New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12859

Reflections on the Emerging Theology of Synodality

Jacob Phillips

Abstract

This paper works from the ITC document, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), to outline four essential components of an emergent theology of synodality: the claim that synodality is constitutive of the Church, an ecclesiology of communion, the ecclesial title People of God, and the *sensus fidei*. The paper then critically assesses the interplay of these four elements in the ITC document, along with the *Vademecum* and the Preparatory Document which were disseminated with the beginning of the synodal process itself (2021). Certain issues from this interplay, it is argued, require further reflection as this emergent theology develops: the theological weight of consensus, the degree to which belonging to the Church is (or is not) essentially discursive in character, how the *sensus fidei* seems to imply that the practice of the faith is an integral element of meaningful synodal participation by Catholics, and indeed, finally, the participation of those who do not bear the name of Christian.

Keywords

consensus, ecclesiology, People of God, *sensus fidei*, synodality

Introduction

The documents accompanying the preparatory stage of the Synod on Synodality show how deeply Ignatian this invitation going out to the Church is. The Preparatory Document suggests we prayerfully meditate on two scenes from Scripture: firstly, those involving 'Jesus, the Crowd, and the Apostles', particularly the Canaanite woman from Matt. 15 and the Woman at the Well of John 4, and secondly, the conversion of Cornelius from Acts 10. Prayerfully imagining these scenes, and ourselves as characters within them, the faithful are invited to participate in the narrative as a means of discerning the voice of the Spirit for the synodal pathway.

© 2023 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I'm drawing to this here because this paper starts with an imaginary scene of its own. This is a situation in which one is talking to someone who knows little or nothing about the Catholic faith. We've all been there. So much of the internal language of the Church is suddenly not at our disposal, because it will be so unfamiliar for our conversation partner. This means we have to speak in broad generalities and transferable terms, which in turn will mean there is some sacrifice of meaning, a loss of specificity and exactness.

Let us imagine telling someone we're going to a symposium on synodality, like that which preceded this issue's publication. The person would of course ask, 'What is synodality?'. Having been thrust into this unenviable position, we might then awkwardly say, 'well, it's a sort-of umbrella term for matters pertaining to synods'. Our imaginary interlocuter would then ask, 'But what are *synods*?'. We'd then find ourselves sacrificing the fullness of meaning by saying something like, 'Synods are how the Church engages in corporate decision-making'. Then our perplexed friend starts to get a very loose grip on things: 'Ah, like parliament, or the governors at the local school?' To which we might say, 'Yes and no' or 'more or less' or 'not really', and so on.

We might try to think of a synonym for the key term itself, for synodality. According to the scene just described, it would helpful if we could have a German-style compound noun, and say something 'corporate-decision-making-ness'. But obviously here our imaginary conversation threatens to lose so much meaning it might not be worthwhile to have it at all, because the Church is a corporate body unlike any other, and therefore any corporate decision making by the Church must by definition be unlike the other forms of collective decision making undertaken by other corporate bodies. I don't need belabour why this is the case, but *in nuce*, the Church's chief member or head is a divine person (Christ Jesus), she is of divine origin (called into being by the command of God), she is endowed with divine means (that is, the outpouring of the Spirit and the sacramental economy), and she has a divine end (the restoration of all things, the new heaven and the new earth of Rev 21).

In what follows, I want to unpick some of the theology behind this term 'synodality', a theology which must, by definition, expound the meaning of the term in such a way as to hold fast to the disclaimers just given about the Church's uniqueness for God's dealings with humanity. I will do this firstly by describing certain central elements of the concept of synodality in the analysis provided by the International Theological Commission in the document, 'Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church'. Secondly, I shall offer some evaluative reflections on the ITC's groundwork in providing theological bases for this term, and also on how that groundwork has been implemented through the working of the *Vademecum* and the Preparatory Document accompanying the beginning of the process itself.

© 2023 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Central Elements

Synodality as Constitutive of the Church

The first thing to highlight is just how theologically important the documents present synodality as being. Each of the three documents under discussion in this paper frame synodality not as an optional thing that some members of the faithful might feel called to participate in, nor as some ephemeral thing relative to a particular 'sign of these times'. No, we have to be clear about what is being stated here, for there are remarkedly bold statements being made about the significance of what synodality involves.

To quote from the ITC: 'synodality is an essential dimension of the Church' and 'an expression of the very nature of the Church' (42). Note – it is described not just as essential, but as explicating or articulating the essence of what the Church is, the being of the Church. It is also described as 'the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church' (6), that is, as *the* mode, not 'a' mode, in which the Church lives and acts. Hence, the document speaks of a 'synodal Church' (8). It is precisely because of the gravity of these claims, which the ITC tell us have been emerging in recent decades, that synodality is presented as a 'constitutive dimension' of the Church. Synodality is said to go right to the very heart of what the Church is, it is something that constitutes the Church *as* the Church. This would seem to suggest that the Church is somehow comprised by collective decision making, or maybe dialogue, or mutual accompaniment, or being with and for the other, alongside whom we stand. It is in the doing of these things that the identity of the Church herself is realised.

The remaining central elements of synodality to be discussed below are essentially out-workings of this basic point, which help us to understand the constitutive claim.

An Ecclesiology of Communion

An ecclesiology of communion should be foregrounded among the necessary elements at stake. This is because this element best captures my earlier point about the uniqueness of the Church and why corporate decision making must by definition be unique for the Church. The Church is of course recognized by her marks, as One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. For the ITC's presentation of synodality, it is oneness that is crucial. Put very briefly, oneness as 'communion' has been the focus of much ecclesiology after the Council, following from *Lumen Gentium*'s quoting of St Cyprian and St Augustine, that 'the Church has been seen as a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'. (*LG* 4). This is commonly offset with an

© 2023 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

approach like that popularly associated with St Robert Bellarmine, for whom it is said oneness was primarily about the unity of faith and practice under the Roman pontiff. Thus, for Bellarmine, the Church is one because she is 'united together by the profession of the same Christian Faith, and by participation in the same sacraments, under the governance of lawful pastors, more especially of the Roman Pontiff, the sole vicar of Christ on earth'.[1] Avery Dulles considers this a 'juridical' oneness, something codified in the climate of the Counter Reformation in order to distinguish 'between the true Church and its counterfeits'.[2]

An ecclesiology of communion emphasizes that the divine origin of the Church comes forth from the Trinitarian processions, and is therefore grounded in and exemplified by the mutual indwelling or *perichoresis* of the Persons of the Trinity in unity, and it is this that configures the being of the Church herself: '[t]he Church is *de Trinitate plebs adunata*' (*LG* 43), for it is assembled by and in divine filiation. This Trinitarian communion moreover perpetually sustains the Church in being: she 'shares in the life of communion of the Blessed Trinity' which the ITC says is ever 'destined to embrace the whole of humanity' (43). Ultimately, of course, communion points forward to the end, when each of those called to communion will 'need neither lamplight nor sunlight', for they will see the vision of God face-to-face.

The implication is, therefore, that synodality – that ecclesial decision making – is an expression of an unspeakably profound mutual indwelling that pertains between the Church's children, because they are elevated by grace to share in the *perichoresis* of the Blessed Trinity. This would seem to be the case when the ITC speak of synodality as requiring 'a reciprocal exchange of gifts' (9) between the members of the Church, a reciprocal exchange that is somehow analogous to the divine reciprocity that pertains between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This ecclesiology of communion goes a considerable way toward explaining how synodality can be called 'constitutive' for the Church. This is because it is being presented as a form of the communion which is 'the *res* of the *Sacramentum Ecclesiae* [the Church as Sacrament]: union with God the Trinity and unity between human persons, made real through the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus' (6). In other words, insofar as syndolaity fosters union, it fosters oneness, and the oneness of the Church is not to be understood as mere concord horizontally or sociological conceived. Believers are called to be one by their participation in the oneness that pertains to the nature of God himself.

[1] St Robert Cardinal Bellarmine, *On the Church Militant Diffused Throughout the World*, translated by Ryan Grant, (Post Falls, ID; Mediatrix Press, 2016), p. 9.

[2] Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Models of the Church*, (New York: Doubleday, 2002), p. 117.

© 2023 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Church as People of God

The ecclesiology of 'the pilgrim and missionary People of God' will be familiar to most readers of this volume. It is well-known that it rose to prominence through *Lumen Gentium*, and for the purposes of this discussion the important point is that, put simply, it offers a nomenclature for speaking of the Church in such a way that the primacy of baptism and the universal call to holiness bind all members of the Church together in Christ *first*, before distinguishing between the different gifts the Spirit dispenses among the members of the body. For this reason, some offset speaking of 'the People of God' with ecclesial phrases which precede the Council, which some would say prioritised the distinctions existing *between* the bearers of the different gifts. Examples include speaking of the bishops as the *ecclesia docens* or 'teaching Church' and the laity as the *ecclesia discens* or 'listening Church'. Or, one can distinguish between states of life in terms of heaven and earth – speaking of the Church Militant and Church Triumphant, and so on. Chapter 2 of *Lumen Gentium* emphasizes that the Church is one People of God first, and that the Church as this People makes her members 'citizens of a kingdom which is of a heavenly rather than of an earthly nature' (13). We all bear the promise of heavenly citizenship in and through the Church, so again, mutual belonging is prior to differentiation.

Moreover – to mention something that will prove important later - the boundaries of belonging are arguably made somewhat porous by this terminology. Or, put better, there are attempts to ensure that being classed as a member of the Church is not *primarily* about distinguishing or differentiating oneself from non-believers or even the rest of humanity. That is, the general direction of the 'pilgrim people' is ultimately shared by all people to some extent by virtue of the universal call to holiness. *Lumen Gentium* says that 'those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God' (16). We are all *unterwegs*, as they say in German, and in terms poignant for this issue on synodality, we are all called therefore to tread the same path, and indeed some go so far as to claim that all people are on this path to some extent, however falteringly. After all, the term synod is a compound of *syn* (with) and *hodos* (path). The ITC thus refer to the faithful as the *synodoi* or 'companions of the journey' (25). The point here is that all members of the Church are held to be on the same journey, and this journey is ultimately the fullest expression of that pilgrimage to the fullness of divine life that has bearing on all members of the human family.

However, contrary to what some people might think, while the ITC document describes the insights of *Lumen Gentium* in terms of 'the ecclesiastical hierarchy' being 'at the service of the People of God', it nonetheless distinguishes carefully between the different gifts or

© 2023 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

charisms pertaining to what used to be called the *ecclesia docens* and *discens*. It does so by distinguishing between 'deliberative and consultative votes' (68), and the processes of 'decision-making' and 'decision-taking' respectively (69). The current stage of the synod is quite specifically collective decision *making*. It is a maieutic stage prior to the execution of the decisions themselves. All the faithful are to be consulted in a synodal Church, of course, but we are reminded that the 'authority of Pastors is a specific gift of the Spirit of Christ' and 'not a delegated and representative function of the people' (67). And Decision-*taking* is described as being 'in the competence of the Bishop' who is 'guarantor of apostolicity and Catholicity'. Decision-making, by contrast, is what happens as 'the whole community…pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and *offer advice*' (68) so that the taking of pastoral decisions might correspond as closely as possible to God's will.

The Sensus Fidei

The last central element to be touched on is the 'sense of the faithful'. Synodality cannot be understood without bearing in mind at least four things: the constitutive claim, our communion in and with the Trinitarian persons, our walking of the path of the pilgrim and missionary People of God, and the particular charism which grounds the consultative, maieutic, or 'decision-making' function of the Church's members, the *sensus fidei*.

This notion of course has very ancient pedigree, and is generally defined in terms of being 'a sort of spiritual instinct that enables the believer to judge spontaneously whether a particular teaching or practice is or is not in conformity with the Gospel and with apostolic faith'.[3] It also has a collective application, and the two are distinguished in terms of the *sensus fidei fidelium* (sense of the faith on the part of the faithful) and *sensus fidei fidelis* (sense of the faith on the part of an individual member of the faithful).

This sense flows from the theological virtue of faith as *fides quae*, as *that* which is believed, the content of the faith, and not just *fides qua* the act or moment of faith. I would suggest that this is one of the most distinctive differences of Catholic from much Protestant theology; that Catholics are not only supernaturally equipped to have faith in God, but equipped by and in that faith to apprehend particular specifics of 'right teaching' or doctrine as true.[4]

[3] International Theological Commission '*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church', §49, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html

[4] Ibid.

© 2023 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The ITC therefore quotes from Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*: '[a]s part of His mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an *instinct of faith – sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God', and *Evangelii Gaudium* also states that '[t]he presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, "even when they lack the resources to give them precise expression" (*EG* 119). Similarly, the *Vademecum* states that, '[t]ogether, all the baptised are the subject of the *sensus fidelium*', and, '[t]ogether, we are inspired by listening to the Word of God, through the living tradition of the Church, and grounded in the *sensus fidei* that we share'. The ITC draw attention to the 19th century as a time when there was a growth in awareness of the importance of the *sensus fidei*, mentioning particularly Johann Adam Möhler, Antonio Rosmini, and of course St John Henry Newman.

In almost goes without saying that inviting all the faithful to engage in collective decision making seems to flow quite naturally from the existence of the *sensus fidei*. Indeed, wide-ranging consultation seems even necessary, insofar as doctrinal developments have to be filtered through the *sensus fidei* as a benchmark of their authenticity. The *depositum fidei* needs to be deposited, to become embedded, or to have taken root, or maybe be sedimented in and among the People of God. Otherwise such developments are just words and ideas – it is among the people that mere notions are 'activated' and 'effected'. Newman's metaphors from his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* come to mind here. There is that most famous passage where he says the 'stream' is not 'clearest near the spring' because the body of doctrine is [quote] 'more equable, and purer, and stronger, when its bed has become deep, and broad, and full'.[5]

By this understanding, it is through the faithful that the idea of the Church becomes a reality. Newman says it was only after his conversion that he fully appreciated that this 'making real' had never happened with what he had once considered the 'catholic' interpretation of Anglicanism, which he eventually decided must ever remain a 'mere paper religion'. After spending time in Rome in the late 1840s, he writes almost incredulously that Catholics 'speak of the "Sacred Heart", or of "the Mother of mercies"', or of "Our Lady of Walsingham" as things which are as concretely real as any worldly object'. He considers this to be a marvellous blessing, and his rapid drilling in the Scholastic textbooks led him to conclude it was a consequence of the supernatural virtue of faith enabling the reality of these things to be apprehended. Those he deemed to be without this

[5] John Henry Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching, Volume 1,* (New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green, & Co, 1901), p. 281ff.

© 2023 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

virtue, that is, the more genteel English, he says always opt for 'vague' and general words for the divine which don't have personal reality and urgency - like 'Providence', or 'the Deity' – things which are essentially just ideas or principles. Hence, when the *Vademecum* speaks of a 'living tradition', this need not be taken just as questioning static notions of tradition, but also connected to that sense of the faithful which makes elements of the tradition personal and vibrant realities in and among human lives.

Reflections on Synodality's Discursive Paradigm

Moving now to the second, more evaluative, section, the reflections to follow all arise from what might be called a 'discursive paradigm' governing the documents accompanying the synod. By this I mean that, the *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church is said to be synodality, and the documents clearly present the *modus operandi* of synodality itself as discursive, in the sense of pertaining to the explicit articulation of points of view, dialogue on and around those points of view with fellow *synodoi*, and ideally reaching a consensus, which somehow captures how the Church might best respond to the signs of these times. Then that summary articulation goes forth for consideration and decision taking under the executive function of the episcopal *collegium*. Insofar as synodality is presented as pertaining to the very nature of the Church herself, this means that the Church is constituted *as* Church through mutual discussion, through the process the ITC adumbrate with the verbs 'pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern, and offer advice', or the pithier formula 'dialogue, discern, and harmonise'. Some of the ramifications of this paradigm, however, present questions which are as yet unanswered in the official documentation in question.

Consensus

The first question surrounds the theological significance of 'harmonising' or 'consensus', particularly in light of an ecclesiology of communion. In short, we are called 'dialogue, discern, and *harmonise*', and the ITC take the Council of Jerusalem as our pattern. This event is described by the ITC as the moment where we 'see a synodal event coming into being', an event which 'has been interpreted as the paradigm for Synods celebrated by the Church', as something from which the normative synodal dynamics emerge. We read that the community present at this Council moved from 'initially divergent opinions' to the 'consensus and unanimity' signified by the term ὁμοθυμαδὸν (Acts 15.25). This is the unanimity of discursive agreement, something presented as the fruit of communal discernment.

© 2023 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Without wanting to seem churlish, the problem is that, if ὁμοθυμαδὸν applies to the Council of Jerusalem, this might well be exceptional for synodal events. I'm reminded here of Benedict XVI's infamous 2005 Christmas speech to the Roman Curia, which quotes St Basil's comments on the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea, on '[t]he raucous shouting of those who through disagreement rise up against one another, the incomprehensible chatter, the confused din of uninterrupted clamouring, [which] has now filled almost the whole of the Church, falsifying through excess or failure the right doctrine of the faith'.[6]

A church historian would need to confirm whether Jerusalem or Nicaea is the more *de facto* normative for the Church. From the perspective of dogmatic or systematic theology, however, the pressing question is how a unanimity of discursive agreement, that is, ὁμοθυμαδὸν, fits in with the oneness of a communion ecclesiology, which is a theological basis for synodality itself. To draw this tension out, I will touch briefly on how the afore mentioned oneness of perichoretic indwelling has some of its lineage in St Ignatius of Antioch's so-called 'monarchical' view of the episcopate, which evinces important similarities to an ecclesiology of communion.

For a Greek-speaking audience, to speak of a bishop with terms like 'mon-archos' would have an immediate theological application, because unity (or oneness) with the bishop uses exactly the same cluster of terms which would come to define God's Trinitarian unity or oneness, the oneness between Father and Son, in the centuries that follow St Ignatius. Monarchos thus means oneness () with the origin, beginning, or source (ἀρχή) of divine life. This Trinitarian oneness was fully articulated (ironically, given its tempestuousness) at Nicaea among all that disagreement St Basil spoke of, with the statement that Christ shares the same divine nature (οὐσία) as the Father, being *homousious* (ὁμοούσιος), 'of one substance' or 'consubstantial' with him. Indeed, one might even claim that ecclesial authority is intrinsically linked to this oneness of nature. For authority is ἐξουσία in Greek, composed of 'ex-' meaning out of, and *ousia* meaning nature. Authority thus implies a coming forth from God's nature, and here we arrive at a point where Bellarmine and communion ecclesiology meet. Unity of faith and practice under the Roman Pontiff is grounded for St Ignatius in the oneness that pertains between Father and Son, the oneness of the ὁμοούσιον (*homousion)*, the connaturality of the first and second persons.

[6] Quoted by Pope Benedict XVI, 'Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia Offering them his Christmas Greetings', 2005. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html

© 2023 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Considering all this background to communion ecclesiology, and that ecclesiology's centrality for syndolaity's constitutive dimension, presents a difficult question. How might ὁμοθυμαδὸν, the oneness of discursive agreement, be mapped onto ὁμοούσιος, the oneness of nature? The most obvious response would seem to be to suggest that discursive agreement is a shadowing of divine indwelling, a oneness pertains to the former which is somehow analogous to the latter. This is all well and good, but it presents second, more thorny, question. This question arises from considering what happens when the consultative decision-making stage reaches clear unanimity (ὁμοθυμαδὸν) and is elevated to the decision-taking, episcopal stage. That is, if we go so far as to ground the importance of ὁμοθυμαδὸν in a communion ecclesiology, on what grounds might the execution of a decision not correspond to it, for this is a possibility the ITC consider intrinsic to understanding the process. In other words, by what authority, speaking out of what nature, might the decision of the bishops deviate from a synodal consensus with this way of resolving the tension?

Belonging as Discursive

This difficulty could perhaps be avoided by suggesting that ὁμοθυμαδὸν should not be elevated to such a standing, not least because to associate oneness with consensus threatens to downplay many examples of non-discursive belonging pertaining to the members of the Church. After all, within the Church there is a primordial or foundational standing alongside others with whom you disagree, on the basis that there is some mysterious dimension by which you are one, and perhaps this dimension transcends explicit articulation and semantic differentiation or analysis. Some of Benedict XVI's comments on the nature of conscience come to mind here, recalling that for him conscience is not just individual but collective – there is an ecclesial conscience, which he describes as being 'not a conceptual, articulated knowledge', but rather, 'an interior sense, a capacity of re-cognition'.[7]

The problem with this approach, however, is that it is challenging to find any grounds in the documentation under discussion to suggest that the faithful have a capacity to recognise their siblings in Christ at some level beyond the discursive. Synodality is described in terms which centre on discussion as that which is constitutively bearing on all members of the Church. One wonders here how all the varied roles and contributions of the faithful fit into synodality's discursive paradigm. That is, the very young and very old, for whom listening, analysing,

[7] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *On Conscience,* (San Francisco; Ignatius Press, 2007).

© 2023 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dialoguing, discerning, and offering advice can be impossible or at least very difficult.

Along with those inhibited by age or ability to participate fully in discursive activities, there is also what some call the 'simple faithful'. This should not be construed as patronising, pejorative, or condescending, by any means. In fact, just the opposite. There is a particular gift of a simplicity of faith – something like that which Newman saw in the childlike piety of the Roman population in the 1840s, for whom analysis and linguistic understanding is not required. For the Catholic faithful like those he encountered, God is a reality to be met in wordless devotion, not restless inquiry.

The issues here is that there are a great many siblings in Christ who are difficult to capture within a discursive paradigm for belonging and participation, and I think some more reflection would be welcome on this point. This is not least because the points just made resonate with some elements of the writings of Pope Francis himself. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, for example, he writes of 'importance of popular piety, a true expression of the *spontaneous* missionary activity of the people of God' – I emphasise *spontaneous* because it is not discursively arrived at or discovered in dialogue, as such, nor subjected to reflective and dialogical mediation by words. Like Newman implies of the devotion to the Sacred Heart among the Roman populace, very few of its devotees could or would have engaged in an analytical discussion of the merits or demerits of the wounded heart of Christ. Words fall short before something of awesome sanctity when it is apprehended as it truly is: in Newman's terms, as something 'concretely real'.

Faith

The final two reflections to be discussed each follow on from the fact that the *Vademecum* and the Preparatory Document take some steps which go beyond what the prior ITC document establishes the theological bases for. This need not necessarily mean these are missteps, simply to point out why there is some work to be done for the theological discussion to catch-up, as it were.

The first of these surrounds the importance of the *sensus fidei*. Returning briefly to the last point, it is worthwhile to mention that this 'sense', in and of itself, is arguably not discursive, as such. It is described as an instinct, or pertaining to an intuitive apprehension. When we say we 'sense' something we are often searching for a word to describe an impression which evades analysis and deliberative discernment, hence the word 'spontaneous' as used above. The ITC document thus quotes *Evangelii Gaudium*, again: the People of God 'does not err in faith, even when it *cannot find words* to explain that faith' (*EG* 119). Using the quote from the same document as mentioned

© 2023 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

above, it goes on '[t]he presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities' (*EG* 119). Connaturality of course means a sharing in the ὁμοούσιον aforementioned, and we read that this 'connaturality' enables the faithful 'to grasp' the realities of the faith 'intuitively', and also as an ability 'to feel, sense, and perceive' (56). Yet none of these are intrinsically discursive means of apprehension. The *sensus fidei* is described as the '*eyes* of faith', because we do not usually analyse and choose to agree or disagree with what we see with our eyes; we simply live among that which comes before our vision.

Moving on to the main issue at stake in this subsection, the *Vademecum* and the Preparatory Document take some steps which are particular, practical outworkings of Pope Francis's 'theology from the margins'. The *Vademecum* states, 'special care should be taken to involve those persons who may risk being excluded' from the synodal pathway': 'women, the handicapped, refugees, migrants, the elderly, [and] people who live in poverty'. This is no doubt a well-intentioned inclusion. Then the document goes on to include 'Catholics who rarely or never practice their faith'. Again, this is well-intended. But, as it stands, it threatens to diverge a little from the ITC's theological analyses, insofar as the classical understanding of the supernatural virtue of faith, and the *sensus fidei* that flows from it, present it as something cultivated, or extended, or which flourishes, by virtue of the practice of the faith itself. That is, through participation in the sacramental economy, by contemplating the riches of Scripture in our hearts, by perpetual attempts at obedience to the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, and so on. It is an instinct that cultivates nature as it is brought into fruition by grace. This is not to say that those who 'rarely or never practice their faith' should be excluded, or that their unpractised or neglected faith is without value. Nor does one want to pretend that the most outwardly pious can be the most inwardly 'gravely deficient'. The issue is that some more discussion is needed about to measure and evaluate the contributions of those *synodoi* for whom faith is not a lived practice. After all, it was in an ITC document of just 2014 that so-called 'Dispositions needed for authentic participation in the *sensus fidei*' are enumerated, the first and primary of which is: 'participation in the life of the Church' (*SF* 89).

Humanity at Large

My fourth reflection will be made very briefly – and it follows from another bold step taken by the *Vademecum*, which similarly extends the discussions of the ITC. This is the urging of us to do everything we can to exclude no-one 'no matter their religious affiliation' from 'sharing their perspective or experiences'. This would seem to be rooted in that

© 2023 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interpretation of a People of God ecclesiology in the broadest possible terms, seeing our sharing the same direction of travel heavenward that pertains to all humanity. Again, thus far, the ITC has gone a long way in showing how and why synodality is constitutive of the Church, but not yet quite showed how this constitutive dimension pertains to the broadest interpretations of the Church as the People of God as related to those from beyond the margins of its own domain. That all are called is without question, and perhaps much can be learned from those who answer their call in ways which are 'true and holy' but not yet Christian. But this goes further than the other elements at play seem to permit, particularly as regards communion ecclesiology. To give just one example, the profoundly Trinitarian nature of this ecclesiology makes it difficult to class as broadly 'Abrahamic', let alone shared among world religions. Then there is of course the *sensus fidei*, again, which as bequeathed by baptism surely cannot belong to the unbaptised, by definition.

Conclusion

To summarise my discussion in this paper: I began by inviting us to enter into an imaginary scene in which we try to explain synodality as 'corporate decision making'. I suggested the Church is unique for having her chief member or head being a divine person in Christ Jesus, for being of divine origin through the command of God, and endowed with divine means in the outpouring of the Spirit and the sacramental economy. That this uniqueness can be captured in the emerging theology of synodality is not in question, but it would seem that there are a few points of implementing this emergent theology where there is still some work yet to do. If this work is undertaken successfully, however, perhaps our imaginary interlocuter won't be left so utterly perplexed after all. This is because there would be theological bases to consider even he or she as some invited to walk the same synodal path as all the faithful.

Jacob Phillips
St Mary's University Twickenham, Institute of Theology, Twickenham,
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

jacob.phillips@stmarys.ac.uk

© 2023 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12859 Published online by Cambridge University Press