

Ecclesial Synodality in Continuity with the Theology of Vatican II

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Introduction

The French Salesian moral theologian Xavier Thévenot (1938-2004) distinguishes between two categories of change. There is ‘type A’ change, which means doing the same thing, just differently. And then there is ‘type B’ change, which means doing something new. Pope Francis makes the type ‘A’ change in the very form of ecclesial synodality which already exists and inherited in the theology of Vatican II. Our Church needs one or the other, depending on the area and issue.¹ The Synod of Bishops was instituted by Pope Paul VI towards the end of the Second Vatican Council.² Normally, the Synod of Bishops³ meets for Ordinary General Assemblies every 3-4

¹ A Synodal Church and options for change, <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/a-synodal-church-and-options-for-change/15434#>, accessed on 30 January 2022.

² Pope Paul VI revived the idea of the synod and established the Synod of Bishops in 1965 with the *Motu Proprio Apostolica Sollicitudo*. According to the Code of Canon Law, the synod is “a group of bishops who have been chosen from different regions of the world and meet together at fixed times to foster closer unity between the Roman Pontiff and bishops, to assist the Roman Pontiff with their counsel in the preservation and growth of faith and morals and in the observance and strengthening of ecclesiastical discipline, and to consider questions pertaining to the activity of the Church in the world”. Canon 342

³ Synod is an exercise in strategic planning, with the Apostolic Exhortation being the plan. For example, in 1974, St. Paul VI’s *Evangelii nuntiandi* (on Evangelization in the Modern World), gave impetus to the realization that the Church is essentially an evangelical movement: It exists to evangelize. In 1990, Pope John Paul II’s *Pastores dabo vobis* (on the formation of priests in circumstance of the present day). Perhaps

years, with other meetings (Extraordinary General Assemblies or Special Assemblies) taking place at the discretion of the Pope.⁴ It was continued by Pope John Paul II, Benedict XVI and now Pope Francis doing the same thing differently which involves the entire Church. As it is noted, the coming synod in Rome this October will be a bit different. The Pope is looking for the participation of not just the bishops, but of all the faithful of the Church. This is the first time since the Synod of Bishops was established that opening discussions will be decentralized. The Holy Father wants to hear from all corners of the world and for all of us to listen to each other and the Holy Spirit. "It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium": this statement was made by Pope Francis at the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops by Blessed Paul VI.⁵

While papal nuncio in France, Archbishop Angelo Roncalli the future Pope John XXII read Yves Congar's *True and False Reform in the Church*⁶ and he pondered over the question: "A reform of the Church; is such a thing possible?" As Pope John XXIII, he convoked Vatican II. In 2021, Pope Francis while convoking the synod cited Congar's same book: "There is no need to create *another Church*, but to create a *different Church*".⁷ What sort of Church Pope Francis has in mind? Where does he want to take the Church? He himself says that:

We need a Church unafraid of going forth into their night. We need a Church capable of meeting them on their way. We need a Church capable of entering into their conversation. We need a Church able to dialogue with those disciples who, having left Jerusalem behind, are wandering

better known today is *Evangelii Gaudium* (the new evangelization for the transmission of the Christian faith) by Pope Francis in 2013.

⁴ An Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was convoked by Pope Francis in 2014 on "The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization"; one year later, the Ordinary General Assembly considered the topic of "The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World". In 2018, the Ordinary General Assembly focused on "Young People, Faith, and Vocational Discernment". Most recently, in October of 2019, Pope Francis called a Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region, "to identify new paths for the evangelization of God's people in that region".

⁵ Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015, *AAS* 107 (2015) 1139.

⁶ Yves Congar, *Vraie ou fausse reforme dans l'Église*, Paris, 1950.

⁷ Pope Francis, Reflection for the beginning of the synodal journey, 9 October 2021.

aimlessly, alone, with their own disappointment, disillusioned by a Christianity now considered barren, fruitless soil, incapable of generating meaning.⁸

As an answer to this wish the Pope himself proposed the nature of the Church in the third millennium is Synodality. The Pontificate of Pope Francis brought new impulses for the implementation of this ecclesiology based of synodality and the mission of the People of God. The ecclesiology of the Vatican II is also centered on Church as the mystical body and People of God which leads towards communion. To put the ecclesiological vision of Pope Francis in this perspective, this article will search to find out how the ecclesiology of Vatican II is inherited in the theology of ecclesial synodality proposed by Pope Francis.

Ecclesial Synodality in Vatican II

The document of the International Theological Commission “Synodality in the life and mission of the Church” states in no. 6 that although the concept of synodality is not found explicitly in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, it is at the heart of the work of renewal that the Council initiated and promoted. The Council itself is considered as the highest expression of synodality. In this sense, Vatican II, as an event and a new beginning, reopened the essential aspects of synodality of the Church and, recalling the establishment of Synods, Provincial Councils, and Plenary Councils from the earliest centuries, encouraged the promotion and fostering of this kind of institution (cf. *Christus Dominus*, No. 36). *Lumen Gentium* announced a major transition from a hierarchical model to a communitarian model of the Church. It also revealed remarkable insights upon the meanings of the Church such as People of God, Sacrament of Salvation, Mystery, Collegiality, relationship between *magisterium* and the faithful, etc.⁹

In *Lumen gentium* we recognize the theological presuppositions underlying the post-conciliar conceptualization of synodality. The universal Church is presented as a ‘sacrament’ (*LG* 1) and the ‘People of God’ (*LG* 4). *Lumen Gentium* recover also the doctrine on the ‘common priesthood of the faithful’ (*LG* 10), in which the laity are once again understood to be

⁸ Pope Francis, “A Church that Accompanies Man on the Journey Home”, *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng.ed., 31July 2013,12.

⁹ Cf. Maureen Sullivan, *The Road to Vatican II, Key changes in Theology*, New Jersy, 2007,84.

central in the life of the Church. By virtue of baptism, all her members are awarded the ‘dignity of children of God’ and their active participation in the mission of the Church is necessary and indispensable. These central themes are theologically incorporated in the notion of synodality which is considered as the nature of the Church itself.

Pope Francis consider synodality as walking together of the entire people of God, the laity, Pastors and Bishop of Rome. This walking together is depicted in Vatican II as sacramental way of life. The Holy Spirit is the principle of unity that brings all members of the Church, with their different vocations, missions and ministries, together in a single dynamic subject. As the many grains become one bread, the Eucharist is the ‘fount and apex’ of the believing community (*LG* 11; *SC* 10). Vatican II thus indicates in the action of the Spirit who vivifies the Church through sacramental grace, especially in the moment of celebration of the Eucharistic assembly, the original source from which the ecclesial ‘we’ springs and flows. The Second Vatican Council affirmed that ‘the entire body of the faithful... cannot err in matters of belief’ (*LG* 12) and that this sense of faith ‘is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth’. Ecclesial synodality presented in *Lumen Gentium* is a sacramental life, so the definition regarding the Church itself indicates this reality: “Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission” (*LG* 1).

Vatican II was a council of the Church and about the Church. It intended to have rejuvenation in the life and mission of the Church. Vatican II did not offer a simple definition of the Church but as Karl Rahner remarked that Vatican II, “in all of its sixteen constitutions, decrees, and declarations, was concerned with the Church.”¹⁰ The entire theological vision of the council fathers were focused on the renewal of the Church and to make her more appropriate to handle her missionary role in the changing world. Leon cardinal Joseph Suenens during the council declared that we need a major declaration on the role of laity in the Church recognizing the rights and obligations of lay people by virtue of their baptism.¹¹ The

¹⁰ Karl Rahner, “The New Image of the Church,” *Theological Investigations*, X (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973) 3.

¹¹ Leon Cardinal Joseph Suenens, *Memories and Hopes*, Dublin, Veritas, 1992, 95.

Council wanted to move away from a static, juridical vision of the Church to one that was open and dynamic.¹² The council fathers highlighted the sacramental nature of the entire people of God because through baptism each member of the Church receives the Holy Spirit and they contribute in their own way to build up the Church. Pope Francis in this same directions re-orient the Church towards the basic theological perspectives of Vatican II such as Church as mystery, People of God, communion, etc.

Church as Mystery

Pope Paul VI opened the Second Session with the words, “The Church is a mystery, a mystic reality, steeped in the presence of God.”¹³ After much discussion the council fathers placed the title “The Mystery of the Church” before the first chapter of the Constitution repeatedly referred to the Church as a Mystery. For example in LG 5 we read, “The Mystery of the holy Church is manifest in its very foundation” (LG 5, 39, 44, and 63). The definition of mystery is very close to that of the definition of sacraments as “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.” (CCC 1131). Mystery as not that which I cannot know rather it is that which I cannot exhaust. I can never enclose it in definition. Mystery is filled with the presence of God and it is beyond any simple definition.¹⁴

Lumen Gentium was intended “to describe the Church’s life *ad intra*, that is to say its nature, its relationship to revelation, its inner structures, ministries, and general vocation.”¹⁵ It was Cardinal Leon Suenens who insisted that *Lumen Gentium* should first address the inner life of the Church (*Ecclesia ad intra*) followed by a discussion of the outer life of the Church (*Ecclesia ad extra*).¹⁶ By introducing an ecclesial synodality Pope Francis also invites us to look into the internal nature of the Church and to live it out in our vocation.

¹² Cf. A. Acerbi, *Due ecclesiologie: Ecclesiologia giuridica ed ecclesiologia di communione nelle Lumen Gentium*, Bologne, Dehoniane, 1975.

¹³ Pope Paul VI, “Opening Address”, Second session of Vatican II, September 1963.

¹⁴ Cf. Maureen Sullivan, *The Road to Vatican II, Key changes in Theology*, New Jersey, 2007, 91.

¹⁵ Micheal A. Fahey, “Church”, in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, vol.ii, Francis Shussler and John P. Galvin eds., Minneapolis, Fortress, 1991, 31.

¹⁶ Cf. Maureen Sullivan, *The Road to Vatican II, Key changes in Theology*, New Jersey, 2007, 90.

In this perspective the orientation of Council Fathers states the interdependence between the human and divine realms of the Church. “The Church is essentially both human and divine, visible but endowed with invisible realities, zealous in action and dedicated to contemplation, present in the world but as a pilgrim, so constituted that in her the human is directed toward and subordinated to the divine, the visible to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, the object of our quest” (SC 2). From the very beginning *Lumen Gentium* links the mystery of the Church to the ultimate mystery of Holy Trinity, which is the source of her life (LG, 2,3,4) Henri de Lubac says that “the Church is a mystery for all time out of man’s grasp, because, qualitatively, it is totally removed from all other objects of man’s knowledge that might be mentioned. And yet, at the same time, it concerns us, touches us, acts in us, reveals us to ourselves.”¹⁷ The mystery of the Church has both divine and human aspects which demonstrates her inner life and outer manifestations. Paul VI affirmed in the opening address of the second session of the Council Church as mystery steeped in the presence of God it is always therefore possible to gain new and deeper insights into its nature.¹⁸ Pope Francis is re-affirming the inner nature of the mystery of the Church by articulating her Synodal nature. For him Synodality is not just one particular model according to which the Church could be organized but it is the expression of the Church’s existence and mission grounded in the Triune mystery of the divine life. Synodality indicates the ultimate ‘*communio*’ of all creation which cannot happen without the *communio* of humanity.¹⁹

Church as People of God

Another deep insight about Church’s self-understanding is her nature as People of God and it is also considered as one of the central theological framework of Vatican II. This theological dimension of the Vatican II became the grounding principle of Pope Francis’ ecclesial synodality. The Church as the People of God reveals a pilgrim community related to the messianic people, rooted in biblical covenant and in continuity with divine

¹⁷ Henri de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, New York, Alba House, 1969, 14.

¹⁸ Paul VI, *Opening address of the second session of Vatican II*.

¹⁹ James Hanvey SJ, “*The journey of synodality*”, <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/journey-synodality>, consulted on 11 February 2022.

election.²⁰ With the understanding of Israel as God's beloved (Ex 19:5; Jer 32:38), the Church constitutes a people elected and consecrated by God through Christ. In the New Testament, the early Christian community is described as the new People of God (Rom 9:23–26; 1 Pt 2:9). This expresses the loving relationship that God has with humanity through Christ (LG 9). The image of the People of God illuminates the Church as a community called by God through Christ and in the Spirit. The Church built upon a new covenant sealed by Christ's paschal mystery is 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession ... who in times past were not a people, but now are the people of God (1 Pet 2:9–10)' (LG 9). Christ is the head of this chosen people, gathered by the Father, and in whose hearts the Spirit dwells. The image of the People of God reveals the universality of the community of salvation beyond all boundaries between peoples (LG 9). "All women and men are called to belong to the new people of God" (LG 13). Members share a common priesthood of believers by virtue of baptismal profession. Each member shares in the offices of Christ as priest, prophet, and king (LG 9–13; GS 1, 4; DV 8, 10). In these offices, the faithful are to render their lives "as a sacrifice, living, holy and pleasing to God (Rom 12:1)" (LG 10).

The Church as the People of God is missioned to the world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth (LG 9). It exists in the world as a leaven, seeking to transform and be at the service of humanity (GS 11). The Church as God's People is a community of salvation assembled by the Father through Christ's paschal mystery and guided by the Spirit toward God's reign (GS 1). With faith in Christ, the Church, like a pilgrim in a foreign land, presses forward through the world with God, "announcing the cross and death of the Lord until he comes" (LG 48). It is at the final banquet, according to Avery Dulles, that the Church becomes most fully the people of God.²¹ The image of the People of God reveals the historicity, catholicity, and universality of the Church. Membership in this community of salvation is by faith in Christ, who makes the faithful a consecrated people.

Lumen Gentium acknowledge the role of the People of God as participation in the salvific mission of the Church and they are commissioned

²⁰ Cf. Joseph Komonchak, "The Church: God's Gift and Our Task," in *Origins* 16, no. 42, 1987, 741.

²¹ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, New York, Image Books, 1987, 103.

by the Lord himself (LG 33). Their ministry is not something given to them by hierarchy rather it is something they are called to by God, by virtue of their baptism. The notion of *Sensus fidelium* (LG 12) not only respects the significance of laity in the Church but also acknowledges the role they play in the mission of the Church.

The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when "from the bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth (LG 12).

The 'sense of faithful' becomes effective when the whole Church participate. The Church can no longer justify viewing the laity as mere spectators in the mission and the teachings of the Church. They have an active role and they collaborate with the entire body of the Church to build up the Church through the grace received from baptism. Pope Francis is recognizing this role and mission and also concretizing their presence in building up the Church by introducing the new way of being the Church, i.e, Synodal Church. How he integrated this theology of People of God in ecclesial Synodality?

Church as People of God in Pope Francis

Pope Francis' ecclesiology is greatly influenced by the theology of 'People of God' which considers the 'faithful people of God' as a key source of theological reflection.²² Among different images of the Church depicted in Vatican II, Pope seems to prefer the image of People of God. The metaphor of the people of God is deeply scriptural, and was used prominently by Vatican II to describe the mystery of the Church in relation to the modern world. "What does it mean to be the People of God?" Pope Francis asked at his weekly audience on June 12 and he said "Being the Church, being the People of God, means being God's leaven in this our humanity." Within the Church, the Pope said, the People of God are governed by "the law of love" and the mission of the People of God, the Pope continued, is "to bring God's hope and salvation to the world: to be a sign of the love of God who calls all to friendship with him."²³ What is

²² Cf. J.C. Scannone, "Pope Francis and the theology of People", in *Theological Studies*, vol. 77/1, 2016, 118-135.

²³ Pope Francis, *General Audience*, Wednesday, June 12, 2013.

at the center of becoming the people of God? According to Pope Francis, it is God who gathers and forms this community of believers. *Ecclesia* is not a sociological reality but a theological reality by free and gracious initiatives of God (EG 111). His vision of the Church is “first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God” (EG 111).

The Pilgrim and eschatological nature of People of God is very much evident in Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortations. He says “evangelization is the task of the Church. The Church, as the agent of evangelization, is more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God. She is certainly a mystery rooted in the Trinity, yet she exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelizers, transcending any institutional expression, however necessary” (EG,111). The International Theological Commission in its document *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, explicit the missionary nature of the Church connecting its thoughts with that of *Ad Gentes*. “Synodality is lived out in the Church in the service of mission. *Ecclesia peregrinans natura sua missionaria est* she exists in order to evangelise. The whole People of God is an agent of the proclamation of the Gospel. Every baptised person is called to be a protagonist of mission since we are all missionary disciples. The Church is called, in Synodal synergy, to activate the ministries and charisms present in her life and to listen to the voice of the Spirit, in order to discern the ways of evangelisation”.²⁴

Pope Francis indicates that all the baptized are “missionary disciples” and “agents of evangelization” (EG 120). The encounter with Christ and reception of the Spirit transforms the faithful into witnesses of the gospel. Through the *sensus fidei* the Church becomes a sacrament of salvation to the world. Pope states, “Grace supposes culture, and God becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it” (EG 115). Our mission is embodied within history. As we receive the Spirit and discern God through the *sensus fidei* we also grow in the wisdom that allows us to incarnate the gospel. God is one, but the agents of evangelization learn their missionary calling within the diverse contexts that give birth to “genuine catholicity” (EG 116). The gospel cannot be known outside of culture, and the *sensus fidei* is essential for showing the Church “new aspects of revelation and giving her a new face” (EG 116). It is through manifold cultures, and not apart

²⁴ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no,53.

from them, that we discern the presence of God and put our response into action. In this perspective listening the People of God is considered as the main feature of ecclesial synodality. Pope proposed “a mutual listening in which each one has something to learn. Faithful people, episcopal college, bishop of Rome: one listening to the other; and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (*John* 14:17), to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (*Rev* 2:7).”²⁵ From this orientation we can see an accentuation from the theology of People of God towards the theology of Church as communion.

Church as Communion

The focus of ecclesiology in the Vatican II moved away from questions about institutional dimensions of the Church to discuss about the Church’s inner nature as well as the Church’s mission in the plan of salvation.²⁶ It was the synod of Bishops in 1985 affirmed that the notion ‘communion’ is the theological key to interpret all the documents of Vatican II.²⁷ This shift is enriched by the communion ecclesiology. *Lumen Gentium* states that the Church is ‘a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit’ (LG, 4) Thus, the necessary starting point for communion ecclesiology is the communion between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Communion in the Church is derived from participation in the divine love of the Trinity, and through the Church there is communion among the believers. Thus, the Church as communion has a vertical dimension – relationship with the Trinitarian God, and a horizontal dimension – relationship with fellow believers. Pope Benedict XVI says that “this twofold communion with God and with one another is inseparable. Wherever communion with God, which is communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, is destroyed, the root and source of our communion with one another is destroyed. And wherever we do not live communion among ourselves, communion with the Trinitarian God is not alive and true either, as we have heard”.²⁸

²⁵ Pope Francis, *Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, October 17, 2015.

²⁶ Michel J. Himes, “The Development of ecclesiology: Modernity to the Twentieth century”, in *The Gift of the Church*, Peter c. Phan ed., Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2000, 58-59.

²⁷ Synod of Bishops, “Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops,” *Origins* 15, no. 27 (1985): 444-450

²⁸ Benedict XVI, “The Gift of Communion”, General Audience, Wednesday, 29 March 2006

The communion ecclesiology of Vatican II underscores communion as the heart of the Church's life and mission. Theologian Dennis Doyle claims that communion ecclesiology is an approach to understand the Church, it emphasizes the sacramental and historical dimensions of the Church.²⁹ The image of the Synodal Church evokes the vision of the Church as communion, emphasizing participation and mutuality. It involves the participation of each one in the mission of Church, each parish, each diocese, each individual Churches... together forms the communion within the universal Church. It does not abolish hierarchical leadership but insists that authority in the Church is a service to the People of God. Pope Francis consider synodality is the work of Holy Spirit. The concept of Church as communion also sees the Spirit as the source of life in the Church and promotes a renewed appreciation for the role of the charisms to all members by the Spirit for the building up of the Church.³⁰ Ecclesiology of communion values both the Christological dimension (Apostolic mission in the Church) and pneumatological dimension (activity of the Holy Spirit in the individual members) because the members of the Church who like the apostles are baptized in the Holy Spirit.³¹

Communion ecclesiology has specific implications for the Church's mission of evangelization if the communion is to be fruitful. It is through the Church that Christ is revealed to the world, both as a reflection of his glory and in the proclamation of the Gospel. *Lumen Gentium* states, 'The Church... receives the mission to proclaim and to spread among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God and to be, on earth, the initial budding forth of that kingdom' (LG 5) communion ecclesiology brings with it 'an astonishing shift in the way we understand the world and the Church's mission to the world'. For communion ecclesiology understands that the Church, in Christ Jesus, 'is to be intrinsically oriented towards the world, because and insofar as it extends Christ's own mission'.³² It is in this perspective Pope John Paul II highlights the interdependence between communion and mission.

Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point

²⁹ Dennis Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology, Visions and versions*, New York, Orbis, 2000, 58.

³⁰ Cf. Maureen Sullivan, *The Road to Vatican II, Key changes in Theology*, 2007, 101.

³¹ Cf. Maureen Sullivan, I, New Jersey, 2007, 99-100.

that *communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion*. It is always the one and the same Spirit who calls together and unifies the Church and sends her to preach the Gospel “to the ends of the earth” (*Acts* 1:8). On her part, the Church knows that the communion received by her as a gift is destined for all people. Thus, the Church feels she owes to each individual and to humanity as a whole the gift received from the Holy Spirit that pours the charity of Jesus Christ into the hearts of believers, as a mystical force for internal cohesion and external growth. The mission of the Church flows from her own nature. Christ has willed it to be so: that of “sign and instrument... of unity of all the human race”. Such a mission has the purpose of making everyone know and live the “new” communion that the Son of God made man introduced into the history of the world.³³

Communion in the Church bears fruit when it is shared with others. The communion with Christ is for all people and, therefore, it has specific implications for evangelization. Believers are called to proclaim Christ so that others may encounter him, to come to know and love him and thereby share in the communion. The Church as communion must be open to creating new Christians and nurturing them in the body of Christ. Thus, evangelization is a fruit of communion and communion is resulted from mission of the Church. Pope Francis in this orientation proposes synodality as the key point of being the Church in order to facilitate the communion-mission nature of the Church.

Missionary discipleship and synodality

Pope Francis dreams of a Church of “missionary disciples” for whom missionary activity is intrinsic to their very being and identity. Every Christian is called to be a disciple, each is called in a uniquely personal way. For Pope Francis Church is a missionary community of believers, a community with a mandate to preach the Gospel to all mankind (EG 34). He holds in his entire teachings that the identity of the Church comes from its mission. He asks all Christians to be “permanently in a state of mission” (EG 25). Vatican II affirms it by saying “The Church has received this solemn mandate of Christ to proclaim the saving truth from the apostles and must carry it out to the very ends of the earth (LG 17). Pope Francis

³² David L Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church*, p. xi.

³³ John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 32.

hope that the self-understanding of the Church as mission could open new face of evangelization marked with vitality (EG 17). In virtue of Baptism, all members of People of God have become missionary disciples (EG 25). Pope John Paul II in his encyclical letter *Redemptor Hominis* states :

For the whole of the community of the people of God and for each member of it what is in question is not just a specific social membership , rather for each and every one what is essential is a particular vocation.... Therefore, if we wish to keep in mind this community of the People of God, which is so vast and so extremely differentiated, we must see first and foremost Christ saying in a way to each member of the community: “Follow me” it is the community of disciples, each of whom in a different way... is following Christ.³⁴

The foundation to missionary discipleship is Baptism – the primordial sacrament that incorporates us into the Body of Christ and provides the impetus for the Church’s mission of proclaiming the Good News of salvation to all the world. Pope Francis explains this in his very first apostolic exhortation, on *The Joy of the Gospel* when he states:

In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). 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. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love (EG 120).

In *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope states with conviction about the missionary orientation of People of God: “Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are “disciples” and “missionaries”, but rather that we are always “missionary disciples”. The sacramental grace that makes People of God missionary disciples and links them directly to the life and work of the God in whose Trinitarian name we have been baptized. The People of God is a disciple People — because it receives the faith — and

³⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Hominis*, 21.

a missionary People — because it transmits the faith. Pope Francis elaborates it further:

One of the great challenges facing the Church in this generation is to foster in all the faithful sense of personal responsibility for the Church's mission and to enable them to fulfill that responsibility as missionary disciples, as a leaven of the Gospel in our world. This will require creativity in adapting to changed situations, carrying forward the legacy of the past not primarily by maintaining our structures and institutions, which have served us well, but above all by being open to the possibilities which the Spirit opens up to us and communicating the joy of the Gospel, daily and in every season of our life.³⁵

Pope Francis holds that the Church exists for the salvation of the world, the very continuation of the *Missio Dei*. Therefore, the characteristics of missionary community is work for the unity and to participate in the reunification of the flock.³⁶ If the mission of the Church is the salvation of the world her vocation becomes an outgoing movement (EG 30). The mission of the Church is not building walls, but breaking them down.³⁷ Pope Francis urges the Church to be a welcoming house of the Father with doors always wide open (EG 47). Communion and mission nature of the Church according Pope Francis demands to listen the *sensus fidelium*.

Church of the People and *Sensus Fidelium*

Church as a pilgrim people and missionary disciples needs to pay attention to the exercise of the *Sensus Fidelium* in the Church. Pope Francis consider it as the 'wisdom which the Holy Spirit gives to the faithful'.³⁸ Generally speaking the theological notion of the *sensus fidei* holds that the whole body of the faithful cannot err in matters of belief.³⁹ *Lumen Gentium* teaches that because of its anointing by the Holy Spirit, the whole body of the faithful possesses a sure sense of faith (LG 12). In virtue of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit all baptized participate in the prophetic ministry of Jesus. Pope Francis says that

³⁵ Pope Francis, "More Responsibilities for the Laity", *L'Osservatore Romano*, 2 October 2015, 16.

³⁶ Pope Francis, "No one is ever Lost", In *L'Osservatore Romano*, May 2016,1.

³⁷ Cf. Pope Francis, "More responsibilities to the Laity", In *L'Osservatore Romano*, October, 2015, 16.

³⁸ Cf. Pope Francis, *L'Osservatore Romano*, March, 2013, 11.

³⁹ Cf. International Theological Commission, "Sensus fidei in the life of the Church", *Origins*, vol. 44/9, 2014, 133-155.

In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization. The people of God are holy, thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*. This means that it does not err in faith, even though it may not find words to explain that faith. The Spirit guides it in truth and leads it to salvation. As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain con-naturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the words to give them precise expression (EG 119).

Through the supernatural sense of faith, the People of God is a true evangelizing subject who walks in the heart of human history. Francis referred to the words of the Second Vatican Council, which describe the people of God as the totality of the baptized, “called to form a spiritual dwelling and a holy priesthood” (cf. LG 10), and stressed that “the totality of the faithful, having the anointing that comes from the Holy One (cf. 1 John 2:20.27), cannot err in believing, and manifests this property by the supernatural sense of faith of the whole people, when ‘from the bishops down to the last of the lay faithful’ they show their universal assent in issues of faith and morals (cf LG 12).”⁴⁰

The Pope illustrated this idea by recalling what he had already written in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG 119-120) on the holiness of the People of God by virtue of the Spirit’s anointing, adding new elements for reflection: “The People of God are holy by reason of this anointing which makes them infallible ‘*in credendo*’ (EG 119). Each baptized person, whatever his or her function in the Church and the degree of instruction in faith, is an active subject of evangelization and it would be inadequate to think of a plan of evangelization carried out by qualified actors in which the rest of the faithful people were merely receptive to their actions” (EG 120). The *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between the *Ecclesia docens* and the *Ecclesia discens*, since the flock also possesses its own ‘nose’ for discerning the new paths that the Lord opens up to the Church.” And he concluded as follows: “A Synodal Church is a listening Church, in the awareness that listening ‘is more than hearing’ (EG 171).”

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, *Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, October 17, 2015.

In the Post Synodal exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II warned against mixing up the *sensus fidei* with ‘consensus of the faithful’ determined by sociological and statistical research. According to him it is the task of the Church’s pastors to promote, discern and authoritatively judge the genuineness of the sense of the faith in all the faithful (FC 5). Pope Benedict XVI also highlighted the need to distinguish the authentic *sensus fidelium* from its counterfeit.⁴¹

Synodal Church : Significance and impacts

As we have seen ecclesial synodality is rooted in the Tradition of the Church and it is enriched by the theological orientations of Vatican II. Ecclesial synodality is the *modus vivendi et operandi* with which the Church prepares all its members to share responsibility and thereby to participate in the mission of the Church.⁴² Ecclesial Synodality authentically integrate the ecclesiology of communion, Mystery nature of the Church and Church as people of God. Michael cardinal Czerny explains that:

Francis uses the term synod- synodality in a broad sense, that is, to translate theological orthodoxy into pastoral orthopraxis. Synod does not exclusively refer to the ecclesial structure headed by the collegial government, but it is the visible form of communion, the path of ecclesial fraternity, which all the baptized personally participate in and contribute to in their own way. A Church that, in its striving towards universality, wants to protect the diversity of cultural identities, considering them an indispensable asset, cannot but assume synodality as that connection or intermediary between the unity of the body and plurality of members.⁴³

Ecclesial synodality refers to the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church.⁴⁴ Ecclesial synodality will have great impact on the way of being the Church today. The communion, participation and mission of the Church will have renewal,

⁴¹ Benedict XVI, “Address to the international Theological Commission”, in *Origins*, vol.42/31, January 2013, 502.

⁴² Michael Czerny, “The Church becoming Synodal”, Part I “*Lumen Genitum* and the inverted pyramid”, in *Thinking Faith*, 6 January 2021.

⁴³ Michael Czerny, “The Church becoming Synodal”, Part I “*Lumen Genitum* and the inverted pyramid”, in *Thinking Faith*, 6 January 2021.

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, “Address for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the synod of Bishops”, 17 October 2015.

restoration, and re-focus. In other words, the Church will 'look within', look around and go forth.⁴⁵ Fundamentally Church will have renewal in Christological, ecclesiological and missiological aspects.

The Church exists to evangelize. We can never be centered on ourselves. Our mission is to witness the love of God in the midst of whole human family. This Synodal process has a deep missionary dimension to it. It is intended to enable the Church to better witness to the Gospel, especially with those who live on the spiritual, social, economic, political, geographical and existential peripheries of our world. In this way, synodality is a path by which the Church can more fruitfully fulfil her mission of evangelization in the world, as a leaven at the service of the coming of God's Kingdom.⁴⁶

Pope Paul VI affirms the same goal when he says "the objectives of the Second Vatican council are summed up definitively : to make the Church more suitable to announce the Gospel to the humanity of the 20th century".⁴⁷ Ecclesial synodality envisaged by Pope Francis also moves in the same direction of the Vatican II and the priority is given to the entire People of God to participate in the mission of the Church. Pope Francis affirms that the Church is called to live its mission in faith fullness, truth and charity. According to him, the Church is called to carry out her mission in charity without pointing its fingers to judge others. It must be faithful to her nature as a mother by being conscious of her duty to seek out and care for the wounded couples with the balm of acceptance and mercy. He insists on the need to reach out to others with true love, to walk with our fellow men and women who suffer, to include them to the wellspring of salvation.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Pope Francis envisions a missionary Church of the People of God. What Pope seems to be aiming at is not a Church for the People, but a Church of the People.⁴⁹ He envisages this missionary Church not as his own invention but in line with the theology of the Vatican II and also in

⁴⁵ Gonsalves, "Synodal Spirit, Lead us on", in *JIVAN*, October 2021,5.

⁴⁶ *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality, September 2021, 1,4.

⁴⁷ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 2.

⁴⁸ Pope Francis, Homily at the opening of the XIV general assembly of the Synod of bishops in *AAS* 107, 2005, 1129-1132.

⁴⁹ Cf. Joseph Xavier, "The Church of the People: Ecclesial Vision of Pope Francis", in *VJTR*, 80, 2016, 49.

continuity with the teachings of his predecessors. He Says “ordinary people always have room to take in the mystery. Perhaps we have reduced our way of speaking about mystery to rational explanations., but for ordinary people the mystery enters through heart”.⁵⁰ Ecclesiological vision of Vatican II such as Church as mystery, People of God and communion-mission envisages to recognize the vocation of each member received through baptism in founding the Church. A Church who listens and accompanies People of God learns how to walk with everyone. Pope Francis says “I envisage a Church that knows how to walk with men and women along the path”.⁵¹ In this way Church is always on a journey of becoming in nature and mission. Church is always in redemptive process so it has both salvific and pilgrim dimensions. Pope Francis consider Synodality as the nature of the Church in both being and mission. So Synodality cannot be just a feature of the Church’s life, it needs to become the way in which we are Church. Vatican II marked an important step in the awareness of the Church, her nature and her mission. This understanding is more concertized through the practice of ecclesial Synodality. It has two objectives as mentioned Pope Francis: on the one hand the missionary dream of reaching every one (EG 31) and the other to form a fraternal and missionary community to serve the common home (*Laudato si* and *Fratelli Tutti*).

⁵⁰ Pope Francis, “A Church that accompanies Man on the journey home”, in *L’Osservatore Romano*, 31 July 2013,12.

⁵¹ Pope Francis, “Following Man into the digital age”, in *L’Osservatore Romano*, 25 September 2013, 9.