



Walking Together as a Synodal Church

A Formation Toolkit for Asian Contexts



Walking Together as a Synodal Church

A Formation Toolkit for Asian Contexts

East Asian Pastoral Institute

Contents

Published by:
East Asian Pastoral Institute
Ateneo de Manila University Campus
Katipunan Road, Loyola Heights
Quezon City 1108 Philippines
<https://eapionline.org/>

In collaboration with:
Network of Institutes for Formation and Studies in Asia (NIFSA)

Copyright © East Asian Pastoral Institute, 2026

Cover photo: EAPI's diamond jubilee opening celebration
Book style and direction: Jeanrick D. Nuñez
Layout and design: Vanessa Gorra

Images: General Curia Communications Office Society of Jesus, East Asian Pastoral Institute, Synod.va/Chung, Myanmar Jesuit Mission, Cambodia Jesuit Mission, The International Conference on Ignatian Spirituality, Pedagogy, and Leadership (ICIS) 2025, Pexels



Scan the QR code to get the digital version of this book. This digital version is for non-commercial use only and is subject to the same copyright restrictions as the print book.

05
Foreword

06
Introduction

11
Chapter 1:
Introduction to synodality

29
Chapter 2: Models of the
church

69
Chapter 3: The
significance of our faith-
sense in synodal
spirituality and human
formation

96
Chapter 4: Communal
discernment and
decision-making

118
Chapter 5: Leadership in a
synodal church: Towards a
culture of communion and co-
responsibility

142
Chapter 6: Building
communion through
relationships and structures
for synodal mission

160
Chapter 7: Inculturation in a
missionary synodal church

185
Appendix: The method of
Conversation in the Spirit

188
About the contributors



Foreword

In recent years, the promotion of synodality has helped to realize the vision of the Second Vatican Council of the church as the People of God journeying together in communion, participation, and mission. Hence, it is my pleasure to offer, on behalf of the East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI) and its partners, this valuable resource for formation in synodality.

EAPI was established for the purpose of fostering the reception of Vatican II in Asia. Over the past 60 years, there has been much progress. Yet much more remains to be done. The consultations carried out in conjunction with the Synod on Synodality 2021-2024 revealed that many of the laity, religious, and clergy throughout Asia have yet to fully experience a participative and co-responsible church. As the Synod Final Document notes, more than just structural reform or additional programs, the whole church is called to a conversion of relations, processes, and bonds. At the same time, whilst there are common synodal principles shared throughout the church, some unique features and pastoral practices are found within each continent. Such diversity contributes to a rich tapestry of what it means to be a synodal church in mission within every concrete reality.

It was with these inspirations that EAPI took on this project of developing a unique formation toolkit suited to the context of Asia. The contents in this toolkit draw from the common theological principles of synodality shared throughout the church while also adapting to the perspectives and experiences of Asian contexts. The pedagogy adopted is also a synodal one, encouraging a communal engagement with the materials as well as the integration of prayer, reflection on experience, and conversation.

We are grateful to the authors who have lent their expertise to this project as well as to our partners and supporters. I hope you will find this toolkit a helpful resource for developing your local community as a synodal missionary church, in line with the vision of the Second Vatican Council and the Gospel of Christ.



John Chong Chechon, S.J.
Rev. Fr. John Chong Chechon, S.J.
Director, East Asian Pastoral Institute

Introduction

In recent years, many people in our faith communities have encountered the word “synodality”. Yet for many, it remains an unfamiliar and abstract term. Some people know it as a “church project”; others as a process of consultation, but relatively few people have learnt it in-depth and lived it intentionally as a day-to-day way of being Church. It is hoped that this formation toolkit responds to that gap by offering a simple, practical, and engaging pathway to understand synodality more deeply — and to accompany others in the same journey.

The primary target audiences of this resource include local church communities, religious associations, and Catholic institutions. The overall aim is to cultivate an understanding of synodality in all its dimensions and to promote a synodal culture — one where all believers listen to one another, participate meaningfully, and walk forward in mission together. This resource seeks to make formation in synodality accessible and grounded in real life, not only for specialists or theologians, but also for ordinary Catholics who desire to live their baptismal call more fully. Through clear explanations, flexible training tools, and adaptable activities, each chapter is meant to be engaged within a group setting where members can reflect, share with, and listen to one another.

As the materials are modular, self-guided, and experience-based, they may be used in a wide variety of pastoral settings. Among these are:

- Parish workshops, retreats, and renewal programs
- Diocesan pastoral centers and formation institutes
- Small Christian Communities (SCC)/ Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC)
- Youth groups, campus ministries, and lay associations
- Parish or Diocesan Pastoral Councils
- Religious communities, novitiates, and formation houses
- Seminaries and theological training programs
- Catholic schools, teachers' formation, and leadership development



© Jesuit Media - Péter Pasztor



Every setting will have its own rhythm and needs. It is hoped that this book will offer a framework that each local community can adapt creatively.

Additionally, this resource is especially intended for those who would provide basic synodality formation for others. These include:

- Diocesan and parish synod teams, catechists, pastoral councils, formation teams, pastoral animators, and other leaders
- Religious formators and congregational leadership teams
- Seminary staff and clergy formation facilitators
- Youth ministers, SCC/BEC leaders, and school pastoral teams

The content assumes no advanced theological background. It is written in everyday language so that even those new to the topic can understand and use it confidently.

The foundation of this book lies in the magisterial teachings of the Catholic Church, especially the Second Vatican Council and official documents of the Synod on Synodality. Resources from the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) are also brought to bear. At the same time, the material is intentionally shaped by Asian experiences and pastoral needs. The diverse cultural, social, and religious landscape of Asia possesses certain features that both enrich as well as challenge synodal practice.



How to use this book

This resource is not merely a text to read — it is meant to be an experience of synodality in practice. Throughout the chapters, users will find:



Suggestions for prayer



Group activities, sharing and listening exercises



Short, clear teachings on key concepts



Case studies



Reflection prompts & journaling questions



Suggestions for adapting the content to different groups

Users, especially formators, are encouraged to approach this book in teams, trying out activities among themselves before facilitating them in their own communities. It is recommended that users set aside about 1.5 to 2 hours of group meeting time for each chapter, coming together either weekly or monthly as a team, preferably in-person or, if this is not possible, online. Some chapters are slightly longer and may be covered over two or more meetings. In any case, before each meeting, everyone should prepare by going through the materials within the chapter, praying about them, and reflecting on the given questions and case studies.

Though it is not envisaged that those who complete the whole course of this material would become experts in synodality, it is nevertheless hoped that the process of doing this together will foster a real experience of synodality within each group of users. They can thus, in turn, be catalysts of communion, participation, and mission in their respective contexts.



LEGENDS USED IN THIS BOOK



JOIN IN PRAYER

Invitation to Prayer



DIALOGUE TOGETHER

Group Discussion and Activities



DISCOVER OUR TRADITION

Main Church Teachings on the Topic



PUT INTO PRACTICE

Practical Applications



DID YOU KNOW?

Interesting Fact



PASS IT ON

Pedagogical Suggestions



HEAR THE JOURNEY

Real Life Narratives and Testimonies



KEY RESOURCES

List of References



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Personal and Group Reflection

ABBREVIATIONS

- FD Pope Francis, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* (Final Document of the Synod on Synodality), 2024.
- LG Second Vatican Council. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 1964.
- SC International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2018.
- SF International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, 2014.

INTRODUCTION TO SYNODALITY



Pope Francis (center) poses for a photo with the participants of the Synod of Bishops at the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican on October 23, 2023. Photo by Tiziana FABI / AFP via LICAS News

Synodality is a way of being, living, and operating in the Church marked by on-going spiritual renewal and structural reform so as to strengthen communion, participation, and co-responsibility towards the mission of God. It is a hallmark of the Church and enables all Christians to walk together with one another and with all creation, radiating the light of Christ.



JOIN IN PRAYER

We begin our journey together as we pray *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus*, the official opening prayer of the Council and the Synodal Assembly:

Adsumus Sancte Spiritus

We stand before You, Holy Spirit,
as we gather together in Your name.
With You alone to guide us,
make Yourself at home in our hearts;
Teach us the way we must go
and how we are to pursue it.
We are weak and sinful;
do not let us promote disorder.
Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path
nor partiality influence our actions.
Let us find in You our unity
so that we may journey together to eternal life
and not stray from the way of truth
and what is right.
All this we ask of You,
who are at work in every place and time,
in the communion of the Father and the Son,
forever and ever.
Amen.



As you go through your reflection, you may also watch the video *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus Reflection* as a companion to your contemplation. You may scan the QR code to the left or visit the link provided below.

► Watch: *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus Reflection*

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZhmh5onEwE>



PAUSE AND REFLECT

After a moment of quiet reflection, we invite you to share your thoughts and feelings with the group using the following questions as your guide:

1. How am I as I begin this formation process? What do I hold in my heart?

2. What are the desires I wish to pray for and the graces I seek?



DIALOGUE TOGETHER

As we begin the dialogue, each member is encouraged to do a brief self-introduction, especially if not all group members know each other yet. Each of you is invited to share:

- Your name and where you live
- The ministries or church committees you are currently involved with
- A “fun fact” about yourself
- Your feelings and hopes as you join this synodal formation team



HEAR THE JOURNEY

In the process of building this formation together, we turn our attention to our brothers and sisters who witnessed the synodal assembly. Watch the video *Building a Synodal Church: The experience of participating in the synodal assembly* by scanning the QR code to the right or visiting the link provided below. As you watch, examine what strikes you the most in this conversation.

► Watch: Building a Synodal Church: The experience of participating in the synodal assembly
Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VghxKdWhmXw>



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Before diving into the core teachings of this chapter, you are invited to get in touch with your current perceptions, impressions, feelings, and paradigms about the Church.

Respond to the following questions below, and note your own intuitive and immediate answers. Write them in the space provided below.

1. What words do you associate with 'Church'?

2. What feelings does the word 'Church' invoke in you? What would a more inclusive Church look like?

3. What images come to mind?



DIALOGUE TOGETHER

Take a moment to look over your reflections. What do you notice about your responses? Are there recurring patterns or elements? As a group, compare your responses with one another. What do you find striking or significant? What arouses your curiosity? What similarities and differences from the responses do you discover?



DISCOVER OUR TRADITION

Synodality as the Way of Being Church

Pope Francis has remarked that “it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium ... in fact, synodality is an essential dimension of the Church.”¹ This implies that synodality is a key word to be associated with the Church. But what is synodality? This word has gained much attention in recent years since the launch of the Synod on Synodality 2021-2024.



Based on two Greek words *syn* (together) and *hodos* (journey), synodality has been described as the way of being, living, and operating in the Church. It is a way characterized by communion, participation, co-responsibility, and walking as pilgrims along the path of mission. The Final Document of the Synod highlights that:

“Synodality is the walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God’s Kingdom, in union with all humanity. Orientated towards mission, synodality involves gathering at all levels of the Church for mutual listening, dialogue, and community discernment. It also involves reaching consensus as an expression of Christ rendering Himself present, He who is alive in the Spirit. Furthermore, it consists in reaching decisions according to differentiated co-responsibilities. Along these lines, we can understand better what it means to say that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church. In simple and concise terms, synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ.” (Para. 28)²

Several important elements are present in this statement. First, the **trinitarian God** is the center of the life and mission of the Church. To fulfil the Father’s reign of love, Jesus Christ the Son enters human history as the Divine self-offering and continues God’s saving activity on earth in the Holy Spirit. The Second Vatican Council highlights that the Church is the sign and instrument of this salvation.³ As a Christian community, our on-going **spiritual renewal**



¹ Pope Francis, Address at the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html

² Pope Francis, *For A Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* (Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly Of The Synod Of Bishops), October 26, 2024. <https://www.synod.va/en/news/final-document-of-the-xvi-assembly.html>.

³ Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1964), para. 1. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html



and intimate relationship with the trinitarian God, who is the ever-flowing font of grace, is thus vital for our life and mission, including the flourishing of synodality.

Second, the Synod statement highlights that all Christians are **co-responsible** for mission. Carrying out the saving work of God is the duty and dignity of every baptized person. Each one is gifted with particular **charisms** expressed in terms of specific abilities, talents, aptitudes, interests, life situations, and ways of being present to others. No one is excluded from this gift and responsibility, regardless of each person's physical, social, economic, and cultural circumstances. Moreover, diversity of charisms is essential for synodality so that differentiated and complementary roles are brought together in fruitful harmony through proper coordination of everyone's **participation**. As St Paul says, "Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit... it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is

given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good... All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses" (1 Cor 12:4-11).

Third, the synod statement emphasizes unity and togetherness. We are called not to walk alone but in **communion** with one another, excluding no one. Baptism binds us into the One Body of Christ. This means that our Christian life and mission are not lived in isolation but in community. In this way, we manifest the presence of Christ and give prophetic witness to a divided and polarized world. At His passion, Jesus prayed "that they may all be one," adding that "as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21). A deep bond of unity characterized by solidarity and unconditional love is how we are to be recognized by others as Christians. As pointed out in the Synod Final Document, "we recognise a synodal Church by flourishing interpersonal relationships flowing from the mutual love that constitutes the new commandment left by Jesus to His disciples (cf. Jn 13:34-35)" (para. 34).





Fourth, synodality is made concrete through dispositions, structures, and ways of proceeding characterized by mutual listening, dialogue, and **communal discernment** involving people at all levels of the Church. This enables us to hear and follow Christ who is present in the whole Church especially among the least. Listening also extends to those beyond the Church especially at the peripheries of society. Moreover, synodal decision-making is not top-down, divisive, or arbitrary but consultative, participative and orderly. St Luke provides a demonstrative account of this way of proceeding by the early Christians in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 15).

Finally, synodality and **mission** are inseparable. In walking together, Christians are on mission to accompany every person in the world with the compassionate love of Christ so that “God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). We are still on the way. As pilgrims, the Christian community experiences suffering, sin, weaknesses, and setbacks. However, we continue to step out courageously into new frontiers and remain hopeful even in times of darkness because Christ the Light leads us on and walks with us until the end of time.

The next chapters will deal with each of these dimensions of synodality in detail. Meanwhile, the Synod Final Document offers the image of an orchestra to describe a synodal Church (para. 42). The very essence of an orchestra consists in its diversity of instruments, each with unique characteristics yet



indispensable in the symphony. All are equally important and all need to harmonize together, focusing on the “we” rather than the “I”. Thus, musicians pay attention to the movement of the whole song even as they are producing it. This is how the music of God’s mission is accomplished. In the Church, our symphony is unfinished—we are always on the way.

There remains one question to be answered: If synodality is so essential in the Church, why is it receiving attention only in recent years?

Actually, the foundational elements of synodality are as old as the Church itself and can even be traced to the Old Testament. The word “synod” was already in use during early Christianity, referring to the assemblies in which pastoral leaders came together to discern important issues.⁴ In the ensuing two millennia, the Church grew and spread throughout the world, experiencing abundant graces but also many challenges in walking together. Such challenges included major schisms as well as an increasing tendency towards more pyramidal and top-down ways of relating and operating in the Church, both at the local and universal levels. Gradually, distinctions began to increase between laity and clergy as well as between various ranks of ecclesial authority. It was not until the Second Vatican Council in 1962-1965 that a renewed vision of the Church as the Pilgrim People of God was reclaimed, where all the baptized share equal dignity and co-responsibility in mission. Such a model emphasized communion, participation, and unity in diversity. Since then, the word “synodality” emerged to signify the way of walking together in mutual dialogue and collaboration as fellow pilgrims in the Church.

⁴ International Theological Commission (ITC), *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (Vatican City, Vatican Press: 2018), para. 3-4.
https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html





DID YOU KNOW?

The International Theological Commission points out that “synodality” is a neologism; that is, a newly coined expression. Although this word has been closely associated with Pope Francis, it was not the Pontif who came up with it. One of the earliest occurrences of the word “synodality” can be found in a document by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Gift of Authority*, published in 1998. This document highlighted that:

“In each local church all the faithful are called to walk together in Christ. The term synodality (derived from syn-hodos meaning “common way”) indicates the manner in which believers and churches are held together in communion as they do this. It expresses their vocation as people of the Way (cf. Acts 9.2) to live, work and journey together in Christ who is the Way (cf. Jn 14.6). They, like their predecessors, follow Jesus on the way (cf. Mk 10.52) until he comes again” (no. 34).

Hence, contrary to popular misconception, synodality is not an invention of Pope Francis. It has been a hallmark of the Church since the early Christian community and continues to be promoted in our times by Vatican II and subsequent pastoral and ecumenical initiatives.

In October 2021, the Synod on Synodality was launched as a global process of listening, consultation, and communal discernment in order to examine how we were living out synodality as a Church and what the Holy Spirit was asking of us in terms of conversion and growth as a synodal missionary Church. Over

three years, Catholics from all over the world came together for prayer, reflection, and conversation with one another as well as with fellow Christians, people of other faiths, and various sectors of society. This process enabled synodality to be more widely known and understood.

Nevertheless, it still requires promotion and meaningful implementation in many places, including the local churches in Asia. As observed by some Asian theologians,

In a number of places, both ordinary parishioners and even priests may not be well-informed about the nature and purpose of synodality. There exists a fear that synodality might disrupt the well-established hierarchical structure of the Church. For those who participate, some struggle to overcome prejudices, are ill-prepared or unwilling to listen, leading to indifference, unrealistic expectations or very challenging demands. Despite the Pope’s call, it is often the case that the marginalized are not actively involved in the synodal process. Outdated ideologies, archaic systems, and prevalent authoritarianism, in contrast to contemporary societal trends, all contribute to the disengagement of young individuals from ecclesial spheres.⁵



⁵ Federation of Asia Bishops' Conferences Office of Theological Concerns, *The Asian Face of Synodality*, FABC Papers No. 191, August 2024. <https://fabc.org/document/fabc-paper-191-the-asian-face-of-synodality-fabc-otc-august-2024/>



HEAR THE JOURNEY

Read the following article about a parish in the Philippines which participated in the Synod on Synodality and experienced a change as a result of the process. The article can be accessed by scanning the QR code or visiting the link below :



READ: *Philippines: A Catholic parish journeys together, living synodality*

Link: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2022-10/philippines-catholic-parish-journeys-together-living-synodality.html>

Guide Questions

- What touched you in this story?
- What do you learn about synodality from it?



PUT INTO PRACTICE

As a way of integrating the content in this chapter, you are invited to connect these insights with your own concrete experiences. Gather together with your fellow formators and form small groups of about four or five persons. To enrich the dialogue, each group should comprise people from diverse backgrounds or local community contexts.

Each person takes turns to share on the following questions, giving concrete examples. Some quiet time for reflection can be made before sharing.



- What strikes me in the discussion on synodality as the way of being church? What do I find new and refreshing? What do I find challenging? What perspectives have I gained compared with my responses about the word “Church” in the first activity? What new questions have arisen for me?
- In what ways do I experience synodality in my local church (or religious congregation)?
- In what ways do I experience a lack of synodality?
- What do I think are the factors that promote or hinder synodality in my local culture and context?
- What similarities and differences do we observe in our responses as priests, religious, and/or lay persons?



PASS IT ON

As a formator, you could consider offering this introduction to synodality in the following way:

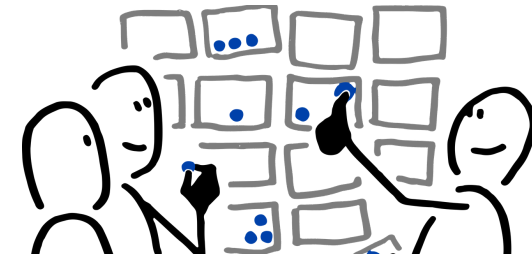
Begin with a similar activity using the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter. The time for this activity could be around 30 minutes. To make it interesting for your participants, it could be done with online Word Cloud programs (such as [Mentimeter](#)) if internet is available. You could also provide post-it pads and colorful drawing materials. With post-it pads, similar words and feelings could be grouped together on a large poster.

Participants can then be invited to react to the outputs they see by noticing and sharing what strikes them.



USEFUL TIP: WHY BEGIN WITH THIS ACTIVITY?

There are several advantages to beginning the formation session with the participants' own impressions and experiences. First, it signals that they are active participants and not merely passive recipients of formation. This is consonant with synodality. Second, it validates the reality and value of their own voice and experience before any theory is presented so that these can be brought into dialogue with the theory. Third, it helps participants to become more aware of their existing paradigms about the Church and how



these had been shaped by a variety of factors. This then enables them to engage in critical reflection on their own paradigms in light of the church teachings.

A presentation could then be given based on the content in this chapter, with further details from the suggested readings if necessary. Some time for questions and comments could also be incorporated at suitable junctures. (Estimated time for presentation: 30 min)

Your participants could then be invited to reflect and share in small groups as above. Thereafter, you could ask some groups to share their main points in a plenary session. A total time of 1 hour could be allotted for small group sharing and plenary.

Finally, as a wrap-up, invite participants to reflect in silence on what struck them or stirred within them during the session. What might the Holy Spirit be saying in their hearts? After about 3 minutes of silence, some participants could be asked to share in just a few words what is emerging within them. There should be no discussion at this point. A brief moment can be given for participants to journal their take-aways.

The total time for the whole session could be about 2½ hours including opening and closing prayers and tea-break.



KEY RESOURCES

1. Pope Francis. *For A Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* (Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly Of The Synod Of Bishops), October 26, 2024.
2. International Theological Commission. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*. Vatican City, Vatican Press: 2018.
3. Federation of Asia Bishops' Conferences Office of Theological Concerns. *The Asian Face of Synodality*. FABC Papers No. 191, August 2024.
4. Czerny, Michael. "The Church becoming synodal, Part 1: Lumen Gentium and the Inverted Pyramid." *Thinking Faith*, January 6, 2021.
5. Colberg, Kristin M., and Jos Moons. *The Future of Synodality: How We Move Forward from Here*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2025.

CHAPTER

2

MODELS OF THE CHURCH

We can better understand the Church through a variety of analogies or models. No single description can completely define the "Mystery of the Church" (cf. Lumen Gentium). The Second Vatican Council has highlighted several perspectives which, when taken together, help us to appreciate the nature and mission of the Church in a holistic way. What's common in these perspectives is the centrality of our Trinitarian God and the loving communion that we are all called to live as we participate in God's mission for the salvation of the world.





JOIN IN PRAYER

As you gather, spend a moment in silence to become aware that as a community, you are the *ecclesia* - the church, the sacred assembly of disciples. The Holy Spirit is present with you now, dwelling in your midst.

Read slowly **Psalm 84** below, which proclaims the loveliness of God's dwelling.

How lovely is your dwelling place,
 Lord Almighty!
 My soul yearns, even faints,
 for the courts of the Lord;
 my heart and my flesh cry out
 for the living God.
 Even the sparrow has found a home,
 and the swallow a nest for herself,
 where she may have her young—
 a place near your altar,
 Lord Almighty, my King and my God.
 Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
 they are ever praising you.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
 whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
 As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
 they make it a place of springs;
 the autumn rains also cover it with pools.
 They go from strength to strength,
 till each appears before God in Zion.

Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty;
 listen to me, God of Jacob.
 Look on our shield, O God;
 look with favor on your anointed one.

Better is one day in your courts
 than a thousand elsewhere;
 I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
 than dwell in the tents of the wicked.
 For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
 the Lord bestows favor and honor;
 no good thing does he withhold
 from those whose walk is blameless.

Lord Almighty,
 blessed is the one who trusts in you.

Take turns to say aloud a word or line that touches you, and pray for a particular intention which you desire as a member of the church community.



DISCOVER OUR TRADITION

The Church is like a river, flowing from the heart of God and moving through the landscapes of human history—like the waters flowing from the temple in Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 47:1–12), or the river of life in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 22:1–2). Along its path, it takes on many forms—as a community, a body, a sanctuary, a servant. Each model offers a unique lens through which we can glimpse the mystery of what it means to be Church. When these models come together in harmony, they do not compete—they sing in chorus.

The Church, like a diamond, shines in many directions. Each facet—People of God, Body of Christ, Servant, Institution, Sacrament—reveals something vital. These models are not in competition but in communion.

Throughout time, the Church has been described in various ways. These aren't merely titles or theological concepts. They are living realities—mirrors of how God chooses to dwell with us. Especially in our



Asian contexts, where life is understood more through symbols, relationships, and story, these models help us see the Church not as a rigid structure, but as a dynamic, Spirit-filled body journeying with all peoples.

In this chapter, we will explore seven foundational images or “models” of the Church—each one rooted in Scripture, tradition, and daily life. They help us ask: *What kind of Church are we called to become in a synodal age? How do these models speak to our own communities, cultures, and struggles today?*



DIALOGUE TOGETHER

Read the text “Models of the Church” below. Then, assign one model to each member of the group to explain and share personal insights and experiences about it. If there are less than seven members in a group, some members can be assigned two models.

Models of the Church

1. The Church as People of God

“I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.” – Exodus 6:7
“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”
– 1 Peter 2:9

At its heart, this model tells us: The Church is not a building, but a people. The Church is the family of those who belong to God—called not by privilege but by promise. We are gathered, not because we are perfect, but because God has chosen to walk with us.

Imagine a long road stretching through mountains and valleys. Along this road, a community of people walks together—some strong, some weak, some

old, some young. They sing, stumble, pray, rest, and carry one another. This is the Church: the People of God on the journey.

This image speaks deeply to our Asian experience. In many rural areas of India, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka, etc., it is common to walk together to a festival, temple, or village event. Walking together means making a relationship—we talk, we rest, we listen.



A young catechist in Nagaland once said: “The Church is like our rice fields — the elders sowed it, we water it together, and the whole village eats from it.”

Biblical Roots

The foundation of this model is found in the Old Testament. God calls Abraham to be the father of many nations. Later, God liberates the Israelites from Egypt and forms a covenant: “I will be your God, and you will be my people” (Ex 6:7). But these people are not chosen for their own benefit—they are chosen to be a blessing to others (Gen 12:1–3).

In the New Testament, this covenant is fulfilled in Christ. Peter writes to the early Christian communities, calling them a “holy nation,” a “people set apart.” And Paul reminds us: “You are no longer strangers... but members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19).

The Teaching of Vatican II

At the Second Vatican Council, the model of “People of God” was revived in a powerful way. The Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* begins with these words: “The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or sign and instrument... of communion with God and of unity among all.” (LG 1)



And it boldly states: “All the faithful, by virtue of their baptism, share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission of Christ.” (LG 31)

This was a shift from thinking of the Church primarily as a hierarchy to thinking of it as a community of all the baptized—where every voice matters, and no one is excluded.

Asian Resonance

In Asia, this model resonates with the communitarian nature of our societies.

- In tribal and indigenous cultures, decisions are made by consensus, not decree.
- Family and community are the heart of identity.
- Festivals are communal—not individual.

Thus, a synodal Church in Asia must be a Church that walks with the people, listens to all voices, especially the marginalized, and roots itself in local life.



HEAR THE JOURNEY

In **Borneo**, the vast island shared by **Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei**, the indigenous **Dayak peoples** celebrate **Gawai** – the annual harvest festival marked by joy, gratitude, and cultural pride. In many Christian villages, especially in **Sarawak (Malaysia)** and **Kalimantan (Indonesia)**, the whole village walks together to the church during Gawai: children skipping barefoot, elders in traditional dress, mothers carrying rice baskets as offerings of thanksgiving. It is more than a custom — it is a **movement of faith and community**. That is Church. **The People of God walking together**, rooted in land and culture, united in gratitude and grace.



Strengths of This Model

- Emphasizes belonging, dignity, and participation
- Encourages listening, shared responsibility
- Reminds us the Church is not “them” (clergy) — it is “us” (all baptized)



Risks if Overstated

- May ignore the need for structure and clear leadership
- Can lead to vagueness about identity if not rooted in Christ

Connection to Synodality

Synodality literally means “walking together.” The model of People of God is the **foundation** for this.

It tells us:

- We are **equal in dignity**
- Each of us is responsible for the journey
- The Spirit speaks **through all**, not only through leaders

As Pope Francis said:

“The only authority in the Church is the authority of service and listening.”⁶



⁶ Pope Francis, Address at the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html



2. The Church as *Body of Christ*

"Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." – 1 Corinthians 12:12

The Church is not just a group of individuals who believe the same things. It is a **living body**, deeply connected, spiritually united, and moved by one Spirit. In this body, **Christ is the head**, and **we are the members**—each with unique roles, gifts, and dignity.

Imagine a traditional loom — like those used in Tamil Nadu, Laos, or North-East India. Threads of many colours are woven together, crossing and connecting, until they become a **single, beautiful cloth**.

This is the Body of Christ: different lives, vocations, and backgrounds—all woven by the Spirit into a unity that reflects God's beauty.



"When I pray the Rosary," a grandmother from Vietnam once said, "I imagine each bead as a member of our family — even the ones far away. When I finish, I see the full circle. That is our Church."

Biblical Roots

The Apostle Paul, writing to a divided community in Corinth, gave this image of the Church as a **body** to correct pride, competition, and exclusion.

- "If the foot says, 'I am not a hand, I do not belong,' it does not cease to be part of the body..." (1 Cor 12:15)

- "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.'" (1 Cor 12:21)
- "If one member suffers, all suffer. If one is honoured, all rejoice." (1 Cor 12:26)

This powerful image teaches **interdependence, compassion, and unity in diversity**. Each member—layperson, religious, bishop, child—is necessary. No one is "extra." No one is invisible.

In Ephesians 4:16, Paul adds: *"From Christ the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love."*

Eucharistic Depth

The Body of Christ is not only a **symbol**—it is also **sacramental**.

- At every Eucharist, we say: *"The Body of Christ"*—and we receive Christ into ourselves.
- But we also become what we receive. St Augustine taught:

"Be what you see. Receive what you are—the Body of Christ."

This is deeply rooted in our **identity as one Body in Christ**. The Eucharist does not just unite us to God—it unites us **to one another**, especially to the poor, the excluded, and the wounded members of the Body.

The teaching of Vatican II

Lumen Gentium speaks of the Church as the **Mystical Body of Christ** (LG 7), animated by the **Holy Spirit**, nourished by the **sacraments**, and sent on mission.

"Christ... continually provides his body, that is the Church, with gifts of ministries... for the renewal and building up of the body."

The document reminds us that "this body has only one Spirit." This means that even though there are different vocations—married, religious, lay, ordained—we all share **one baptism, one Spirit, one hope** (Eph 4:4–5).



Asian Resonance

In many Asian cultures, the idea of interconnection is natural.

- In Indigenous wisdom, the body is not just physical—it includes ancestors, community, land.
- In Chinese and Indian philosophy, harmony in the body represents harmony in society.
- In villages, especially among fisherfolk, farmers, or artisans, no one survives alone.

A Tamil potter once said, “I shape the clay, but my daughter fires it, and my wife paints it. It is not *my* work — it is *ours*.”

This is **ecclesiology in practice** — the Body of Christ in the rhythm of daily life.



Strengths of This Model

- Encourages **belonging** and **responsibility**
- Affirms diversity of gifts, cultures, and vocations
- Creates space for **mutual care and solidarity**



Risks if Overstated

- Could become inward-looking (“caring for ourselves”) if not tied to mission
- Danger of romanticizing unity while ignoring **real wounds or injustice**

Connection to Synodality

A synodal Church listens to all its members because it understands that the Spirit speaks through the whole body, not just the “head.”

- Listening is not an option—it is how the body stays alive.
- Discernment is not imposed—it is sensed together.

When we walk synodally:

- We respect every part—even the smallest voice
- We seek to heal wounds, not cover them
- We grow not through dominance, but mutual care

Pope Francis says:

“A synodal Church is one that listens—in which everyone has something to learn.”⁷



⁷ Pope Francis, Address at the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/hf-fr-20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html



3. The Church as Temple of the Holy Spirit

"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" – 1 Corinthians 3:16

The Church is not just a visible community or an institution with rules. It is a **dwelling place of the Holy Spirit**—a living temple where God's presence breathes, speaks, and animates every person, community, and culture.

When we say the Church is a "temple," we are not referring only to a building of stone. We mean something **mystical and spiritual**—a sanctuary made of people, not bricks. And the Spirit is its soul.

Imagine a bamboo forest—silent, supple, and strong. A gentle wind passes through it, and suddenly the air is filled with a soft rustling sound—as though the forest were whispering.

The Spirit is like that wind—invisible, yet powerful. It stirs the Church into song, movement, and mission.

In many Asian spiritual traditions, the wind or **breath** (Ruah in Hebrew, Qi in Chinese, Prana in Sanskrit) is sacred. It represents **life, spirit, energy**. In Christian faith, this breath is the Holy Spirit—the giver of life, the awakener of gifts, the guide of the Church.

Biblical Roots

In the beginning, the Spirit of God **hovered over the waters** (Gen 1:2), bringing life to creation.

At Pentecost, the Spirit **descended like wind and fire** (Acts 2), transforming the fearful disciples into bold witnesses.

Paul writes to the early Church: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?" (1 Cor 6:19) This applies not only to individuals, but also to the whole **community**.

We are **temples**, and **together** we are the **Church as the temple**—set apart, filled with light, and open to the movement of the Spirit.

The Spirit:

- Builds communion
- Awakens charisms
- Guides the Church in truth
- Sends us out on mission

The teaching of Vatican II

In *Lumen Gentium* (LG 4), the Council speaks of the Holy Spirit as the "soul" of the Church:

"The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple guiding the Church in all truth and uniting her in fellowship and ministry."

The Spirit is the breath of synodality—the silent force behind discernment, participation, and mission.

Asian Resonance

Asian spirituality is deeply tuned to silence, inner presence, breath, and awareness. In Buddhist meditation, Hindu prayer, and tribal rituals, the focus is often on **harmony**—with nature, the community, and the divine.

Thus, the image of the Church as a **Spirit-filled temple** resonates beautifully with:

- Sacred groves and village shrines
- The reverence for **ancestral wisdom**
- The contemplative traditions of Asia

"In Kerala, an elder once said, "I don't speak much at church meetings, but I pray before them. If the Spirit speaks, the people will listen."



The Holy Spirit speaks not only through noise or authority but also through **conscience, nature, beauty, silence**, and the community's discernment.

Connection to Synodality

Synodality is not a method or strategy—it is a **spiritual journey**, and it requires **attentiveness to the Spirit**. To walk synodally, we must:

- Be **open** to surprise
- Be **patient** in listening
- Trust the **wisdom of the whole community**

Just as in Acts 15, when the early Church faced disagreement, they listened to each other—and to the Spirit—and concluded:

"It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (Acts 15:28)

This is the heart of a Spirit-led, synodal Church—discernment, not domination.



Pope Francis says:

*"The Holy Spirit is the protagonist of synodality. Without the Spirit, there is no synod."*⁸

⁸ Pope Francis, Opening Speech at the Launch of the Synod Process, Oct 9, 2021.



Strengths of This Model

- Recognizes the Church as **alive and dynamic**
- Emphasizes **charisms**, discernment, and inner conversion
- Connects the Church to the **mystery of God's presence** within



Risks if Overstated

- Can become **too inward or mystical** without action
- Danger of neglecting structure or accountability

4. The Church as a Servant

"The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." – Mark 10:45

"If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." – John 13:14

To be Church is not to sit on a throne, but to kneel with a towel.

The Church is called to **serve**, especially the poor, the excluded, and the brokenhearted—just as Christ did.

This model reminds us: the Church exists **not for herself**, but for the **world**. She is not the master, but the humble servant of God's kingdom.

In every Holy Thursday liturgy, we watch the priest bend down and wash the feet of parishioners. This is not a mere symbol—it is the *DNA of the Church*.

A deacon in Cambodia once said: "When we clean wounds at the shelter, we are not only healing — we are praying. Our hands are the homily. The towel is our theology."

In an age that glorifies power, control, and wealth, the Church holds up a towel and a basin — **tools of love** — and invites the world to a different way.





Biblical Roots

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed not as a king with armies, but as a **servant with compassion**.

- He **touches lepers**, dines with outcasts, uplifts women and children
- He identifies himself with the hungry, the imprisoned, the naked (Matthew 25:31–46)
- At the Last Supper, he **washes feet**—even the feet of one who would betray him

Isaiah speaks of the *Suffering Servant*, and Jesus fulfills this role not only through words, but through a life of radical humility.

The early Church followed this model:

- Caring for widows and orphans (Acts 6)
- Sharing their goods in common (Acts 4:32)
- Ministering to the sick and imprisoned

The teaching of Vatican II

In *Gaudium et Spes* (GS 1), the Council declared:

"The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age... are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."

This powerful statement places the Church **in the heart of the world**, not above it. The Church's credibility today depends not on the wealth of its buildings, but on the **depth of its compassion**.

Lumen Gentium (LG 8) speaks of the Church as a mystery that is both visible and spiritual — but always united with the poor and suffering.

Asian Resonance

Across Asia, millions live on the margins — slum dwellers, farmers in debt, migrant workers, ethnic minorities, domestic workers, and trafficked children. In such a context, the Church's most powerful witness is her service.

A tribal catechist from Jharkhand shared, *"Our chapel is small, but when the flood came, the parish centre became a shelter. That was the Church."*

In many parts of Asia:

- Catholic nuns run clinics and schools in remote villages
- Lay volunteers teach refugee children under mango trees
- Youth groups clean churches or interfaith prayer grounds

Here, theology is not in books, but in *acts of solidarity*.



Strengths of This Model

- Witnesses the Gospel **with actions, not just words**
- Builds bridges across **religions, classes, and cultures**
- Places the Church with the **suffering Christ in today's world**



Risks if Overstated

- May reduce the Church to just another social service organization if **spiritual depth** is lost
- Can lead to burnout if not rooted in **prayer and discernment**



Connection to Synodality

Synodality is not only about **listening**—it is also about **serving together**.

A synodal Church:

- Serves **from below**, not from above
- Empowers the poor to be **subjects**, not just recipients
- Shares leadership—clergy, laity, women, youth—in action and decision

Pope Francis often urged that the Church must go out to the peripheries, to the places where people suffer most.

Service becomes a form of listening—we hear the cries of the poor, the earth, and the forgotten. And in responding, **the Church becomes truly Christlike**.



HEAR THE JOURNEY

A Contemporary Story: The Migrant Kitchen

During the COVID-19 lockdown, as hundreds of migrant workers across Asia lost their jobs and access to basic services, faith-based communities stepped in to provide food and support. In cities like Kuching, Ranchi, and Singapore, parishes and Catholic organizations opened their kitchens and mobilized volunteers—many of them young Catholics—to prepare and deliver meals daily to stranded migrant workers. In some places, people of different faiths worked side by side in these kitchens, showing solidarity in action. These humble efforts became lifelines for workers who had no income and no access to state relief, and they remain powerful signs of compassion and collaboration in a time of crisis.

A Hindu cook said: "I didn't know the Church cooked for others. But now I understand—the Church has a mother's heart."

5. The Church as Sacrament

"The Church, in Christ, is like a sacrament—a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all people." – Lumen Gentium 1

A **sacrament** is a visible sign of an invisible grace—something we can see and touch, through which God communicates life and love.

To say the Church is a **sacrament** means she is a **living sign** of God's desire to be present in the world. Through her life, sacraments, community, and mission, she **makes Christ visible**—like a lamp placed on a stand.

The Church is not the destination, but the **signpost** pointing to God's kingdom. In many Asian homes, a small oil lamp is placed on the windowsill during festivals or prayer. It may seem small, but it tells a powerful story: **there is light here, there is life here, God is present here**.

The Church is like that lamp—a quiet, faithful glow in a darkened world, offering direction, meaning, and hospitality.

A catechist in Laos once shared: "When people come to our chapel during drought, they don't ask for theology — they ask for prayer, blessing, hope. That's our role: to shine, even when there's no rain."

Biblical Roots

Jesus himself is the **primordial sacrament**—the perfect sign of God's love made flesh (John 1:14).

In his life, he touched the blind, lifted the fallen, and spoke with power—but every action pointed beyond itself to God's mercy.



Jesus gave the Church **seven sacraments**—signs of divine grace—but he also made the Church **a sacrament** in herself:

- Baptism gives new life
- Eucharist nourishes communion
- Reconciliation heals wounds
- Anointing brings strength
- Matrimony and Holy Orders build love and mission

The Church, as the **universal sacrament of salvation**, carries the presence of Christ into the world.

The teaching of Vatican II

The very first line of Lumen Gentium defines the Church in this way:

"The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity."

This vision affirms that the Church is not an end in herself, but a means through which:

- God's grace is communicated
- Unity among people is fostered
- The world is made holy through everyday life

Sacrament is a **bridge**: between the divine and the human, the visible and invisible, the spiritual and social.

Asian Resonance

In Asia, **symbols and rituals** are woven into daily life.

- A garland on a guest's neck
- A bowl of water before entering a home
- Rice grains placed on the forehead
- Incense offered in temples and homes

These gestures say what words cannot—they **carry meaning, emotion, belonging**.

Thus, the Church's sacramental life—and her own sacramental identity—speaks deeply to Asian hearts.

In the Philippines, a child once said after receiving First Communion: *"I feel Jesus is inside me — like my breath when I run."*

In tribal India, baptism is sometimes celebrated near rivers, under open skies — merging Christian initiation with ancestral reverence for nature and water.

The Church as sacrament reminds us that:

- Every liturgy is a celebration of life
- Every parish is a sacred encounter place
- Every Christian is a bearer of grace



Strengths of This Model

- Connects **faith and life** through visible rituals
- Makes the Church a **transforming presence** in society
- Promotes unity across **cultures, classes, and generations**



Risks if Overstated

- Can become **too focused on ritual** and lose prophetic voice
- Danger of separating **sacrament** from **service and justice**



Connection to Synodality

A synodal Church is a **sacramental Church**—not in the sense of performing rituals, but in being **a sign of communion** through:

- Welcoming diversity in worship and culture
- Reverencing the poor as bearers of grace
- Making decisions that reflect Gospel values visibly

When we gather in prayer, listen in discernment, and act in communion—we are a sacrament of God’s reign already breaking in.

Pope Francis reminds us that the liturgy is not an escape from life. It is the deepest way of entering into life.

Thus, the sacramental Church is not just at the altar—she is also **at the village well, at the refugee camp, at the hospital bedside**—bringing the light of God through word, touch, and presence.



HEAR THE JOURNEY

Story: The Blessing at the Brick Kiln

In a small Catholic community in Vietnam, most families work in brick kilns. On Easter morning, the priest could not come. But an elderly catechist, barefoot and humble, gathered the people, lit a candle, read the Gospel, and offered each worker a drop of holy water and a blessing.

“We didn’t have Mass,” said a woman, “but I felt like heaven touched us. The Church was there.”

That is sacrament—**wherever love meets faith, and God meets people.**

6. The Church as Institution

“All things should be done decently and in order.” – 1 Corinthians 14:40

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church.” – Matthew 16:18

The Church is not only a mystery and movement—she is also an **organized community** with **structures, roles, and rules**. This model reminds us that the Church needs visible leadership, administration, tradition, and accountability to function well and stay faithful to her mission.

An institution is **not about power**—it is about **preserving memory, guarding truth**, and **serving the people of God** responsibly.

Imagine an ancient banyan tree. Its roots go deep into the earth—grounding it in history, anchoring it in storms. At the same time, it sends out new branches, offering shade and fruit to all who come. The Church as an institution is like this tree—rooted in tradition, but ever growing, ever adapting to serve the world today.





A seminarian in Myanmar once said:
"Without roots, the Church would be like a tent in the wind. But without new leaves, it would not breathe."

Biblical Roots

Jesus founded the Church not as an idea, but as **a community with leadership**.

- He chose the Twelve (Luke 6:13)
- He gave Peter a special role of rock and shepherd (Matt 16:18, John 21:17)
- He commissioned the apostles to teach, baptize, and lead (Matt 28:19)

The early Church:

- Gathered in councils (Acts 15)
- Appointed deacons and elders (Acts 6, Titus 1)
- Collected offerings, organized ministries, preserved the teachings (Eph 4:11-13)

Paul's letters often refer to **order, leadership, discipline, and oversight**. This shows that from the beginning, the Church needed not only inspiration but **structure**.

The teaching of Vatican II

Lumen Gentium presents a vision of Church structure that is both **faithful** and **servant-hearted**.

"The bishops, under the authority of the Pope, govern the particular Churches... always mindful that they must be examples to the flock." (LG 27)

Vatican II emphasized:

- **Collegiality** — shared governance among bishops
- **Co-responsibility** — all the faithful participate in the Church's life



- **Subsidiarity** — decisions made at the most local appropriate level
- **Pastoral care over legalism**

The institutional model is not to dominate, but to ensure communion, continuity, and care.

Asian Resonance

In many Asian cultures, institutions—like monasteries, village councils, or family clans—are deeply respected when they:

- Preserve ancestral wisdom
- Resolve conflicts fairly
- Include elders and youth alike

But where institutions become **rigid, hierarchical, or elitist**, they lose their credibility.

In the Church, this tension is also felt:

- When authority becomes **control** instead of **service**
- When women, youth, or the poor are **excluded** from decisions
- When bureaucracy overshadows **compassion**

A Catholic teacher in India said: *We don't mind that the Church is a structure — we just want to be included in building it.*

This is the cry for a **renewed institution**—not one that disappears, but one **that listens, includes, and adapts**.





Strengths of This Model

- Protects **doctrine and unity** across generations
- Provides **stability and leadership** in a complex world
- Maintains links between **local and universal Church**



Risks if Overstated

- Can become **inflexible**, focused more on control than care
- May encourage **clericalism** and silence lay voices
- Can be disconnected from **real life and struggles**

Connection to Synodality

Synodality invites a **conversion of the institutional Church**—not to erase it, but to reform it from within.

A synodal institution:

- **Decentralizes power** to local communities
- Recognizes **the charisms of all baptized** persons
- Makes decision-making **transparent and participatory**
- Embodies authority as **listening and accompaniment**, not domination



Pope Francis often warns against the disease of clericalism, which distances the hierarchy from the people. And he dreams of a missionary, synodal Church where structures serve the mission and all people, not the other way around.

This model challenges us to **reimagine leadership**—not as superiority, but as shared stewardship.



HEAR THE JOURNEY

A Contemporary Story: The Parish Council That Changed Everything

In a **rural parish in Sri Lanka**, decisions had long been made solely by the priest—women, youth, and lay Catholics had little formal voice. After participating in a **diocesan synod formation workshop**, the priest introduced a new practice: **monthly listening circles** as part of the parish council.

These circles invited voices from diverse groups—**women, farmers, youth**—to speak openly. During one meeting, **a young girl from outside the Church's traditional decision-making groups** spoke and said:

"This is the first time the Church has heard my voice."

From that moment, parish life began to change: scholarships were offered to poor children, an **eco-garden** was established, liturgies became more **inclusive**, and local women and youth were appointed to parish commissions. The **structure remained**, but its **spirit shifted**—transforming the council into a living institution of grace and shared mission.

This transformation mirrors the vision of a Catholic synodal Church: practicing communal discernment, enabling lay participation, and responding to the prompts of the Spirit in local mission.



7. The Church as Herald of the Gospel

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." — Matthew 28:19–20

"Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" — 1 Corinthians 9:16

To be Church is to be a **messenger of Good News**. The Church is called to **proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ** — his life, death, resurrection, and the kingdom of justice, mercy, and love — to all peoples, in every place, and in every culture.

To **herald** does not mean to impose or shout. It means to **announce with joy, witness with life**, and **invite with love**.

In many tribal communities of Northeast India and the Philippines, a drumbeat signals a message—a wedding, danger, or gathering. The sound travels across fields and forests, calling people to come, to listen, to respond.

The Church as herald is like that drum—**not noise**, but invitation. Her mission is to proclaim **hope, liberation, and new life**, especially to the poor and forgotten.



A young pastoral worker in Bangladesh said: *"The Gospel is not a rulebook. It is like a song—if we sing it well, others will join in."*

Biblical Roots

Jesus began his ministry with a proclamation:

"The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news." (Mark 1:15)

He preached in synagogues, on hillsides, in boats, and at meals, but his most powerful "sermons" were acts of mercy—healing, forgiving, feeding, and liberating.

The apostles, filled with the Spirit at Pentecost, went out **boldly**:

- Peter preached to the crowds (Acts 2)
- Paul evangelized cities and countrysides
- Philip shared the Gospel with the Ethiopian official (Acts 8)

But proclamations were not only words. The early Christian community **lived differently** — in love, simplicity, and solidarity — and this attracted others.

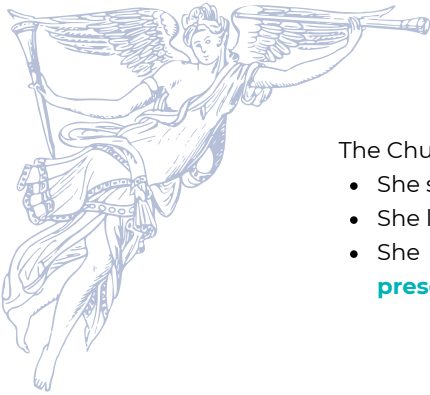
The teaching of Vatican II

Ad Gentes, the Vatican II document on mission, stated:

"The Church, driven by the Spirit, must go forward to the ends of the earth to proclaim the Gospel." (AG 1)

And in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI wrote:

"Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers... and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." (EN 41)



The Church is a herald when:

- She speaks with **humility**
- She lives with **integrity**
- She proclaims Christ through **dialogue and presence**, not force

Asian Resonance

In Asia, where Christians are often a small minority, proclamation must be **gentle, respectful, and relational**.

- Dialogue with other religions is not optional—it is **essential**
- The Gospel must be **inculturated**—expressed in local symbols, stories, and music
- The message must be **liberating**—especially for Dalits, tribals, women, and the poor

In Indian, a nun working in a leprosy colony said: “We do not preach with words. We preach by staying.”

And in Japan, a priest remarked:
“We are not here to convince — we are here to accompany.”

This is the herald model in Asia: **a quiet but steady presence**, announcing Christ by **living love**.



Strengths of This Model

- Keeps the Church **outward-looking and missionary**
- Challenges complacency—urges **prophetic witness**
- Invites creativity in **media, art, music, and dialogue**



Risks if Overstated

- Can lead to **activism without depth**
- May neglect **interiority and liturgy**
- Danger of **proselytism** or cultural insensitivity

Connection to Synodality

A synodal Church is a Church **on the move**—sent out to proclaim, but always **listening as it walks**.

Proclamation in a synodal key means:

- Speaking **with others**, not just to others
- Listening to the Spirit in **cultures, peoples, and creation**
- Being a community that **attracts by love**, not force

Pope Francis reminds us that mission is not a task among others — it is the task of the Church. But he also adds that we propose, not impose. We offer Christ, not ourselves.

Thus, synodality and mission go hand in hand—walking together, listening deeply, and **proclaiming Christ in word and witness**.



HEAR THE JOURNEY

Radio Seeds of Hope – Bangladesh

In a remote rural region of Bangladesh, a group of lay Catholic youth and catechists partnered with the Radio Veritas Asia Bengali Service to create a weekly programme filled with Gospel reflections, devotional music, and interfaith themes rooted in local culture. Though clearly Catholic in origin, the programme was designed with respect, openness, and dialogue at its heart.

To their surprise, many Hindu and Muslim listeners began tuning in regularly. The messages—simple, hopeful, and grounded in Scripture—touched something deep in their hearts.

At a local listener gathering, one listener from another religion (not Catholic) shared:

"I don't know your religion, but your words bring me peace. I feel God's presence when I listen."

This is what it means to herald the Gospel in a synodal, Asian way—lay-led, rooted in local culture, welcoming to all, and deeply attentive to the movements of the Spirit.

Conclusion: One Church, Many Faces

The Church is a **mystery too rich for a single image**. Like the moon reflecting the sun's light in many phases, the Church reveals the face of Christ through many models.

Each one—People of God, Body of Christ, Temple of the Spirit, Servant, Sacrament, Institution, Herald—captures a **dimension of her truth**, but none can contain it fully.

These models are **not in competition**—they **complement** each other. Together, they shape a Church that is:

- Rooted in Scripture and tradition
- Responsive to the world's cries
- Faithful to Christ's mission
- Open to the Spirit's leading
- Deeply connected to Asian realities

In a **synodal key**, these models become dynamic, participatory, and discerning. The Church is not static—she is always listening, walking, learning, reforming. More importantly, this journey is made by **all the faithful**, together.

The Church is not an idea. She is a **people on pilgrimage**, a lamp in the dark, a voice in the wilderness, a wounded healer, a mother and servant—and above all, a **living sign of God's love** in the world.



PUT INTO PRACTICE

"The Gospel is already being lived—we must learn to see it."
— An Asian pastoral worker

In this part, we offer three brief yet powerful case studies from different parts of Asia, where the Church is **living out multiple models** simultaneously—often without naming them, but deeply embodying them. These stories offer hope, challenge, and direction for a **synodal Church** rooted in local reality. You can read these stories as a group and then share what they evoke in you.



Case Study 1: The Synodal Church in Timor-Leste

"We survived the war. Now we must walk together in peace."

After decades of occupation and violence, the people of Timor-Leste emerged into independence carrying deep wounds—of trauma, displacement, and loss. In this fragile landscape, the **Catholic Church became a central pillar** of healing and hope.

Across the villages and hills:

- **Catechists walked on foot** to far-flung communities, carrying not only the Bible but also food, medicine, and words of encouragement.
- **Elders and youth sat together** in listening circles, facilitated by priests and religious, to share stories, identify needs, and plan small reconstruction efforts—from rebuilding chapels to planting community gardens.
- **The Eucharist became a feast of healing**, often celebrated in open-air tents, with music and tears flowing freely.

A young woman said: *"Our Church did not wait for orders from Rome. She stayed with us when no one else did."*

Models lived here:

- *People of God* walking together
- *Body of Christ* reconciling wounds
- *Servant and Sacrament* in action
- *Institution* supporting grassroots initiatives

This is the **Church as companion and healer**—not only proclaiming hope, but building it, brick by brick, person by person.



Case Study 2: Myanmar Churches as "Tents of Hope"

"Our churches are now homes — For all who have no home."



Since the 2021 coup and ongoing civil unrest, **thousands of people in Myanmar** have fled their homes—especially in Chin, Kachin, and Karenni states. In the midst of bombing, fear, and displacement, many **Catholic parishes have opened their doors** to shelter the vulnerable.

- Churches have become **makeshift tents**, filled with mats, food supplies, and whispered prayers.
- Lay leaders organize **rotations of cooking, teaching, and trauma healing**, with catechists and religious providing sacraments and spiritual support.
- Muslim and Buddhist neighbours are also sheltered — without distinction.

A displaced father shared: *"I don't know if I will ever go back to my village. But here in this church, I feel dignity again."*

**Models lived here:**

- *Servant Church* welcoming the broken
- *Sacrament Church* creating sacred space from suffering
- *Temple of the Spirit* in which peace is breathed despite fear
- *Herald* of inclusive love and justice

The Church here is not a fortress. She is a **tent in the wilderness**, echoing the synodal vision of Pope Francis—a Church that **pitches her tent among the people**, listens to their cries, and walks with them in the dust.

**Case Study 3: A Women's Gospel Circle in Tamil Nadu**

"We teach the Gospel through kolam — our grandmother's wisdom becomes our theology."

In a small town in Tamil Nadu, a group of **Dalit Catholic women** gather every Thursday morning. They come not as theologians, but as mothers, widows, workers, and grandmothers. Their tool? Chalk powder. Their medium? **Kolam**—the traditional South Indian art of drawing sacred designs on the ground.



After reading a Gospel passage, the women sit on the ground and together **create a kolam that reflects the text**. For the parable of the sower, they drew seeds being eaten, scorched, and finally blossoming. For the washing of the feet, a pair of sandals, a basin, and waves of water emerged.

- The women **interpret Scripture** through symbols, storytelling, and shared silence.
- Teenage girls are learning to join in — bringing colour and songs.
- They sometimes display their kolams at village festivals — a quiet but clear witness to Christian hope.

One member said:

"The Church used to teach us. Now we also teach the Church."

Models lived here:

- *Body of Christ* where all members have a voice
- *Herald* through art and culture
- *People of God* walking in faith
- *Temple of the Spirit* through contemplative creativity

This circle is a powerful reminder that **lay women—especially those from marginalised communities—are not just recipients of evangelisation. They are also its bearers, artists, and theologians.**

Final Thought

In these stories—from post-conflict nations to village courtyards—the Church is alive. Not perfect, not always recognised, but real. She lives not only in cathedrals or documents, but in **rice fields, refugee tents, and chalk-drawn symbols**.

To be Church today means to keep learning from these voices. A truly synodal Church must ask:

"Who is already living the Gospel among us — and how can we walk with them?"



PAUSE AND REFLECT

1. Which model of the Church speaks most to your own experience? Why? (For example, was it “People of God”? “Servant”? “Body of Christ”? Or any of the other 7 models?)

2. Have you ever felt excluded or invisible in the institutional Church? What would a more inclusive Church look like?

3. What does it mean to be “a sacrament” in your local context? Can you recall moments when the Church truly reflected God's presence?

4. How can the Church in Asia become a better “herald” of the Gospel — especially in interfaith, multicultural contexts?

5. In your ministry, which model do you naturally embody? Which model do you need to develop more?

6. Where do you see synodality in action in your community?

Where is it still lacking?



PASS IT ON

Here are some suggestions for sharing with others what you've learnt in this chapter. The following activities are designed so that everyone can participate. You can adapt them creatively to suit your target group.

1. Model Mapping

Draw a large tree with 7 branches (one for each model). In small groups, write on the leaves:

- Examples of each model in your Church
- Challenges and gifts of each.
- Post them on the tree and discuss.

2. Dramatize the Models

Invite groups to prepare short, silent dramatizations of each model (e.g., Servant = foot washing, Sacrament = offering bread, Herald = beating a drum). Others guess the model and discuss. What are the different feelings evoked by each dramatization? Why?

3. Visual Collage

Provide newspapers, magazines, and printouts. Ask each person to cut images that represent one model. Make a collage with a caption: “We are the Church as _____.”

**4. Walking Synodally**

Create a simple prayer-walk. At each station, reflect on one model of the Church, reading a short quote, offering a symbol (e.g., lamp, towel, drum), and praying with a brief intention.

5. Invite Stories

Encourage members of your group/community to share a personal story:

“When did you feel a strong sense of belonging in the Church?”

“When did you feel unheard or unwelcomed?”

“When did you feel excited to be in mission together?”

“When did you experience support from the Church during a time of struggle?”

“What dream do you have for the Church?”

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OUR FAITH-SENSE IN SYNODAL SPIRITUALITY AND HUMAN FORMATION

**KEY RESOURCES**

1. Dulles, Avery. *Models of the Church*. New York: Image Books, 2002.
2. Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2013.
3. Pope Paul VI. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1975.
4. Second Vatican Council. *Lumen Gentium*. Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1964.
5. Second Vatican Council. *Gaudium et Spes*. Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1965.



All Christians receive the gift of the sensus fidei from the Holy Spirit at baptism. This is a natural instinct for the truths of the Faith. It enables all the baptized to participate fruitfully in discernment towards the development of the Faith tradition. At the same time, the sensus fidei needs to be cultivated through a lifetime of spiritual, intellectual, and human formation.



JOIN IN PRAYER

Begin by spending about 10 minutes in silence to examine the time that has passed since you met as a group. Recall the events, activities, and experiences you were involved in. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you become aware of the times you felt deep joy, peace, and consolation, as well as the times when you felt sadness, tension, or desolation. Where do you sense the presence of God in your life over this period? Get in touch with what God has been communicating to you deep in your heart.

Share something that moved you in this examen, and pray aloud for a grace you desire.

Recite slowly the following Scripture passage together:

"I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you."

John 16:12-15



DISCOVER OUR TRADITION

As we know, the Catholic Church—under the guidance of Pope Francis and now, Pope Leo XIV—is aiming for a profound shift towards becoming a synodal Church. Synodality requires a change not only in the way we think about the Church, but also, more fundamentally, in our very way of being Church. This includes moving away from a top-down and excessively hierarchical model—where a "Teaching Church" primarily engages in instruction—towards a vision of the Church as the entire People of God, walking together, listening to one another, and discerning the way forward. This vision of a "Listening Church" depends entirely on the belief that the Holy Spirit is active in everyone because everyone has received the gift of the *sensus fidei* (literally, a sense of the faith). This sense of the faith is the grace the Spirit gives each one of us to participate in an ongoing conversation, to contribute our wisdom, and to help the whole Church hear what God is saying in our time. Only a spirituality of the *sensus fidei*—manifested in the practice of discernment—can make synodality possible.



But what does this faith intuition look like and sound like? And what are some of the common misconceptions about this faith-sense? More concretely, what does it have to do with synodality—with speaking up, asking questions, discerning together, and even disagreeing with authority if needed? When we think about it, these features are exactly what a Synodal Church should look like and sound like.

We will also look at what this all means for how we learn, teach, and hand on the faith in our schools and parishes today, transforming them into vibrant nurseries that cultivate this essential faith-sense.



What is the *Sensus Fidei*?

Have you ever felt that your faith requires you to leave your critical thinking at the church door? Have you wondered if asking tough questions about certain teachings, or feeling a sense of unease over a particular practice, is a sign of a weak or a wavering faith? The doctrine of the *sensus fidei*—one of the most often misunderstood and least appreciated teachings of our Catholic tradition—tells us not to worry.

The Church teaches that the Holy Spirit gives every baptized Christian a “sense of the faith,” an intuitive aptitude to discern the faith, a faith-consciousness.⁹ Here we shall call it our “faith-sense.” Although the 2014 International Theological Commission document, “[Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church](#),” probably offers the fullest official treatment of the doctrine, the Church has always subscribed to this teaching, as expressed in Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium*.

What then is our faith-sense? How can we understand this capability that is in each one of us?

Think of veteran medical doctors. When they walk into a patient’s room, they don’t just look at a list of symptoms from a chart. They have a “clinical eye”—a deep, intuitive understanding honed by years of practice. Often, they can sense what’s wrong with a patient even before all the test results are in. This knowledge isn’t anti-rational; it’s built on all their accumulated experience and wisdom, but it operates on a more direct, intuitive level.

Likewise, think of the faith-sense as the “clinical eye” of a believer. Our faith-sense is a kind of spiritual instinct that is gifted by the Holy Spirit to every single baptized person. It is an inner aptitude that helps us recognize, respond to, and live out the truth of the Gospel in our daily lives. It enables us to feel, deep in our bones, when something aligns with the authentic message of Christ or when it strikes a dissonant chord.

⁹ International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2014) (hereafter abbreviated as SF), para. 49.
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Look back over your faith journey. Can you recall a time when a homily, a scripture passage, a piece of sacred music, or a Church teaching resonated deeply with you? When it felt profoundly true in your bones and you felt some kind of “spiritual resonance”?

Conversely, can you recall a time when something felt ‘off’ or dissonant, even if you couldn’t immediately articulate why?

Spend a few minutes reflecting or writing about one of these experiences. Don’t worry about theological precision. Focus on the feeling, the intuition. What was the situation? What did it feel like? Would you consider these occasions to be the times when your faith-sense was at work?



DIALOGUE TOGETHER

Our faith-sense or *sensus fidei* is a gift from the Holy Spirit given to all the baptized. Let's take a moment to let that sink in: Not just the bishops, not just the ordained, not just the religious—and not even just the practicing Catholics! Rather, all baptized Christians have been given access to this faith-sense.

- Do you accept this teaching readily? What appeals to you about it? What concerns you?
- How do you feel about this gift of a faith-sense already given to you at baptism? Why do you feel this way?

A Creative and Critical Function

We should be grateful for this gift of our faith-sense, but many of us probably feel pressured or daunted by the responsibility, especially when we realize that with our faith-sense, we are called to do two things:

- To exercise agency in interpreting our faith authentically and creatively, and
- To evaluate different interpretations of the faith.

On the one hand, we are expected to use our faith-sense to “make sense” of what Scripture and the Church teaches us, to ask ourselves what they mean, what they entail and why they are valuable and relevant in our lives. This process of meaning-making is necessary if we want our faith to become personally meaningful to us.

For example, the Church teaches us that our Lord Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. It is not enough to agree with it or even to memorize this fundamental article of our faith. We need to appropriate it and make it our own by asking “How do I sense or experience this? What does this mean for

me, for us?” For a person who feels rejected by others, it might mean that the Lord understands this person because He has had similar experiences and knows the pain of rejection. This sense of the Lord's empathy towards this person is the product of his/her faith-sense.

The task of creative interpretation, however, is not enough: Using the same faith intuition, we are also called to evaluate our interpretations (as well as those of others') and to exercise our judgment about whether these interpretations are faithful to the teachings of the Church.

Going back to our example: According to this person's interpretation of Jesus' divine and human nature, our Lord was like this person because as a human person, He was also vulnerable to getting rejected and hurt by others. This is one person's interpretation of the Church teaching about our Lord's dual nature. Is it a valid interpretation—one that is compatible with the Gospel?

One with a developed faith-sense might readily say so. In fact, we do have a verse from the Letter to the Hebrews that explicitly supports this interpretation:

“For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15: italics added).

This faith-sense is a unique and powerful form of creative and critical thinking. It is a way of “thinking with the Church” that is rooted not just in logic, but also in love, experience, and a living relationship with God.



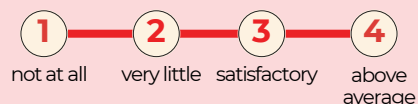


DIALOGUE TOGETHER

How would you assess your **competence** and **confidence** in the two functions that your faith-sense calls you to exercise? Rate them from 1 to 4.

1. Creative Interpretation of the Faith

Rate Your COMPETENCE:



Rate Your CONFIDENCE:



2. Critical Evaluation of Different Interpretations of the Faith

Rate Your COMPETENCE:



Rate Your CONFIDENCE:



Share your reasons for your responses. What could be some possible initial steps for you to build your competence and confidence in these two functions?

How Our Faith-Sense Works

Our faith-sense is not some obscure or esoteric concept reserved for academics. It is more spontaneous, rooted in the lived experience of our faith. But if it's not just book smarts or vague feelings, what kind of knowing is it? We can understand it through two powerful ideas: knowing from the inside out, and faith for real life.

Knowing from the Inside Out: Connatural Knowledge

St. Thomas Aquinas spoke of a powerful way of knowing called "knowledge by connaturality." It's a bit of a mouthful, but the idea is simple yet profound. It's a way of knowing something not by studying it from the outside, but by sharing its very nature.

Think about how you know your close friends. You haven't just studied a biography of them and built up your knowledge about them. You know them personally because you've spent countless hours with them, shared many experiences together, created memories with them, and built a relationship of love and trust. Through that intimacy, you gain a deep, intuitive knowledge. You can tell what they're thinking sometimes just from a single glance. You can almost guess what they would do in a certain situation. This is connatural knowledge. (cf. SF 50-53)

Our faith-sense is not so much about having a catalogue of facts about our faith. Rather, it is more about a deep sense of familiarity with God. It's a way of knowing that comes from being in an intimate relationship with God and being deeply immersed in the life of the faith. It is not at all about knowing the whole Catechism verbatim, but more about building an actual living relationship with God and growing so familiar with God that we are almost always correct in our hunches about what God might want from us.

Our faith-sense is a form of connatural knowledge. Through faith and baptism, a deep bond—a connaturality—is created between the believer and



the very truth of God. We come to know God not just as an object of study, but through a relationship of love and familiarity. This creates a "knowledge of the heart," an ability to recognize the truth of the faith spontaneously because we are, in a sense, in tune with it (SF 50).

Faith for Real Life: Existential Knowledge

The second key idea is that our *sensus fidei* is not about abstract philosophical or theological puzzles; they are meant to illuminate the entirety of our lives. Our faith-sense helps us understand and act within the messy, complicated, beautiful, and uncertain reality of our world.

The primary text for the sense of the faith is not Scripture, but the "narrative of life": our concrete experiences of loving, working, suffering, forgiving, and building community. It is there in the narrative of our lives that the teachings of the Church come alive and are truly understood. This is a holistic knowledge that embraces our intellect, our emotions, our bodies, our conscious thoughts, and our subconscious depths.

The Two Dimensions of Our Faith-Sense

It is very crucial to note that our "faith-sense" is not only individual, but also communal. It has two inseparable dimensions:

1. **The Individual's Faith-Sense:** This is our personal *sensus fidei*, our God-given ability to discern what is true to the faith in our lives.
2. **The Church's Faith-Sense:** This is the communal faith-sense, the *sensus fidelium*, belonging to the entire Church, the People of God. It is our shared consciousness of the faith that has been lived, celebrated, and passed down through generations.

These two are not in competition; rather, they should be in constant dialogue. Our individual faith-sense has a necessarily reciprocal relationship with its communal counterpart. The faith of our faith community nurtures, guides,



regulates our individual sense of the faith. In turn, our personal faith experiences and insights ought to contribute to and enrich the entire Church's understanding.

It is like a solo violinist playing within a grand orchestra. The soloist's beautiful music is made possible by the orchestra, and her unique expression, in turn, enriches the orchestra's performance.



PUT INTO PRACTICE

Which of the following descriptions does NOT fit the idea of the *sensus fidei*? Check as many as needed.

- ☐ 1. It is the same as the theologian's academic expertise.
- ☐ 2. It refers to the believer's feelings and emotions.
- ☐ 3. It is equivalent to a passive download from the teachings of the hierarchy.
- ☐ 4. It is a solo act.

Hopefully, you checked *all* four items because the *sensus fidei* is none of the above. Here are the explanations:

1. Unlike technical theological knowledge, our faith-sense is more direct and immediate—a form of knowledge that comes more from the heart so it is not formulated into neat concepts and definitions.
2. Even if the *sensus fidei* is more intuitive, it still entails sound judgment, much like how the doctor's "clinical eye" is not a mere feeling or emotion. The *sensus fidei* involves a deeply honest search of the heart.



3. It is not blind obedience to Church authority. It is not about being an empty hard drive waiting for the Magisterium to upload doctrines but an active, dynamic participation in understanding and living the faith.

4. Our faith-sense cannot be exercised in isolation, divorced from the Church. A violinist who does not listen to the orchestra will fall out of tune. The believer's sense of faith must always be in dialogue with the wider community, guided by Scripture and Tradition, and in conversation with the Church's pastors and theologians.



DID YOU KNOW?

The Dialogue of Faith

As we have seen, our faith-sense is not the same as the academic expertise of theologians (*scientia fidei*) or the normative judgments of the magisterium. It is more spontaneous, rooted in the lived experience of the faith. It is not some obscure or esoteric theological concept reserved for academics.

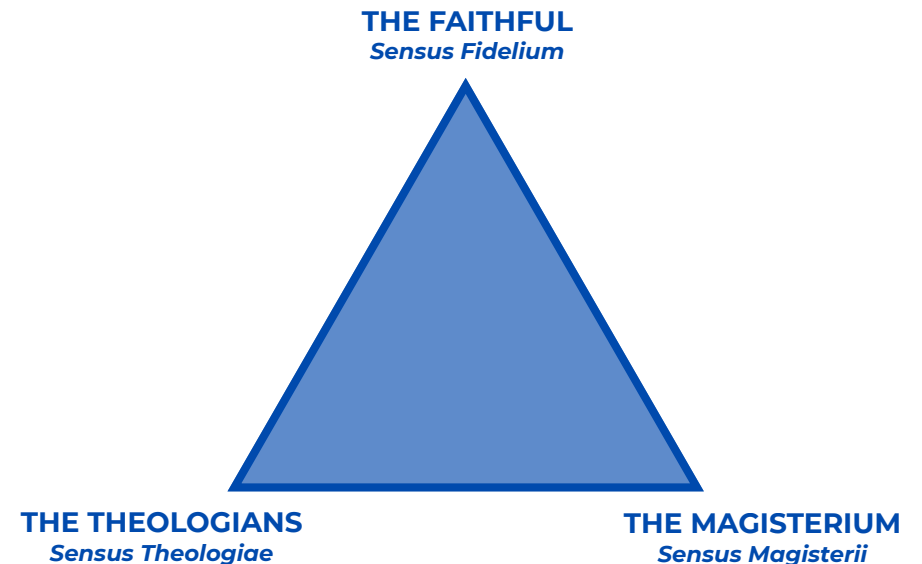
Our faith-sense has three agents in the Church, and there needs to be an ongoing dialogue among them:

- The magisterium (*sensus magisterii*): The ministry of regulating and preserving the faith



- The theologians (*sensus theologiae*): The scholarship to interpret and articulate the faith
- The faithful (*sensus fidelium*): The concretization of the faith through our lived experiences and collective faith-sense of the whole community

The source and foundation of the faith sense is the revelation of God in Christ, animated by the Holy Spirit.



All three agents are committed to the service of the Word of God. The People of God are nurtured by the Word and guided by the teaching of the Magisterium. But the Magisterium and Theologians need to listen to the *sensus fidelium*.



Dispositions for the Exercise of the Faith-Sense

While in principle, the Holy Spirit's gift of the faith-sense is given to all baptized Christians, certain dispositions are required for its proper and authentic exercise. The International Theological Commission (2014) names the following six prerequisites (SF 88-105):

1. Participation in the life of the Church: more than just formal or nominal membership
2. Listening to the Word of God and responding accordingly in one's life
3. Openness to reason in one's faith
4. Adherence to the magisterium
5. Holiness characterized by humility, freedom, and joy
6. Seeking the edification of the Church

One way of summarizing these dispositions is in terms of the following three personal areas, which we can examine to assess our readiness in exercising our faith-sense:

- **Our relationship with God:** Our union with God and openness to the Word of God, as expressed in a life of prayer and discernment, holiness and service of others;
- **Our relationship with the Church:** Our closeness with the church community and our willingness to participate with regularity and devotion in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, as well as to "think with the Church"—i.e., to use both our reason and our faith as we appropriate the teachings of the Church, especially as expressed by the magisterium.
- **Our relationship with our own faith:** Our commitment to grow holistically in our faith—not just in prayer and worship, but also in our moral lives and our willingness to share in the Church's mission to be a sacrament of the Lord's presence in the world.

Implications on the Life of Faith

If we are expected to use our faith-sense to think critically about our faith, here's an important question to ask: "Can we, by virtue of our faith-sense, disagree with the Church?"

The very existence of a personal "faith-sense" implies that blind, unthinking assent or agreement is not the ideal. The goal is a reasoned and faithful assent. And this opens up the possibility for something that often makes us uncomfortable: dissent.

First, we need to understand what we mean by "dissent." This isn't about outright rebellion or storming out of the Church. The word comes from the Latin *dis-sentire*, which means "to feel or think apart from." As one theologian puts it, a dissenter is someone who "sits apart from those one is a part of" (McDonough, G. P., 2012).

Legitimate dissent, therefore, comes from loyal insiders. It comes from a place of deep love for the Church and a desire for its good. It avoids the two extremes of either total conformity or total separation. It is a "high-quality dissent"—a way of thinking *for* and *with* the Church, precisely to help the Church be more faithful to its mission.

Our faith-sense provides the framework for this through a three-fold discernment process. We can think of them as three crucial questions a believer is empowered to ask.

The Discernment of Coherence: "Does It Ring True?"

When the Church teaches something, believers, drawing on their "faith-sense," instinctively judge whether that teaching is in harmony with the core of the Gospel: "Does this teaching sound like something that Christ would teach? Is it consistent with what I have learned about my faith so far?"

If there is a deep and widespread sense of incongruence, believers may respond with a "warranted interior resistance," leading them to withhold their full assent. The Church is increasingly acknowledging that when a teaching is



not received by the faithful, it isn't automatically because the people are sinful, ignorant, or brainwashed by secular culture. It may be a signal that the Church's leaders failed to adequately consult the faithful, to listen to their experiences and their collective faith-sense. This recognition firmly establishes the legitimacy of dissent in certain circumstances. (cf. SF 62-63, 80)

The Discernment of Significance: "How Important Is This"

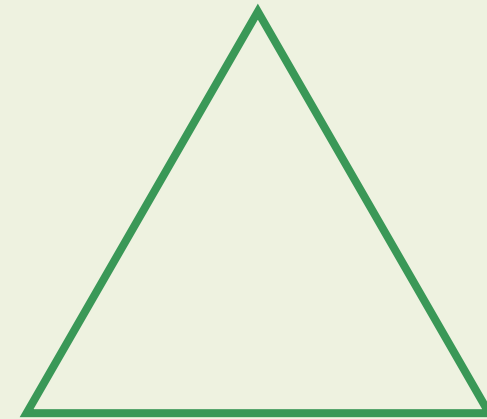
Not all Church teachings are created equal. Some belong to the very heart of our faith, while others are of secondary importance. This is known as the "hierarchy of truths." For example, the doctrine of the Resurrection is infinitely more central to being a Christian than, for example, a specific disciplinary rule about fasting. The believer's faith-sense helps them to distinguish between what is the non-negotiable foundation of the house and what is the color of the paint on the walls. This hierarchy of truths grants believers an authentic liberty: One can question the paint color without being accused of wanting to tear down the entire house. (cf. SF 64)



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Think of three to five Catholic beliefs or practices that you find challenging or have been having difficulty appreciating or accepting. For example, the Immaculate Conception, the Real Presence in the Eucharist, the Church's teaching on divorce, the practice of not eating one hour before Mass, the Church's opposition to the death penalty, etc. On the "Pyramid of Truths" on the next page, classify the items in your list by placing them on one of the levels. Don't expect a single "correct" answer for all of them. What does this mapping exercise tell you about your faith?

"THE COLORS OF THE PAINT ON THE WALLS"



"THE NON-NEGOTIABLE FOUNDATION OF THE HOUSE"

The Discernment of Practice: "How Does This Work in My Life?"

Finally, the faith-sense is exercised in the nitty-gritty of daily life. Faith has to be lived to be understood. It is only in the concrete experiences of trying to apply a teaching—in our marriages, our workplaces, our communities, our struggles with poverty or illness—that we can truly appreciate its meaning and implications.

This is why the lived experience of the lay faithful is not just anecdotal evidence; it has a truth-attesting function. The joys and sorrows, questions and insights of ordinary Catholics are an invaluable source of wisdom for the entire Church. When there is a disconnect between a teaching and the lived reality of faithful people, dissent can be a prophetic and constructive signal that the Church needs to listen, reflect, and perhaps refine its understanding or its formulation of a truth. This kind of dissent is not a threat; it's a vital component of a living Tradition, guided by the Holy Spirit. (cf. SF 59, 73)



DIALOGUE TOGETHER

Activity 1:

Choose a Church teaching or practice that you find beautiful and compelling or controversial and challenging (for example, the Real Presence of the Lord in the Eucharist, the Rosary, the Church's stance on gender identity, or the practice of praying to saints).

Discuss: "When you think about the core message of Jesus in the Gospels, how does [the selected teaching/practice] fit in—or not fit in? Does it feel like a natural extension of His message of love and mercy, or does it feel like it's creating some kind of tension?"

Listen more than you speak. The goal is not to win a debate or to resolve the question, but to hear and experience how another believer's faith-sense is processing the issue.

Afterwards, write down your insights, feelings, or questions about the faith-sense as a result of this experience.

Activity 2:

Pick one Church teaching that you would like to reflect about either because it has been personally helpful or challenging for you. Spend some time prayerfully considering this teaching using these three discernment questions as your guide:

Coherence: "Does this teaching ring true with the core of the Gospel as I understand it?"

Significance: "How central is this teaching to my identity as a follower of Christ? Would I consider it non-negotiable?"



Practice: "How does this teaching connect with, or disconnect from, the concrete reality of my life and the lives of good and faithful people I know?"

This exercise is a simple form of training in the responsible and faithful use of your faith-sense. What is your main take-away from this experience?



PUT INTO PRACTICE

Analyze the following case study, and use what you have learned so far in resolving the issue.

Paul and Mary have been married for over ten years, and they have been trying to conceive—but to no avail. They decide to consult a specialist who offers them the option of in vitro fertilization (IVF). "So many couples have availed of IVF," the specialist assures them, "and they're now very happy parents of lovely children!"

Paul and Mary are aware of the Catholic Church's stance against IVF, considering it morally unacceptable. They approach you for advice.

You understand that for the Church, life must be conceived solely through the natural sexual act between spouses. Procreation should not happen in a laboratory.



You are also aware of the Church's concern for embryo dignity, condemning the practice of freezing or discarding embryos because embryos are considered human beings with a right to life.

This teaching is not always easily accepted, especially by couples who greatly desire to have their own children. But how would you respond to Paul and Mary, given what you understand of our faith-sense? Provide the reasons for your response.



PASS IT ON

When you think about it, the Church's teaching on the *sensus fidei* provides a rationale for the Church's direction towards synodality. The Church needs to be synodal, to build a culture of attentive listening to everyone, precisely because all baptized Christians have the capacity—through their faith-sense and with the right dispositions—to make a contribution to the discernment of the Church.

Our faith-sense is crucial in a synodal Church. Let's think about what we can do in our parishes and schools with regard to building our community members' faith-sense and promoting synodality in the process. After all, the Catholic School and the parish are the ideal places to cultivate the *sensus fidei*. We ought to design them as "nurseries for the Catholic faith-sense."

The Religious Education Classroom: From Memorization to Meaningful Reception

Synodality and the *sensus fidei* call for a fundamental shift in our mindset and practices in religious education. For far too long, students have been assessed based on their ability to supply the correct answers—that is, the answers that conform to official Church teachings. As a result, students commit the content of Church teachings to memory—at least until after the examination—but they develop neither their ability to interpret their faith creatively and meaningfully nor any capacity to evaluate faith claims.

If the classroom is to be a genuine school for synodality and the *sensus fidei*, the ideal goal is not so much for students to know the teachings, but for them to actively engage with them, to wrestle with them, and ultimately, to make them their own.

The central question in the classroom must shift from "What is the Church's teaching?" to "Here is the Church's teaching. Why is it so, what does it mean, and what is the value of giving my assent to it?"

This shift has three important implications:

1. It sends a message to students that simply knowing the information is not enough. They need to interpret it, make sense of it, and relate it to their lives.
2. It discourages blind assent. Simply accepting a teaching "because the Pope said so" is not the goal. What is sought is a reasoned assent.
3. Crucially, it opens the door to the possibility of a reasoned and faithful dissent.

This new approach calls for a new kind of religious educator. This new brand of teacher cannot be a dogmatic indoctrinator who simply drills in official beliefs, nor can s/he be a neutral equivocator who just presents information without any personal conviction. These are the usual two extreme types of religious educators.





The teacher must learn to be a 'Listening Guide'—a "pedagogue of faithful questioning" who mediates between the official teachings of the Church and the students' genuine personal need to make sense of them. This teacher creates a safe space for honest questions, models how to think critically and faithfully, respects student inquiries, and challenges them to ground their assent or dissent in a deep understanding of the Tradition and a spirit of love for the Church.

This approach is not just a theory. It is already being put into practice in isolated cases. When a brave and creative teacher, for instance, facilitates a judicious and respectful discussion on a controversial topic like the ordination of women, students are being invited to draw upon their nascent faith-sense and prepare them for their synodal role in the life of the Church.



PAUSE AND REFLECT

1. What would be some of the obstacles or challenges that you foresee in designing the Catholic school—particularly, the religious education classroom—as a place that offers students opportunities to exercise and develop their faith-sense?

2. Given the goal of forming synodal believers, how can we promote reasoned and faithful assent instead of blind assent?



DIALOGUE TOGETHER

Can you recall a discussion of a religious education topic or lesson? This may either be a matter of faith or morals. How would you characterize the teacher or the facilitator of the discussion? Where would you locate him/her in the following spectrum? What were some of the words or actions that led you to your decision?

**DOGMATIC
INDOCTRINATOR**

**NEUTRAL
EQUIVOCATOR**



Knowing what you know today, and conscious of the goal to cultivate your students' faith-sense, how would you design your discussion? Why is this approach more conducive to promoting the *sensus fidei* and synodality? What would be some challenges or risks that you ought to be mindful of?

The Synodal Parish: From Uncritical Obedience to Discerning Engagement

The parish is the primary home where the faith is lived, celebrated, and shared week after week. If the synodal vision of a "Listening Church" is to become a reality, it must take root in our parishes. This also requires a shift in mindset of both pastors and parishioners alike.

Unfortunately, our default model of "good parishioners" has for too long been one of uncritical obedience: those who followed all the rules, obeyed every word of the pastor unconditionally, and accepted the teachings of the Church without any question. While their loyalty is commendable, this model can lead to a passive, immature faith and is far from synodal.



A parish that nurtures the faith-sense invites its members into a more adult relationship with the Church—i.e., one of **discerning engagement**. This doesn't mean being rebellious or disobedient; rather, it means being co-responsible. Parishioners understand that their lived experience, their prayerful insights, and their spiritual instincts are a gift to the whole community. Discerning engagement empowers parishioners to move beyond being passive consumers of religion to becoming active participants in the mission of the Church, discerning together how to live the Gospel in their specific time and place.

To facilitate this shift among parishioners, the Pastor needs to assume the role of a 'Listening Discerner.' The pastor is, and always will be, a teacher and a leader. But in a synodal parish, he is just as importantly called to be a listening discerner. This means cultivating a deep trust that the Holy Spirit is truly at work in the people and can speak to him through them. Hence, he needs to understand that his primary task is not to supply or possess all the answers, but to create the spaces where the right questions can be asked and the answers discerned together. He becomes an expert listener, skilled at drawing out the wisdom of the community. His leadership is exercised less by decree and more by animating the gifts of others, gathering the various threads of the parish's *sensus fidelium*, and helping the community discern their path forward together.



Here is a summary of the differences between a traditional top-down parish and a discerning parish:

THE TOP-DOWN PARISH MODEL	THE DISCERNING PARISH MODEL
Primary Goal: Maintain programs & sacraments	Primary Goal: Foster a community of discerning disciples in active mission
Pastor's Role: Chief Administrator & Teacher	Pastor's Role: Listening Discerner & Animator of Gifts
Parishioner's Role: Passive Recipient / Volunteer	Parishioner's Role: Active Participant & Co-responsible for mission
Key Mindset: Uncritical Obedience	Key Mindset: Discerning Engagement
Parish Council Focus: Administration & Finance	Parish Council Focus: Pastoral Discernment & Listening
Communication Flow: Top-down (from pastor)	Communication Flow: Circular (listening, dialogue, discernment)



PAUSE AND REFLECT

1. Given the hierarchical culture prevalent in most Asian countries, how difficult is it for you to share your ideas to a religious authority, to “speak truth to power”, and especially to express your disagreement?

2. What are some of the things that a pastor (or bishop) can do to encourage people to exercise their faith-sense and promote synodality? Be as concrete as possible.

Conclusion

The authentic practice of synodality entails the cultivation of people's *sensus fidei* or faith-sense. It is important to reiterate that developing one's faith-sense is not about diluting Church teaching, weakening Church authority, or promoting a free-for-all democracy. Rather, it is about retrieving an ancient understanding of the Church as communion, a family on a shared journey. It is about recognizing that the Holy Spirit speaks through the entire People of God, not just the hierarchy or the ordained.

Cultivating our personal "faith-sense" and learning how to listen to the collective "faith sense" of the community is one of the most important responsibilities we have as believers. It is how we participate in the Church's living Tradition, ensuring that the eternal truth of the Gospel remains vibrant, compelling, and transformative for generations to come. It is how we, together, learn to think, and live, and love with the heart and mind of Christ. It is through our faith-sense that we can promote the synodal way of being Church.



KEY RESOURCES

1. International Theological Commission. *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*. Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2014.
2. McDonough, G. P. *Beyond Obedience and Abandonment: Toward a Theory of Dissent in Catholic Education*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012.
3. Rush, Ormond. *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation*. Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009.

CHAPTER

4



COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT AND DECISION-MAKING



Communal discernment is a hallmark of a synodal church. Walking together as co-responsible disciples means that members of the church community come together frequently to listen to one another, to the Word of God, to the signs of the times, to all peoples especially those on the margins, and discern what God's Spirit is saying to the community in each time and place. Communal discernment enables the Church to know and follow God's will through history.



JOIN IN PRAYER

As you begin your gathering, spend a moment in silence to look back at your experiences so far in this formation journey. You may refer to the following questions in your reflection:

- Which experiences stir within you as you look back?
- Do certain moments of consolation or desolation come to mind?
- Do you recall a moment that was particularly moving or insightful?
- Where did you find the gentle promptings of God's Spirit?
- When did you feel tension or even desolation?

What do you see emerging as the movement of the Holy Spirit in the group?

Share your reflections with one another. Listen to each other with a contemplative disposition and without engaging in any discussion.

After the sharing, spend another moment in silence. Be attentive to what is emerging within you, such as an insight or realization of how the Holy Spirit has been moving the group.

Conclude with a prayer of gratitude as well as a petition to seek the grace of patience and perseverance in this formation journey.





PAUSE AND REFLECT

What you have just done is the beginning of personal and communal discernment. First, you recalled the memory of your own experiences. Then you observed your reactions to these experiences, paying attention to those deeper stirrings, whether consoling or desolating. Then you shared and listened to one another in order to get an initial sense of what the Holy Spirit might be saying. Of course, besides personal experience, discernment also includes background knowledge and guiding principles, which we will see later.

For the time being, reflect on the realities in your community or organization and discuss these questions in the group:

- How well do you think people in your community or organization listen to one another?
- Do you feel that your own views and experiences are often welcomed, listened to, understood, and appreciated?
- How are decisions usually made in your community or organization?
- To what extent do people feel consulted, especially those at the margins?
- Do you think your community or organization takes enough time to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit in assessing situations or in making decisions?

Which of the following pictures reflect the tendencies in your community or organization?

1 A group dominated by the leader



2 A group in conflict



3 A group where people are working separately



4 A group where everyone is meeting in a circle



5 A group where one person is pulling the strings as the default influencer





DISCOVER OUR TRADITION

Pope Francis has said that “today, the Church needs to grow in **discernment** ... We are used to a ‘yes you can or no you can’t’ mentality ... Generally, above all, we who are part of the religious setting of life as priests and bishops often show little ability to discern, we don’t know how to do it for we have been educated with another theology that is more formal. We go as far as ‘you can or you can’t.’”¹⁰



DIALOGUE TOGETHER

Before going further, share with the group your answers to these questions:

- What does discernment mean? Describe using some words, images, or symbols.
- In light of the answer to the first question, what is communal discernment?
- What are common misconceptions about communal discernment?

¹⁰Pope Francis: Fraternal and Spontaneous”, La Civiltà Cattolica Perspectives, 2018

What is Discernment?

Some typical meanings that people have in mind when they think of the word “discernment” include:

- Careful thinking and judgement
- Being mindful that there is more than meets the eye
- Reflection or contemplation, usually leading to a decision

From a faith-based perspective, we can regard discernment as the act of paying attention to what’s happening so as to discover the movements of the Holy Spirit, distinguishing them from the influences of the opposing spirits. Ultimately, it is about seeing a situation more deeply through the eyes of faith so we can become aware of God’s presence and actions. If there is a decision to be made, discernment involves seeking what best aligns with God’s will.



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Reflect on your experience with faith-based discernment using the guide questions below. Then share your takeaways with your group.

Can you recall a time when you made a discernment from a faith-based perspective? What was the issue you were discerning about?

How did you proceed? What impact did the experience of discernment have on you?

What consolations did you feel? What difficulties did you face?



What Does It Mean to Discern Together as a Synodal Church?

The Synod Final Document says that “synodality involves gathering at all levels of the Church for mutual listening, dialogue, and community discernment. It also involves reaching consensus as an expression of Christ rendering Himself present, He who is alive in the Spirit. Furthermore, it consists in reaching decisions according to differentiated co-responsibilities” (FD 28).

As the People of God, we want to be attentive to God’s presence and actions in all situations and follow God’s will in all things, including those which seem less overtly religious, such as financial and administrative matters. But why not just leave it to the leaders to discern? Once again, the Synod Final Document reminds us that the Holy Spirit is given to every Christian at baptism, such that all members of the faithful possess the *sensus fidei* (FD 81) as we saw in the previous chapter. This is an interior sense of the faith, a spontaneous intuition or knowledge of the heart, which enables us to recognize what is truly aligned with God’s truth, love, and will.

The Holy Spirit can speak through anyone and oftentimes chooses to reveal what we need to hear through those “little ones” whose voices are often disregarded or forgotten by the community. Hence, the Synod Final Document emphasizes that “the more everyone is heard, the richer the discernment. Therefore, it is essential that we promote the broadest participation possible in the discernment process, particularly involving those who are at the margins of the Christian community and society” (FD 82).

Communal discernment is also in line with the principle of co-responsibility in a synodal church. Members of a community or organization cannot simply ‘wash their hands’ from their role in shaping its life and mission, and leave all the discernment to their leaders. Instead, everyone has the responsibility of listening to the Holy Spirit together, and discerning the path forward.

Most of all, we form One Body as the disciples of Christ. We are not merely a collection of individuals, but rather, through baptism, we become part of a

single, new, and organic subject and agent of mission. This reality is inseparable from the call to listen to one another, to share deeply from the heart, to be mutually-dependent, and to discern together.

Hence, baptismal unity, co-responsibility, and the *sensus fidei* are key theological reasons why communal discernment is the way of proceeding of the People of God.

Besides these, we know from secular organizational theory that the communal way of discernment has many additional advantages. These include having diverse points of view, increasing sense of co-ownership, and cultivating unity.

When Do We Carry Out Communal Discernment?



In what instances was communal discernment carried out in your community or organization? Were there occasions when, in hindsight, communal discernment should have been exercised but was not?

As mentioned above, it is fitting that the People of God exercise communal discernment when major decisions are being made. This is particularly crucial when making choices such as:

- What should be our parish pastoral plan and pastoral priorities for the next five years?
- What should we do about this ministry which has much less participation than before?
- What evangelization programs can we start in the diocese?
- How should we restructure our religious congregation?



- Where should we locate our new school?
- How can we re-distribute our reduced budget?
- Should we accept this piece of land donated from the benefactor with certain conditions attached?

What other choices can you think of that would entail communal discernment?

Besides decision-making, there is also another application of discernment where there is no particular and immediate decision to be made. This can be called situational discernment. The purpose is to reflect more deeply on a particular situation or experience in order to become more attentive to the reality and discover what the Holy Spirit is saying. Some occasions to exercise situational discernment include:

- Reviewing the past year or doing an examen on the past month
- Evaluating a ministry or organization
- Reflecting on a social trend or the signs of the times
- Understanding a particular situation better
- Going through a crisis together
- Improving mutual understanding in a conflict
- Taking stock of progress in implementing a recent decision or pastoral plan

Oftentimes, it is helpful to carry out a situational discernment first, even if you have to make a decision eventually about a particular issue. The situational discernment helps everyone understand better the current realities and see them with diverse perspectives, opening a door to what the Holy Spirit is already revealing.



PUT INTO PRACTICE

What are some occasions in your community or organization in which you could have exercised situational discernment? Share your answer with your group.



HEAR THE JOURNEY

Take a moment to explore the following articles on real-life stories of communal discernment. As you read the stories, reflect on what you find striking, inspiring, or challenging. Access the following articles by scanning the QR codes or visiting the links below:



Missionaries of Synodality: Rwandan Church Embraces the Synodal Journey

Link:
<https://www.rvasia.org/world-news/missionaries-synodality-rwandan-church-embraces-synodal-journey>



An Experience of Spiritual Conversation

Link:
<https://www.jesuits.global/2020/06/09/an-experience-of-spiritual-conversation/>



Synod Challenges Members to Be Synodal at Home, Archbishops Say

Link:
<https://www.ncronline.org/vatican-news/synod-challenges-members-be-synodal-home-archbishops-say>



The Core Skills of Communal Discernment

Communal discernment requires all members in a discerning group to have certain core skills. These are not merely techniques but are ways of proceeding based on underlying spiritual dispositions and attitudes.

1. Attentive Listening

Attentive listening is a way of listening deeply with stillness and openness of mind and heart, in which we welcome every person unconditionally. As we listen, we seek to learn something new, even what might be unexpected. We pay attention to the whole person, including that person's words, body language, emotions, energies, and interior movements. We try to notice not only what is said but also what is not said. We strive to hear the underlying 'song' beneath the words and if necessary, ask questions in an inviting way, not to interrogate but to encourage a fuller sharing.

At the same time, we maintain awareness of the flow of our thoughts, feelings, and inner stirrings. We remind ourselves to put aside our biases and impulsive judgements and bring our focus back to the speaker whenever we find our minds wandering or formulating our own responses.

Lastly, we pay attention to what is happening at the group level and look out for movements of the good and bad spirits. Ultimately, we are seeking to discover what God is revealing through the person and the conversation.



PUT INTO PRACTICE

Find a partner and take turns in sharing a childhood memory that is significant for you. Explain why it is significant and how you feel about it. While one partner is sharing, the other will endeavor to practice what is said above about attentive listening. When both have finished, debrief the experience in the whole group using the following guide questions:

- What challenges did you face in trying to exercise attentive listening?
- What was consoling or joyful in that experience?
- What was new to you?
- How does it feel to be listened to in this manner?



Listening like Jesus

The Synod Final Document reminds us that "the Gospels present to us a Lord who is often in the act of listening to the people who come to Him along the roads of the Holy Land. Jesus never sent anyone away without stopping to listen and to speak to them, whether men or women, Jews or pagans, doctors of the law or publicans, righteous men and women or sinners, beggars, the blind, lepers or the sick.

By meeting people wherever their history and personal freedom had led them, He revealed to them the face of the Father. By listening to the needs and to the faith of those He met, and by responding through words and gestures, He renewed their lives, opening the path to healed relationships.

When we listen to our sisters and brothers, we are participants in the way that God in Jesus Christ comes to meet each of us." (FD 51)



2. Reflective Speaking

In the age of digital media, we have become habituated to reacting or sending messages impulsively and somewhat superficially, without adequate reflection or elaboration. This often leads to misunderstanding, reinforcement of prejudices, and acceleration of conflict.

In contrast, reflective speaking calls upon us to express ourselves from the basis of personal reflection, sound reasoning, and even contemplation, which can be defined as seeing with the eyes of the heart. We speak honestly and genuinely, without falsehood or pretense, after listening deeply to our own heart and our own reflections. We share our opinions, feelings, experiences, deeper thoughts, and intuitions, even if we can't yet find the right words to express them. We also endeavor to present our underlying perspectives or assumptions if we're able to become aware of them. We do not cover up what is difficult to say nor do we try to avoid any kind of disagreement or tension in the group.

Reflective speaking requires us to be faithful to our experiences and not diminish or discount them, thinking that they are unimportant. Pope Francis has always encouraged us to speak with *parrhesia*, i.e., with courage and honesty, so that we might be a channel of the Holy Spirit.

Lastly, we speak in a manner that sows seeds of faith, hope, love, and understanding, rather than anger, division, cynicism, and discouragement, even if we are saying something that is in disagreement or conflict with another.



PAUSE AND REFLECT

In some Asian cultures, people tend to defer to seniors, experts, and those in authority. Sometimes this makes them keep silent rather than speak out. Certain groups such as women, minorities, and young people often do not have a voice or do not value their own voice adequately.

Does this apply to your context? Discuss this with your group using the following guide questions:

What cultural factors do you think facilitates reflective speaking in your context?

What factors inhibit it? How might these be addressed during a communal discernment?

3. Walking with Tradition

What does it mean to “walk with tradition”? In communal discernment, there is sometimes a tendency for group members to either forget about their tradition or to be stuck on one or other aspect of it, refusing to change.



Communal discernment requires us to “walk with tradition”; i.e., not leaving it behind but walking in its light and moving forward with it. Tradition—whether it is the general Christian faith tradition or the tradition of a specific religious congregation or lay association—evolves and develops throughout the community’s history. On the one hand, it provides enduring wisdom that can illuminate discernment on present issues. On the other hand, it continues to be formed and shaped by the community itself, as each new generation of members takes decisions and actions in response to changing contexts, guided by the core values of the tradition.

4. Learning to Stay with the Questions

A key disposition in communal discernment is the capacity to “stay with the questions.” What does this mean? Oftentimes, we want to rush to the finish line, obtaining the answers as quickly as possible. We have little appetite for uncertainty and no patience to let the issues and our understanding ripen. A central feature of communal discernment is that it needs to be given sufficient time.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* of the 2023 Synod Assembly has a beautiful paragraph that says: “Trying to walk together also brings us into contact with the healthy restlessness of incompleteness... This is not a problem to be solved, but rather a gift to be cultivated. We are faced with the inexhaustible and holy mystery of God and must remain open to its surprises as we walk through history towards the Kingdom... As a first step they require listening and attention, without rushing to offer immediate solutions.” (para. 29)

As a pilgrim church, our knowledge and understanding are always a work-in-progress. The Spirit often leads us in a gradual manner, enabling us to grow in understanding and insight gradually. This means that we need to cultivate an ‘appetite’ for open questions, including uncertainties and tensions yet to be fully resolved. We hold these in our hearts just like Mary who ponders the mysteries of her Son’s life and faithfully awaits God’s unfolding revelation.

This capacity for staying with the questions enables us to walk together despite our differences. Synodality does not mean that there is no conflict or disagreement amongst us. Rather, it means being committed to remaining in the boat and navigating the journey ahead together, bringing our diverse perspectives into constant dialogue.

5. Desiring the Greater Good and Truth

In communal discernment, we seek to be free from our own attachments by being oriented towards the will of God, which always leads us to greater life, love, and truth. Yet it is God’s grace that enables our interior freedom. On our part, we can allow God’s Spirit to touch us by going into prayer and encountering Christ in the Word. In a religious congregation or lay association, we can also go back to the sources of tradition by re-reading the foundational texts and contemplating them in prayer together. In this way, we gain insight into what is truly essential and central in our tradition. This serves as a compass for our discernment and decision-making, especially when we have to make difficult choices. Going back to the sources in a prayerful manner also brings about the spiritual graces we need in order to let go of our attachments or partial viewpoints, and to commit to what is ultimately good and true.

6. Contemplating with Our Whole Self

We engage in a discernment with all our human faculties – our intellect, will, feelings, bodily senses, and spiritual sensibilities. In other words, discernment involves body, mind, and spirit. Some people tend to think too much or use their intellectual reasoning alone. They are very concerned with facts, statistics, and analysis. Others tend to rely solely on their feelings, ignoring the concrete data. Yet others think that the answer will somehow drop down from heaven if they spend enough time in prayer!

Discernment requires us to pay attention to the facts, to ensure sound analysis, to listen to people’s experiences, to empathize with their feelings, to allow our own emotions to surface, to pay attention to body language and notice what our own bodily sensations indicate, and to sense the stirrings of God in the innermost recesses of our hearts. When the disciples of Emmaus realized that they were hearing the voice of Christ, they remarked: “were not our hearts burning within us?” (Luke 24:32) The Holy Spirit’s directions often give us deep peace, true joy, greater love, and inner freedom.



7. Relational Conversion

Finally, communal discernment requires us to enter into a relationship with one another. We no longer keep one another at arm's length or maintain a merely superficial relationship in the community. Instead, we welcome each other unconditionally, enabling all to feel accepted as persons with their gifts and vulnerabilities. We help everyone to communicate authentically, deepen relationships, and feel safe enough to be more transparent with one other. Thus, each one feels respected, valued, and free to participate from the true self. We also engage in dialogue with an openness to being changed and to change our positions where necessary.



PUT INTO PRACTICE

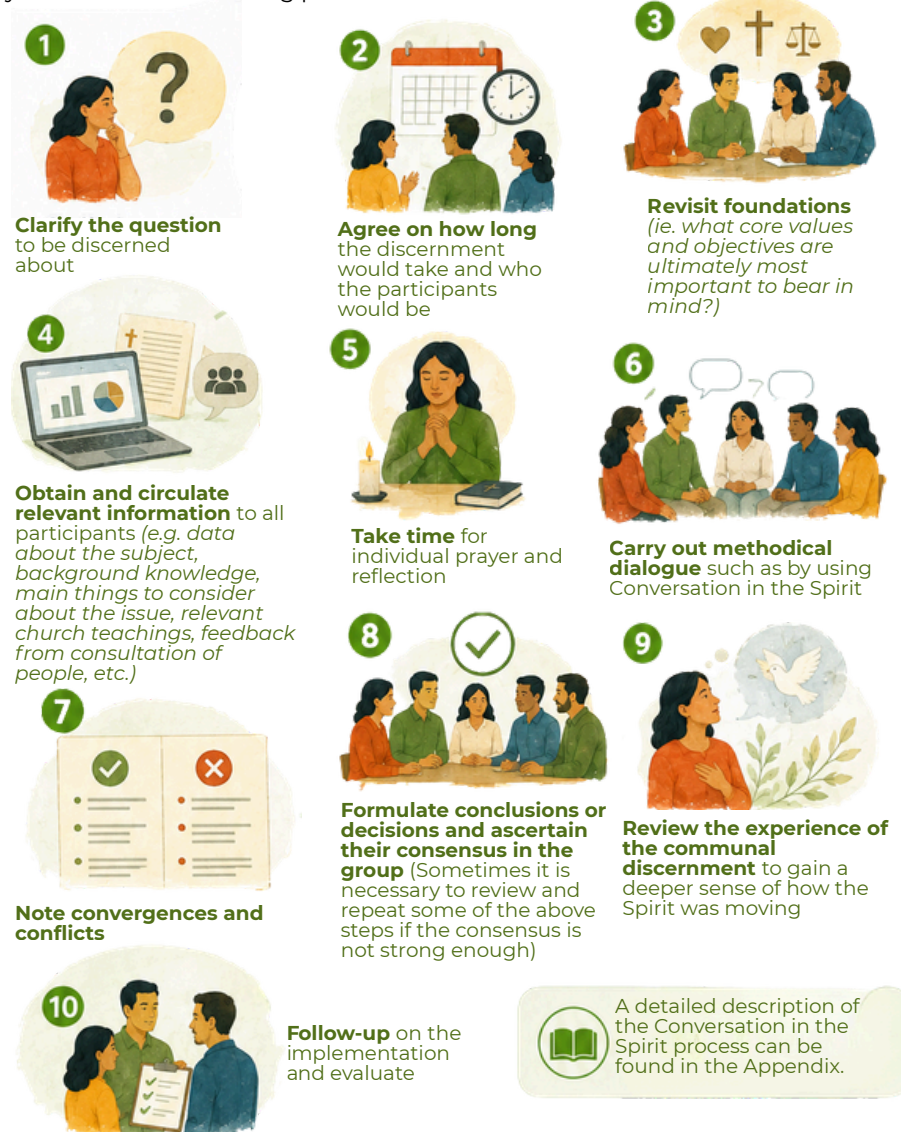
Read Acts 15:1-35. Can you identify the 7 core skills of communal discernment in this account of the early disciples?

Communal discernment is formative

It can be seen from these seven core skills that communal discernment is not merely a means to an end. Rather, it is an on-going way of being, relating, and proceeding as the community of Christ's disciples. It forms the community. In this light, the core skills are more like daily habits to cultivate rather than actions to take only when there is a specific issue to discern about. In all interactions, whether casual conversations or formal meetings, attentive listening and reflective speaking can certainly be exercised. Likewise for all the other core elements of communal discernment. Over time, these habitual practices and dispositions make the community more synodal.

A Process for Discerning About a Specific Issue

If there is a particular issue to discern about or a specific decision to be made, you can use the following process:





The Role of Leaders in Communal Discernment

At the Parish Priest for the Synod assembly in May 2024, Pope Francis spoke to the participants with these words: “With all my heart, I suggest that you learn to practise the art of communal discernment, employing for this purpose the method of ‘conversation in the Spirit’.”

What do leaders do during a communal discernment? First and foremost, synodality implies that leaders adopt communal discernment especially when it comes to major decisions or issues affecting the community. They need to encourage the participation of everyone and ensure adequate information-gathering and consultation, especially among people at the peripheries. During the process, leaders listen widely and deeply, especially to those most affected by the matter being discerned. Where necessary, they need to offer greater attention and care to those facing difficulties in the matter at hand.

Leaders also participate in dialogue and spiritual conversation with everyone, sharing their own perspectives and concerns, while also learning and increasing in understanding of the viewpoints of others. In doing so, they enable a fruitful exchange between the people and themselves so that the final conclusions or decision would be a well-developed consensus. In their way of participating and speaking, leaders need to ensure that their presence does not hinder others from engaging courageously and honestly in the conversation.

If there is a decision to be made, leaders pay close attention to the consensus that emerges from the communal discernment rather than make a different choice based on their personal preferences. The Synod Final Document highlights that

Those in authority are, in several instances, obligated by current law to conduct a consultation before taking a decision. Those with pastoral authority are obliged to listen to those who participate in the consultation and may not act as if the consultation had

not taken place. Therefore, those in authority will not depart from the fruits of consultation that produce an agreement without a compelling reason which must be appropriately explained. (FD 91)

Finally, leaders should be role models of transparency and accountability, and ensure proper follow-up and implementation, including monitoring and evaluation of the decisions and actions.



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Reflect on your key takeaways from the discussion on communal discernment using the guide questions below. Share your insights with your group.

1. Now that you have gained an overview of communal discernment, what existing practices of discernment and decision-making in your community can you now recognize as positive and helpful? What aspects of communal discernment do you think has been neglected or not well-attended in your community?

2. What would be the key habit you would like your community to cultivate?



PUT INTO PRACTICE

Identify three specific upcoming decisions or situations in your community where communal discernment can be practiced (e.g., planning an event, resolving a concern, setting priorities). For each one, outline a simple process your group can follow (eg. who will be involved, key steps, and how a decision will be reached, etc).



PASS IT ON

You can consider the following suggestions when providing formation in communal discernment:

1. Start by asking participants to describe how decisions are made in their community. Ask them to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the decision-making approaches of their community.
2. Share with the participants that during the local consultation process for the Synod on Synodality, people at the grassroots level often exclaimed that they felt much “joy” at being consulted, many for the first time, and that the Church has made them feel that they matter. You could ask your participants why they think consultation engendered such joy.
3. Finally, ask participants to recall an occasion, if any, in which they experienced a real dialogue or heart-to-heart conversation on an issue that matters to the local church or community. Invite them to describe the experience and how they felt.

After the discussion, you could introduce the material as presented in this chapter. An exercise of listening as given in the example above would be helpful. Likewise, you could get the participants to practice situational discernment on a current issue that they face, using the method of Conversation in the Spirit.



KEY RESOURCES

1. Pope Francis. *For A Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* (Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly Of The Synod Of Bishops), October 26, 2024. See especially Part III.
1. Kheng, Christina. “Key Elements of a Holistic Approach to Communal Discernment that Promotes Synodality in Church and Society.” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 13, no. 2 (2024):107-120.
<https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/jhe/vol13/iss2/8/>
3. Grogan, Brian. “Give the Spirit the Mic! – A Strategy for Communal Discernment and Synodality”, *The Furrow*, May 2020.
<https://thefurrow.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Furrow-May-2020-Pages-68pp.pdf>
4. Grogan, Brian. *Communal Discernment: A Lamp for Our Synodal Journey*. Dublin: Messenger, 2024.
5. Secretariat of the Synod. “Conversation in the Spirit.”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixQSg5_I7hk

CHAPTER

5

LEADERSHIP IN A SYNODAL CHURCH: TOWARDS A CULTURE OF COMMUNION AND CO-RESPONSIBILITY

Synodal leadership promotes the voice and co-responsibility of all members of the community. It fosters the gifts of everyone, bringing together a diversity of charisms for the life and mission of the Church. It exercises authority in a way that is empowering, attentive, collegial, and oriented to mission.



JOIN IN PRAYER

Read together the Scripture passage below and take turns to say aloud a word or phrase that touches you.

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. (1 Peter 5:1-4)

Next take a moment in silence to draw some images or symbols that reflect how you have experienced God leading you in your life. Do not spend time to analyze your experiences but simply draw immediately what arises in your heart, intuitively and instinctively.

Share your images with one another.

Conclude by praying for the grace you desire for yourself and for the leaders in your church community.



DISCOVER OUR TRADITION

Synodality calls for a reimagination of what leadership means in the Church. Only fairly recently has the term “leadership” been explicitly used in the English translations of Catholic magisterial documents—and rarely at that. Relatively speaking, related words like “governance,” “authority,” “management,” and “administration” have been used more frequently. Moreover, in those occurrences, “leaders” and “leadership” almost exclusively referred to the ordained and the clerical hierarchy.¹¹

A different breed of leader is demanded by a synodal Church if it is to be characterized by a culture of active and widespread participation of its members, engaged in “mutual listening, dialogue, and community discernment” (FD 28).¹²

What Synodal Leadership Might Look Like

Kheng (2026) explores seven dimensions of this new, synodal brand of Church leadership.

1. Leading to the Frontiers

Synodal leadership involves inspiring the community to move beyond the status quo and to explore new frontiers for the Church’s mission. Synodal leaders encourage the flock to reach out to the “peripheries” and try creative, even risky, new ministries rather than just maintaining existing programs.

¹¹ Christina Kheng, “The Contribution of the Synod on Synodality Towards a Systematic Theology and Praxis of Leadership,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 15, Special Issue 1 (2026): 65–90. Kheng notes that the case is different in non-magisterial theological and pastoral literature, with greater usage of the term “leadership” and with a more inclusive meaning beyond ordained men in the Church.

¹² See Kheng (2026) for various aspects of this new brand of Church leadership.

2. Empathy through Listening

Authentically synodal leadership begins with deep listening and understanding. A leader ensures that communal discernment and mutual listening become the “normative way of proceeding” before any major final decisions are made.

3. Empowerment through the Development of God’s People

A synodal leader recognizes and summons the unique gifts (charisms) that the Holy Spirit has given to every baptized person. In a concrete setting, a leader acts as a “scanner of talent” who calls forth the creative expertise of others—such as in arts, technology, catechesis, or social work—to build up the community.

4. Building Better Pathways

Leadership requires establishing and improving the actual structures—like councils and committees—that allow people to participate meaningfully. Practically, this involves regularly reviewing institutional policies and processes to ensure they are truly participative and inclusive, rather than just keeping old structures alive out of habit.

5. Radical Openness and Teamwork

Synodal leadership rejects the “strong-leader” archetype in favor of a leadership style characterized by transparency, accountability, and collective responsibility. Such a leader openly shares how programs and finances are managed and invites regular communal discernment and evaluation to foster trust.

6. Creating Harmony in Diversity

Leaders are called to be bridge-builders who foster “relational conversion” and healing among diverse groups. In practice, this means proactively bringing together people with different viewpoints—even those who are in conflict—to seek reconciliation and mutual understanding.



7. Following the Spirit's Lead

The ultimate aspect of synodal leadership is recognizing that God's grace is the primary driver of any renewal, requiring a leader to be humble and prayerful. Concretely, this looks like a leader who fosters "spiritual depth" in the community and is willing to admit mistakes, allowing the Holy Spirit to lead the way forward.



DIALOGUE TOGETHER

Take some time to think about a Church organization or institution that you are involved in. Which of the following seven aspects of synodal leadership, in your opinion, is most desired and most urgently needed given your community's context? Why? What initial steps might be taken to address this gap?

- ☐ 1. Leading to the Frontiers
- ☐ 2. Empathy through Listening
- ☐ 3. Empowerment through the Development of God's People
- ☐ 4. Building Better Pathways
- ☐ 5. Radical Openness and Teamwork
- ☐ 6. Creating Harmony in Diversity
- ☐ 7. Following the Spirit's Lead

Among these seven dimensions of synodal leadership, we will focus on a) Empathy through Listening and b) Empowerment through the Development of God's People.

The Synodal Leadership Style

Leaders are necessarily leaders of *people*—whether in large organizations or smaller and more informal groups. More often than not, it is the types of relationships that leaders build with the people they lead that define their leadership and end up making or breaking it. In the context of the Catholic Church's call to be a more 'synodal' Church, this relational aspect of leadership takes on a new and profound importance. Synodality, at its core, is about journeying together (from the Greek syn-hodos), listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit to discern the path forward.

Leadership development tends to focus on the importance of the relationship between Leader and Follower. Without a doubt, the rapport between the two is crucial and is often regarded as the defining element of one's leadership.

For instance, the classic distinction is often made between the task-oriented leader and the process-oriented leader. Both are, of course, valuable: Task-oriented leadership tends to be a leadership "by command and control" of people, so the task-oriented leader focuses on accomplishing the tasks at hand and certainly gets things done as efficiently as possible—but at times, at the expense of the quality of work life or the group's morale.

The process-oriented leader, on the other hand, prioritizes people and their needs, believing that any demoralization will eventually slow down or compromise the work. It is primarily a leadership of accompaniment, but taken to the extreme, the tasks may end up neglected and deadlines missed.

The ideal is, of course, a balance between the two.

A helpful springboard for our reflection on synodal leadership is to think of these two poles of leadership, and to examine our own style of leadership. Take a moment to think about your leadership style: Which of these two tendencies is stronger in you?

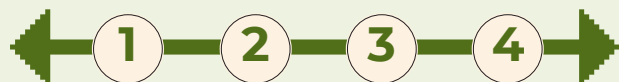


PAUSE AND REFLECT

Where would you locate yourself in terms of your leadership style?
Which tendency is stronger in you, by default? Why is it the case?

TASK-ORIENTED

PROCESS-ORIENTED



We shall call the ideal between these extremes “synodal leadership”, which is a leadership style characterized primarily by listening and conversation. This resonates deeply with the synodal call for a Church that is constituted by dialogue, mutual listening, and communal discernment. This is a leadership style that promotes not only empathy but also empowerment among the members of the community.

The Twin Task of Culture- and Capacity-Building

A synodal leader is a leader who builds up the whole Church for the mission. This task of community-building is essential to leadership because synodality implies that all believers are called to be One Body in Christ, serving the mission together.

Synodal leadership, therefore, is operationalized here as the twin task of culture- and capacity-building. This task can be understood as the leader's contribution to building a synodal community of Communion and Participation for the sake of the Mission, the three pillars of a synodal church. A synodal leader is one who is able to build a culture of empathy and a capacity for empowerment.¹³

¹³ The definition of synodal leadership here has been adapted from the dimension of the Listening Leader in Go, J. C. & Cuyegkeng, M. A. (2024). *Leading with Depth*. Ateneo de Manila University Press.

(a) Promoting Empathy by Building Culture

A synodal leader promotes empathy by building a culture of listening and dialogue. This means creating spaces where people feel safe to share their experiences and perspectives, and where they are encouraged to listen to one another with an open heart. Building personal relationships is key to the synodal Church:

To be a synodal Church, we are required to open ourselves to a genuine relational conversion that redirects each person's priorities, and we must once again learn from the Gospel that attending to relationships is not merely a strategy or a tool for greater organisational effectiveness. Relationships and bonds are the means by which God the Father has revealed Himself in Jesus and the Spirit. When our relationships, even in their fragility, allow the grace of Christ, the love of the Father, and the communion of the Spirit to shine through, we confess with our lives our Faith in God the Trinity (Synod on Synodality Final Document, par. 50).

St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, provides a powerful example of this. When he gathered his first companions, he did not impose a pre-conceived plan on them. Instead, he invited them into a process of spiritual conversation and communal discernment. They shared their stories, their dreams, and their desires, and through this process of deep listening, they discovered a shared calling. The spirituality and the mission that they shared bonded them. This experience of communal discernment and shared spiritual conversation is a historical antecedent to the 'Conversation in the Spirit' method that was central to the Synod on Synodality.

A synodal leader is intentional about building a culture of empathy because such a culture does not just happen by accident. It requires a conscious effort to create an environment where empathy can flourish. Think of the Chinese round table used for banquets or lauriat. The round dining table became popular at the beginning of Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Its defining characteristic is that its design lacked a distinct “head of the table” and allowed all the diners to face one another. Moreover, these round tables often



featured a turntable (餐桌转盘) known today as the Lazy Susan. These turntables further facilitated communal dining because it made all the dishes equally accessible to all.

The round banquet table is a symbol of unity, harmony, and equality, where everyone had a voice and equal access, where no one was more important than anyone else. It was a space for collaborative conversations, where diners could share their stories and learn from one another.



The General Assembly of the Synod on Synodality used precisely a “round table” set-up for its process. It offered a concrete method for fostering such a culture, known as ‘Conversation in the Spirit.’ This is not your usual meeting or debate, but a structured process of prayerful sharing and listening. It involves three rounds of speaking from one’s own experience, listening deeply to others without interruption, and then prayerfully reflecting on what the Holy Spirit might be saying to the group as a whole through the different voices. A synodal leader is one who fosters and facilitates this kind of deep, spiritual listening.



Such a protocol creates a “safety zone” for ‘thinking out loud’, where people feel free to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment. This safety zone is essential for what the synodal tradition calls *parrhesia*—a frank, courageous, and responsible speaking of the truth, born out of love for the Church. The synodal leader, in a synodal perspective, is not afraid of differing viewpoints but sees them as a potential source of richness and a sign of the Spirit’s diverse workings, provided they are expressed within a framework of communion and shared mission.

The synodal leader also ought to exert every effort to monitor the morale of the community. From a synodal perspective, this is not just a matter of good management, but a crucial act of discernment. The joys and sorrows, as well as the anxieties and hopes of the community members, are a *locus theologicus*—a place where God speaks. A synodal leader pays close attention to these interior movements of the community to discern the presence and action of the Spirit. In short, the synodal leader also assumes a role not unlike that of a spiritual director, one who names and celebrates the community’s moments of spiritual consolation, but also one who points out moments of desolation and guides those who may unwittingly be acting as agents of communal desolation.



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Think of the shape of your leadership table. What metaphor would you use to describe your organization’s culture (diocese, school, parish, agency)? Draw your leadership table in the space provided below. Is it more similar to a round table, where conversations are open and two-way? Or does it more closely resemble a rectangular table, where the leader sits at the head of the table and tends to do most of the thinking and talking?



DIALOGUE TOGETHER

With your group, discuss the following:

- How can we create more opportunities for deep listening in our communities?
- What obstacles might prevent people from sharing with parrhesia, and how can I help remove them?

(b) Promoting Co-responsibility by Building Capacity

A synodal leader does not simply empower followers but recognizes and promotes the co-responsibility of all the baptized for the life and mission of the community. This means moving beyond a model of “leader and follower” to a model of a community walking together, where the members contribute their unique gifts for the common good.

The synodal leader aims to build the capacity of the members of the team so that it can carry out their shared mission. The leader ensures that the people are provided with the training, resources, and support they need to use their gifts effectively. It also means creating structures and processes that enable people to participate meaningfully in the life of the community.

The expertise of the synodal leader is not that of a technical expert who has all the answers. Rather, it is the expertise of a facilitator who can create the conditions for the community to discover its own answers. In short, the leader is not meant to be “a synthesis of ministries”; rather, synodal leadership entails “a ministry of synthesis,” bringing together the gifts of the community and summoning them to collaborate in the service of the Church’s mission (Forte, 1991).

Hence, from a synodal perspective, the leader’s primary expertise is not in having all the answers about the Mission, but in guiding the community’s process of listening to the Spirit to discern the Mission together. The synodal leader is a guardian of the process, ensuring that all voices are heard, especially those on the margins, and that the community remains faithful to the Gospel as it discerns its path forward. This requires a deep trust in the members’ faith-sense or *sensus fidei*, the supernatural instinct for the faith that belongs to the whole People of God.



PUT INTO PRACTICE

This reflection activity is to be conducted by the leader with the team or community.

1. Individual Reflection (10 mins): Ask each member of your team or community to reflect on and write down answers to the following:

- "What unique gift, skill, or passion do I bring to this community?"
- "In what area of our shared mission do I feel most energized and called to contribute?"

2. Pair and Share (15 mins): In pairs, ask the members to share their reflections. The role of the listener is to affirm what is shared and ask questions to draw out more detail, such as, "Tell me more about why that is important to you."

3. Harvest (20 mins): On a large whiteboard or flip chart, create two columns: "Our Community's Gifts" and "Our Shared Mission." As a group, populate the "Gifts" column with what was shared. Then, collaborate on listing down the key components of your shared mission.



4. Connecting Gifts to Mission (15 mins): As a facilitator, guide a conversation to connect the identified gifts to the mission. Ask questions like:

- "Looking at our collective gifts, where do we see natural strengths for accomplishing our mission?"
- "Are there parts of our mission that no one feels particularly gifted or called to? How might we address that as a community?"
- "How can we structure our work to better align with the gifts and energies present in this room?"

This exercise aims to make visible the co-responsibility that already exists. The leader's role is not to simply assign tasks but to recognize, affirm, and coordinate the gifts that the Spirit has already given to the community. How can leaders continue to foster this awareness in their day-to-day leadership?

Clericalism: The Enemy of Synodal Leadership

As we exert our effort to make synodality our way of proceeding, it is helpful to pause and name the elephant in the room: Clericalism, which is probably the biggest obstacle to synodality.

For most of its history, the Catholic Church has foregrounded the clerical hierarchy for understandable reasons: To preserve the Church's unity, it has been crucial to preserve a clear chain of authority, roles, and responsibilities, ranging from the Holy Pontiff and the College of Bishops, down to local pastors, priests, and deacons.

Synodality is not at all a call to do away with this necessary and valuable governance structure in the Church. Rather, it is an invitation to evaluate our default top-down way of proceeding and to explore how we can promote synodality within these Church structures.

For this reason, it is important to discuss how we can address the issue of clericalism in the Church. Clericalism is defined as "the use of power to one's own advantage and the distortion of the authority of the Church that is at the service of the People of God" [FD 74].

It is clear, therefore, that more than an obstacle to synodality, clericalism can be a poison in the Church. As Pope Francis writes in his letter to the People of God (20 August 2018): "Clericalism, whether fostered by Priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to an excision in the ecclesial body that supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today."

One way that a synodal leader can take the initiative to address the problem of clericalism is through practices that are marked by transparency and accountability. Clericalism, after all, assumes that those in authority, unlike the rest of the People of God, need not be held accountable for their decisions and actions. Transparency and accountability should characterize not only an organization's responses to cases of abuse (sexual, financial, etc.), but in the ways of proceeding of the organization, the lifestyle of the leader, as well as the working conditions within the institution (FD 98).



DIALOGUE TOGETHER

Discuss the issue of clericalism with your group using the following guide questions:

1. In what ways is clericalism evident in your organization, if at all?
2. What has been the role of your organization's structures, policies, and practices in minimizing or propagating clericalism? What of the leader and the members of the community?
3. What assumptions, unspoken rules, or values about clericalism in your organization need to be surfaced and examined?



Real-world Challenges of Synodal Leadership

Promoting both empathy and empowerment sounds challenging enough on paper, but when “the rubber hits the road” in the real world, the challenges grow exponentially.

The following case studies are designed to help you reflect on the practical challenges of fostering empathy (Communion) and co-responsibility (Participation) in real life. Try your hand in cracking one or two of the following real-world cases. Working with a colleague or in groups, identify the challenges and possible strategies to promote synodality and to exercise synodal leadership. Be as concrete as possible.



Case Study 1: Bishop Ong

Bishop Ong is a newly appointed bishop in a diocese in a Southeast Asian country. He is passionate about implementing the vision for a synodal Church. His predecessor was a well-respected but traditional and authoritative figure, and the diocesan culture reflects this. Priests are accustomed to receiving clear directives and rarely question the bishop's decisions in public meetings.

Bishop Ong decides that the new five-year Diocesan Pastoral Plan must be created synodally. He convenes a diocesan assembly with clergy, religious, and lay representatives from every parish. He introduces the “Conversation in the Spirit” method and invites open sharing.

During the sessions, however, he encounters significant challenges. Many of the older priests remain silent, deferring to him with phrases like, “Whatever you think is best, Your Excellency.” The lay representatives, particularly those from rural areas, are intimidated by the setting and barely speak. A few younger, more outspoken priests dominate the conversation, but Bishop Ong can sense their ideas are not fully representative of the whole presbyterate.



He overhears one older priest whispering to another, “Why are we being asked to talk so much? The bishop should be a leader and just tell us the plan. Isn’t that his job?”

The bishop feels a little trapped. He wants to create a culture of empathy and listening, but the ingrained cultural habits of deference to authority are proving to be a major obstacle. He is worried that if he pushes too hard, he will be seen as a weak or indecisive leader. But if he



PUT INTO PRACTICE

- If you were Bishop Ong, what concrete steps would you take next to build a culture of empathy and encourage authentic **parrhesia** (frank speech) among your priests and laity?
- How can a leader balance the synodal call for participation with the cultural expectation for clear and decisive leadership?
- What structures or processes could Bishop Ong introduce before the next assembly to build the capacity for co-responsibility among both clergy and laity?

**Case Study 2: Mrs. Shinawatra**

Mrs. Shinawatra has been appointed the first lay principal of a prestigious Catholic girls' school after a long line of religious sisters. The school has a strong academic reputation, with high-calibre teachers, parents, and students, who have been encouraged to engage in critical thinking and are not afraid to raise questions.

The problem, however, is that due to previous leadership, there prevails a lack of trust between the administration and these stakeholders. The community is quite polarized, and there prevails an atmosphere of suspicion.

Mrs. Shinawatra wants to lead synodally, but she knows that due to these very reasons, the school community is far from ready for such a direction. A significant challenge emerges when a group of students raises concerns about the school's mental health support services, citing high levels of academic stress.

Instead, Mrs. Shinawatra forms a "listening circle" composed of teachers, student leaders, parents, and the school counselor. She wants to use this as an opportunity for the whole school community to discern a path forward together.

The initiative meets immediate resistance. Some senior teachers feel their professionalism is being questioned by students. Several influential parents unapologetically express their alliance with their children and accuse the teachers of incompetence. The students themselves are hesitant to speak openly in front of their teachers and parents, fearing repercussions. The culture of "saving face" and avoiding direct confrontation, coupled with the fractured relationships among the stakeholders, makes authentic dialogue difficult. Mrs. Shinawatra's attempt to build an empathetic, listening culture is perceived by some as a lack of control and a threat to the school's established order.

**PUT INTO PRACTICE**

- How does the cultural value of "saving face" or avoiding conflict challenge the synodal call for open dialogue and mutual listening?
- If you were Mrs. Shinawatra's, how would you frame the purpose of the "listening circle" to the teachers and parents so that their concerns would be alleviated and they would feel encouraged to engage with the process?
- What practical steps can a leader like Mrs. Shinawatra take to create a "safety zone" where students feel genuinely supported as well as empowered to speak their truth without fear, especially in a hierarchical educational setting?

**Case Study 3: Father Tony**

Father Tony is a brilliant administrator with a background in canon law and a reputation for "getting things done." He is currently assigned to a suburban parish with a dwindling but active congregation and a highly successful parochial school.

For five years, Father Tony has transformed the parish's crumbling infrastructure. He successfully raised funds for a new parish hall and stabilized the school's budget. However, his leadership style is strictly unilateral.



Father Tony views the parish as a complex machine that only he is qualified to operate. Hence, he has not summoned the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) to any meeting in over a year, citing "scheduling conflicts." Instead, he meets individually with specific heads of ministries or wealthy donors to give directives.

Now, the Bishop has mandated that every parish launch an initiative to reach out pastorally to groups who feel alienated from the Church (eg. the divorced, migrants, tribal communities, LGBTQ+ Catholics, etc.). A group of parishioners, led by a retired social worker named Claire, gathers a list of ideas based on informal "listening circles" they have held in their homes. They request a meeting with Father Tony to present their findings.

During the meeting, Father Tony sits behind his large desk. When Claire explains that the community feels a need for a "healing Mass" and more inclusive language in the bulletin, Father Tony interrupts:

'Claire, I appreciate your zeal, but we must be careful. I have the theological training to discern what is appropriate for this liturgy. Furthermore, our current donors might be alienated by this radical left-leaning 'inclusive' approach. I have already decided we will hold a traditional Mission Week in October. I've booked the speaker. If you'd like to help with the flower arrangements for that week, I'll have my secretary call you.'

When Claire tries to bring up the feedback from the listening circles, Father Tony stands up, signaling the end of the meeting. "The Church is not a democracy, Claire. It is a family, and a family needs a father who knows the path. Let's not get bogged down in committees."



PUT INTO PRACTICE

- How can the parishioners address this obstacle to synodality? What could be the reason(s) for his resistance to synodality? It may be helpful to try to understand where Father Tony is "coming from."
- The parishioners leave feeling dismissed and infantilized. Claire's group is now at a crossroads: do they bypass the priest and go to the bishop? Do they stop volunteering entirely? Or is there a way to "walk together" with a leader who refuses to move his feet? What would this response look like concretely?



Case Study 4: Father David

Father David has been the parish priest for two years in a large, multicultural urban parish in Asia. His Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) is composed of dedicated lay leaders, most of whom have served for many years. They are excellent at organizing events and managing parish finances. However, decision-making has always been the same: Father David presents an idea, and the council members unanimously approve it and then execute it efficiently.

Inspired by the synodal process, Father David wants to foster a sense of shared discernment and co-responsibility. A major issue arises: the parish's youth ministry is struggling, with very few young people participating. At the



PPC meeting, Father David doesn't offer a solution. Instead, he asks, "I want to hear from you. Why do you think our young people are disengaging, and what do you think the Spirit is calling us to do about it?"

An uncomfortable silence fills the room. Finally, the council head, a respected elder named Mr. de Castro, speaks up. "Father, you know best. We have always trusted your direction. Just tell us your plan, and we will support you 100%." Other members nod in agreement. A younger member, Teresa, starts to speak tentatively, "Maybe the youth feel..." but she trails off, feeling the weight of the elders' deference to the priest.

Father David realizes that simply asking the council for their input is not enough. The council sees its role as supporting the priest's initiatives, not as co-discerning the path forward. They are empowered to act, but not to decide. He needs to build their capacity for genuine co-responsibility.



PUT INTO PRACTICE

- What is the difference between "getting help" from the laity and fostering true "co-responsibility"? How is this difference playing out in Father David's parish?
- If you were Father David, what kind of formation or capacity-building activity could you introduce for your PPC to help them understand and embrace their role as co-responsible discerners of the parish's mission?
- How could Father David have structured the conversation differently to help Sarah and other quieter members feel more comfortable sharing their perspectives?



Now that you have discussed some of the cases, hopefully you've begun to understand what synodal leadership might look like and sound like, especially the constraints and challenges that come with implementing synodality.

For any change or reform that we want to implement, the last thing we need is to have a naive impression that change is going to be easy and unproblematic. It is important to begin our efforts as wide-eyed as possible, conscious of the challenges and ready to face them.



PAUSE AND REFLECT

After the case studies, think about your own organization or team.

- From a scale of 1 to 4, how would you assess its readiness to practice synodality? How about the leader (whether it is you or someone else)?

LOWEST

HIGHEST



- Which is the greater challenge in your context? Why?

- What initial steps can you take to promote synodal leadership in your local church or religious community?



PASS IT ON

To share about this chapter with others, you could begin with the case studies above. This is a good way to get people to recall their own real-life experiences and challenges, and thus gain a deeper desire to learn more about this topic. After discussion on the case studies, you can then present the material provided in this chapter along with the reflection questions and group activities.

Focus on listening to the experiences and perspectives of participants. Remember that actions speak louder than words. The pedagogy with which you use to conduct formation sessions on this chapter will be the most important witness of synodal leadership!



KEY RESOURCES

1. Go, Johnny. C. & Cuyegkeng, M. A. *Leading with Depth: A Practitioner's Guide to 21st-Century Ignatian Leadership*. Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2018.
2. Kheng, Christina. "The Contribution of the Synod on Synodality Towards a Systematic Theology and Praxis of Leadership." *Journal of Moral Theology* 15, Special Issue 1 (2026): 65–90.
<https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/161531-the-contribution-of-the-synod-on-synodality-towards-a-systematic-theology-and-praxis-of-leadership>
3. Forte, Bruno. *The Church: Icon of the Trinity: A Brief Study* (R. Paolucci, Trans.). Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1991.

4. Pope Francis. "Letter to the People of God." The Holy See, 20 August 2018.
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html.
5. Kheng, Christina. *Welcoming The Spirit: A Communal Discernment Approach to Pastoral Planning*. Rome: Office of Discernment and Apostolic Planning, Society of Jesus, 2023.
<https://discernmentandplanning.org/resources/book-welcoming-the-spirit-a-communal-discernment-approach-to-pastoral-planning/>.

CHAPTER

6

BUILDING COMMUNION THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS AND STRUCTURES FOR SYNODAL MISSION



We are baptized into the One Body of Christ. Synodality highlights the intrinsic nature of the Church as not merely the sum of individual Christians but as an organic communion. Our faith life and mission are not lived individually but communally. This requires our on-going relational conversion as well as structural reform so that we can walk and collaborate together in mission.



CHAPTER 6: BUILDING COMMUNION THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS AND STRUCTURES FOR SYNODAL MISSION



JOIN IN PRAYER

Read Matthew 20:1-16 on the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Spend a moment in silence and let the Word of God speak in your heart. When you are ready, share with one another what struck you in this passage. What insights do you receive personally from the Lord about relationships, collaboration, and inclusion in mission?

After the sharing, someone in the group can offer a prayer to seek the grace of openness and understanding needed for a fruitful formation on the topic of this chapter.



HEAR THE JOURNEY

Read the following article about a parish assembly in Malaysia which you can access by scanning the QR code. After reading, reflect on what strikes you about the relationships and structures in this parish for walking together in mission.



READ St Anthony's parish embraces synodal approach for 2025 pastoral plans

Link: <https://www.heraldmalaysia.com/news/st-anthonys-parish-embraces-synodal-approach-for-2025-pastoral-plans/80491/5>



PAUSE AND REFLECT

In your parish or diocese, how well do people know one another? How would you describe their relationships? What metaphors would you use for the community e.g. a family, a formal organization, a group of strangers, a sports team, tribal clans, etc? Are there people who interact more with each other? Who are those often left out? Who remain at the periphery? What challenges do you face with regard to unity and diversity?

In terms of mission and ministries, what channels exist, formally and informally, for people to participate and contribute? How well do the ministries and church groups work together? What challenges are frequently encountered with regard to collaboration, teamwork, and unity?



DISCOVER OUR TRADITION

Synodality as Relational Conversion and Structural Reform

The Synod Final Document cites an important teaching from Vatican II that “it has pleased God, however, to sanctify and save men and women not individually and without regard for what binds them together, but to set them up as a people who would acknowledge Him in truth and serve Him in holiness’ (LG 9)” (FD 15). To be Christian is to be a member of the faith community. Each baptized person no longer exists in isolation but becomes part of the Body of Christ, a new creation.

In post-modern societies, an increasing number of people seem to want spirituality without religious community or devotional piety without social commitment. This is perhaps one symptom of “an individualistic understanding of happiness and salvation” (FD 20). True Christian spirituality, however, involves genuine oneness with God, self, others and all creation. Thus, the Synod Final Document points out that:

to be a synodal Church, we are required to open ourselves to a genuine relational conversion that redirects each person's priorities, and we must once again learn from the Gospel that attending to relationships is not merely a strategy or a tool for greater organisational effectiveness. Relationships and bonds are the means by which God the Father has revealed Himself in Jesus and the Spirit. When our relationships, even in their fragility, allow the grace of Christ, the love of the Father, and the communion of the Spirit to shine through, we confess with our lives our faith in God the Trinity. (FD 50)



Hence, in accepting to embrace the challenges of communion, the Church is “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” (*Lumen Gentium* 1). For this reason, the International Theological Commission, in its document on synodality, underscores the “personal conversion to the **spirituality of communion**” which involves “the paschal transition **from ‘I’** understood in a self-centred way **to the ecclesial ‘we’**, where every ‘I’, clothed in Christ (cf. Galatians 3,27), lives and journeys with his or her brothers and sisters as a responsible and active agent of the one mission of the People of God” (SC 107).

In the Gospel of John, Jesus declares that “by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). Yet

in many local churches, people tend to live isolated lives and do not really build relationships with one another or actively care for each other. Faith tends to be a private, individual affair. Some communities even experience internal divisions and prolonged historical conflict. There are also people who remain unnoticed, such as those living in poverty, migrants, indigenous communities, the homeless, etc. Additionally, the Synod Final Document speaks of those who “continued to express the pain of feeling excluded or judged because of their marital status, identity, or sexuality” (FD 50).

How can we promote relational conversion in the Church? Foremost of all means is the Eucharist. The Synod on Synodality has seen a renewed emphasis on the centrality of the Eucharist in building communion and forging a synodal Church. Reiterating the teaching of Vatican II, the Final Document highlights that “the unity of the Church is both signified and made a reality (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 2) by the celebration of the Eucharist” (FD 26). It renews the Council’s call to ensure that the celebration fosters meaningful participation of all.

At the level of the local Church, you could consider how the Eucharist, especially the Sunday Mass, can be made more inclusive, engaging, contextual, and impactful. In particular, consider how the Eucharist can be more accessible to those who live in remote areas, those who have mobility challenges and other disabilities, those whose livelihoods involve irregular working hours, and those who feel excluded for various reasons.

Complementing the Eucharist, there are many other forms of communal liturgies which can be adapted so that everyone participates meaningfully. Some other ways to build communal relationships and collaboration are suggested below.

At his homily during the Opening Mass to launch the Synod on Synodality in 2021, Pope Francis offered three verbs that characterize the synod: Encounter, listen, and discern. Note that the first is encounter. Pope Francis points out that:



every encounter calls for openness, courage, and a willingness to let ourselves be challenged by the presence and the stories of others. The experience of encounter changes us: frequently it opens up new and unexpected possibilities. Everything changes once we are capable of genuine encounters without formalism or pretense, but simply as we are.¹⁴

In this light, the Synod Final Document points out that “differences that are found in every Christian community with respect to age, vocation, sex, profession, and social belonging provide an opportunity for an encounter with otherness that is indispensable to personal growth and maturity” (FD 34). For this reason, it stresses that “formation must aim not only at acquiring theoretical knowledge but also at promoting the capacity for openness and encounter, sharing and collaboration” (FD 143).



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Use the guide questions below for your reflection. Then share your insights with a partner.

1. To what extent do you find yourself approaching your faith as a private, interior, and individual affair?

2. To what extent do you have regular and meaningful interactions and relations with others in your local church?

Relational conversion goes hand-in-hand with **structural reform**. This means that there must be concrete ways in which the faith community can participate and collaborate together in mission. The Synod Final Document lists many participatory bodies that are already highlighted in Canon Law. For churches of the Latin rite, these include the following (see FD 103):

- Diocesan Synod (cf. CIC, can. 460)
- Presbyteral Council (cf. CIC, can. 495)
- College of Consultors (cf. CIC, can. 502)
- Diocesan Pastoral Council (cf. CIC, can. 511)
- Parish Pastoral Council (cf. CIC, can. 536), and
- Diocesan and Parish Finance Council (cf. CIC, can. 492, 536)

A renewal or activation of these structures is highly encouraged because they provide a channel for all the People of God to be co-responsible for the mission, ministries, activities, and resources of the local church. However, as the Final Document highlights, there is a need to ensure their **effective functioning** and not their “merely nominal existence” (FD 104). This means including voices from all realities of the local church especially those on the margins. The way of forming, operating, and decision-making in these bodies also need to be synodal, discerning, accountable, and transparent (see FD 103-106).

Besides these canonical structures, local churches could also establish and promote additional channels for people to participate collectively in the life and mission of the Church. For instance, a wide range of commissions and

¹⁴ Pope Francis, Homily at Opening Mass of Synod, October 2021.
<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html>



ministries could be explored in each specific context. Dioceses and parishes often have commissions, ministries, and dedicated groups for liturgy, prayer, bible study, family life, children and youth, social outreach, evangelization, catechesis, dialogue with other religions, care for creation, justice and peace, and special communities such as migrants and indigenous peoples. What is important is to not simply maintain these groups as a matter of routine but to constantly ask: What is needed for the mission? How is the diocese or parish encouraging creativity and ground-up initiatives? As Pope Francis has said,

I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. "Mere administration" can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be "permanently in a state of mission" (Evangelii Gaudium 25).

Synodality also calls upon diocesan and parish groups to collaborate with each other rather than to compete or work in an isolated way. Collaboration can take the form of planning programs together, sharing personnel and resources, coming together for reflection and evaluation, and communicating regularly to give updates and seek feedback.



One effective way for Christians to journey together in mission is by forming or joining small Christian communities. The Final Document recognizes that "in many regions of the world, small Christian communities or basic ecclesial communities are the terrain where meaningful relationships of closeness and reciprocity can flourish, offering the opportunity to experience synodality concretely" (FD 117).

Finally, the synod has emphasized the importance of convening ecclesial assemblies more frequently at all levels. These include parish, provincial, and diocesan assemblies where a wide range of the faithful come together to

discuss, evaluate, reflect, and discern about significant issues in the life and mission of the Church or to develop its pastoral plan. (FD 107-108)

Communion does not mean having no conflict

It is helpful to note that unity and communion do not mean uniformity or having no conflict and diversity. In fact, a synodal church is one that comprises a rich diversity of charisms, vocations, experiences, cultures, and perspectives. Synodality requires each person to participate and contribute with sincerity and parrhesia; ie, honesty and boldness. The Holy Spirit speaks through diverse members of the faithful, and sometimes the most marginal voices can point out the most important viewpoints.

Communion means being committed to listening to one another with openness, empathy and understanding. This is a listening that seeks to learn something new. Communion also means being committed to journeying together despite our differences and wounds, and seeking to work through our conflicts, acknowledging that healing and reconciliation comes only gradually and with patience, humility, and the grace of God.



PAUSE AND REFLECT

In some Asian cultures, especially during inter-personal interactions, people tend to avoid disagreeing openly and speaking honestly, especially when one has a negative opinion. Conflicts are often prevented from surfacing. Reflect on this using the following guide questions. Then share your insights with one another.

How is conflict or disagreement viewed and dealt with in your local culture?



Does conflict avoidance inhibit or promote synodality? What do you think?

How would you define synodal harmony? How could this be practiced in cultures where conflict or disagreement tends to be avoided?



PUT INTO PRACTICE

Promote friendship

Fr Timothy Radcliffe, OP related this meaningful story at the retreat given to members of the Synod Assembly in 2023:

"When the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, met St John Paul II, he was disappointed that no progress towards unity seemed to have been achieved. But the Pope told him to be confident. 'Affective collegiality precedes effective collegiality.'"¹⁵

Fr Radcliffe reminded synod participants to first become friends in the Lord. In a synodal church, effective collaboration happens when we can begin to see the human face of each other. This is why the Synod on Synodality has placed so much emphasis on building friendships.

What are some ways in which you can create spaces and opportunities for the cultivation of fellowship in your local church? Sometimes the best interactions happen spontaneously. The sociologist Ray Oldenburg has proposed the concept of "third places" which are neither residential homes nor workplaces but informal neutral spaces where people can gather voluntarily, interact spontaneously, and build community and a sense of belonging. They are the modern village fountains or village squares where people meet as equals, where each person is known by name.

As a "third place," you might consider creating:

- A parish café
- A playing field
- A wifi hotspot corner
- A reading room
- An open pantry
- A garden or park
- An outdoor open hut
- An elder-friendly or disabled-friendly gathering place
- A digital platform where people from different backgrounds can meet

¹⁵ Timothy Radcliffe, Meditation at Synod General Assembly Retreat, 2023. Listen to the podcast here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfOlytraIEM>



Start by thinking of the various groups that you would like to bring together. Then step into their shoes and get to know what kind of places would attract them; places where they would feel at ease, where they would enjoy ‘hanging out’ and simply being themselves.

You can also create opportunities for interaction by organizing gatherings for feast days, special festival days of popular piety, cultural events, or even host online meetings for people who are not ‘of the same mind’ to converse with each other. What’s important is to promote fellowship between groups of people who would otherwise not interact with one another.

Engage in Outreach Ministries

Who are the people in need of a listening ear in your local community? Perhaps it is the elderly or the youth who are left alone at home, or those with family or work-related difficulties, migrants and refugees, people with disabilities, those in prison, or the homeless. Perhaps it is those who feel discriminated against for one reason or other. Or perhaps it is those who have drifted away from the church. The Synod on Synodality raises the idea of a **“Ministry of Listening and Accompaniment”**. It notes that “the synodal process has renewed the awareness that listening is an essential component of every aspect of the Church’s life” (FD 78).

Listening is an essential step in reaching out to those in need and building communion. Accompaniment is a sustained commitment to be with someone along their journey especially when they are walking through challenging times. You could consider starting “Ministries of Listening and Accompaniment” for various groups of people and provide formation for volunteers who might feel called to this ministry.

Build Basic Ecclesial Communities

Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) are an effective way for Christians to walk together in their life of faith and mission. BECs can be formed in villages or neighborhoods among families who live nearby, or on the basis of schools, workplaces, occupational groups, and even age groups—though it is important to ensure that each group is open to a diversity of members. The size of a group ranges from 7 to 20 so that it is large enough for a plurality of experiences and small enough for in-depth listening and sharing.

BECs are gathered around the Word of God and the sharing of life experiences. Their members support one another in the journey of faith and are oriented outwards for mission. Gatherings are held regularly on a weekly, fortnightly, or monthly basis, usually in one of the members’ homes. The following is a suggested structure for BEC meetings:

1. Arrive with an act of hospitality to one another (e.g. reverent greeting, welcoming, putting away personal devices, etc)
2. Begin with an opening prayer and/or hymn
3. Offer words of welcome (by the host or prayer leader)
4. Read the scripture (e.g., Gospel passage from the Sunday Mass)
5. Include an optional reading of a brief text related to the Gospel (a relevant video or podcast can also be used)
6. Observe a moment of silent prayer and contemplation



7. Share “my story” (What was striking in the Scripture passage? How did it speak to me? A proper method such as the three rounds of Conversation in the Spirit may be used)
8. Offer intercessory prayer arising from the sharing
9. Plan or give updates on BEC mission projects (e.g., neighborhood outreach program, charitable activities, etc)
10. Conclude with a closing prayer

BEC meetings usually last 1.5 to 2 hours and can be accompanied by a fellowship-building activity such as a meal together. New BECs often need to be guided by a trained facilitator.



DIALOGUE TOGETHER

Spend a moment to reflect on what you have learned in this module and share with one another:

1. What insights do I gain that could help me face the challenges and difficulties of communion which I often encounter?
2. After this module, how has my attitude changed, if at all, regarding relationships in the church and regarding structures?



3. How might we promote relational conversion in our local church?
4. What improvements are needed in our structures for collaboration and being on mission together?
5. What are some areas of division or lack of coordination in our diocese or parish that demand our closer attention?

Now that you have undergone several modules together with your formation team members, share something you have learned and appreciated about someone in your team. In what ways has the team grown in communion? What deeper growth do you desire for the team?



PASS IT ON

When offering formation on this topic to others, you can invite participants to begin with the following hands-on activity:

Make simple paper cut-outs of human figures. On the various pieces, ask participants to name and write down various groups of people in the diocese or parish. Some examples are illustrated on the next page.



Elderly



Homeless

Rural
Villager

Migrants

Committee
Members

Next, invite the participants to arrange these pieces on a mat or paste them on the wall, according to how closely connected they are with one another. Ask participants to notice who are placed at the center and who are at the peripheries, as well as who are more connected and who are less connected.

Invite them to have a conversation about this current reality. How do they feel about it?

Next, ask the participants to list all the spaces or avenues, both formal and informal, through which people in the local church interact or work together, apart from the Sunday Mass. Additionally, get them to list words or draw images that describe the relationships between people.

Invite them to reflect on this reality. How do they feel about it?

You could then present the content of this chapter, taking pauses now and then to get participants to reflect back on their own experiences.

Finally, they could be invited to share on the same questions in the above section on take-aways.



KEY RESOURCES

1. School for Synodality, *Reimagining Parish Councils Starter Kit*
<https://www.schoolforsynodality.org.uk/pastoral-council-toolkit>
2. *Congregation for the Clergy, The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church.*
Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2020.
3. Poothavelithara, V. "Encouraging and Developing the Participative Bodies for a Synodal Church." *Asian Horizons* 14, No. 1 (Mar 2020): 181-208.
4. Sofield, Loughlan and Carroll Juliano, *Collaboration: Uniting Our Gifts in Ministry.* Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2000.

CHAPTER

7

INCULTURATION
IN A MISSIONARY
SYNODAL CHURCH

JOIN IN PRAYER

Pray the following words together as a group, taking this opportunity to seek the Lord's guidance as you pursue building a united church amidst your diversity:

Though you are God, you emptied yourself to become one like us, and you walked with us,

You witness to us not only the love of the Father, but you also show us how to live as sons and daughters of the Father—and to be brothers and sisters to all Creation,

You invite us to listen and walk with the peoples of our land, to listen to what the Holy Spirit wants to teach us and show us,

You love all people, every culture and language – and you desire that all may come to the 'fullness of life' in you— as you have created everyone,

Help us to be like little streams of living water, connecting with people wherever we go, bringing the freshness of your Gospel to the people of our lands,

And receiving from them the beauty and hidden presence of your Holy Spirit at work in their lives— transforming everything and everyone from within. Amen.



The Church exists for the mission of God in spreading God's kingdom of love throughout the world. Synodality reminds us that mission is best carried out by walking with all peoples, listening to them in humble attentiveness to the presence of God in every age and culture. A synodal style enables the Christian faith tradition to take root in each context with its unique circumstances, traditions, and gifts. It is only in this way that the whole Church around the world can grow and be enriched by a mutual exchange of gifts.





HEAR THE JOURNEY

Read the following entitled *Gawai and Kaamatan Celebrations in Borneo* which you can access by scanning the QR code. After reading, reflect on how one's distinct cultural traditions can be an expression of one's faith in the Lord.



READ *Christians in Borneo celebrate the harvest festival with colourful traditions*

Link: <https://www.asianews.it/en/south-east-asia/malaysia/christians-in-borneo-celebrate-the-harvest-festival-with-colourful-traditions>



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Think about how you can celebrate and express your faith through your cultural heritage. Use the following guide questions below:

1. What are some practices, symbols, values, and beliefs in your local culture that resonate with synodality?



2. What are the ways in which the Church inculturates its life, liturgy, and mission in the culture of the local people in your country or community? What do you think are the reasons for doing so?



DISCOVER OUR TRADITION

"God did not leave himself without witnesses..." (Acts 14:16, cf. Rom 1:20).

During his missionary journeys, when Paul arrived in Athens, he began not with rejection, but with respect and recognition. He saw an altar to the unknown God (Acts 17:23) — a sign of longing for mystery and meaning — and used it as a bridge for dialogue. He listened first, then spoke. He connected Christ with what was already sacred to the people. We see the dynamism of the early disciples wanting to 'evangelize' or bring the 'Good news' or Gospel to the people and cultures around them, while at the same time they seek to 'inculturate' or find a home for the Gospel of Jesus they are proclaiming — within the cultures, worldviews, and practices of the people. It's a two-way movement that is happening, as Pope Francis was fond of repeating:



Faith must be inculturated and culture must be evangelized. The inculturation of Faith, evangelization of culture – always.”¹⁶

Early Efforts of a Missionary Church

Scripture says, “[God] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). This is God’s moral will, His compassionate and universal desire. His divine presence permeates all existence—for “the world is charged with the grandeur of God.”¹⁷ And the Spirit of God seeks to bring all creation who are “groaning for liberation” (Romans 8:22-23) into the fullness or completion in His Son Jesus Christ.

The Church throughout the ages has not stopped engaging with the longings, worldviews, cultures, and values of the people wherever she went. Like St Justin Martyr (CE 100 – CE 165), she seeks to find in them the “seeds of the Word” or the rays of light and beauty, the truth that illuminates, and to bring these into encounter with the Gospel she preaches and witnesses. Why? Because it is the way of Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness (Phil 2: 6-7; 2 Cor 8:9).

Jesus became human to manifest God’s desire for relationships with all His creation. His paschal mystery (the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus) is an event in history and not merely an idea or

philosophy. Jesus lived and witnessed God’s merciful love and the fullness of life for all people. The Church, in turn, embraces and models his humanity and his witness as he went about bringing God’s love and saving help.¹⁸

The Biblical Vision

This process of “evangelizing the culture, and inculturating the Gospel” will continue until the end of times—for it is the nature and mission of the Church to embrace all peoples, every culture, their history and ways of life—until all will come to join in the great feast of catholicity or universality of peoples and nations giving praise and glory to God (Rev 7:9): “there was a great multitude... from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages...”

Scripture presents such a hope-filled vision that we shall all come unto God with our tribes, our families, our languages, our nations, where nothing is dismissed, ridiculed, or discarded as unworthy—but everything is offered and sanctified in that great encounter. This universality of God’s love and saving help was proclaimed right from the beginning in the promise to Abram (Genesis 12:1–9)—that the blessing is for “all families of the earth,” through the prophets (cf. Isaiah 49:1–6), and down the ages.

Through her many pastoral activities, ministries, and worship, the Church brings to God all that is good, true, and noble in the life and culture of every people. At every *Eucharist*, she thanks and blesses God for the gifts he has poured out on all peoples. She recalls the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13), when she received the outpouring of God’s Spirit—it is a living testimony to her unity in Christ and her rich diversity. She is to be the “sign and instrument” of communion of all

¹⁶ Pope Francis at the General Audience of 25 October 2023, spoke of this process of inculturation in the example of two brothers, Sts. Cyril and Methodius, known as the “apostles of the Slavs”. See <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2023/documents/20231025-udienza-generale.html>

¹⁷ God’s Grandeur, poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

¹⁸ Pope Francis writes, “Church history helps us to see the real Church and to love the Church as she truly exists, and love what she has learnt and continues to learn from her mistakes and failures. A Church that even in her darkest moments is conscious of her deepest identity can be capable of understanding the imperfect and wounded world in which she lives... The Church also realizes how much she needs the maturing influence of centuries of past experience in order to work out her relationship to the world.” Letter, *Renewal of the Study of Church History*, 21 November 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2024/documents/20241121-lettera-storia-chiesa.html#_ftn10



peoples (LG 1), for God desires to save us not just as individuals but together with the nations and families we belong to (cf. LG 9).

The Risen Lord sends His Church to go forth from our comfort zones, for she is a missionary by her very nature (AG 2), to cross boundaries, and accompany and serve all groups of people, especially those who are in the peripheries or margins of society (EG 20), that they too may come into the plenitude of the Kingdom of God (LG 5).



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Do you know how the Christian faith arrived in your country? Share your recollection with one another and try to recall how missionaries approached the local cultures. To what extent do you think inculturation took place? What were the underlying reasons? How are things similar or different today?

Defining Culture

Asia is home to various indigenous cultures and faith traditions, which come with their diverse languages and lifestyles, traditions and practices, clothes and colors, food and drinks, literature (oral, visual, or written), and wisdom. Culture is everywhere around us, and it permeates every activity and thought, yet it is elusive to define. There is no one fixed definition, but culture can be understood as a shared system of meanings expressed through symbols—passed down across generations, constantly evolving, and deeply woven into what it means to be human. A popular definition of culture is,

"A system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [human beings] communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitude towards life."¹⁹

Culture is learnt progressively or acquired by the person as a member of their society. Culture, with its customs, values, and way of life, helps distinguish one group of people or community from another, giving them some identity. As an example, wearing red or using gold colors is considered auspicious during the Lunar New Year; boiling fresh milk and eating sweet rice during the South Indian Pongal harvest festival is to give thanks for all the blessings and share those with neighbors and visitors.

Why Inculturation?

The Church teaches that the Holy Spirit is the source and foundation of all truth wherever it is found. Pope John Paul II writes in *Redemptoris Hominis* that the Spirit is at work in the world even before Christ has been glorified, and always in relation to Christ. Thus, every authentic inspiration, "all truth, wherever it is found, comes from the Holy Spirit."²⁰

¹⁹ Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

²⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (*The Redeemer of Man*, 1979), no. 6.



The Second Vatican Council acknowledged the existence of saving elements or the “seeds of the Word” (semina Verbi) in all cultures and religions. The Council Fathers taught:

“The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”²¹

Likewise, the Synod Final Document highlights that:

“Being open to the world allows one to discover that the Spirit has sown the seeds of the Gospel in every corner of the globe, in every culture, and in every human group. These seeds bear fruit in the ability to live healthy relationships, cultivate mutual trust and forgiveness, and overcome fear of diversity. They also give life to welcoming communities, promote an economy respectful of people and the planet, and bring about reconciliation after conflict” (FD 56).

The Church, therefore, exhorts her members, “to engage in dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions” and to “recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among [them]” (Nostra Aetate 2).

As early as 1970, the Asian Bishops committed to continuing dialogue. At the first Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) Plenary Assembly in 1974, they called for a ‘triple dialogue’ with Asian cultures, religions, and multitudes of the poor (FABC I, art. 12, 19). This has been revisited at subsequent meetings and assemblies.

The FABC Office of Theological Concerns explains that engaging in study and dialogue with Asia’s cultures offers a distinctive way for understanding the

²¹ Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), October 28, 1965, para. 2.



meaning of human existence, while at the same time opening new pathways to uncover the richness and depth of the Gospel. No one culture can claim the authority to voice the truths of faith:

“Each culture not only provides us with a new approach to the human but also opens up new avenues for the understanding of the Gospel and its riches. When the Gospel encounters the tradition, experience, and culture of a people, its hitherto undiscovered virtualities will surface: riches and meanings as yet hidden will emerge into the light. That is why it is so important to reinterpret the Gospel through the cultural resources of every people: this reinterpretation truly enriches the Christian tradition.”²²

The theologian Aylward Shorter defines inculturation as “the ongoing dialogue between faith and culture, which takes place in the heart of the community of believers.”²³ This means it is not something that can be imposed but needs to emerge from the lived experience of the faith community. As the Gospel encounters communities of different cultures, new ways of living, worshiping, and reflecting are created. These expressions show the universality of the Church and reveal, in diverse forms, the fullness of Christ’s mystery.

Against the backdrop of a fast-changing and developing Asia, the bishops had discerned that the primary focus of the task of evangelization is the “building up of a truly local church,” with an indigenous vision of the Church:

“The local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble, and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions – in brief, with all the life realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own.”²⁴

²² Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) Papers no. 60, *Theses on the Local Church*, 20 – 21.

²³ Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 11.

²⁴ Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), *Evangelisation in Modern Day Asia*, First Plenary Assembly, 1974, FAPA I, no. 9–12, 14.



Echoing these views, the Synod Final Document highlights that “the plurality of cultures requires that the uniqueness of each cultural context is taken into account” (FD 53). It adds that:

Synodal renewal fosters an appreciation of local contexts as the place where the universal call from God manifests and fulfills itself... ‘The unity of the Church is not uniformity, but an organic blending of legitimate diversities’ (Novo Millennio Ineunte 46). There is a variety of ways in which the message of salvation is expressed. This helps avoid reducing this message to a single understanding of the life of the Church and of the theological, liturgical, pastoral and disciplinary forms it takes (FD 39).

At the same time, the Synod calls for an “exchange of gifts” (FD 39) between local churches so that they can mutually enrich one another towards the flourishing of the whole Church.



DIALOGUE TOGETHER

Take turns to share in the group:

- What strikes you in the above material on culture and inculturation? What was new or surprising to you?
- What are some ways in which the Christian Faith could be better inculturated in your local culture as well as in some indigenous communities in your country?

Inculturation as Liberation

Inculturation must embrace all human endeavors. It involves not only traditions and celebrations but also the liberation of peoples and cultures from all forms of domination and injustice. Our task as Christians is to bring to light such cultural domination or discrimination, even within our churches or religions. As the Synod Final Document notes,

“All cultures are also marked by distorted relationships that are not in keeping with the Gospel. Throughout history, these relational failures have turned into structures of sin... In particular, structures of sin create obstacles and generate fear. We need to face these in order to set out on the road to the conversion of relationships in the light of the Gospel” (FD 53).

As human beings, our cultures and institutions are not perfect and in need of reform. As an example, in many parts of Asia, clericalism is rampant. Clergy dominates over laity, or laity dominates over other laity—it is not acceptable as baptized Christians in a synodal church. Similarly, the social system of patriarchy, with males dominating all decision-making and marginalizing women or girl-children, is not acceptable. In a revolutionary message for his time, St. Paul emphasized the radical equality of all believers in Christ, as children of the Father (cf. Galatians 3:28). Likewise, sexual abuse and human trafficking are not acceptable, no matter what the reasons or popular culture say.

Inculturation is the call to relive the incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus. “Taking on the burden of wounded relationships is part of [the church’s] mission” (FD 56). Wherever genuine inculturation is occurring, there Christ is becoming flesh among His people. Our faith calls all peoples and cultures to be transformed: it is a process of dying to attitudes, values, and customs that are not in conformity with Christ and his Gospel.



Becoming a Local Church

A local church emerges from such an ongoing and dynamic encounter between a people and the Gospel—a dialogue marked by humility, joy, and openness.²⁵ Like a living organism, the local church realizes her identity or becomes herself only by ‘going forth,’ out of herself and engaging in relationships—with neighbors of various faiths, civic institutions, and the pains and aspirations that shape the people’s lives.²⁶ These aspirations may include a better quality of life, civic facilities, job security, spirit of fraternity, dignity of people, care for creation, the defense of human rights, and more. In this manner, the church as a believing community brings the message of the Gospel to encounter the life and culture of a people, especially her *loving option* for the poor—and to bring these voices from the margins into discernment and decision-making as one local church community. Such participation in the life of the society and involvement in the lives of people flows from the implications of living in the world as Christians who believe in the Gospel of Jesus and what he witnessed—the Kingdom of God for all.²⁷ In this sense, Inculturation is rightly understood as “the self-realization of the local Church.”²⁸

Synodality as the Church’s Missionary Witness in the World

In his message to the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis concludes with a powerful paragraph, highlighting the importance of a synodal church for humanity:

²⁵ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), §24. See also John Gnanapiragasam & Felix Wilfred (eds), *Being Church in Asia Today, Theological Advisory Commission Documents, 1986 – 1992*, (Claretian Publication, Quezon City, 1994), 52.

²⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World]* (1965), §1.

²⁷ FABC Plenary Assembly IV, 1986, 3.1.2, FAPA I, 180. See also Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1975), §31.

²⁸ John Gnanapiragasam & Felix Wilfred (eds), *Being Church in Asia Today*, 36. See also *Theses on the Local Church*, *ibid*, 33 – 82. See also Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 26.

“A synodal Church is like a standard lifted up among the nations (cf. Is 11:12) in a world which—while calling for participation, solidarity, and transparency in public administration—often consigns the fate of entire peoples to the grasp of small but powerful groups. As a Church which “journeys together” with men and women, sharing the travails of history, let us cherish the dream that a rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and of the function of authority as service will also be able to help civil society to be built up in justice and fraternity, and thus bring about a more beautiful and humane world for coming generations.”²⁹

Four key images in this text deserve our attention:

A synodal Church as a “a standard lifted up among the nations”

By invoking Isaiah 11, Pope Francis recalls the biblical vision of peace, justice, and reconciliation under God’s reign. The Church, as God’s raised banner, is called to draw people toward unity without erasing their identities. In a “polyhedron” or multi-dimensional, inculturated Church, there is room for everyone. Synodality thus makes the Church a visible sign of hope and reconciliation in a fragmented world.

“Participation, solidarity and transparency” versus the power of “small but powerful groups.”

Across the world, demands for inclusive governance are often undermined by political, economic, or media elites. Without real structural change, participation remains rhetorical. When the Church lives synodality internally—through listening, shared discernment, accountability, and respect for cultures—she becomes a credible witness of co-responsibility. Catholics who embody these values can truly be “salt and light” in public life.

²⁹ Pope Francis, “Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops,” October 17, 2015.



Rediscovering the “inviolable dignity of peoples”

Pope Francis affirms that every culture bears the imprint of the Creator and must never be reduced to a tool for political or economic interests. He condemns cultural domination, exploitative systems, and forms of aid that undermine local cultures or religious beliefs. In *Querida Amazonia* and elsewhere, he calls for “reparations for injustices” and for listening to Indigenous wisdom as a resource for caring for creation. He warns that “ideological colonialism stifles the natural bond between people and their values, by trying to eradicate their traditions, history, and religious beliefs.”³⁰ In response, the Church can promote vernacular languages, dialogue with cultural and indigenous councils, and preserve threatened knowledge as part of building a synodal Church and world.

Authority reimagined as a service for building civil society and fraternity

Throughout his pontificate, Pope Francis contrasts “lordly” authority with Christ, who washes feet. He envisions leadership—ecclesial and political—as *diakonia*, service for the common good rather than dominance. Such authority prioritizes the poor and marginalized, including migrants, refugees, and the unemployed. By encouraging fraternity and broad participation, public institutions can become “houses of encounter,” where citizens help shape decisions and a more just common life.

A listening, servant-led, synodal Church can inspire societies to rebuild bonds of human dignity, shared responsibility, and universal fraternity. In every people and culture, we can catch glimpses of the face of the Lord Jesus—fully Asian and fully divine. The path of inculturation of the Gospel is therefore also the path of the Church’s incarnation as a community of missionary disciples.

³⁰ Pope Francis’s message to the workshop on “Colonization, Decolonization and Neocolonialism in the Perspective of Justice and the Common Good” which was organized from March 30-31, 2023, by the Pontifical Academy for Social Sciences. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-04/pope-modern-neocolonialism-is-a-crime-and-threat-to-peace.html>. See also Synod Final document on ‘structures of sin’ §53, and ‘inequalities and fractures’ §54.



PAUSE AND REFLECT

In what ways in your local church giving missionary witness to the wider society through the four areas discussed above? What are the opportunities and challenges?



PUT INTO PRACTICE

Practical Pathways for Inculturation in Parish Life

Here are some ways in which inculturation can be promoted in the local church:

1. Spiritual Discernment and Faith Reflection

- **Spiritual Conversation Circles**

Small groups can gather to practice spiritual conversation and communal discernment. Participants learn to listen, share, and reflect together on parish needs and local concerns. Over time, this



method can shape pastoral council or ministry team decision-making. Faith and life become more integrated as the community discerns the Spirit's movements.

- **Doing Theology from Life**

People discover how Scripture illuminates their joys and struggles through formative sessions that invite storytelling and sharing of real experiences in connection with the Scripture passage. For example, the healing of the blind man in the Gospel may speak to personal liberation; the Exodus journey may echo local struggles against injustice. These insights become the community's own everyday theology, connecting Gospel meaning with cultural and social realities.

2. Culture, Creativity, and Local Expression - Cultural Circles

Youth or BECs can host small sharing circles with artists, elders, pastoral workers, or community leaders. They can discuss symbols, values, and traditions that shape identity. These conversations will deepen cultural pride and cross-generational bonds.

- **Parish Creative Compositions**

Invite young musicians and poets to create faith expressions using indigenous styles, rhythms, motifs, and languages. New hymns, psalms, or chants can incorporate traditional instruments and music. Poetry or narrative prayer may be offered in vernacular languages and later used in BECs or parish liturgy.

- **Story Circles and People's Faith Media Projects**

Young people can interview elders and document their experiences of faith interacting with culture. Video clips, podcasts, and digital

stories can form a People's Faith Archive, which preserves communal memory and highlights how the Gospel has taken root locally.

- **Creative Imagination Initiatives**

Parish competitions can be hosted where young people design vestments, Stations of the Cross, altar banners, or sacred symbols, drawing from local and indigenous artistic motifs. Meaningful designs can be incorporated into parish liturgy and catechesis.

3. Ritual, Symbol, and Liturgical Integration

- **Curating Tradition**

Communities can examine local rituals, gestures, dances, or offerings and discern how they can be understood more deeply, purified where needed, and integrated meaningfully into parish or BEC celebrations.

- **Intercultural Catechetical Sessions**

Before cultural festivals, parishioners can share their traditional practices, myths, symbols, and family customs. Together, the group can then discern which values harmonize with the Gospel and which practices need purification or reinterpretation.

- **Sharing Tradition Through Food and Story**

Small groups can prepare traditional dishes and explain their origins, rituals, and symbolism. Cooking becomes a doorway into cultural memory and opens deeper conversations about how God speaks through food, hospitality, and tradition.



4. Community, Journeying, Ecology, and Local Identity - Eco-Cultural-Spiritual Pilgrimages

Journeys can be organized to local sacred sites, cultural landmarks, or ecological heritage zones. Participants listen to histories, learn traditional eco-knowledge, and share meals. The local pilgrimage becomes a lived experience of synodality—walking together, listening, and learning.

• Youth Documentation of Cultural Memory

Young people can be invited to map local shrines, symbols, traditional practices, proverbs, and ecological cues. These insights will enrich catechesis, homilies, and social outreach ministries.

5. Synodal Governance, Participation, and Renewal - Parish Synods & Assemblies

Annual parish assemblies can evolve into synodal gatherings marked by broad participation, inclusive listening, communal discernment, and transparent decision-making. Communities can reflect on steps taken toward inculturation, the blessings and challenges encountered. Indigenous communities, too, have many resources for governance and building a synodal church.

• Formation for Lay Leaders

Train catechists, youth leaders, BEC animators, and ministry teams to interpret cultural symbols through Gospel values, identify practices needing transformation, engage respectfully with diverse religious contexts, and facilitate spiritual conversation and communal discernment.

A Contextual Reading of Life Realities: “See-Judge-Act”

The *See-Judge-Act* method remains central to Asian pastoral formation. It can be practiced by pastoral councils, Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), youth groups, and social ministries. Rooted in the Asian Church’s tradition, this inductive method invites us to listen attentively to the lived realities of people (see); reflect upon and discern these realities in the light of the Gospel and the Spirit (judge); and respond with concrete, context-sensitive action (act). Without attentiveness to people’s real situations and the Spirit’s presence within them, the Church cannot speak God’s Word effectively or prophetically. Without dialogue and inculturation, mission itself risks stagnation, and the Church can easily slip back into self-centeredness.



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Among these ideas for inculturation practices, which do you think are the most doable for your community? How do you plan to execute them?



HEAR THE JOURNEY

Read the following article on indigenous cultural wisdom which you can access by scanning the QR code.



READ *How reconnecting with ancestral wisdom could reshape and save our world*

Link: <https://mybrotherthetree.licas.news/2024/06/how-reconnecting-with-ancestral-wisdom-could-reshape-and-save-our-world/>

This example from the heart of rural Asia shows how a local priest, Fr Niphot Thienvihan, and the team at the RTRC (Research and Training Center for Religio-Cultural Communities), based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, used the religio-cultural wisdom of the Indigenous people to transform the prevailing poverty and unjust situation, and bring the hope of the Kingdom of God.³¹ It helps us see how evangelization is best carried out through local cultures and communities—after sufficient time and effort is given to walk with them and understand their worldviews and situation.

Fr Niphot was influenced by the witness of the Betharram missionaries to commit his life to the 'peoples on the mountains' and has devoted over half a century to supporting Indigenous communities to re-appreciate and integrate their ancestral wisdom. The team at RTRC, together with the Diocesan Social Action Centers (DISAC), has been instrumental in promoting the Rice Merit Network as an indigenous and sustainable solution.

See the article titled "Back to the Future: 'Nine Grains of Rice' at: <https://spotlight.licas.news/back-to-the-future-nine-grains-of-rice/>.

See also: <https://spotlight.licas.news/rice-the-soul-of-life-and-community/>

Faith Reflection: "The Theology of Rice"

This exercise teaches us to think theologically from below. In many Asian kitchens, there is always rice cooking. Rice sustains life, gathers families, carries memory. A Filipino mother sets aside rice for a neighbor during hardship. A Malaysian Tamil farmer prays over the first rice harvest at Pongal. A migrant worker in Singapore sends bags of rice money home every month instead of keeping it for himself. If we sit with that reality, a theology emerges:

- Rice is Eucharist-like—broken and shared so others may live.
- Rice reveals communion—what one has is never only for oneself.
- Rice teaches a mission—love becomes food for others.

This is theology born not from a textbook, but from the table of the poor. When people share stories, symbols, rituals, and wounds and reflect on them through the Gospel, they do theology as a community and make synodality at work.

Local theology forms the heart of a synodal Church because people reflect together, making the community a co-author of theology. As faith grows in dialogue, culture becomes a meeting place for God. A synodal Church is a place where gospel and culture enrich each other. Moving away from clericalism, a synodal Church listens before it speaks and learns before it teaches.

³¹ Cf. Albeiro Rodas Inca Moyachoque, *How reconnecting with ancestral wisdom could reshape and save our world*, LICAS News, 10 June 2024. <https://mybrotherthetree.licas.news/2024/06/how-reconnecting-with-ancestral-wisdom-could-reshape-and-save-our-world/>



1. What sayings or teachings in your culture promote a balanced life—integrating economic progress, cultural preservation, and ecological harmony?
2. How does the 'Theology of Rice' inspire your community to build a synodal Church rooted in listening and shared values?
3. Are there similar teachings in your culture that emphasize sacrifice, generosity, and interdependence?



DIALOGUE TOGETHER

Reflect using the following guide questions and share your insights with your group:

1. After this module, what has changed in your views about culture?
2. What new attitudes do you now have regarding your own culture and the culture of others?
3. What connections do you see between synodality, inculturation, and mission?



PASS IT ON

In sharing this chapter with others, you could begin by asking them what comes to mind when they think of the word "culture". What is culture to them? What does it mean? How would they describe their own culture?

You could then present the definition of synodality as given in Chapter 1:

"Synodality is the walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God's Kingdom, in union with all humanity. Orientated towards mission, synodality involves gathering at all levels of the Church for mutual listening, dialogue, and community discernment. It also involves reaching consensus as an expression of Christ rendering Himself present. He who is alive in the Spirit. Furthermore, it consists in reaching decisions according to differentiated co-responsibilities. Along these lines, we can understand better what it means to say that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church. In simple and concise terms, synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ." (FD 28)

Then ask the participants this question: What does culture have to do with synodality? Where do they see the place of culture in this definition of synodality?

After this discussion, you can then present the material in this chapter along with the suggested reflections and activities.

The session could end with a discernment on how dialogue with cultures can be better enhanced in the local church as it pursues its mission of walking together with all humanity.



KEY RESOURCES

1. Bertille, Charles. "Indigenous Ministeriality for a Synodal Church in Asia: New Pathways for Mission." *Asia Pacific Mission Studies* 7, no. 1 (2025): 97-117.
2. Chia, Edmund. *Asian Christianity and Theology, Inculturation, Interreligious Dialogue, Integral Liberation*. Routledge, New York: 2022.
3. Schineller, Peter. *A Handbook on Inculturation*. Paulist Press, New York: 1990.
4. Shorter, Aylward. *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 3rd ed. Orbis Books, New York: 1994.
5. Tan, Jonathan. FABC Papers 89 – Towards Asian Liturgical Inculturation. <https://fabc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/FABC-Papers-89.pdf>
6. Tan, Jonathan. FABC Papers 109 – Theologising At The Service of Life. <https://fabc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/FABC-Papers-108.pdf>

Appendix

THE METHOD OF CONVERSATION IN THE SPIRIT

Introduction

The term "Conversation in the Spirit" is used here to refer specifically to a method of dialogue that has been developed in the Ignatian tradition. It involves three rounds of sharing and listening, with times of silence in between. Conversation in the Spirit is not a debate or discussion. It is not about trying to resolve a problem or advocating one's own point of view. Rather, it is about listening attentively and deeply to oneself and to others with sensitivity towards the influences of the spirits, so as to recognize and follow how God's Spirit might be moving in the whole group.

There is no "right" or "wrong" answer in Conversation in the Spirit. Each person's sharing is welcomed and acknowledged. The whole group listens so as to hear what the Spirit is saying through each person. To this end, the prior time of personal prayer and reflection is crucial. Without it, there is no Conversation in the Spirit.

Listening with the heart involves paying full attention to the speaker without thinking of what you are going to say and without making judgments about the speaker. It entails listening to both verbal and non-verbal communication, which includes not only what is said explicitly but also emotions, moods, body language, inner stirrings, and even what is not said. The aim is to empathize with the speaker and to sense what he or she might be experiencing interiorly. All persons are 'experts' of their own personal experiences. Listening with the heart also means allowing oneself to be affected by the other, seeking to learn something new, and even being open to the possibility of being changed by what is heard. Listeners pay attention.



to how they themselves are moved interiorly by what they are hearing. Indeed, this is a demanding task, but in the long run, it cultivates a disposition of loving attentiveness, inner stillness, appreciation of others, humility, and depth of living.

Speaking from the heart comes from being accepting of and welcoming towards oneself, along with all that one is experiencing. It requires a level of attentiveness and self-awareness, as well as honesty in facing and speaking the truth from one's heart. Such self-acceptance and authenticity are often cultivated in prayer and reflection. Speaking from the heart also means taking responsibility for what one says, and expressing the interior movements that accompany it.

Instructions for participants

The size of each group should be about 5-7 persons. The time allotted for this exercise can be about 1½ hours. Choose a facilitator and a time-keeper. They should estimate and inform everyone how much time each one will have for sharing during the first round. Keep to the allotted time so that everyone will have a chance to share. Ensure that the 3 rounds are completed, and that the review is done. Follow the processes described below as closely as possible because they are integral to the dynamics of the Spiritual Conversation.

First round

One at a time, each person shares the fruit of his/her personal prayer. The others listen, paying full attention to what is being said. Listen to each person with attention, love, and reverence. Welcome what is said with gratitude and interest, knowing that the Spirit speaks through every person. During this round there is no dialogue or interaction between participants, not even to ask questions or give answers. It is just a round of listening deeply to each one, with every person, regardless of rank or representation, given an equal amount of time to speak. As you listen, be aware of how you are moved e.g., when you feel harmony with what is being said, when you feel joy, tension, frustration, sadness, curiosity, etc. Pay attention also to the interior movements of the speaker and the underlying and shifting moods in the group as a whole. For the speaker, share what you feel moved to share, briefly and clearly. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer. Just share honestly from your prior prayer experience.

Silent reflection

(About 3 minutes after the first round is completed) Reflect on what has been shared, and how you felt as you listened. What stands out? What is emerging subtly?

Second round

Whoever wishes may start sharing the fruits of this moment of silent reflection. When everyone has finished sharing and there is still available time, there can be some dialogue on the movements, questions, and views raised in the group, or how another person's sharing has affected you or given you deeper insights or a new perspective. You might also be moved to share personal experiences that resonate with what was said. If there are contrary opinions, the group may wish to explore the strengths and limitations of each opinion, though this is best done in a separate Conversation in the Spirit, with everyone considering the strengths together, followed by the limitations. During this round, the facilitator needs to ensure that the dialogue is not dominated by a few people and that the group keeps to the allotted time.

Silent reflection

(About 3 minutes) Reflect on what happened in the Second Round, how you were moved, and how the group was moved. Note any common themes or significant points that were emerging, as well as divergences of opinion or tensions or even new questions if any.

Third round

Each person shares the fruit of the time of silent reflection. This can include insights, significant points or movements. You may also pray aloud thanking for graces received, or asking for a specific grace.

Review

(About 5 minutes) When the 3 rounds are completed, review and reflect on the experiences and feelings. This may lead to further enlightenment about how God's Spirit was moving.

Report

If the group is required to make a report, take a few minutes to agree on the main points emerging in the conversation and what the group wishes to report on. It is important that this is done by the whole group rather than by one or two assigned persons.

About the contributors

Christina Kheng, Editor and Contributing Author

Christina Kheng is from Singapore and teaches theology and leadership at the East Asian Pastoral Institute and the Loyola School of Theology in Manila, as well as the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. She has been involved in the Synod on Synodality 2021-2024 through various committees at the Vatican and served as facilitator at the Synod General Assembly. She is also a member of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences' Commission for Synodality. Christina has a PhD in Theology from the Australian Catholic University and a Master in Public Administration from the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Her research focuses on foundations for inter-disciplinary method particularly in the areas of pastoral leadership and management.

Johnny Go, S.J., Coordinator, EAPI Extension Programs and Contributing Author

Fr. Johnny Go is the Founding Dean of the Gokongwei Brothers School of Education and Learning Design of the Ateneo de Manila University, where he also teaches Education and Philosophy. Additionally, he is the coordinator of the Extension Program of the East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI), where he regularly facilitates a module for the participants. He previously served as the President of Xavier School, a K-12 Jesuit School in the Philippines, as well as the Basic Education Coordinator for the Jesuit Asia Pacific Conference. Fr Go received his EdDs from the UCL Institute of Education (University of London) and the Singapore National Institute of Education at the Nanyang Technological University. He is well-known for his online retreats and bible blogs called "Pins of Light."

Charles Bertille, Contributing Author

Charles Bertille has served in various ministries in the Asia Pacific region and also globally as a lay person and missionary in the areas of youth & lay formation, mission & governance, Caritas & community development, pastoral institutes,

institutes, bishops' conferences, and philanthropy. With a Master's degree in Theological Studies from the Loyola School of Theology at Ateneo de Manila University (2014), he also completed his PhD at St Vincent School of Theology, Manila, with a dissertation on synodality and cultural integration within the Malaysian Church. Married to Beatrice, they currently live in Malaysia.

Pushpa Joseph, Contributing Author

Pushpa Joseph holds a PhD from the University of Madras. Trained in theology with a specialization in feminist theology, she has dedicated her work to the intersection of faith, justice, and social transformation. She has over two decades of experience in higher education, serving primarily in the Department of Christian Studies at the University of Madras, where she was engaged in teaching, research, and academic leadership. Alongside her academic work, she has been actively involved in spiritual leadership and formation within the Catholic Church. Her research and writing focus on theology, feminist theology, women's issues in the Church, and synodality. She continues to accompany and work closely with the Catholic Church in Asia, contributing to initiatives that promote participation, dialogue, and ecclesial renewal. Pushpa served as the Chief Editor of Magnet, the monthly publication of the Conference of Religious India (CRI). She has also served on the Board of Trustees of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, a grant-making organization dedicated to strengthening higher education across the region.

Jeanrick D. Nuñez, Style Editor

Jeanrick Nuñez works as Research Associate at the Ateneo Research Institute for the Futures of Education (RIFE) and Learning Designer at the Ateneo SALT Institute. He also serves as Social Media Coordinator of the East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI). He earned a Master of Arts in English Language and Literature Teaching from Ateneo de Manila University.

