SYNODALITY IN THE CONTEXT

OF CATHOLIC RENEWAL MOVEMENTS

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22 Sept. 2021

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version updated edition.

During the 20 centuries that the Catholic Church has existed, it has time and again undergone decline and renewal. I would like to describe 10 efforts at renewal in Church history, the last being the current effort to implement synodality.

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1. monasticism

In the Roman empire, the Church had to struggle to establish itself. But despite local and regional persecutions, and two empire-wide persecutions (under Emperor Decius in 250-51 and Emperor Diocletian in 303-11), the Church grew steadily, from about half a million in ad 100 to about 5 million in ad 300 (out of about 50 million Empire inhabitants). Emperor Constantine, the first Christian emperor, in his Edict of Milan of 313, declared that Christianity was now a *religio licita* (legal religion). The official religion of the Roman Empire, however, remained Greco-Roman polytheism. Only in ad 391 did Emperor Theodosius I declare Christianity the official state religion.

Both the persecutions and the explosive growth tended to lower the level of morality in the Church. To counteract this, some laymen demanded of themselves an exceptional level of behavior. They based themselves on sayings of Jesus: in addition to commandments applicable to everyone, Jesus also offered counsels applicable to the few. In Matt 19:16-22, for example, he recommends poverty: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor.” In Matt 19:12, he recommends celibacy: “there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” In Mark 14:36, he provides himself as an example of obedience: “yet, not what I want, but what you [God] want.” These three “evangelical counsels” became vows for later monks and nuns.

In ad 271, a layman named Anthony withdrew to the Egyptian desert and became a hermit; others gathered near him. In ad 318, a layman named Pachomius withdrew to the Egyptian desert and became a monk; others gathered around him. Thus began the two forms of the monastic life: the eremitic (hermits) and the coenobitic (monks in community). Today there are thousands of such “religious orders.” Some members live apart from the world, devoting themselves to worship and prayer for the good of the Church. Others live within the world, devoting themselves to providing social services and education. Monasticism was an early, and important, renewal movement for the Church.

2. devotions

Another occurrence in the early Church which aided in its renewal was the development of devotional practices. Perhaps the earliest of these was the sign of the cross (which may go back to the apostles themselves).[[1]](#footnote-1) This sign is made by touching forehead, chest, and both shoulders (left then right in the Western Church, right then left in the Eastern Church). The Church also began honoring martyrs, because they demonstrated heroic virtue under persecution. After the age of persecutions ended with Constantine’s Edict of Milan (ad 313), those who demonstrated heroic virtue in their daily lives were also honored, as saints. The Catholic Church believes that God offers internal helps (graces) to everyone; if people allow these graces to work upon them, God will make them increasingly holy. (E.g., 2 Cor 4:16, “our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”) Since dead Christians are still alive with God, Catholics can ask saints to pray (intercede) for them, just as they can ask still-living friends to pray for them.

One way to venerate (honor) saints is to show respect to their remains. Saints’ remains became relics: bodies or body parts, or objects that had touched bodies before or after death. (See Acts 5:15, “they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he came by”; Acts 19:11-12, “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them.”)

Besides the sign of the cross and saints, other devotional practices developed through the centuries. Vestments colors, music, paintings and statues, feast days, pilgrimages, the liturgy of the hours (spiritual readings and prayers for set times of day), the rosary, the way of the cross—all these and many more enriched Christians’ piety. Though devotions are not a renewal “movement” in the sense of a revitalization effort at a particular time, it has been, and will continue to be, a recurring source of renewal.

3. theology

A third way in which the Church renewed itself was in the development of theology. For example, it developed creeds, brief summaries of its major beliefs. (Thus, around ad 200, Rome’s baptismal creed became universal as “the Apostles Creed.”)

One major development in theology was the use of meetings of all the bishops to decide disputed questions. Already in the New Testament, one sees the Apostolic Council (or “the Jerusalem Council”). Acts 15 relates that Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem to meet with the other apostles; the issue at hand was whether Christians still had to obey the Mosaic law (Acts 15:5; the decision was no). During the 100s-700s, Church leaders held 7 worldwide meetings, called “ecumenical councils” (from Greek *oikoumene*, “household,” hence “universal”). These were held primarily to counter mistaken ideas about Jesus’ divine and human natures.

* In ad 325, the Council of Nicaea declared that Arians (who said the Son was the highest creature, a kind of “superangel”) were wrong and that the Father and Son are divine, “of the same substance” (*homoousios*) as the Father.
* In ad 381, the First Council of Constantinople declared that Apollinarians (who said the Son replaces Jesus’ human intellect and will, so that God walks around in Jesus’ body like a hand in a glove) were wrong and that Jesus had a human intellect and will.
* In ad 431, the Council of Ephesus declared that Nestorians (who said that Christ’s 2 natures are separate entities, so that he is 2 natures in 2 persons) were wrong and that Christ is 2 natures in 1 person.
* In ad 451, the Council of Chalcedon declared that monophysites (who said that Christ’s divine nature absorbed his human nature) were wrong and that Christ’s 2 natures are inseparable but unmixed.
* In ad 553, the Second Council of Constantinople reaffirmed the Council of Chalcedon.
* In ad 680, the Third Council of Constantinople declared that monothelites (who said the Son’s will replaced Jesus’ human will) were wrong, and it reaffirmed Jesus’ human will.
* In ad 787, the Second Council of Nicaea declared that Christians may use sensory aids in their worship—i.e., the various devotions mentioned above.[[2]](#footnote-2)

These councils affirmed the orthodox Christian belief about Jesus: he is 100% divine and 100% human (all of God and all of a human being are in him); the two natures are inseparable but unmixed; Jesus is a single entity.

Theology continued to develop in the middle ages, especially in the movement called “scholasticism” (because it developed in the “schools,” especially the universities, which began to be founded from 1088 [University of Bologna]). Scholasticism’s chief representative was Thomas Aquinas (1225-74). In 1879, when modern philosophies were threatening Christian beliefs, Pope Leo XIII required seminaries to teach Aquinas’ philosophical system (Thomism), thus promoting “neo-scholasticism.”

4. Gregorian reform

One of the incessant dangers to Christianity through the centuries has been efforts by political states to control it. In the 1000s, this reached a climax called the “investiture controversy.”

“Investiture” means giving a candidate the symbols of office; in creating a bishop, for example, that means giving a ring and a staff. The controversy was over who got to give the symbols, the pope or the king. Power struggles between the two were frequent in the middle ages; in the period 900-1050, the royals usually won out.

But in the second half of the 1000s, a struggle developed between Pope Gregory VII, a recently-elected and reform-minded pope, and Henry IV, king of Germany and Italy (and later the Holy Roman Emperor). Gregory prompted a local council to decree in 1075 that only a pope can appoint bishops. Henry IV sent Gregory a letter, saying he was no longer pope and calling for a new papal election. Gregory then played his trump card: in 1076 he excommunicated Henry and released Henry’s subjects from their oaths of allegiance to the king. German princes began snatching the king’s territories, and open rebellion ensued.

In 1077 Henry was forced to submit: he walked to the castle of Canossa in northern Italy, where the pope was staying, and stood barefoot and bare-headed in the snow for 3 days until Gregory lifted the excommunication. Soon, however, Henry had a local council elect an antipope; and soon thereafter he had enough strength of arms to besiege Rome. Gregory fled and died in exile.

But the damage was done: Henry’s territory continued to diminish, and soon a successor pope, whom Gregory had recommended, was elected. Though popes and emperors continued to battle over who should invest bishops, the spiritual realm had escaped the control of the secular realm: a major renewal for the Church.

(Nowadays, of course, a pope’s influence is entirely spiritual. Since 1929, he governs only the Vatican City State, the world’s smallest country—only 110 football fields in size.)

5. medieval councils

In the “dark ages” (first half of the middle ages, roughly 500-1000), the level of morality was very low. “The numerous wars and political disturbances fostered robbery, blood revenge, cruelty, gross sensuality, and intemperance.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The Church tried to enforce “the Peace of God”: no armed combat from Wednesday evening until Monday morning or during Advent, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Infidelity by kings and noblemen was common, and the clergy were often no better: even bishops ignored the canon law requiring celibacy, and most clergy in Italy were married. Simony (buying or selling spiritual things or offices) was frequent.

To combat these and other abuses, the Church held a series of ecumenical (worldwide) councils during the “high middle ages” (second half of the middle ages, 1000-1500). Ecumenical councils 8-12 were convened at Constantinople (Constantinople IV, ad 869-70) and at the Lateran Palace (Lateran I, 1123; II, 1139; III, 1179; IV, 1215). Numbers 13-14 were at Lyons (Lyons I, 1245; II, 1274). Numbers 15-18 were at Vienne (1311-12), Constance (141-18), Florence (1431-45), and the Lateran (Lateran V, 1512-17). But none of these 11 councils was sufficiently successful to stave off a reform effort so massive that it is simply called “the Reformation.”

6. pre-Reformation reformers

The Reformation, however, was not without precedent. Various individuals throughout Church history had initiated reform movements. Most of the movements, unfortunately, not only attempted to improve moral practices but also asserted beliefs with which the Church could not agree. Hence, they failed to achieve their ends. There is room here only to list these.

primarily gnostic or dualistic reform movements

Marcionism (144-c. 600)

Montanism (172-c. 500)

Manichaeism (c. 270-c. 600)

Priscillianism (c. 370-600)

Paulicianism (c. 700-present)

Bogomilism (c. 700s-c. 1120)

Catharism (c. 1100-c. 1250)

primarily ascetical reform movements

Waldensianism (c. 1160-present)

Spiritual Franciscans (c. 1220s-1450)

primarily mystical reform movements

Beguins, Beguards, and Free Spirits (1200s-1300s)

Brethren of the Common Life (1381-c. 1800)

primarily anti-clerical reform movements

Lollardism (1374-1400s)

Hussitism (c. 1400-present)

7. the Reformation

The Protestant Reformation began when Martin Luther, on 31 October 1517, nailed to a church door in Wittenberg a list of propositions he was willing to debate (the *95 Theses*). His reform movement initiated four currents: Lutheranism (Germany, 1517); Anabaptism (such as Mennonites and Amish: Holland, 1525); Anglicanism (England, 1534); and Calvinism (France and Switzerland, 1536).

Undoubtedly the Reformation stemmed to some extent moral laxity in the Church. A chief example is the incident which prompted Luther to post the *95 Theses*: the sale of indulgences, a particularly egregious form of simony. Along with the Renaissance, which preceded the Reformation, and the Enlightenment and scientific revolution, which followed it, the Reformation also reduced to some extent the superstitions that were then common. (For example, in the 1500s-1700s the “witch craze” killed 200,000 to 1 million people, mostly poor widows and spinsters.)

Of course, the Reformation made affirmations that ran counter to Catholic doctrine—affirmations with which Catholicism remains in disagreement. Chief among these are: the belief that, after the fall, nothing good remains in human nature; justification as only the forgiveness of sins and not also the renewal of a person’s nature; and restriction of authority in religion to scripture alone (*sola scriptura*), to the exclusion of tradition (Church Fathers, councils, popes, liturgical developments, etc.).

The principal response of the Catholic Church to the Reformation was the Council of Trent (1545-63), its 19th ecumenical council. It published decrees on the canon of scripture (Luther had removed 7 books from the Old Testament and 4 from the New);[[4]](#footnote-4) on original sin; on justification (Trent said justification “is not merely remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior person”); on the sacraments (Luther had reduced them from 7 to 2[[5]](#footnote-5)); on purgatory (Luther had denied it); and on saints, relics, and images (Luther had condemned sensory aids to worship, because of his low opinion of human nature).

Trent also, like the medieval councils, implemented moral reforms; but once again, these largely failed. Many problems remained, including involuntary vocations, childhood vocations, non-residence (clergy living elsewhere than their jurisdictions), and pluralities. (one cleric having several jurisdictions). As an example of the latter, in 1638 “Armand-Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé, then only twelve years old, was already a canon of Paris, abbot of three abbeys and holder of another forty benefices.”[[6]](#footnote-6) But slowly things improved—not least because Trent implemented a seminary system that gradually raised clerical education.

Protestants and Catholics went to war with each other. In the Thirty Years War (1618-48), around 450,000 died in combat, and over 4 million (perhaps as many as 12 million) died overall. The result was a compromise: the principle *Cuius regio*, *eius religio* (“Whose rule, his religion”)—i.e., the ruler in each state imposed his religion on its citizens. Unfortunately, for the Protestants this resulted in the creation of national churches. (Today, for example, by law the “established” church of Scotland is Presbyterianism; the established church of England is Anglicanism; etc.) National churches allowed the subjugation of the churches to the states—in essence, a return to the situation before the investiture controversy.

One hopeful sign for overcoming the divisions created by the Reformation is the ecumenical movement, which developed in the 20th century. Though it began among Eastern Orthodox and Protestants (e.g., the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1937), it also came to fruition in Catholicism at its 21st ecumenical council, The Second Vatican Council. Vatican II said, “separated churches [Eastern Orthodox] and communities [Protestants] . . . have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The ecumenical movement’s irenic attitude extended also to other religions. Vatican II also said, “The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Ecumenism remains an important renewal movement in most of the churches.

8. social justice

In its 300,000 years, humanity has lived under three principal economic systems: hunting and gathering (hunting animals and scrounging plants), farming (starting c. 10,000 bce), and industry (c. ce 1750). The Industrial Revolution increased prosperity but deepened inequality.

In response to the Industrial Revolution, a renewal occurred in Catholic theology. It manifested itself in the “social encyclicals.” (An encyclical is a document circulated [it is “cyclic”] by the pope to his fellow bishops, containing teaching which the bishops are to pass on; more recently encyclicals have sometimes been addressed to everyone.) The principal encyclicals dealing with social problems resulting from the Industrial Revolution are:

Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum* (*On the Condition of Workers*, 1891)

Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno* (*On the Reconstruction of the Social Order*, 1931)

John XXIII, *Mater et magistra* (*Mother and Teacher*, 1961)

John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (*Peace on Earth*, 1963)

Paul VI, *Octogesima adveniens* (*A Call to Action*, 1971; actually an apostolic letter)

Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (*On the Development of People*, 1967)

John Paul II, *Laborem exercens* (*On Human Work*, 1981)

John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (*The Social Concern*, 1987)

John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* (*The Hundredth Anniversary of* Rerum Novarum, 1991)

Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (*Charity in Truth*, 2009)

Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 2013; actually an apostolic exhortation)

Francis, *Laudato si*’ (*Praise Be to You*, 2015)

These encyclicals deal with social justice. (Justice refers to just relations; social justice refers to just relations between groups.) In the social encyclicals, the groups are primarily capitalists and workers; but they are also to some extent developed and developing countries.

Catholic social-justice teaching presents a middle way between totalitarian communism and predatory capitalism. It seeks “an equilibrium be­tween the concern for the whole society, especially for the weakest and poor­est, and the respect for human liberty, including the right to private property.”[[9]](#footnote-9) According to John Paul II, “the characteristic principle of Christian social doctrine [is that] the goods of this world are originally meant for all. The right to private property is valid and necessary, but it does not nullify the value of this principle.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Some key principles of Catholic social teaching are: the sanctity of human life; the dignity of the person; the dignity of work; the common good; a preferential option for the poor; and subsidiarity. (The latter principle says that responsibility for tasks should belong first to individuals; only if they cannot accomplish them should responsibility belong to intermediate associations and political units; and only if those cannot accomplish them should responsibility belong to the state).

9. charismatic renewal

Luther expressed contempt for medieval Catholic scholasticism. Nevertheless, Lutheranism itself became highly intellectual in the period known as “Lutheran orthodoxy” (1580-1730). A reaction against Lutheran orthodoxy was pietism, a movement which de-emphasized doctrine and emphasized a holy life. It also advocated “conventicles,” small groups of laypersons who encouraged one another. Most pietists remained Lutheran, but those in Moravia (now the southeast Czech Republic) created a new denomination, Moravianism.

In 1735, a storm blew up in the Atlantic while a group of Moravians were sailing to America; also on board was a young Anglican priest, John Wesley. Wesley was impressed by how calm the Moravians remained. On his return to England, he organized Moravian-style conventicles. Members of one of Wesley’s groups, at Oxford, were derisively called “Methodists” for their methodical approach to increasing their holiness. At a Moravian meeting in 1739, Wesley had an exceptional experience. He described it thus: “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and of death.”[[11]](#footnote-11) In centuries past, Catholics might simply have called that a mystical experience; but Wesley interpreted it to be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, *after* baptism. In 1771 John Fletcher gave the experience the name by which it is now known: “baptism in the Holy Spirit.”

Wesley said the new experience led to “perfection” or “entire sanctification,” though he remained ambivalent about the possibility of total sinlessness. Nevertheless, from 1825 on (Timothy Merrit’s *The Christian Manual*: *A Treatise on Christian Perfection*), many Methodists emphasized that sanctification was not a process but an instantaneous and complete perfecting by the Holy Spirit. In the latter half of the 1800s, several holiness denominations separated from Methodism. One of the largest, the Church of the Nazarene (8 million members today), is representative of the holiness churches; its creed says, “the Holy Spirit bears witness to the new birth, and also to the entire sanctification of believers.”

Just as the holiness movement emerged from Methodism, so modern Pentecostalism emerged from the holiness movement. What Pentecostalism added to the holiness movement was an emphasis on charisms, spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to individuals for the building up of others. These are mentioned several times in the New Testament (Acts 2:1-11; Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:8-10; 12:28; 12:29-30; Eph 4:11; 1 Pet 4:10-11; see the appendix). Chief among the charisms for the early Pentecostals was speaking in tongues.

Speaking in tongues had occasionally occurred at holiness camp meetings in the 1890s. But on 1 January 1901, at his Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Charles Parham laid hands on a student, and she began to speak Chinese. In the next three days, Parham and 12 other students also spoke in tongues.

In 1906, one of Parham’s students became pastor at a church on Asuza Street in Los Angeles. Thus began “the Asuza Street revival”: over 13,000 spoke in tongues within a year. From there Pentecostalism spread to Chicago, New York, Canada, and so on. It reached Norway and India in 1906, Chile in 1907, China in 1908, Brazil in 1910. Today there are 645 million Pentecostals. The largest Pentecostal denominations are:[[12]](#footnote-12)

World Assemblies of God Fellowship (68 million)

Assemblies of God (67 million)

Assembléias de Deus (22.5 million, in Brazil)

The Apostolic Church (15 million, especially strong in Nigeria)

International Circle of Faith (11 million)

International Church of the Foursquare Gospel (9 million)

Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) (7 million)

Church of God in Christ (African-American, 6.5 million)

Jesus Is Lord Church Worldwide (Philippines, 5 million)

(In China, three Pentecostal denominations [not recognized by the Chinese government] are the Born Again Movement [20 million], the Fangcheng Fellowship [10 million], and the China Gospel Fellowship [8 million].)

But Pentecostalism did not just result in Pentecostal denominations. It also influenced pre-existing Christian bodies, a development known as the “charismatic movement.” Pentecostal influence reached Episcopalians in 1958, Lutherans and Presbyterians in 1962, Methodists in the 1970s, and evangelicals in 1974.[[13]](#footnote-13) It reached Catholics in 1967, when two Catholics from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh attended a Pentecostal service and experienced baptism in the Holy Spirit. From Duquesne it spread to the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana; and soon networks of conventicles—now called “covenant communities”—were founded in the upper Midwest and elsewhere. (One such community, the People of Praise in South Bend, recently received media attention when one member, Amy Coney Barrett, became a US Supreme Court justice.)

The charismatic movement in the Catholic Church has received approbation from Church leaders. In 2019, Francis inaugurated CHARIS (Catholic Charismatic Renewal International Service) as an umbrella organization. Most recently, Pope Francis has encouraged charismatic Catholics “to share baptism in the Holy Spirit with everyone in the Church.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

As Jesus observed (John 3:8), “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Estimates are that 40 million charismatic Catholics (out of 1.2 billion Catholics) now belong to this renewal movement.

10. synodality

When a person or an institution is under attack, it is instinctive to pull inward. Thus, under the dual blows of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, the Church became more ultramontanist. (Since most Europeans are north of the Alps, the pope is *ultra montes*, “beyond the mountains”: ultramontanism is a heightening of papal leadership.) Ultramontanism culminated in Vatican Council I (the 20th ecumenical council), which in 1870 declared papal infallibility to be a dogma. (A doctrine is a teaching [from Latin *doctrina*, “teaching”]; a dogma is a doctrine declared to be, with certainty, part of the faith [from Greek *dogma*, “tenet”].) Papal infallibility does not mean the pope is always right. It only occurs when 4 conditions are met: the pope must (1) consult the faith (ensure that his declaration is indeed part of the faith); (2) speak as head of the universal Church; (3) speak on faith or morals, not something else; and (4) give evidence that he intends to *define* a doctrine (declare it as certain, for all time). In 2000 years, papal infallibility has only been exercised twice: in 1854, to declare the immaculate conception (that Mary was born without original sin); and in 1950, to declare the assumption of Mary (that Mary entered body and soul into heaven).

Vatican I strengthened the papacy; it did not focus on bishops. That was left to the next council, Vatican II (1962-65). Vatican II did much to restore a balance between the pope and the college of bishops.

Just prior to Vatican II and during it, some suggested that a “synod of bishops” should be created as an advisory board to the pope. In September 1965, two months before Vatican II ended, Pope Paul VI established such a body. The synod of bishops is a subset of the (presently 5,600) Catholic bishops; the synod’s members represent different regions of the world. Others also attend: heads of Eastern Catholic Churches, heads of religious orders, heads of curial offices, and Eastern Orthodox and Protestant observers. The synod meets regularly to advise the pope. There are two types of meeting, with two subtypes of the first type.

* General assemblies consider universal problems.
  + Ordinary general assemblies meet every 3 years. (There have been 15 since 1967.)
  + Extraordinary general assemblies treat urgent matters. (There have been three [in 1969, 1985, and 2014], treating cooperation between the pope and bishops, the 20th anniversary of Vatican II, and the family.)
* Special assemblies consider regional problems. (There have been 11 since 1980, discussing the regions of Europe, Africa, Lebanon, America, Asia, the Middle East, and the Amazon.)

So Vatican I empowered the papacy, and Vatican II empowered the bishops. But what about the laity? Shouldn’t the laity be strengthened too, so that its members can participate in the direction of the Church?

Several times scripture refers to the Holy Spirit guiding the people of the Church.[[15]](#footnote-15) From these references, the Church early on inferred the existence of a grace in its members, a *sensus fidelium* (“sense of the faithful”), an instinct for the truths of the faith.[[16]](#footnote-16) This sense of the faithful ensures that the people of the Church, as a whole, cannot err about the truths of the faith. According to Vatican Council II:

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”[[17]](#footnote-17) 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.[[18]](#footnote-18)

One who believes the laity’s *sensus fidelium* should be relied upon is the current pope, and Pope Francis has chosen the synod of bishops as the instrument by which to bring about a strengthening of the laity. In his apostolic constitution *Episcopalis communio* (2018), Pope Francis “changed the style of the Synod from collegial (something that primarily regarded the College of Bishops in communion with the Roman Pontiff), to synodal (allowing the entire People of God to contribute).”[[19]](#footnote-19) Theologian Massimo Faggioli has called this new understanding of synodality “the biggest wager Pope Francis has made for the Catholic Church today.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

In this new version of the synod of bishops, the synod is no longer merely advisory to the pope. Rather, Francis envisions three stages of synods.

* First there will be synods in the 2,898 dioceses.
* Then there will be regional (usually continental) synods.
* Then there will be the synod of bishops.

Francis points to the etymology of the word “synod”: “What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word “synod” [Greek *syn*- with + *hodos*, way, journey]. Journeying together—laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome . . . Only to the extent that [we] start from people and their daily problems, can a synodal Church begin to take shape . . .”[[21]](#footnote-21)

To implement this bold new plan, Francis has called for a Synod on Synodality, to unfold over 2 years. From October 2021 to April 2022, synods will meet in every diocese and bishops’ conference. From September 2022 to April 2023, regional synods will meet. In October 2023, an ordinary assembly of the synod of bishops will use all the data from the prior synods to consider the theme, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.”

Francis’ plan to decentralize the Church is not without risks. Faggioli notes: “truly listening to all to ensure the participation of all in the synodal process . . . necessarily means a rebalancing of power in the Church—not only between the clergy and the laity or between men and women, but also (for example) between the power of money and the contributions of the voiceless.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

One danger is that the *sensus fidelium* may be seen as a second magisterium (source of authoritative teaching) alongside the 2000-year-old magisterium of the bishops. For example, a handbook to help carry out the diocesan synods has said, “it is in the fruitful bond between the *sensus fidei* of the People of God and the magisterial function of the Pastors that the unanimous consensus of the whole Church in the same faith is realized.”[[23]](#footnote-23) That can be interpreted to mean that henceforth there will be two rival teaching authorities: “the handbook claims that “the teaching authority of the Pope and the bishops is in dialogue with the *sensus fidelium*” rather than forming a constitutive and essential part of it, setting up the possibility of conflicting claims of authority between the “prophetic witness” of the lay faithful and the authority of the hierarchy.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

A second danger is that the process might be taken over by one side of the current partisan divide that afflicts the Church as it afflicts the rest of the world. The process might, for example, be appropriated by progressives. This seems to have happened already in Germany. There the bishops decided to begin their “synodal way” (*Synodale Weg*) on 1 September 2019. Their process has been heavily criticized for promoting progressive positions: intercommunion with Protestants, the elimination of priestly celibacy, the ordination of women deacons and priests, and the blessing of homosexual unions. On the other hand, conservatives will also push their agendas. Faggioli complains that “donors and pressure groups . . . now control . . . much of the conversation in ecclesial spaces.” He also points to “militant neo-Catholic media, cyber-militias . . . Catholicism simply has no experience of running synodal events at the national and global levels in an information ecosystem that is largely shaped by . . . social media.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Despite the dangers, Pope Francis clearly believes the effort will be worth it. As he has said, “the Church is nothing other than the ‘journeying together’ of God’s flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord . . .”[[26]](#footnote-26) Indeed, “the greatest achievement of Francis’ papacy may be his creation of a more synodal Catholic church, where synods serve as a platform for open and energetic debate.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

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The Church is always in need of renewal. As these 10 instances of renewal in Church history demonstrate, it has been willing to engage in it.

G.K. Chesterton said somewhere that the Church reels through the centuries. It is like a punch-drunk boxer, dizzied by historical developments. Yet it always manages somehow to keep its feet: for as Jesus said to Simon, the leader of the twelve apostles (Matt 16:18), “And I tell you, you are Peter [*petros*, from Greek *petra*, rock], and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

APPENDIX: CHARISMS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *text* | *gifts listed* | *type* |
| Acts 2:1-11 | 2:4, “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. |  |  |
| Rom 12:6-8 | “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.” | prophecy exhorter  ministry giver  teacher leader  the compassionate | functions and  offices |
| 1 Cor 12:8-10 | “To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.” | wisdom prophecy  knowledge discernment  of spirits  faith  healing tongues  miracles interpretation  of tongues | functions |
| 1 Cor 12:28 | “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.” | apostles healing  prophets assistance  teachers leadership  deeds of tongues  power | offices and  functions |
| 1 Cor 12:29-30 | “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?” | apostles healing  prophets speaking in  teachers tongues  miracle interpretation  workers of tongues | offices and  functions |
| 1 Cor 14:1-40 | (Compares the relative merits of prophecy and speaking in tongues.) | prophecy  speaking in tongues |  |
| Eph 4:11 | “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers . . .” | apostles pastors  prophets teachers  evangelists | offices |
| 1 Pet 4:10-11 | “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. 11 Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.” | speaker  server | functions |

1. Congar, Yves, OP. *The Meaning of Tradition*. Trans. A.N. Woodrow. Foreword by Avery Dulles, SJ. London: Burns and Oates (under the title, *Tradition and the Life of the Church*); New York: Hawthorn, 1964. Rpt. San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004. (Original: *La Tradition et la vie de l*’*Église*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1963.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants accept the first 4 councils; Catholics and Eastern Orthodox accept the first 7; Catholics accept ecumenical councils held after the Catholic/Orthodox split of ad 1054 (ecumenical councils 8 through 21—the most recent being the Second Vatican Council, 1962-65). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bihlmeyer, Karl. *Church History*. 3 vols. Rev. Hermann Tüchle. Trans. Victor E. Mills and Francis J. Muller. Westminster: Newman, 1958-66. 2.136. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The 7 Old Testament books were Tobit, Judith, 1-2 Maccabees, Book of Wisdom, Sirach, and Baruch; the New Testament books were Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. After Luther, Protestants added back the New Testament books. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The 7 sacraments of Catholicism are baptism, confession, the Eucharist (aka communion, Lord’s Supper), confirmation, marriage, holy orders (ordination), and anointing of the sick (last rites). Luther retained baptism and communion. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Holmes, J. Derek, and Bernard W. Bickers. *A Short History of the Catholic Church*. London: Burns and Oates, 1983. 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Unitatis redintegratio* (*Decree on Ecumenism*). 1964. § 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Nostra aetate* (*Declaration on Non-Christian Religions*). 1965. § 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Adamiak, Stanisław, and Damian Walczak. “Catholic Social Teaching: Sustainable Development and Social Solidarism in the Context of Social Security.” *Copernican Journal of Finance & Accounting* 3.1 (2014) 9-18. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (*The Social Concern*). 1987. § 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *John Wesley’s Journal*. London: 1949. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “List of the Largest Protestant Denominations.” *Wikipedia*. 25 July 2021. 11 Sept. 2021. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “Charismatic Movement.” *Wikipedia*. 6 Sept. 2021. 11 Sept. 2021. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Pope Francis. “To Participants in the International Conference of Leaders of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal International Service.” *Vatican*.*va*. 8 June 2019. 10 Sept. 2021. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. There are several references to the Holy Spirit guiding the people of the Church in John (e.g., 16:13, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth”; see also 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7-14). But in these references Jesus is addressing the twelve, so the assurance may refer to the Spirit helping Church leaders. Other references, however, more certainly apply to all Christians:

    1 Thess 2:13, “God’s word . . . is also at work in you believers.”

    1 John 2:20, “But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge.”

    1 John 2:27, “As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.”

    1 John 4:6, “We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”

    Jude 3, “the faith . . . was once for all entrusted to the saints [here meaning Christians on earth].” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rush, Ormond. “*Sensus fidei*: Faith “Making Sense” of Revelation.” *Theological Studies* 62 (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Augustine. *On the Predestination of the Saints*. ad 428 or 429. 14.27. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Vatican II. *Lumen Gentium* (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*). 1964. § 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “What Themes Have Been Discussed at the Synods of Bishops?” *Vatican*.*va*. 4 Oct. 2019. 13 Sept. 2021. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Faggioli, Massimo. “Synodality and Papal Primacy: Questions Regarding the Catholic Church Today and the Next Pope.” *NCROnline*.*org*. 3 May 2021. 4 May 2021. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Francis. “Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.” *Vatican*.*va*. 17 Oct. 2015. 13 Sept. 2021. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Faggioli, “Synodality and Papal Primacy: Questions Regarding the Catholic Church Today and the Next Pope.” *NCROnline*.*org*. 3 May 2021. 4 May 2021. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. *Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches*. *Vatican*.*va*. 7 Sept. 2021. 14 Sept. 2021. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Condon, Ed. “*Sensus infidelium*: How the Synodal Docs Could Fuel Conflict Between Laity and Bishops.” *PillarCatholic*.*com*. 7 Sept. 2021. 10 Sept. 2021. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Faggioli, Massimo. “With New Synodal Process, Francis Creates an Insurance Policy for Reforms.” *NCROnline*.*org*. 26 May 2021. 26 May 2021. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. “Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.” *Vatican*.*va*. 17 Oct. 2015. 13 Sept. 2021. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. “Synod of Bishops.” *Wikipedia*. 9 Aug. 2021. 12 Sept. 2021. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)