to a theological foundation. The example of celibacy reflects this second type of confusion. At present, the Catholic Church, composed of 23 churches *sui iuris*, has married ordained ministers for the first degree, for the diaconate, in the Latin Church as well as in several Eastern Rite churches. However, in several Eastern churches, celibacy is also not a limitation for the priesthood. Therefore, this aspect is not a sacramental or theological question, but one of the organization of the local churches, as Pope Francis has affirmed in various locutions. This confusion of the stages is still in force – even among theologians – and, therefore, we must be clear and truthful and avoid unfounded repetition in these aspects.

To rethink ministries theologically leads us to emphasize a Church that is more service-oriented (diaconal), much less clericalized, and more united in participative dynamisms that link all the baptized in the conformation of the People of God. The clericalist logic of unilateral authority and representation must give way to full participation in the configuration of the institutions and in the mechanisms of authority and representation, and to disassociate the latter from the sacramental dynamism, when appropriate. It becomes necessary to delimit sacramental issues from those other ones that are functional, that have been necessary and useful forms of organization, as well as contextualized vehicles of the incarnational dimension of ecclesiality. By delimiting the sacramental dimension of the ministries, it is easier to open the non-sacramental functions such as those of authority, jurisdiction, formation, theological deepening, and

evangelization to other members of the People of God, who can consequently be trained in a more formal and specific way.

The sacramental delimitation in the case of women will also require a serious interdisciplinary study between the history of their participation in the ritual and cult sphere. In this sense, historiographical and sacramental studies have been carried out regarding women in the celebrations and various rites¹⁷. The analyses of the recovery of the place of women in the symbolic, celebratory, and liturgical configuration point to a strong incidence, and it is possible to point out places differentiated by periods of time, as well as by geographical contexts. Diversity is presented as a reality that flourishes in time and contexts.

5. Conclusion: The Necessary Ministerial Discernment as a Path to Communion

As we have pointed out, the issue of women's ministries is a priority of the global and local synodal discernment. Therefore, the situation of women's ministries appears as a touchstone in this journey together. In fact, it marks points of difficulty and diversified opinions, and therefore, requires an extended common discernment.

If one analyzes the documents of the various dioceses together with that of the General Secretariat of the Synod, recurring themes appear, such as ministries and forms of authority in the Church, integral ecology, evangelization, and ministries, and making visible the participation and authority of women in the Church and in the mission. These issues represent thematic nuclei that should give rise to further ongoing work. They are theoretical and practical cores that for many believers are essential to experience themselves as full participants in the synodal life, and represent insurmountable issues for them to live their baptismal integrity and their fulfillment as members of the People of God. Being subjects in the Church means taking the floor and making it structurally meaningful.

In this contribution, we have referred to personal and collective responsibility in discerning agreement on important issues. We have pointed out that while many of these issues do not enjoy absolute consensus, many other ministerial issues do. In relation to those issues that enjoy consensus, there are possible and urgent actions that are of common discretion, that are in the ministerial line of substance and that have to do with the functions assigned to the different

¹⁷ Cf. Depalma: *Espacios litúrgicos de mujeres* (2020); Depalma: *Celebraciones creativas. Modelos y desafíos*, vol. 63 (2021); Depalma: *Ritos que transforman* (2022).

ministries, whether ordained, instituted, or temporary. Regarding the tensest issues, it is good to remember that in the dialogue neither diversity nor reciprocity can be overshadowed, and that it is necessary to take a path of recognition of the gifts and charisms proper to the local churches. Moreover, this theme and the many other issues discussed are touchstones for the Church as a whole. Precisely because they are conflictive nuclei, they have the potential for creative deepening. As Serena Noceti affirms, “the experience of confrontation with the otherness that is at the heart of every conflict has the potential to lead to a deepening of the content of the common faith and to renew the ecclesial organization [...]. Loyal dissent from one another, ‘dissonance’, is essential for the Church”¹⁸.

Entering with hope into dialogue on the ministeriality of women in the Church has the potential to generate unprecedented worldviews. It is not a matter of making unilateral decisions or impartial resolutions, but of deepening listening and participatory dialogue. Moreover, “unexpected ideas emerge from the interaction among the subjects; the plurality of contributions allows for the maturing of an unprecedented worldview that embraces and surpasses the initial visions of the participants, as well as a new approach to the problem being addressed”¹⁹.

Women understood as ecclesial subjects, with increasingly recognized voices, constitute a touch point to the concrete realization of the synodal structure, and point out concrete themes in tune with the defense of the poorest and neediest, offering a view of authority understood as a service that offers the Church a more merciful and tolerant face and that is capable of incarnating faith in the heart of contemporary society.

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Global Circulations of Asian Catholic Clergy

Bernardo E. Brown

1. Introduction

It is estimated that only 30 percent of the global Catholic population lives in Europe and North America in the early 21st century, while a century ago the share of Catholics living in the northern hemisphere was close to 70 percent. This demographic shift also has a specific class dimension. Young Catholic communities in the southern hemisphere are predominantly rural and poor, and thus constitute a substantial portion of the migrant populations that move towards the urban centers of the developed world in search of employment opportunities. Therefore, there are two important dynamics taking place simultaneously that affect the composition of Catholic churches in Europe: the movement of Catholicism to the Global South, and the movement of workers to the Global North. The Church aims to attend to the needs of these migrant Catholics who are now populating European parishes through advocacy, pastoral work, and charity organizations, and it also emphasizes the importance of training pastoral leaders, especially those attuned to the issues raised by the migratory experience¹.

In response to the growing importance of human mobility in the contemporary world already recognized by Vatican II, the Catholic Church created the “Pontifical Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People” in 1970, later elevated to “Pontifical Council” in 1988 by John Paul II. Its instruction of 2004, *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi* (The Love of Christ towards Migrants), notes that,

[T]he uprooting that moving abroad inevitably involves (from country of origin, family, language, etc.) should not be made worse by uprooting the migrant from his religious rite or identity too. When groups of immigrants are particularly numerous and homogeneous therefore, they are encouraged to keep up their specific Catholic traditions. In particular, efforts must be made to provide organized religious assistance by priests of the language, culture and rite of the migrants selecting the most

¹ Hanciles: *Migrants as Missionaries, Missionaries as Outsiders* (2013); Jenkins: *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (2002).

suitable juridical option from among those foreseen by the *CIC* and the *CCEO* [...]. This means that local Churches must rethink pastoral care, programming it to help the faithful live their faith authentically in today's new multicultural and pluri-religious context.

More recently, in Pope Francis' second encyclical of 2015, *Laudato si'*, there is a clear emphasis on the plight of migrants and the importance of giving answers to the millions of Catholics on the move. A true synodal process is thus one where intercultural dialogue and collaboration are at the forefront of every attempt to offer solutions to the problems faced by the Church in the 21st century, and with millions of Catholics relocating across the world for economic and political reasons, migration has become a key area of concern².

This article focuses on the work of Sri Lankan Catholic priests who are appointed as chaplains for the nearly 100,000 Sinhalese and Tamil-speaking migrants who live and work in different Italian cities. Research for this article was conducted in Italy in 2014–15, and over several fieldwork trips to Sri Lanka between 2015 and 2020, when I interviewed Catholic priests who had worked and studied in Italy and migrant workers who returned to Sri Lanka after several years working in Italy.

The Sri Lankan migrant chaplains are primarily appointed to offer pastoral care to migrant communities settled in Italy, but they are also required to conduct regular parish duties with Italian churchgoers. Although this is not their main mission in Italy, it helps remedy the problem of diminishing numbers of European clergy who are able to work in ordinary pastoral and parish work. By appointing young migrant priests to assist the aging clergy in charge of local parishes, local congregations receive the much needed help of an energetic and youthful clergy from the Global South, a very particular kind of migrant labor.

The average age of Italian priests in 2012 was 60 years old, and 20 percent of the clergy were over 80 years old, making the daily operation of parishes a challenge for bishops across the country³. Although this experiment of importing parish priests was initially meant only as an emergency solution to the scarcity of clergy available for parish work, some of these priests have become a stable presence in Italian parishes and fundamental to their operation. This new participation of Asian and African clergy in the daily life of European parishes has produced some conflicts and misunderstandings between local and foreign priests, who disagree over the pastoral priorities that their churches should have. However, the relationship between foreign clergy and Italian parishioners has been markedly positive, often developing congenial and deeply spiritual

² Tan: Pope Francis's Preferential Option for Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers (2019).

³ Garelli: Religion Italian Style: Continuities and Changes in a Catholic Country (2014).

connections between them, with fruitful cross-cultural experiences that are worth examining closely.

2. Sri Lankan Catholics in Italy

As the Sri Lankan migrant community in Italy became established in the 1990s, the Italian Catholic Church took note of this growth and sought to contribute to the spiritual wellbeing of its immigrant flock. Catering to the cultural and linguistic needs of the community, Sinhalese priests were assigned to work in different Italian parishes. Catholicism is the only religious denomination that crosses the ethnic divide in Sri Lanka, with approximately 70 percent identifying ethnically and linguistically as Sinhalese and 30 percent identifying as Tamil. Although the majority of migrants to Italy came from Sinhalese-speaking areas, there was also an important number of Tamil-speakers, mainly in the south of the country. However, at the time of my research, there was only one chaplain who was ethnically Tamil working in Italy. This raised criticisms from Tamil migrants, who argued that this was not really a Sri Lankan migrant chaplaincy in Italy, but rather a Sinhalese chaplaincy.

In 2015, approximately twenty of these Sri Lankan members of the clergy were distributed across the country, mainly in urban centers that concentrate employment opportunities for migrants. These priests who work as part of the Sri Lankan Catholic Chaplaincy in Italy conduct pastoral duties exclusively and have little interaction with other Sri Lankan members of the clergy working for Vatican offices and religious congregations. However, younger priests who are in Italy for their studies also collaborate with the efforts of the chaplaincy and dedicate evenings and weekends to the Sri Lankan community. Overall, there are approximately 50 Sri Lankan priests in Italy at any given moment.

Sri Lankan priests who volunteer for assignments with the Italian chaplaincy are recommended by their bishops to the CEI (Italian Bishop's Conference), which applies for their work visas and gives them three-year contracts. Migrant priests are appointed to work in specific dioceses where immigrant communities concentrate. Upon arrival, they participate in a week-long workshop organized by the Catholic NGO Caritas/Migrantes, which is aimed at helping them become familiar with Italian culture and become acquainted with common legal problems faced by immigrants. This workshop provides priests from Asia, Africa, and Latin America with a certificate that they are required to present to church authorities before working in local parishes.

After being appointed to a parish, these priests are given a stipend similar to the one received by the Italian clergy. Italian bishops are responsible for finding

appropriate accommodation and locations for the migrant chaplains to conduct their pastoral work, which is generally divided between serving as regular parish priests to Italians and acting as chaplains for the Sinhalese community. In this way, on any given Sunday, a Sri Lankan priest celebrates mass in Italian at eight in the morning in one parish, and then commutes to another parish to pray again in Sinhalese at eleven, where he also spends the rest of the afternoon in catechism, choir, devotion hours and organizing community events.

Italian bishops sometimes struggle to find suitable venues for the migrant chaplains to conduct their work, as a special effort is made to avoid interfering with the normal activities of Italian parishes. One of the Sri Lankan communities in Rome meets at a vacant convent that an order of nuns agreed to share with them on Sundays. This situation causes a degree of friction between Italian and Sri Lankan priests, who disagree over what space immigrant communities should be offered in Italy.

A Sri Lankan priest I met in Rome protested that at the parish where he worked, Italian mass was usually attended by no more than twenty people, but at least 200 people came for the Sinhalese service. "Take a look at this church. It is closed, run down, dark, all the doors and windows shut. Can you imagine something like this in Sri Lanka?", asked Fr. Chaminda Silva, as we walked down the streets of Rome after lunch on a Thursday afternoon. We had just passed a 16th century minor basilica located only a few steps from Piazza Venezia, where the Sri Lankan community had been meeting since 1992.

As Fr. Chaminda explained, despite the evident disparity in church attendance, when Easter celebrations were being organized, the Sinhalese community was only offered a small meeting hall for their celebrations and 'kindly' asked to leave the main parish for the Italians. However, throughout the Easter holiday the main church remained virtually empty, while the small chapel attended by Sri Lankan Catholics was full. "We are migrant labor too", he explained, "not very different from the domestic workers. We come, do our job, help the local churches in whatever they need, get our salary, and a couple of years later we go back home."

It had been shocking to him to find only a couple dozen elderly Italians attending mass when he had first arrived in Rome, but even more striking was that this situation did not seem particularly troubling to Italian priests who passively accepted it as a natural consequence of European secularization and acted as if there was not much they could do to change the situation. From the perspective of Sri Lankan clergy like Fr. Chaminda, Italian priests appeared to have grown too accustomed to the secularism of their communities, and thus redirected their interests towards non-pastoral religious activities. Italian priests could be found pursuing administrative careers in the Vatican, organizing trade unions, getting involved in faith-based development organizations, or taking

a more academic approach as theologians and professors at universities, but they seemed reluctant to engage in the kind of ordinary pastoral work that Sri Lankan clergy specialized in.

The apparently irreversible secularization of Italian Catholics, who increasingly pursued their spiritual interests through channels that circumvent the religious institution in which they were raised, seemed to encourage many European priests to find meaningful dimensions for their religious vocation outside pastoral work. As scholars specialized in contemporary Italian Catholicism like Garelli⁴, Palmisano⁵, Napolitano⁶, Herzfeld⁷ and Muehlebach⁸ have noted, the Church across Italy has retained its capacity to influence Italians on political topics and social issues to a degree that Christian denominations in other European nations have not, yet Italians have also grown increasingly distant from the Church in their spiritual pursuits and are unlikely to see Italian parish priests as moral authorities.

Fr. Chaminda argued that the secularization of Italian society was so widespread that it had also made the priests secular and ‘business-oriented’, keeping strict office hours and marking clear boundaries of interaction with their communities. He claimed that this had negative effects on their pastoral work, for example, making the celebration of mass a mere formality, repeating formulas and prayers. “We pray the same mass, but we perform it differently. We believe in mysticism and we celebrate it. Many Italians value this and come and tell us what a difference it is to experience mass when celebrated by a foreign priest.” This statement was supported by Italian parishioners I met, who appreciated the dedication of Sri Lankan priests to ordinary pastoral work, as opposed to the behavior of Italian clergy, who sometimes acted as if pastoral work was a distraction from their other commitments. Although some parishioners insinuated that Sri Lankan clergy worked harder and longer hours, the main complaint was not about dedication, but about priorities. Ordinary pastoral work was simply not a strong motivation for European clergy, whereas, for Sri Lankan clergy, parish activities were at the heart of their work.

Fr. Chaminda explained that when he arrived in Italy, he was prepared to confront a secularized Italian society with low levels of church attendance, but he was not prepared to accept the indifference with which Italian priests confronted this situation. From a Sri Lankan perspective, an empty church is an

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Palmisano: *Spirituality and Catholicism* (2010).

⁶ Napolitano: *Migrant Hearts and the Atlantic Return: Transnationalism and the Roman Catholic Church* (2016); Napolitano: *Migrant Hearts and the Atlantic Return: Transnationalism and the Roman Catholic Church* (2016).

⁷ Herzfeld: *Evicted from Eternity: The Restructuring of Modern Rome* (2009).

⁸ Muehlebach: *The Catholicization of Neoliberalism* (2013).

embarrassment for a parish priest, so when he arrived in Italy, his immediate reaction was not to analyze the cultural dynamics of contemporary Italian society but to look toward the work of individual local clergy to assess the situation. If modernity, secularization, and urban life were the standard macro-narratives used in Italy to explain the decline of religiosity amongst Catholics, Sri Lankan clergy tended to analyze the situation at a different level, focusing on the individual work of the clergy, their availability, and their behavior toward parishioners.

The seminary formation of Sri Lankan priests stressed the importance of pastoral work and they were specially trained to be present and serve the community round the clock. This disposition toward pastoral work sometimes had an almost instant impact on Italians, who narrated their encounters with South Asian priests as deeply spiritual and emotional. Some Italians even opted to seek spiritual guidance from priests who often struggled to make sense of the anxieties of modern Italian urban life. The cultural and linguistic barriers that separated foreign priests from local parishioners seemed to have encouraged the development of bonds at a more affective level, articulating common problems in a more universal key, which was capable of cutting across cultural boundaries. Comparable to dynamics commonly found a century earlier across South Asia, these reverse missionaries in Europe were often free from local stereotypes and prejudices, social stigmas, and political stances that local communities based their judgments on⁹. Points of intersection between foreign priests and Italian parishioners were therefore found at a more affective level and through the articulation of local problems in a language that necessarily transcended local idiosyncrasies.

3. Reaching Out to a New Community

Although Fr. Chaminda had several disagreements with his Italian counterparts, he was very open to Italian parishioners and felt excited by the challenge of trying to better understand them and the experience of Sri Lankans living in Italy. He said,

Coming to Italy has been a very humbling experience [...] These people have been so warm and welcoming to Sri Lankan workers. I sometimes see domestic workers who work for Italian lawyers who know how to fight for their rights because their

⁹ Stirrat: *Power and Religiosity in a Post-Colonial Setting: Sinhala Catholics in Contemporary Sri Lanka* (1992).

own employers have taught them how to do it. In Sri Lanka we make Tamil people feel as foreigners in their own country, and then we come here and see how Italians welcome us [...] It is true that they are indifferent to religious practice and devotion, but at the same time they are truly generous and caring. Sometimes much more understanding than we are, it makes you think things twice.

After working for some time in Italian parishes, Sri Lankan priests managed to take a step back from their involvement with the Sinhalese community and took a critical stance towards some dynamics of hierarchy and discrimination that are pervasive in their country. Their experience working with Italians allowed them to develop a positive interpretation of Italian culture, where a focus on moral actions took precedence over the fulfilment of religious obligations.

Some recent initiatives in Italy pointed towards a new approach to intercultural dialogue. Bilingual masses have been organized over the last ten years on the initiative of different Italian and Sri Lankan communities. For one of these occasions, the Sinhalese community was invited to participate in an Italian mass presided by the local bishop. All prayers and responses were in Italian, but the Sinhalese community contributed music and choir. The sermon for this combined mass was delivered in Italian, but a second sermon – that summarized the bishop's words – was later given in Sinhalese. In another of these new experiments in Rome, mass was prayed entirely in Sinhalese to a mainly Italian laity, who followed prayers and readings on paper. Furthermore, special celebrations were hosted by Italians for Migrant's Day in Florence, and a multiethnic Christmas celebration was organized last year in Sicily.

A Sri Lankan priest who was working at the Vatican Pastoral Office for Migrants explained that some people in the migrant community were resistant and weary of these initiatives, as big efforts were made to reproduce as best as possible the Sri Lankan church structures. However, he also noted how appealing these celebrations were to Italian Catholics who would otherwise be uninterested in church activities. From his perspective, Sri Lankan Catholics in Italy could do what Italian priests and the Italian church cannot do: enable a rapprochement between laity and the Church.

This priest at the Office for Migrants also pointed in another interesting direction, offering examples that may signal an unexpected return of the Church to Italian homes that was not made possible by either local or foreign priests, but by devout migrant workers who had the capacity of inspiring a kind of Catholic religiosity that Italians had grown resistant to, especially when promoted by members of the clergy. For example, he explained that some employers gladly drove their Sri Lankan housekeepers to church on Sundays and were flexible and understanding toward the religious commitments of migrant workers, especially during religious holidays. He noted that,

When Sri Lankans have a problem, they light a candle and pray to St. Anthony and just leave it for him to solve it [...] Italians are so dependent on medicine and science, they are very rational, leave no room for the work of faith, but sometimes their housekeepers suggest that they go to church and say a prayer, or they bring a small statue of St. Anthony to the home. Italians still don't believe too much in these things, but they allow this to happen in their homes.

4. Conclusion

In the context of transnationalism and globalization, the Church in Italy has officially taken an approach that appears to reverse its historic interest in adapting faith to local cultural idioms: by affixing faith and ritual to language and culture, the Church denies South Asian migrants the opportunity to immerse their faith in a new cultural context. The Church infuses South Asian Catholicism with thick layers of culture and language, attempting to keep diverse traditions separate from each other. This is precisely the opposite approach to the one taken historically to bring the Christian faith to populations in Asia. The consequence of that missionary strategy was that local converts were incorporated into a Global Church that welcomed different traditions; but in the process, the missionaries who led these actions were also profoundly transformed by local moralities and forms of knowledge.

The Church in Italy is rightfully concerned with protecting and encouraging the traditions and values of Catholic immigrants for fear that integration will lead them to lose their vitality and devotion. Some worry that, by exposing Sri Lankan religiosity and faith to European culture, too much exposure could jeopardize the strength of the community. Life in Italy is already a big source of temptation and solitude for migrant workers from small rural villages, so space should be provided for them to celebrate Sundays in a traditional Sri Lankan way. However, by doing this, the Church is also transplanting religious practices into an Italian setting that only accommodates them in its periphery.

This is not the only alternative. Others in the Church believe that the dynamism of the southern hemisphere should not be sheltered, but used to inspire clergy and laity in the northern hemisphere. As Fr. Chaminda acknowledged, immigrant priests have a capacity for mysticism and for ritual that Europeans value, and that can be an inspiring force for disenfranchised Catholics in the West. From his perspective, the religiosity of immigrant communities is genuine and committed, and it could provide a unique resource to inspire receiving communities to see the Church in a less negative light, something that the European clergy has been unable to accomplish.

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On the Way to Conversion and Renewal

Church Reforms in Germany and the Global Church

Thomas Söding

Rarely since the Second Vatican Council has there been an ecclesial awakening like today. It is characterized by synodality. Pope Francis has dedicated the World Synod, which takes place in two general assemblies in 2023 and 2024, to this topic. The Roman Secretariat of the Synod sent a comprehensive paper with ten key questions to each and every local church in order to obtain as many answers as possible from the grassroots. This initiative is a response to a development that has long been underway in many places, on many continents and in many ways and has gathered momentum, depending on the local cultures, but united in the attempt to spell synodality anew in Catholic terms. In Australia, Ireland, Latin America and the Caribbean, synodal processes took place. In Tanzania, Spain, Italy and Kenya, in the USA and New Zealand, in Switzerland, France and many other countries, the Roman invitation has triggered organized processes. Lebanon had its own women's synod, supported by the Antiochian patriarchy. At the beginning of 2023, synodal assemblies were held on all continents, which are not just bishops' assemblies, but Church assemblies in which lay people, the religious, deacons and priests also actively participate.¹ Pope Francis decided to invite not only bishops, but 80 more persons with full right: lay faithful, members of orders, people of consecrated life.

The Synodal Path in Germany² is part of a global development in the Catholic Church. Of course, it has its special features. It is organized, ambitious and distinctive. Above all, it is not only the responsibility of the Bishops' Conference, but also of the Central Committee of German Catholics (Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken = ZdK).³ The ZdK is an organization of the lay apos-

¹ Cf. Wijlens/Tirimanna (eds.): *The People of God have Spoken – Continental Ecclesial Assemblies within the Synod on Synodality* (2023).

² All documents adopted by the Synodal Assembly can be found on the homepage www.synodalerweg.de/english/documents. The individual prints of the texts on this page are cited, with the suffix "SW" referring to the serial number of each document.

³ Cf. Sternberg: *Partizipation aus Eigeninitiative: Die Katholikentage und das ZdK. Wie sich Laien Partizipation erkämpft haben* (2020).

tolate that dates back to the democratic revolution of 1848 and – quite uniquely in the world – has established itself alongside the Bishops’ Conference as the mouthpiece of the Catholic Church in Germany, rarely as closely linked to the Bishops’ Conference as on the Synodal Path.

As strong as the movement of the Catholic Church towards developed synodality is, the emotions are just as great: the reservations on the one hand, the hopes on the other – not forgetting the many believers who have already given up on a reform of the Catholic Church and are, therefore, either turning away or retreating into inner emigration.

How can the synodal awakening of the Catholic Church be explained? How do the tensions it causes arise? How can they be transformed into energy for a conversion and renewal of the Catholic Church?

1. Two Strong Impulses: One Negative and One Positive

The synodal awakenings that have shaped the Catholic Church around the world, including in Germany, take up two strong impulses: firstly, the disaster of the abuse committed by clergy, including its cover-up, and secondly, the transformation of the *sensus fidei fidelium*, the sense of faith of all believers.

1.1 Combating Abuse

The abuse committed by clergy is a worldwide phenomenon in the Catholic Church. The investigations in the United States and Ireland opened the eyes of many to a disaster that many did not and do not want to admit. In fact, not everything should be lumped together. But the crucial differentiation is obviously not whether there is blatant abuse or not, but whether it is uncovered or not. The critical media play a decisive role. Numerous reports from those affected – moving testimonies of faith, harsh accusations, clear demands – mean that the humanitarian, spiritual and moral catastrophe of abuse of power, sexualized violence and spiritual exploitation are clearly visible.⁴

In Germany, the Bishops’ Conference commissioned a scientific study that conducted a fairly comprehensive investigation into what was recorded in the dioceses, opening their archives between 1946 and 2014. The study was

⁴ Cf. Reisinger: *Spiritueller Missbrauch in der katholischen Kirche* (2019); Haslbeck et al. (eds.): *Erzählen als Widerstand. Berichte über spirituellen und sexuellen Missbrauch an erwachsenen Frauen in der katholischen Kirche* (2020), known as the “MHG“ Study because of the universities involved in it (Mannheim, Heidelberg and Gießen).

compiled by independent experts, primarily from the fields of psychology and criminology. The title is: “Minors’ Sexual Abuse by Catholic Priests, Deacons and Male Members of Religious Orders in the Area of the German Bishops’ Conference” (“Sexueller Missbrauch an Minderjährigen durch katholische Priester, Diakone und männliche Ordensangehörige im Bereich der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz“)⁵. The study not only mentions an alarmingly high number of cases, even if they are lower (the reasons are still debatable) than in the more recent research from France. It also makes transparent how Church leaders – bishops, general vicars and personnel officers in particular – dealt with the crimes: Institutional protection before clarification, perpetrator orientation instead of victim orientation, sloppiness in the investigation and encouragement of new crimes by looking the other way and failing to act. The study comes to the conclusion that there is not only individual failure; the Catholic Church has a systemic problem which, on the one hand, did not prevent the crimes and, on the other hand, hindered their investigation, not to mention the compensation of those affected.

No one should shirk their personal responsibility by pointing to systemic failure; however, identifying personal misconduct cannot neutralize the systemic issue either. The fact that abuse is by no means just a Church problem, but a widespread social problem to which many people turn a blind eye, including in politics and the judiciary, is a sad truth, but one that should not make us forget that we should first remove the plank from our own eye before looking for the splinter in our neighbor’s eye, as Jesus taught (Mt 7:5).

In the meantime, further studies on different dioceses have been presented; others are in progress. Many reports are legally oriented, i. e., focused on identifying the personal misconduct of individuals responsible, which is to be sanctioned according to Church and state law (if the acts are not time-barred). Other studies are historically or sociologically oriented; they bring processes and structures, contexts and types to light. Psychological analysis is still in its infancy, even in the case of spiritual abuse.

However, a theological analysis is also needed. And precisely this has been developed on the Synodal Path. The Foundational Text “Power and Separation of Powers. Joint Participation and Involvement in the Mission”, adopted in the second reading by the entire Synodal Assembly with a very large majority, including a two-thirds majority of the bishops, states: “The kernel to the problem is the manner in which power – that is power to act, power to interpret and power to judge – is understood, justified, transferred and exercised in the Church. A theology of the Church has developed, a spirituality of obedience

⁵ Cf. Dreßing et al.: Sexueller Missbrauch an Minderjährigen durch katholische Priester, Diakone und männliche Ordensangehörige im Bereich der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz.

and a practice of the office which unilaterally bind this power to ordination and declares it to be sacrosanct. The Church is thus shielded from criticism, disconnected from supervision, and cut off from division. Conversely, vocation and charisms, dignity and rights, competences and responsibility of the faithful in the Catholic Church are not taken into account according to the significance that they have to the people of God.”⁶

The keyword is clericalism. The focus is on the vocation of priests.⁷ After the Enlightenment, the Catholic Church in Germany and in many other countries relied on young men taking on leadership roles in the Church through ordination. Since the 19th century, it has given young men in the former missionary areas and today’s growth areas of the Church opportunities for education and promotion if they were ordained. It has emphasized the unity of teaching and leadership, sacrament and authority, Eucharist and pastoral care – all strong modernization thrusts that have been very successful worldwide for more than a century. The First Vatican Council⁸ attempted to establish a representative in the form of the Pope who was independent of all other authorities – both state and ecclesiastical. The Second Vatican Council⁹ released the Pope from his ecclesial solitude and placed him in the college of bishops, but at the same time elevated the office of bishop to the throne in an unprecedented way – as if a sacralized monarchy were the guiding principle of the Church.

This development is imploding before our eyes. In all developed societies, the number of religious and priestly vocations is declining, as recently documented in Poland. The monopolization of power and authority with the bishop no longer corresponds to reality, but is upheld in theory, especially when it becomes critical, although Church administrations and councils have long since taken the reins of action into their own hands. Although the Pope has gained unimagined relevance as a spokesperson not only for the Catholic Church, but for the whole of Christendom and, between the Trumps and Putins, the Erdogans and Xi Pingjings of this world, also as a spokesperson for humanity, he will lose this relevance if he does not take a clear stance against abuse within the Church.

For some, this development is the downfall of the Church, which must be resisted with all our might; for others, it is the transition to a new social form of the Church, in which it is important to renew the resources of faith, love and hope anew and use them sustainably.

⁶ Foundational Text I/SW3, 7.

⁷ On the topic of Catholic Priesthood, see *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift Communio* (2022), Issue 1: Priester.

⁸ Cf. Schmidt: *Kleine Geschichte des Ersten Vatikanischen Konzils* (2019).

⁹ Cf. Wenzel: *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil* (2014).

1.2 Clarification of the Sense of Faith

The most important variable is the sense of faith of the people of God (*sensus fidei fidelium*). There is often talk of a crisis of faith in the Catholic world because Church milieus are disintegrating, traditional beliefs are becoming questionable and young parents are far less concerned about passing on religious knowledge to their children than previous generations. In fact, the number of people leaving the Church is rising dramatically – for example in Germany, where it is possible to measure this accurately (because of the tax-system). The binding effect of Christian congregations (which has never been as strong as in the 1950s) is clearly declining. Secularization, on the other hand, is on the rise – not so much atheism as agnosticism, religious indifference.¹⁰

But this is only one side of the coin. The seriousness of the situation also includes the fact that the Catholic Church, for its part, has become a reason for many people not to believe in God. In the Preparatory Document for the Synod, which was drawn up jointly by the Bishops' Conference and the ZdK in Fulda in 2019, it states the following on the subject of power and the separation of powers: "The crisis has not been brought into the Church from outside, but has arisen within the Church itself. It results from strong tensions between the doctrine and practice of the Church, but also between the way in which power is exercised in the Church and the standards of a pluralistic society in a democratic constitutional state, which many Catholics also expect to be taken into account in their Church."¹¹

It is the faithful who feel these tensions in their own bodies and souls – whether they go away or whether they go with them. According to Catholic doctrine, however, they have their own sense of God: of what is the *Good News* of the Gospel, of the truth that liberates, of the signs of the times in which the signs of God can be recognized. This sense of faith is a work of the Holy Spirit – not only in individuals, but also in their community, from generation to generation, across all barriers of nations, genders and cultures. The sense of faith of God's people is the realization of the promise that Jesus gives to all who believe in him according to the Gospel of John: "But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you in all the truth" (John 16:12).

In traditional concepts of Catholic theology, the *sensus fidei fidelium* is only understood passively: as subsequent consent to what the *magisterium*, the teaching authority, prescribes. However, this definition is an underdetermination. At the end of the 19th century, John Henry Newman used the example of dog-

¹⁰ Cf. Taylor: *A Secular Age* (2007).

¹¹ Cf. Synodaler Weg: *Vorbereitendes Forum Macht und Gewaltenteilung in der Kirche – Gemeinsame Teilnahme und Teilhabe am Sendungsauftrag* (2020).

matic disputes in antiquity to show that the majority of bishops were heretical, but the majority of the people were orthodox; therefore, *consulting the faithful in matters of doctrine* should be an integral part of Catholic practice.

The International Theological Commission (of which I was a member at the time) therefore explained in 2014 that the sense of faith not only reacts, but also acts:¹² it has a proactive side. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis spoke of the “intuition” of the people of God. In this sense, the Orientation Text of the German Synodal Path, which has also already been adopted, says the following about the sense of faith: “It consists not only in what is transmitted by Church teaching. It is also far more than the intuitions of believers who are able to sense the truth of the Scriptures, tradition or the Church’s teaching. The sense of faith of the faithful must also examine everything itself in the Spirit of God in order to find out what is good and right. The Spirit of God inwardly directs the faithful towards what determines everyone and everything: towards the spiritually-interwoven thread of personal conduct in life, the Church as God’s community of discovery and exploration – in constant conversion, and on the path of discipleship of Jesus Christ.”¹³

Understanding the sense of faith on a biblical basis in this way opens up new approaches to significant phenomena that are bound to shake the traditional doctrinal structure of the Catholic Church, but lead to fresh air and new spaces in a modern new building. The “pill encyclical” *Humanae Vitae*, with its ban on (allegedly) artificial contraception, is no longer even met with excited rejection by the vast majority of Church members, but only with head-shaking incomprehension.¹⁴ The same applies to what the Catholic Church teaches in the Catechism: that all extramarital sexual intercourse is “fornication”. The major cultural shift in the assessment of practiced homosexuality has broken down strong differences in mentality between North and South, West and East, but the Roman ban on blessing couples who love each other has fizzled out. Recently, the image of the faithful shepherd, who as a pastor knows best what is good for his flock, was to be painted once again; but the Amazon Synod has long since made it clear that this is a projection; in Germany, too, the letter seems like a nostalgic reminiscence, but not like a model for the future. The attempts to dogmatize traditional gender relations, so that women are not allowed to take on a public office of sanctification and leadership in the Church,

¹² Cf. Söding (ed.): *Der Spürsinn des Gottesvolkes: Eine Diskussion mit der Internationalen Theologischen Kommission* (2016).

¹³ Orientation Text/SW2, 46.

¹⁴ Cf. Aschmann/Damberg (eds.): *Liebe und tu, was du willst? Die “Pillenenzyklika” Humanae vitae von 1968 und ihre Folgen* (2021).

are coming to nothing for more and more people, both inside and outside the Church.

These reserves, which are deeply rooted in active Church members, and by no means only in Germany, are not a problem that needs to be solved through greater communicative efforts, but are part of the solution because they draw attention to contradictions in Church teaching and cracks in the fabric of the Catholic Church. The vast majority of the faithful expect not to be fobbed off with formulas, but to experience God “today”; they take the freedom to decide for themselves what they believe and how they live; they develop the ability to criticize outdated traditions and to think of alternatives. The question, however, is where this sense of faith is expressed and how it can carry weight and in which way it cannot isolate individuals but strengthen the community of the Church.

2. Two Major Challenges: One Structural and One Spiritual

The genuine place to give a forum to people of God’s faith in the Church is a synod. Synods are dominated by two challenges, one structural and one spiritual. In the synodal structures, the tension builds up as to what role bishops play and what role the Church members play, not forgetting priests, deacons and religious people, but also all those who – extremely important in Germany – are not ordained but are sent to work actively and responsibly in pastoral work, in caritative institutions, in religious education, in catechesis and also in theological science. The structural tensions are reflected in spiritual tensions: to what extent do clerical and laical forms determine prayer, the celebration of worship, confession and forgiveness of guilt, reparation and correction, without which there can be no conversion and renewal?

2.1 Synodal Structures

Synodal structures have been part of the life of the Church from the very beginning.¹⁵ However, they have been filled with spirit in different ways, depending on the prevailing convictions and circumstances of the time. At the most important council of the Church ever, the one in Jerusalem, it was the call of the apostles and elders to make decisions – but not alone, the whole Church was involved (Acts 15:1–34; Gal 2:1–10). The history of the Church knows of

¹⁵ Cf. Söding: *Gemeinsam unterwegs. Synodalität in der katholischen Kirche* (2022).

numerous assemblies in which not only clergy but also “lay people” regulate Church matters. However, in earlier times this was a typical expression of political influence into the Church. The “laity were often politicians or dignitaries of society. In modern times, however, there has been an increasing tendency for only consecrated persons to have a seat and a vote. This development was due to the distinction between Church and state. It has opened up areas of freedom for faith and contributed significantly to the differentiation of modern societies. But now they lay faithful represent the Church members as elected representatives in synods. That is a big – and consequent – next step to develop participation in ecclesial life.

After the Second Vatican Council, however, the spectrum narrowed once again to the bishops. The ecclesiastical code codified this focus. As a result, the idea of synodality flourished in the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council; there are regular world and continental synods, which play a major role in the diversity and unity of the Catholic Church. But synods are essentially only meetings of bishops.¹⁶ It is true that a few religious superiors were represented in Rome; there are also *auditors* who are allowed to speak. But when it comes to voting, only the bishops’ votes count. They are also the only relevant figures in the current world Church synodal process. Synodality seems to be synonymous with episcopal collegiality. Just how aporetic this approach is was demonstrated at the 2018 World Youth Synod: some of the main figures were allowed to speak, but only the bishops – who, with all due respect to the young at heart, are not part of the target group – were allowed to vote. Women have no say, and neither do married men. Pope Francis has now ended this practice and appointed 80 people, both men and women, who are not bishops, to advise and decide.

The enormous tensions arising from the traditional constellations and new initiatives are leading to new ideas and approaches. In 2018 (when I was no longer a member), the International Theological Commission made an initial attempt to reserve decision-making for the bishops, but to incorporate deliberation into the structures of a synod as the joint work of all members of the body of Christ.¹⁷ Of course, consultation and decision-making can rarely be clearly distinguished, because dynamic process controls that interlink conception and evaluation are required. Above all, the question arises as to why lay faithful should not also have a say in pastoral and personal matters, when Scripture and tradition often bear witness to this and when Church law, esp. concordats, stip-

¹⁶ Cf. Eterović: *Sinodi continentali. I consigli speciali del sinodo dei vescovi* (2013).

¹⁷ Cf. Graulich/Rahner (eds.): *Synodalität in der katholischen Kirche. Die Studie der Internationalen Theologischen Kommission im Diskurs* (2020).

ulates that expert lay members have the majority in decision-making bodies in matters of finance and property.

However, as long as Church law regulates the opportunities for participation restrictively, numerous new forms are emerging that are intended to put consultation and decision-making on a common basis. These forms are experimental, and therefore not non-binding. Their status under canon law is weak; therefore, the stronger their input must be. This is the case in Australia, albeit within the framework of a provincial council, which secures some participation rights thanks to papal privilege. In Latin America and the Caribbean, it is constituted by the Pope will that not only the “elites” determine the discourse (i. e., not only the bishops), but also the “people”; the forms are in flux, although a collegial leadership has been formed for the Amazonas area, which presides over a veritable Church assembly (CEAMA).¹⁸

The Synodal Path in Germany is also such a compromise. It has a constitution that has been issued by the Bishops’ Conference and the ZdK; it has rules of procedure that the Synodal Assembly has adopted. It has fixed working structures and voting procedures with first and second readings. Its resolutions are binding if the stipulated quorums are reached, including a two-thirds majority of bishops, as is also required at the General Assembly of Bishops. However, the legal authority of each bishop in his diocese remains unaffected. The Synodal Assembly is not a council; therefore, a clear distinction is made between what can be changed locally and what is a matter for the universal Church. The former includes, for example, the development of participation structures in the appointment of leadership positions, pastoral planning for the future and finances, the establishment of ombudsman offices, the promotion of women, the organization of blessings, the creation of catechetical materials, the modernization of priestly training, etc. The second is represented, for example, by the opening of the sacramental diaconate to women or changes to the statements on sexual morality in the World Catechism, but also the enactment of a catalog of fundamental rights in the Catholic Church (*lex ecclesiae fundamentalis*) or the opening of celibacy for priests in the Roman Catholic Church. The fact that women can be ordained as priests would be a far-reaching step; the vote that the discussion must be conducted openly is not so sensational, even if some immediately sense a heresy. It may be that the possible decision is not one for the whole Church but for single local Churches, as it was the case with the rediscovery of the permanent diaconate after the Second Vatican Council. However, such a decision must also be supported by the entire Church.

¹⁸ Cf. Weiler: Gegen Klerikalismus, Machismo und Klimanot. Impulse der Kontinentalen Phase der Welta synode in Lateinamerika (2023).

A key role will be played on the one hand by believers who are willing to volunteer, and on the other by bishops and priests who are willing to engage in synodal processes. In the Catholic Church, the focus is usually on bishops and priests. But it is by no means a matter of course that people are committed to their Church and within it. Voter turnout for the committees is alarmingly low; however, the example of the diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart shows that when the rights of the committees are strengthened, voter turnout also increases. People who exercise their right to vote in a democracy in order to mandate people to make decisions, or who stand for election themselves in order to take on responsibility, will not be fobbed off with non-binding consultation rounds in the Church. The fact that the establishment of significantly higher participation structures can give rise to new problems, from committee functionaries with no grounding to communication specialists without spirit, is a real danger – however, it is not an objection to the development of sustainable synodality in the Catholic Church, but a call to promote legality through competence and legitimacy through quality.

It will not work without bishops who are committed to synodality and relate it to the participation of as many of God's people as possible. On the basis of current law, one possibility is to create greater procedural security through voluntary self-commitment: more transparency and control, more involvement of Church members, more persuasion – and more approval if it goes well. Critics of the Synodal Path¹⁹ fear a “Protestantization” of the Catholic Church – and thus not only reveal anti-reformatory affects that lead to a confessionalization of the Catholic Church, but also a lack of expertise, because in Protestantism, synods²⁰ are typically Church parliaments that are opposed by an assembly of bishops, for example, whereas in the Catholic model, all diocesan and auxiliary bishops are fully integrated. They get involved in the work; they face up to criticism and also practice it. They take part in debates and votes. They do not form a “fraction” (like a party in a parliament is organized), but they are challenged in their specific leadership responsibility.

Processes are taking place on both sides that will decide the future weal and woe of the Catholic Church, not only in Germany but worldwide. Will there be enough people who will commit themselves to their Church, to its conversion and renewal, to its local presence, to its everyday life and its celebrations, out of an inner drive, in the freedom of faith and with their life experience? And will there be enough bishops who will not use their office as a bulwark against the participation of the faithful in deliberations and decisions in the Catholic

¹⁹ Cf. Binninger et al. (eds.): “Was ER euch sagt, das tut!” Kritische Beleuchtung des Synodalen Weges (2021).

²⁰ Cf. von Campenhausen: Synoden in der evangelischen Kirche (1995).

Church, but as an instrument to promote commitment, guarantee participation and share power? A new way of working together is needed – without mixing up tasks, but also without fear of one’s own courage.

2.2 Synodal Spirit

The questions show that the structural tensions cannot be built without the spiritual ones.²¹ Structures without spirit are hollow – just as spirituality without forms evaporates. What synodal spirituality consists of can be discovered along the way. Listening attentively, seeking the truth in the divergent position, being ready for the new without despising the old – these are virtues that are in demand and are practiced on the Synodal Path.

Spirituality, of course, does not end in ethos. It needs the communal celebration of the Eucharist, it needs the signs of faith; it needs the words that make us listen to God’s word. There is a prayer for the Synodal Path in which God the Father is asked for the Holy Spirit: “May He open our hearts so that we may listen to Your Word and accept it with faith. May He impel us to seek the truth together. May He strengthen our faithfulness to You and keep us in unity with our Pope and the whole Church.” The Spiritual Direction has produced an Easter breviary in which synod members develop the Orientation Text, which bears the title: “On the Path of Conversion and Renewal. Theological Foundations of the Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany” and states: “Whoever believes never remains stuck to the letter of the Bible, but seeks to breathe the ‘Spirit’ that ‘gives life’ (2 Cor 3:6)”.²² Sarah Henschke, parish officer and diocesan chaplain of the BDKJ, the Federation of German Catholic Youth (Bund der Deutschen Katholischen Jugend), in the diocese of Trier, member of the Synodal Assembly and Forum IV, which deals with questions of sexual ethics, writes: “I like to hear about the personal faith of others and I like to engage in well-founded and theological arguments, because I like to get to know other perspectives and I like to learn more about my theological expertise. Wherever both sides conduct the discussion in this way, you can actually breathe the spirit that makes people come alive. I don’t want to say that we have already managed to always discuss things with each other in this way in the Synodal Way, but I do think that we have made progress in the meantime and that there is at least some of the ‘good spirit of Frankfurt’.”²³

²¹ Cf. Eckholt: *geist-bewegt. Synodale Wege in den Spuren Jesu gehen. Schriftmeditationen* (2022).

²² Orientation Text/SW2, 18.

²³ *Der Synodale Weg: Osterbrevier 2022. Mit Impulsen aus dem Orientierungstext* (2022).

Spirituality is not opposed to reflection, discourse or criticism. Spirituality stands for alertness, for sensitivity and resilience, for the discernment of spirits and the decisive use of the *kairos*. Spirituality originates from faith, which can develop and express itself. The liturgies of the Synodal Path in Germany most clearly express the spirit that is needed in joint deliberation and decision-making. The source and climax is the celebration of the Eucharist. During the last two assemblies, it was celebrated where the work was done: in a large exhibition hall that looks like a 21st century basilica. The rich treasure of the Christian liturgy is used in many ways: through daily prayers, discussions of the Scriptures, “pauses” that interrupt the continuous operation to create space for reflection.

The spirituality of the Synodal Path is intended to sharpen the senses: it should sensitize us to perceive what there is now and to hope for what is to come. It should deepen the community: not close it off, but open it up. Synodal spirituality means “living alternatives that lead further”, writes Siegfried Kleymann, one of the spiritual guides of the Synodal Path. Maria Boxberg, also a spiritual guide, explains in an interview with Vatican Radio that synodal spirituality involves “a lot of unrest in a good sense”, triggered “by a spirit that also mixes things up”, so that “something moves” and “the message of Jesus Christ really finds more space again in the Church itself.”²⁴

A spirituality that is breaking out is already better expressed on the Synodal Path in Germany than in some Roman forums, which seem to be frozen in routine. All genders are visible and audible. Old and new songs resound; the beautiful ways of faith, of which the history of German piety is so rich, are sung as well as the fresh melodies of a Catholic world music that young and old alike can sing, hum and clap along to.

However, the Synodal Path is still too little characterized by the lament of those who have suffered violence. It has only found the very first forms of confessing “to God Almighty and to all brothers and sisters” what “I have failed to do good and have done evil”. It has also not yet found a solution to the spiritual need to celebrate a reconciliation that is not a disguise. Without a reconciliation worthy of its name, there will be no good future in view of the blatant undesirable developments; it is clear that it cannot be exhausted in a liturgy. But there are examples of a celebration that is as humble as it is hopeful and liberating.

The synod gathers under the sign of the cross. It is a presentation cross: a sheet of metal with recycled gold leaf, made exclusively for this celebration of faith in the forge at Königsmünster Abbey. Many small metal crosses have been cut from the sheet using laser technology: “holding crosses” for all those who

²⁴ Cf. Boxberg: Boxberg zum Synodalen Weg: „Also ich finde da viel Mitte drin“ (2022).

want to hold them in their hands. They are missing from the large corpus – and yet they are there, as open spaces that refer to living people: to people who bring themselves into the Church and who, for their part, can know that it depends on themselves, in a larger whole that refers to God, in the name of Jesus. A candle burns next to the cross, as is the case in all cathedral churches in Germany: a sign of deep solidarity, a sign of hope in difficult times.

3. Two Broad Perspectives – One Theological and One Political

The structure and spirituality of the Synodal Path that is being paved in Germany and in the Global Church open up broad perspectives and must be measured by how much they open up and how much they close off. On the one hand, it is a matter of theological positioning: what are the most important topics and forms? On the other hand, it is about political positioning: where does the Church stand in a world that is wounded by wars and climate catastrophes, but which God wants to be a house of life?

3.1 Theological Responsibility

The theological topics of the Synodal Path in Germany are more concrete than those of the World Synod. They are explained by the need to take up the impulses of the MHG Study. For this reason, “Power and Separation of Powers in the Church – Joint Participation and Involvement in the Mission”, “Priestly Existence Today”, “Women in Ministries and Offices in the Church” and “Life in Succeeding Relationships – Living Love in Sexuality and Partnership” were established as focal points, which provide both fundamental orientation and propose concrete actions in their own forums.

The range of issues that need to be discussed and decided in synods in Germany because burning problems remain unresolved is, of course, much wider. The four that were chosen only highlight the most urgent construction sites where hard work needs to be done, so that those responsible in the Church can look those affected by abuse in the face. In terms of form and content, the Roman guiding questions largely correspond to what took place in Germany from 2011 to 2015 during the five-year discussion process “Believing in Today”: overcoming language barriers between different groups in the Catholic Church, reaching an understanding about the central challenges facing the Church and

further developing the impulses from the Second Vatican Council. Without this discussion process, which was organized by the German Bishops' Conference, the Synodal Path, in which the ZdK was involved "at eye level", would not have been possible. But the step into the new format was necessary if the triad of seeing, judging and acting is not to be cut off.

At the level of the Global Church, there is a lack of experience exchange regarding synodality, both in terms of form and content. In principle, the right course seems to have been set: more multilingualism in the voices that count, more honesty in the analysis of the situation, more courage and zeal in the will to reform. But this dialogue has now begun. It led to a good interim assessment in October 2023 and will have to prepare concrete decisions for the Pope in October 2024. In the 9th key question of the Preparation Document, the problem was raised as to whether the differentiation – as it is called in not particularly elegant English – between *decision taking* and *decision making* is the last word in wisdom. This question is the *crucial point* of the global process. The Roman Synodal Assembly 2023 took it up and called for theological and legal clarifications that guarantee participation and organize subsidiarity.

3.2 Political Responsibility

The question of distinctive participation in an episcopally constituted Church that is embarking on the Synodal Path is a big question. The Catholic Church has a long tradition; it has a stubbornness; it has a missionary responsibility. It lives in a globalized world of many religions, competing ideologies, ecological catastrophes, but also international agreements for peace, justice and the integrity of creation. Will it define itself as Catholic by distancing itself from human rights, by restricting participation rights and by maintaining the gender gap? Or does it want to be part, or even the avant-garde, of an emancipatory movement that overcomes discrimination and ensures participation?

The theological perspective is intertwined with the political perspective. The awakening of the young Church would not have happened without a promise being made with the clarity of the confession to God: whether someone was born a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free man, a man or a woman, makes no decisive difference for life in the Church; "for you are all one in Christ" (Gal 3:26–28). Over long stretches of its history and in wide areas of its present, the Catholic Church keeps this promise (within the limits of its human limitations): it does so today, for example, in international charity, in educational work that is as wide-ranging as it is small-scale, in its commitment to religious freedom, in making it possible to unite love of God and love of neighbor.

But there are also glaring deficits: no fundamental rights in the *Codex Curis Canonici* worthy of the name, machismo and paternalism that are religiously exaggerated, traditional social and family models that are positioned against gains in freedom, authoritarian thinking that is supposed to counter the assumed relativism of late modernity with the truth of the faith. It gets bad when this agenda is also ennobled with the reference to the critical spirit of prophecy, which is part of the DNA of Christianity, although in fact only traditionalism is confused with tradition.

The political task of the Catholic Church is a different one. It is the only *global player* that is also a *global prayer*. It is capable of speaking and acting, locally, regionally and universally. It has a political agenda – not to politicize, but to first show by its own example that freedom does not increase to the extent that religious influence decreases, but grows where faith expands the spaces of thinking and feeling, of speaking and acting. It is the social mission of the Church to fulfill the claim of the Gospel that evil can be overcome by good (Romans 12:21). It corresponds to the Gospel that people do not need to work out their identity before they are valid, nor are they fixed to their past, their body or their social roles, but that they are called to discover and shape the image of God that is laid in their cradle. Because there is one God for all, no worldly or ecclesiastical hierarchy can rule over the meaning of life, over the relationship with God and over personal consciences; rather, a radical equality and diversity arises at the same time, because all people have one and the same God above them and hopefully also within them.

Synodality is not the panacea for the Church and the world, for those affected by sexualized and spiritualized violence, for the proclamation of the Gospel and for the works of mercy. But without developed synodality, it will be difficult to be the Church of Jesus Christ in the 3rd millennium.

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Three Years of the Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany

Local Church Changes – Theological Impulses – Synodal Experiences¹

Bernhard Emunds

The Synodal Path is the German Catholic Church's response to the scandal of widespread sexual abuse by priests and its cover-up by bishops and other clergy at the head of the dioceses. The basis is the diagnosis that this abuse scandal is not only due to criminal acts of individual clerics and the leadership failure of individual diocesan incumbents, but also has causes that are rooted in the system of the Catholic Church itself and in some of its teachings. These are only to a limited extent causal for the individual acts of violence, but they were (or are) highly significant for the fact that the clerical perpetrators were (or are) repeatedly given the opportunity to commit their criminal acts. From empirical studies, four such systemic causes of the abuse crisis, in particular, emerge: 1) the sacralization of priests – and indeed as persons as a whole (as distinct from their actions in celebrating sacraments), 2) the isolation of small circles of diocesan decision-makers from the public and from organizational checks and balances, 3) a chastity-fixated sexual morality that has become blind to the criminal nature of sexualized violence, and finally 4) a 'fraternal' solidarity in a male federation that is particularly close-knit because of the common celibate way of life.

These structural causes also include factors that make the proclamation of the Gospel in Germany and in other European and American societies enormously difficult: sexual morality, ideas about the sexes and their specific roles in the Church, the compulsory celibacy for priests, and an extremely hierarchical form of organization in which only one person – *a* pastor or *a* bishop – decides what is to happen. These peculiarities are currently making the inculturation of Catholic Christianity in many Western societies enormously difficult; they cause

¹ This article is largely based on another article by the author: Emunds: Drei Jahre Synodaler Weg. Eine Zwischenbilanz (2023). Translation: IWM team and Laura Ursprung.

many Catholics who are attached to the Church to perceive their own church, to which they are so devoted, as a foreign body in the culture of their country.

Systemic causes of the abuse crisis and inculturation – these are the two challenges that the Church in Germany is trying to address with the Synodal Path. There were four forums on four focal points of the challenge in which the votes of the Synodal Assembly were intensively prepared.²

In the following, we will first outline how the Synodal Path came about and what characterizes its style of deliberation and decision-making. Then it is emphasized which substantive impulses are connected with it: the progress in the local Church evolution of synodality, its reform theology, its impulses for discussion on dogmatic and moral questions, and finally its suggestions for changes in the local Church in Germany. The article ends with reflections on the concept of synodality and on the experiences that the local German Church is currently having with synodality in its relations with the Apostolic See.

1. How did the Synodal Path come about and what shaped its style?

At the General Assembly of the German Bishops' Conference in the spring of 2019, the bishops realized the deep crisis into which the abuse scandal had plunged the Church in Germany. They took seriously the fact that this crisis also has structural causes. They recognized that a credible path of conversion and renewal was needed – a path that they could not credibly walk alone, but only together with the Catholic laity. That is why they invited the leading representative body of the laity in Germany – the Central Committee of German Catholics (Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken) – to walk this path together: the Synodal Path. Because the Central Committee accepted this invita-

² Forum I dealt with Church power structures, Forum II with the image of priests, Forum III with the situation of women in the Church, and Forum IV with sexual ethics. The forums each developed a foundational text with theological bases for their majority position and implementation texts with concrete guidelines for the Church in Germany or with votes to the theological and canonistic discussions throughout the Catholic Church. These texts were then to be discussed and voted on twice in the Synodal Assembly. Due to time constraints, quite a few implementation texts were not put to a final vote in the Synodal Assembly; some did not even come up for discussion. In addition to the resolutions prepared by the forums, the orientation text introduced by the synod presidium is also significant. All 16 texts that were adopted by the Synodal Assembly can be found on the homepage www.synodalerweg.de/english/documents. The individual prints of the texts on this page are cited, with the suffix “SW” referring to the serial number of each document.

tion, the Synodal Path was able to start in January 2020. In March 2023, the first phase of the Synodal Path, a phase with large Synodal Assemblies and intensive work in four thematic forums, was completed. In the coming months, this will be followed by further work at various levels; at the national level, a synodal committee with about 70 members is now continuing its work. In contrast, the Synodal Assembly of the phase concluded in March 2023 had 230 members.

The way in which the Synodal Path has worked on the challenges so far has been very German and very Catholic. It was very German not only in the thoroughness with which the problems were addressed; it was also German in the fact that, comparatively, many financial resources were available within the Church to organize large Synodal Assemblies. Above all, however, it was German in the fact that it could rely on an extraordinarily well-organized lay Catholicism. Already in the 19th century, Catholic associations (“Verbände”) emerged in opposition to a Protestant-dominated state, and the Central Committee of German Catholics was formed. After the Second Vatican Council and a national synod (“Würzburger Synode”, 1971–75), synodal committees also emerged in all dioceses of the West German Church from the 1970s onwards. Today, these (of course, also the synodal committees of the East German dioceses) are represented in the Central Committee; they form the second supporting pillar of the Central Committee, alongside with the Catholic associations.

Because of the associations and the Central Committee, there has been a second tradition of lived synodality in Germany for more than 100 years – a second tradition alongside the tradition of many religious orders, in which joint decision-making *and* decision-taking, as well as the election of incumbents, is common practice. In the Catholic associations and in the Central Committee, a style of debate is cultivated that is reminiscent of parliamentary debates, and resolutions are prepared and passed in a similar way, as it happens in parliaments. This style has also been the style of the past five Synodal Assemblies. The procedures of decision-making and decision-taking of the associations and the Central Committee were the inspiration for the procedures of the Synodal Assembly. For many observers from other countries, they were certainly strange; for some of the bishops, especially at the beginning of the process, too. But in the end – together with the elaborate substantive work in the forums – they enabled a good joint debate to reach common positions.

However, the Synodal Path was not only typically German, but also very Catholic. Just two important examples: first, every decision required not only a two-thirds majority of all synod members, but at the same time a two-thirds majority of the bishops. This means that texts were written in such a way that they would also receive a two-thirds majority among the bishops (which was almost always accomplished, with only two exceptions). Second, a clear distinction was made for each topic and each resolution: is this about something that

the Church in Germany can decide on its own, e.g., changes in its labor law or the expansion of synodal structures in Germany? Or is it about something that either involves a further development of the Church's teachings on matters of faith or ethics, or requires a further development of the *Codex Iuris Canonici* (CIC)? In the case of the second type questions, the Church in Germany can only decide on proposals to the universal Church, i. e., give impulses for discussion to the World Synod or formulate requests to the Pope and the Apostolic See.

In accordance with this basic distinction, the impulses for the theological and canonistic debates of the universal Catholic Church and the impulses for the Catholic Church in Germany will be presented separately below. Before that, however, the most important accomplishment of the Synodal Path will be illuminated: the first steps toward a culture of synodality in the German Church.

2. Development of a Culture of Synodality

The Synodal Path was associated with a profound cultural change in ecclesiastical deliberation and decision taking. Important decisions prepared behind closed doors with co-opted advisors and then taken in solitude or in small secret circles of power – the time for such processes in German dioceses may now finally be over. The members of the Synodal Assemblies were seated in alphabetical order and not in the order according to the church hierarchy and the discussions were streamed live. Good solutions were sought in a rule-governed and argumentative manner. This created a culture of open dialogue in which uncomfortable personal convictions as well as painful life experiences that had previously been covered up in the Catholic Church were given a voice, e.g. experiences of queer Christians or of women who are spiritually impressive and theologically highly competent, whose charisms are not used appropriately by the Church.

Especially because of the Roman interventions and the clause that a separate two-thirds majority of the bishops for all decisions was required, it was at the same time always very evident that the synodal debate took place under the highly asymmetrical conditions of the Catholic hierarchy. The fact that the Synodal Assemblies were nevertheless able to set some profiled impulses for a future-oriented Catholicism also shows that the vast majority of local bishops in Germany have the will to reform. In addition, there was also counter-power to the hierarchical power of the bishops. It came about through the astonishingly high level of attention in the German public debate, above all through the #OutInChurch initiative, which was excellently portrayed in the media, and in

which homosexual employees of the Church impressively revealed their history of discrimination in it.

3. The Impulse of a Reform Theology

The reform theology with which the members of the Synodal Path reacted to the crisis of covered-up sexual abuse and blocked inculturation can be understood as a first reform impulse at the Global Church level. The profile of this theology, which is developed in the orientation text and in the foundational texts of the forums, can only be indicated here very concisely: sexualized violence by the clergy and its 'fraternal' cover-up by Church leaders also have to do with teachings of the Church as well as with its power structure. They even touch on the Church's sacramental identity.

Through a misguided internal power structure, the Church obscures her mission. Instead of preventing abuse, she has enabled it, instead of investigating it, she has all too often covered it up. This was also made possible because the Catholic Church has not consistently taken up the demands of the Gospel, nor the achievements of liberal standards such as transparency, participation and control. When the church is not experienced as a sign of salvation but as a space of disaster, its sacramental identity is called into question. The reform of the Church's power structures is therefore not some kind of manoeuvre involving cultural refinements that adapt the Church to the zeitgeist. It is required for the sake of the sacramentality of the Church.³

The Church finds orientation in the necessary process of fundamental renewal not simply through a positivistic commitment to papal pronouncements, but in the common striving of the whole people of God for an understanding of the Gospel that corresponds to the reality of people's lives here and now. In this process, the Bible, tradition, the signs of the times, the faith of the faithful, the magisterium and theology are the most important, mutually corrective and supplementing sources of knowledge (*loci theologici*)⁴.

How a corresponding reorientation can look like becomes paradigmatically clear in the explanations on a gender-equitable Church⁵. Here, social and ecclesial phenomena of discrimination against women are illuminated, and the history of the patriarchal over-shaping of the liberating Christian message is reca-

³ Foundational Text I/SW3, 35 f.

⁴ Cf. Orientation Text/SW2, 9 f. and others.

⁵ Cf. Foundational Text III/SW5.

pitulated. In addition, with reference to corresponding approaches in scripture and tradition, the guiding idea of an ecclesial gender order characterized by equality is formulated, from which inquiries about gender-specific admission to sacramental offices also arise. The Foundational Text of Forum IV, on the other hand, which theologically substantiates the new orientation for the area of sexual ethics, failed to achieve the necessary two-thirds majority among the bishops at the fourth Synodal Assembly.

4. Impulses for Dogmatic and Moral-theological Developments

More public attention than the theological foundations of the Synodal Path is given to its demands and impulses for dogmatic and canonical developments and ecclesiastical decisions of the Catholic Church as a whole. Regarding celibacy, the Synodal Assembly addresses the request to the Pope to “reconsider the connection of the conferral of ordination with the commitment to celibacy”⁶. At the same time, the German Church also announced a request to the Pope to allow the ordination of *virī probati*⁷. Finally, the German Bishops’ Conference is asked to request permission from the Apostolic See to allow local bishops to dispense from the obligation of celibacy even now in individual cases⁸.

Three of the implementation texts on sexual ethics also contribute to the formation of opinion in the Catholic Church on a global level. Here, the Pope is asked to withdraw the magisterial condemnation of practiced homosexuality in the World Catechism, among other things. In addition, it is emphasized that no one may be excluded from receiving a sacrament because of homosexual orientation. The Church as a whole should confess that it has caused suffering to homosexuals and violated their dignity in its teaching and pastoral practice⁹. A clear sign is also the “official introduction” of blessing ceremonies for couples who love each other but cannot or do not want enter into a sacramental marriage, and the decision to draw up a guidance document for the local church with suggested forms for these ceremonies¹⁰. The Flemish Bishops’ Conference had already published a similar resolution in September 2022. Finally, it is worth

⁶ Implementation Text Celibacy/SW11, 24.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 28.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 27 f.

⁹ Cf. Implementation Text Homosexuality/SW8, 7.

¹⁰ Cf. Implementation Text Blessing Ceremonies/SW13, 4–6.

mentioning here the call to recognize the gender identity of inter- and transgender people and to draw corresponding consequences for Church action (including diocesan LGBTQ representatives and gender entry in the baptismal register)¹¹. Here, too, the Synodal Assembly sought to close ranks with another local Church, in this case with the Australian Bishops' Conference and its guide for Church schools from the summer of 2022. Finally, the Synodal Assembly rejects the resentful talk of a "gender ideology"¹², which unfortunately can also be found in papal statements. This kind of demarcation from right-wing political tendencies is necessary because right-wing conservative Catholic circles are closing ranks with right-wing extremists and populists on this issue, which is politically highly dangerous in Central and Eastern Europe, for example.

The positioning of the Synodal Path on opening access to ordained ministry to all genders is also likely to be relevant to the theological discussions throughout the Catholic Church. The foundational text of the forum "Women in Ministries and Offices of the Church"¹³ impresses with a solid theological argumentation for the admission of women and of persons with a gender entry diverse to the diaconate and priesthood. From a Church of fundamental equality of all believers "in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28) and from their common calling to proclaim the Gospel, a reversal of the burden of proof arises: it is not the admission of women to sacramental ministries but their exclusion that requires justification¹⁴. However, an examination of the traditionally cited reasons for tying ordained offices to the male gender (Jesus' practice of calling only men as apostles, bridegroom-bride metaphor) proves their "weakness"¹⁵.

What is questioned is the position in the hermeneutics of dogma – developed following the 1994 Apostolic Exhortation *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* – that reserving priestly ordination for men is an infallible doctrine because, while not self-revealed, it is necessary for the preservation of biblical revelation:

Is it really the case that the core of the Christian message, namely the proclamation of the Easter faith, can only be preserved if women are excluded from this office? Or is it not rather the case that women perform precisely this ministry in the Easter stories, and testify to Jesus Christ as a living presence?¹⁶

An answer to these, actually rhetorical, questions is already found in the introduction:

¹¹ Cf. Implementation Text Gender Diversity/SW15, 9, 12.

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, 5 f.

¹³ Cf. Foundational Text III/SW5.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 101.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

To be excluded as a woman* from the official representation of Christ is scandalous. For many Christians, it obscures the message of the Gospel, the proclamation of which was entrusted to the female Easter witnesses.¹⁷

5. Reform Impulses for the Church in Germany

What suggestions has the Synodal Path formulated for the practice and organizational structures of the Catholic Church in Germany? Some impulses aim at the reduction of discrimination. Here, two resolutions should be recalled that have already been acknowledged as impulses for dogmatic and moral-theological developments: the official introduction of blessing ceremonies for homosexual couples and remarried divorcees, among others, and the appeal to draw consequences for pastoral work from the recognition of the gender identity of intersexual and transsexual people. In addition, there is the demand to prohibit any discrimination based on gender identity and to abolish in Church labor law and in the rules for the granting of the *Missio Canonica* for teachers of religion both those obligations of loyalty that relate to the choice of marital status or the form of partnership¹⁸.

Several synodal impulses seek to change the power structures of the local German Church. In Foundational Text I (SW3), a theological foundation is laid for a reform that not only makes Church structures “missbrauchsresistenter (more resistant to abuse)”¹⁹, but also “gives space to the sense of faith of God’s people”²⁰. On this basis, a three-part program is outlined²¹: 1) The faithful are to be legally guaranteed participation in Church processes of decision-making and decision-taking, in order to tie these processes back to their interests and idea. 2) In addition, the faithful are to be protected from the arbitrariness of the ministers by an effective legal binding of the latter. For this purpose, the Synodal Assembly advocates the introduction of a supra-diocesan administrative jurisdiction in Germany and suggests that the project abandoned by John Paul II should be relaunched at the level of the Global Church to bind all Church actions to a Charter of Fundamental Rights (*Lex Ecclesiae Fundamentalis*)²². 3) Finally, procedures should be implemented which could increase the acceptance of ministers. These are intended to involve the people of God more

¹⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁸ Cf. Implementation Text Fundamental Order/SW9, 4–9.

¹⁹ Beck: Im Anfang war die Missbrauchskrise (2021), 83.

²⁰ Foundational Text I/SW3, 50.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 70–73.

²² Cf. *ibid.*, 74, 79.

broadly for example in the appointment of leadership positions; or to promote a constructive resolution of conflicts between bishops or pastors and the other believers involved.

Time pressure in particular, but also Roman interventions, however, led to the fact that the Synodal Assembly only passed the text on the establishment of a nationwide Synodal Council and a preparatory Synodal Committee²³ from this ambitious program, in addition to an implementing text on the participation of the faithful in appointing bishops²⁴. Thus, participation structures were adopted at the national level, which are to make synodal decision-making and decision-taking permanent.

It is particularly painful that until the official conclusion of the Synodal Path, it was not possible to create binding forms of participation also for the diocesan and parish levels. This is because, at the last Synodal Assembly, the second reading of the implementation text “Joint Consultation and Decision-making” was abandoned without a resolution being passed. This can be traced back to an intervention by the Roman Curia in response to a still unpublished request addressed to the Curia by the five conservative dissidents among the German diocesan bishops. In the Roman reaction, all committees of the local German Church, and eventually the local bishops themselves, were denied the authority to establish synodal councils at the national, diocesan, or parish level.²⁵ Indeed, as the Salzburg professor of dogmatic theology Gregor Hoff has noted, it represents a “contradiction” that here “Pope and Curia want to preserve episcopal power by curtailing the right of bishops themselves to decide in their local church”²⁶. Moreover, the approach of the small episcopal minority and the Roman reaction to it are more in line with the two previous pontificates, but not with the present one. The fact that individual bishops of a local church make a denunciatory report to the Roman “center” and that this is positively taken up, in order to intervene in the respective local church with detailed ‘prohibitions’, contradicts Pope Francis’ program of Global Church synodality.

Complementing the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church with a viable synodal structure and finding a balance between them is currently the most

²³ Cf. Implementation Text Sustainable Strengthening of Synodality/SW10.

²⁴ Cf. Implementation Text Appointment of the Diocesan Bishop/SW7. Various concordats are in force in the German federal states. In these, the respective local church is granted limited opportunities to have a say in the process of finding a new local bishop, although the extent of this varies in the different concordats. Until now, these local church participation rights have been the exclusive rights of the cathedral chapters.

²⁵ Cf. Parolin/Ladaria Ferrer S.J./Ouellet: Letter to Bishop Georg Bätzing (2023), 3; Eterović: Greeting to the Spring Plenary Assembly of the German Bishops’ Conference in Dresden (2023).

²⁶ Hoff: Mehr geht immer (2023).

important challenge for Church organizational reform. Therefore, this article ends with two remarks on the concept of synodality, one on local Church synodality and one on Global Church synodality.

6. Notes on the Guiding Principle of Synodality

The Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany has developed a rather precise idea of what a *synodal* distribution of competencies should look like. In the local churches, i. e., at the level of parishes, dioceses, and the whole country, such processes are understood as synodal, in which the bishops, other clergy, religious and lay people deliberate together and then, most importantly, also decide together. In this context, the possibilities of joint decision-making and decision-taking are to be legally guaranteed to make them somewhat less dependent on the momentary goodwill of the respective incumbent. In the financial area, the CIC itself already provides that a bishop may make important property decisions only with the consent of two competent committees (can. 1292 § 1). Here, therefore, canon law obliges the bishop to consult *and* decide together with the clergy and laity of their dioceses. In other matters, however, a legally documented competence not only to deliberate but also to co-decide is only possible under the given canon law conditions if incumbents enter into a self-commitment, i. e., if they voluntarily bind their actions to the joint decisions.

How important decisions are prepared and made together is a matter for each local church to decide. The way suggested by the Synodal Path is probably inappropriate for many other local churches. However, based on their previous experience in synodal committees, it is important to the synodal members in Germany that joint consultation (decision-making) is followed by joint decision-taking.

What can synodality mean at the Global Church level? Even in assemblies and in synodal committees of the Global Church, according to the local German Church, a synodal distribution of competencies on the global level consists in the fact that bishops and non-bishops, especially lay people, deliberate together and decide together. The fact that Pope Francis determined in April 2023 that at the current Synod on Synodality, 80 non-bishops should not only participate but also vote with equal rights, is therefore very much welcomed in Germany as an important step in the right direction.

But even beyond such assemblies, there is an urgent need for a synodalization of the Global Church. This means, on the one hand, that each local Church should be given wide latitude to inculturate itself in its society under present

conditions. The aim is to have sufficient leeway to proclaim the Gospel well in word and deed in one's own culture and thus to be able to act like a leaven in one's own country. If the local churches are to be given room for maneuver, then this also means that the Roman Curia exercises restraint, i. e. that it leaves the local churches room for maneuver and does not repeatedly restrict them.

Synodalization of the Global Church means, moreover, that the representatives of the local churches enter into a good dialogue with each other: a dialogue about the necessary further developments of doctrine and Church structure, a dialogue about the scope that each country needs for the authentic proclamation of the Gospel. It is a dialogue between the local churches, in which the Apostolic See is also involved as a dialogue-oriented interlocutor. In the program of Pope Francis' pontificate, this concern seems to play a central role: the concern for further synodal developments of the Global Church, which does not question the papal primacy, but modernizes it with a view to the realities of the 21st century.

However, the way the Apostolic See deals with the Synodal Path in Germany is miles away from such synodality. Until today, a conversation between the head of the Synodal Path and representatives of the Curia, which the former have been asking for three years, has not taken place. To this criticism, some may reply: "Don't take yourselves so seriously in Germany! The tops of the Curia have other things to do." This is undoubtedly a very good objection! However, it is incomprehensible why new instructions or letters were repeatedly sent to Germany from the Curia in which an attempt was made, without prior discussion, to say no to the reform requests formulated here. The prohibition of synodal councils, which the German church received shortly before the last Synodal Assembly in March 2023, represents a particularly extreme form of Roman centralism. In short, the refusal of dialogue and the instructions and letters from Rome do not fit a synodal Global Church.

These experiences nourish the expectation for the Synod of 2023/2024: with regard to the compulsory celibacy of priests, sexual ethics, and the admission of women to the sacramental diaconate – on all these issues, major parts of the Curia will do everything to prevent further developments. It is therefore all the more important that the local churches on the various continents each bring their reform concerns to the World Synod.

It is well known that the reform concerns of other local churches in many cases overlap with the reform concerns of the German Synodal Path. This is the hope of the members of the Synod in Germany with regard to the World Synod: that all these concerns will be openly addressed and debated with each other, and that the Curia will neither be able to stop these debates nor falsify their results. If synodality succeeds here instead of Roman centralism, then there are still chances for the inculturation of Catholic Christianity in very

different contemporary societies, and there is still hope for a synodal Global Church.

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Indexes of Editors and Authors

Index of Editors

Dr. Catalina Cerda-Planas (Chile) works as a Research Assistant at the Institute for Global Church and Mission at the Graduate School of Theology Sankt Georgen in Frankfurt, Germany, and at the Salesian Catholic University in Santiago de Chile. Her main areas of work are practical-empirical theology, youth religiosity, and synodality.

Dr. Nora Kalbarczyk (Germany) has been Secretary General of the Catholic Academic Exchange Service (Katholischer Akademischer Ausländer-Dienst e.V. – KAAD) since 2021.

Dr. Dr. Markus Lubert S.J. (Germany) is currently the Acting Director of the Institute for Global Church and Mission at the Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology Sankt Georgen in Frankfurt, Germany and is responsible for the research field of Intercultural Theology.

Index of Authors

Dr. Francis-Vincent Anthony (India) currently works as a Professor of Practical Theology at the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome. His main areas of work are empirical theology, interreligiosity, interculturality, and human rights.

Dr. Sandra Arenas (Chile) works as a Professor of systematic theology and is currently dean of the Faculty of Religious Sciences and Philosophy at the Catholic University of Temuco, Chile. Her main areas of work are Vatican II studies, ecclesiology, and ecumenism.

Dr. Carolina Bacher Martínez (Argentina) works as a Professor of Pastoral Theology at the Catholic University of Argentina and as a researcher at the Salesian Catholic University in Santiago de Chile. She participated as an expert in Argentina's national and local synodal consultation processes.

Dr. Bernardo E. Brown (Argentina) works as an Associate Professor at the International Christian University in Tokyo, Japan, and is also part of the Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics (ISAC). His main area of work is the anthropology of Christianity in South and Southeast Asia.

Dr. Kristin Colberg (USA) works as an Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at St. John's University and School of Theology and Seminary in Collegeville. Since 2021 she has been a member of the Vatican's theological commission supporting the Synod of Bishops' General Secretariat.

Dr. Paula Depalma (Argentina) is an Ordinary Professor of Liturgy and Sacramental Theology at the San Pio X University Center, Italy, and a Professor at the Pastoral Institute of the Pontifical University of Salamanca, Spain. She is also an editor at PPC Publisher.

Dr. Bernhard Emunds (Germany) is a professor of Christian social ethics and social Philosophy at the Graduate School of Theology Sankt Georgen in Frankfurt and the director of the Nell-Breuning Institute. He participated as a member of the German Synodal Path.

Dr. Ziad Fabel (Lebanon) works as a Full Professor and is also Director of the University Mission Office at Notre Dame University-Louaize in Lebanon. His main research interests are religions and politics, interreligious dialogue, and pluralism.

Dr. Miloš Lichner S.J. (Slovakia) is a Professor of Systematic Theology and currently holds the position of Vice-Chancellor for Foreign Affairs and Marketing at Trnava University in Slovakia. He was also a president of the European Society for Catholic Theology. His main areas of work are Latin patrology and early Christian dogmatic theology.

Dr. José Ngalula (RD Congo) is a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint André, RD Congo. She holds a Doctorate in Theology and teaches dogmatic theology at the Catholic University of RD Congo, and other African institutions. She is a member of the International Theological Commission.

Dr. Agbonkhanmegbe E. Orobator S.J. (Nigeria) has taught theology and religious studies at Hekima University College in Nairobi, Kenya, St. Augustine College of South Africa in Johannesburg, and Marquette University in Milwaukee, USA, and is currently Dean of the Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University in the United States of America.

Dr. Thomas Södng (Germany) is Professor of New Testament Exegesis at Ruhr University Bochum and Vice President of the Central Committee of German Catholics (Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken – ZdK). He participated as Vice President of the German Synodal Path and serves as expert at the World Synod on Synodality.

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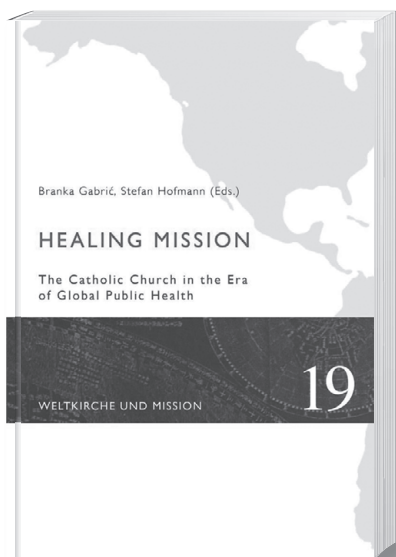


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