



7300 Hanover Drive, Suite 304 • Greenbelt, MD 20770 • 301.588.4030 • cmsm.org

Synodality Primer

Dr. David Rohrer Budiash & Jonathan Harrison

The next Ordinary Synod of Bishops, beginning with local processes in late 2021 and culminating in 2023, is based on the theme *For a Synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission*. Both the process and the theme raise many questions: what is synodality? What is the purpose of having a synod on synodality? What is the history of synodality? How do the terms communion, participation, and mission relate to synodality? This primer will provide an overview of synodality, brief answers to these questions as a foundation for further discussions in the upcoming months on synodality, and an annotated list of resources at the end of the document.

What is Synodality?

The history of “synods” goes all the way back to the Old Testament and continues up to the present, with varying meanings and applications through the Church’s history. Pope Francis and the Synod of Bishops draw on this history to offer a contemporary synthesis suited to the third millennium of the Church’s existence. Their teaching regularly repeats that a synod is a path or journey the entire People of God take together. *Synodality, the specific topic of this synod, is a way of being Church, characterized by active listening to the Holy Spirit and all the People of God as well as dialogue between the sense of the faithful and the teaching authority of the bishops and Pope.*

History of Synodality

In order to unify the Church's understanding of synodality, especially as Pope Francis continues to emphasize it in his papacy, the International Theological Commission (ITC) released *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* in 2018. One element of this document is a detailed history of synodality.

Synodality in Church History

The theme of synodality is present at the very start of the Old Testament, where there are the initial assemblies of the People of God, convoked to remind the Israelites of their divine calling. It is also in the Old Testament where the Prophets teach the People of God about the importance of the new spirit that God will give them through the Messiah and how that new spirit will unite them more closely to Him.

The New Testament reveals the Paschal Mystery and the salvation brought about by Jesus, not just for a select group of people, but for the entirety of the People of God. The ITC writes:

The work of salvation is the unity for which Jesus implored the Father just before His Passion: 'May they all be one, Father, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us so that the world may believe it was you who sent me.'

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descends and gives power to the Apostles and begins the work of the Church. This outpouring of the Holy Spirit leads, in part, to the first synod: the Council of Jerusalem, recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15. It was through the Holy Spirit that this Council was able to both actively involve the People of God and recognize the unique charisms that make up the image of the Church as the Body of Christ.

The assemblies convoked in the Old Testament, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as the means for unity, and the first synodal assembly of the newly formed Church mean that synodality is rooted in Scripture, and it is through Scripture that synodality must be understood.

Nevertheless, synodality did not disappear after the Apostolic generation. Rather, synodality has been influential throughout Church history and has played a major role in church governance and the development of dogma. In the first millennium, the ITC references the Council of Nicea and synods that took place on the local level with the intent of involving the entire local community. In the second millennium, the ITC again references synodality on local and universal levels: universal councils such as the Lateran Councils and the Council of Trent, and local councils that allowed for active participation of the whole People of God. In the third millennium, Pope Francis has indicated that synodality is precisely the path God expects the Church to take.

Synodality from Vatican II – Present

Vatican II stands as an enormous event in recent synodal history, with the preparatory schema being drawn up in consultation with the college of bishops and then debate and voting over four sessions with (mostly) the whole college present. In his teaching on synodality, Pope Francis typically references two major documents from Vatican II: *Dei Verbum* and *Lumen Gentium*. He will often refer to *Dei Verbum* regarding divine revelation and the interaction of God with humanity.

Summarizing some of the main points of *Dei Verbum* in 2017 address, he says:

Tradition is a living reality and only a partial vision regards the “deposit of faith” as something static....The word of God is a dynamic and living reality that develops and grows because it is aimed at a fulfilment that none can halt.

This living reality of tradition is the point of synodality for Pope Francis; since it is a living reality, synodality is how we listen to the Holy Spirit and let the Spirit guide our actions. Pope Francis will regularly appeal to *Lumen Gentium* to invoke the unity of the college of bishops under the Pope and their responsibility to exemplify the communion which is the root of synodality.

Three Aspects of the Synod on Synodality

The title of the upcoming synod invokes three words: communion, participation, and mission. All three are essential to understanding the upcoming synod on synodality.

Communion

Chapter 2 of “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church” by the ITC describes “synodality as an expression of the ecclesiology of communion,” “synodality in the dynamic of Catholic communion,” and “synodality in the *traditio* of apostolic communion.” Paragraph 46 adds that “the principle of synodality is the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God.”

Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Meeting Promoted by the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization,” October 11, 2017, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/october/documents/papa-francesco_20171011_convegno-nuova-evangelizzazione.html.

Participation

Pope Francis is clear: synodal participation is not just for bishops, but all the baptized. In an address in October 2017, Pope Francis references *Evangelii Gaudium* to reiterate that the mission of the Church is the responsibility of the entire People of God. This point has made its way into the preparatory documents: through the synodal process, there is an emphasis on active participation at all levels. In a recent address to the faithful of the Diocese of Rome, Pope Francis lays out his hopes and expectations for the participation of all the faithful throughout the Diocese of Rome, each contributing and bringing their insights and talents to the discussions.

On a practical level, the Synod of Bishops has provided a “Preparatory Document” (PD) and a “*Vademecum*” for the Synod. The PD provides additional theological context for the synod as well as describing the importance of participation by all for the synod. They provide “ten thematic nuclei to be explored.” These thematic nuclei provide the basis for reflection and participation by the People of God through their local community: the journeying companions, listening, speaking out, celebrating, co-responsible in the mission, dialogue in Church and society, with the other Christian denominations, authority and participation, discerning and deciding, forming ourselves in synodality. Whereas the PD gives thematic discussion topics, the “*Vademecum*” is a handbook of how to implement conversations where there can be feedback from these thematic points. The “*Vademecum*” emphasizes “a synodal Church walks forward in communion to pursue a common mission through the participation of each and every one of her members.”

Mission

Pope Francis, in *Episcopalis Communio* 7, emphasizes that mission flows from the synodal process and the synod must be implemented. Additionally, the ITC's document directly connected the theology of synodality to the theology of mission: "the Church is called, in synodal synergy, to activate the ministries and charisms present in her life and to listen to the voice of the Spirit, in order to discern the ways of evangelization." The emphasis on synodality and mission is so that the People of God have structure and opportunities to listen to the Holy Spirit and then act in whatever way the Holy Spirit is directing. Pope Francis gives one concrete example of the interconnectedness of synodality and mission: ecumenism. Both Pope Francis and the ITC emphasize that through listening to the Holy Spirit in synodality, progress can be made in ecumenism. For these reasons, in the upcoming synod on synodality, the discussions will be focused outward on how synodality will support the mission of the Church.

Resources on Synodality

Cardinal Mario Grech, “Synodality: the fruit of prayer.”

A letter from the Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops to all monastic and contemplative religious, asking them to pray for the Synod.

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

A brief overview of Pope Francis’s vision for synodality, including what synodality is, how the local and universal churches work together synodally, and some of the theological resources he is drawing on to develop the idea of synodality.

Pope Francis: “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome,” September 18, 2021.

A September 2021 address on synodality. It includes Pope Francis’s spiritual exhortation to the diocese of Rome, asking them to listen to the Holy Spirit and become involved in the synodal process.

Pope Francis: “Address of the Holy Father Francis on the occasion of the Moment of Reflection for the Beginning of the Synodal Journey,” October 9, 2021.

An address in which Pope Francis highlights the themes of the Synod on Synodality (communion, participation, mission), three risks (formalism, intellectualism, and complacency) and three opportunities for the Synod (structural reform toward synodality, a Church that listens, and a Church of closeness).

Pope Francis, *Episcopalis Communio* (Apostolic Constitution), September 15, 2018.

The official document governing the Synod of Bishops, with an explanatory preface followed by canons regulating the Synod.

Hoffman Ospino, “A closer look at synodality and its promise for a more inclusive church.”

Ospino interviews synodality expert Rafael Luciani, about the differing receptions of synodality and the outcomes of this process.

International Theological Commission: *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church.*

A significant theological resource on synodality, outlining the history of synodality and its theological foundations. The starting point for theological questions about synodality.

Synod of Bishops: “Synod Preparatory Document.”

The document prepared by the Synod of Bishops as an explanation of synodality, some guidelines for enacting synodality, and themes to be explored in the synodal process.

Synod of Bishops: “Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality.”

This “vademecum,” or handbook, is the resource for concrete questions on how synodality works. The document outlines the synodal process and how it is expected to work, especially in diocesan settings. The starting point for practical questions on synodality.

Synod of Bishops. “Document of the Synodal Process. XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.”

An overview of the synodal process, including a calendar of the leadup to the final documents in October 2023.