

## Stepping toward a Synodal Church

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**Amanda C. Osheim**

Loras College, Dubuque, IA, USA

### Abstract

In his address commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis expressed hope for a more synodal church. Consulting recent theological literature aids the discovery of potential—if only partial—steps towards a synodal church in three areas: spiritualities and structures of discernment; theological methodologies; and ecumenical gifts of synodality.

### Keywords

conflict, discernment, ecumenism, Pope Francis, reception, Roman Catholic Church, *sensus fidelium*, spirituality, theological method

**A**s part of this issue's special section on the church, this article engages synodality in the Roman Catholic Church. In particular, it considers how the church may grow in synodality, or journeying together as the people of God. If synodality is, as Pope Francis has claimed, constitutive of the church, then this shared pilgrimage is the Holy Spirit's gift to the church. Yet this gift also calls the church to fulfill its mission through discernment of the *sensus fidelium*, developing synodal methodologies, and receiving ecumenical gifts.

### Francis and a Synodal Church

Pope Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops in 1965. Roman Catholic bishops' experiences of collegiality and collaboration at Vatican II had prompted calls from many council fathers for a more regular means of episcopal participation in the

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#### Corresponding author:

Amanda C. Osheim, Loras College, 1450 Alta Vista, Mail #28, Dubuque, IA 52001-4327, USA.  
Email: amanda.osheim@loras.edu

church's universal governance. The Synod of Bishops was the papal response which created a permanent ecclesial structure to institutionalize the "necessity and importance of making every greater use of the bishops' assistance in providing for the good of the universal Church."<sup>1</sup> In his address commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of its inauguration, in the midst of Synod on the Family, Pope Francis both reflected on the Synod of Bishops and expressed his hope for a synodal church.

Francis described synodality as "constitutive" of the church, and indicated that hierarchical authority within the church functions as an "inverted pyramid": authority is a ministry exercised by those who stand beneath others as their servants.<sup>2</sup> Conceiving of hierarchical authority as an inverted pyramid reverses an older pyramidal conception of the church, a trickle-down ecclesial economy in which the Holy Spirit was given first to the pope and bishops, then to clergy and religious, and finally to the faithful. This pyramid effectively divided the church—not only notionally, but also frequently in practice—into the teaching church (*ecclesia docens*) and the learning church (*ecclesia discens*).<sup>3</sup> By inverting the pyramid, Francis's analogy recasts authority as being dependent upon reception—listening to and learning from others—within the church.

For Francis, such authority is consistent with a synodal church, which he describes as "a Church which listens, which realizes that listening 'is more than simply hearing.' It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth' (John 14:17), in order to know what he 'says to the Churches' (Rev 2:7)."<sup>4</sup> Francis's metaphor for authority in the church and his vision of

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1. Paul VI, *Apostolica sollicitudo* (September 15, 1965), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_motu-proprio\\_19650915\\_apostolica-sollicitudo.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19650915_apostolica-sollicitudo.html) (accessed November 25, 2017). The article aims at considering how the church can develop synodal practices and structures, rather than focusing on the origin and historical development of the Synod of Bishops. For a compilation of information regarding the synod's purpose and structure, see the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, *Synodal Information* (September 15, 2007), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_20050309\\_documentation-profile\\_en.html#C.\\_Ordo\\_Synodi\\_Episcoporum,\\_the\\_Order\\_of\\_the\\_Synod\\_of\\_Bishops](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_20050309_documentation-profile_en.html#C._Ordo_Synodi_Episcoporum,_the_Order_of_the_Synod_of_Bishops) (accessed December 28, 2017). For an early commentary see Klaus Mörzdorf, "Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. II, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 214–21. More recently, the late Archbishop John R. Quinn situated the Synod of Bishops among other ecclesial structures in *Ever Ancient, Ever New: Structures of Communion in the Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2013).
  2. Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis at the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops" (October 17, 2015), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html) (accessed November 25, 2017).
  3. For Giovanni Perrone's influence on this distinction in the nineteenth century see Michael Himes, "The Development of Ecclesiology: Modernity to the Twentieth Century," in *The Gift of the Church*, ed. Peter Phan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000), 45–67 at 60.
  4. Francis, "Address Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary." Francis is quoting *Evangelii Gaudium* 171; emphasis in original.

synodality are rooted theologically in the presence of the Holy Spirit throughout the church; rather than dividing the church into those empowered to teach and those rendered docile to teaching, through the Spirit all church members are both learners and teachers. For example, Francis states in his apostolic constitution on the Synod of Bishops:

Hence the Bishop is both teacher and disciple. He is a teacher when, endowed with the special assistance of the Holy Spirit, he proclaims to the faithful the word of truth in the name of Christ, head and shepherd. But he is a disciple when, knowing that the Spirit has been bestowed upon every baptized person, he listens to the voice of Christ speaking through the entire People of God, making it “infallible *in credendo*.”<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, the authority of the bishops for teaching and governing ought not be abstracted from the authority of all the faithful for teaching about the ways the Holy Spirit calls them to live faithfully; rather, the bishops’ authority relies upon listening to the faithful, a form of learning integral to synodality.

Ormond Rush argues that Francis uses “synodality” in a broader way than does the Second Vatican Council, yet in a manner consistent with the council’s theological principles. He writes of the council, “synodality is much more an element of its intention to balance papal primacy with episcopal collegiality (by calling for more dialogical and collaborative structures between the pope and the episcopal college) than it is a promotion of an ‘upward’ direction in the teaching, sanctifying, and governing aspects of the Catholic Church.”<sup>6</sup> In contrast to this hierarchically focused use of synodality, Rush maintains that Francis’s understanding of synodality reflects two other aspects of the council documents. The first is the council’s decision to place *Lumen Gentium*’s chapter on the people of God prior to its chapter on the hierarchy, and to describe the people of God in terms of what is common to all the faithful—life in Christ through the Spirit. Rush emphasizes the significance of this change from a pyramidal conception of the church, with the hierarchy at the apex, to envisioning the church as the people of God: “When compared with the dominant self-understanding characterizing the church across the whole of the second millennium, the change constitutes nothing less than a reconfiguration of the Catholic imagination regarding the nature of the church.”<sup>7</sup>

The second shift Rush detects in the council documents is implicit rather than explicit: the nature of the church’s communion. In addition to describing the church as a hierarchical communion (*communio hierarchica*) and a church of churches (*communio ecclesiarum*), terms which emphasize the universal and local roles of bishops, the council also describes the church as the communion of the faithful (*communio fidelium*). As the *communio fidelium*, the church is comprised of “all those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and who, dispersed throughout the world in diverse places

5. Francis, *Episcopalis Communio* (September 15, 2018), 5, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco\\_costituzione-ap\\_20180915\\_episcopalis-communicio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communicio.html), quoting *Evangelii Gaudium* 119.

6. Ormond Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church,” *Theological Studies* 28 (2017): 303, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563917698561>.

7. Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid,” 307.

and cultures, are constituted the one community of faith by the Holy Spirit who binds them all together, with all their diversity.”<sup>8</sup> Much as chapter 2 of *Lumen Gentium* contextualized both the hierarchy and the laity within the people of God, so does the *communio fidelium* contextualize the *communio ecclesiarum* and *communio hierarchica*, further strengthening the council’s emphasis on the faithful as a whole and inverting the earlier pyramidal notion of relationships within the church.<sup>9</sup>

Reflecting these two conciliar shifts, Francis’s understanding of synodality is primarily baptismal rather than hierarchical. Taken in conjunction with his inverted pyramid metaphor, this means the Synod of Bishops will have limited value in shaping the pope’s universal ministry if synodal practices and structures do not exist throughout the church. Without these practices and structures, there will be a paucity of mechanisms for discernment, dialogue, and listening “at every level of the Church’s life” which might allow the Synod of Bishops to be “the point of convergence of this listening process.”<sup>10</sup> Yet more is at stake than the effectiveness of this one ecclesial structure. The purpose of a synodal church is to allow for shared discernment of the Holy Spirit, so that all may truly “journey together,” led by the Spirit in living the church’s faith and mission within history and with eschatological hope.<sup>11</sup> Synodal practices and structures will be needed in order to develop listening and discernment as personal and communal habits of the pilgrim people of God, as well as to foster an understanding of faith incarnated in the diverse cultural and historical contexts characteristic of the church’s catholicity. To that end, in the following sections I consult recent theological literature to describe potential—if only partial—steps towards a more synodal church in three areas: spiritualities and structures of discernment; synodal methodologies; and ecumenical gifts of synodality. These steps are partial in that becoming a synodal church will require reflection and action throughout the church, and in ways that are responsive to the church’s catholic diversity. As these steps themselves suggest, while choices to increase synodality are important, synodality is ultimately a way of living in ecclesial relationship rather than merely a program to implement.<sup>12</sup>

## Discernment and Synodality

In *A Ministry of Discernment: The Bishop and the Sense of the Faithful*, I wrote of the importance of both spiritualities and structures of discernment in the church.<sup>13</sup> While

8. Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid,” 317.

9. Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid,” 319–20.

10. Francis, “Address Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary.”

11. Francis, “Address Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary.” The pope references the etymology of the word “synod”: “What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word ‘synod.’ Journeying together—laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome—is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice.”

12. Additionally, the treatment of these steps here is partial in that a thorough development and systematization of these steps lies beyond the scope of this article.

13. Amanda C. Osheim, *A Ministry of Discernment: The Bishop and the Sense of the Faithful* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2016).

that work focused particularly on the role of bishops in discerning the faith of the local church, discernment is essential for the synodal church Francis describes, and is not limited to the bishops but is rather the task of all the faithful. Through discernment the church's tradition expressed in the sense of the faithful, or *sensus fidelium*, is received and recognized. In turn, this discernment allows the church to journey together as the people of God who live out their faith in diverse cultural, political, social, and historical contexts. A synodal church listens to the one Spirit who moves within all the faithful, guiding persons and communities to be faithful to God so that their shared stories may become part of salvation history. This means a synodal church listens to the *sensus fidelium* of the local churches, or dioceses, in order to learn the shared pathways of pilgrimage, discerning together both the destination and the means for arrival. Discernment here refers to ways of learning to receive God's self-gift, and so of understanding and responding faithfully to God's revelation mediated in diverse ways, including through the *sensus fidelium*. Practices of discernment are those that help us learn to authentically receive God's revelation as part of the ecclesial community, and include prayer, dialogue, and self-reflection. These practices help those engaging in discernment to acknowledge the limitations human finitude and sin place on reception; they are also transformative practices that form persons of discernment, or those for whom discernment is a habitual way of relating with God and others.

In a synodal church, the mutual listening characteristic of discerning dialogue must not be occasional, but rather habitual.<sup>14</sup> This habit is fostered and supported by spiritualities and structures of discernment, which are essential for discerning the *sensus fidelium* within a church in which all members are both learners and teachers. These spiritualities form church members as persons of discernment who grow in authentic reception of the Holy Spirit. Their purpose is not to discern whether other persons are holy or good, and so are therefore trustworthy mediators of the church's tradition. Rather, a discerning spirituality develops one's capacity to see the Holy Spirit through all persons, events, and contexts.<sup>15</sup>

Discernment in this sense is a synodal practice because it is a practice of discipleship, a means of learning how Christ lives within and calls forth believers and their communities, making them the faithful pilgrim people of God. Such practices are already part of the church's heritage through Ignatian spirituality, with its emphasis on receiving the communication of love so one may in turn communicate love through mission; Benedictine spirituality's attentiveness to hospitality and the gifts brought by the stranger, as well as the insights of youth; and spiritualities inspired by the examples of Francis and Clare to encounter Christ in the poor.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, many communities of women religious have been practicing communal discernment, and their experiences

14. Osheim, *Ministry of Discernment*, 41.

15. Osheim, *Ministry of Discernment*, xv.

16. See for example: Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. George Ganss (Chicago: Loyola University, 1992), 231; Benedict, *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry et al. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1981), 3, 53; and Bonaventure, *The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*, trans. E. Gurney Salter (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1904) 1.5; 2.7, <https://www.ecatholic2000.com/bonaventure/assisi/francis.shtml>.

of the preparation, process, and outcomes of this discernment are deeply rooted in their spirituality and can provide insight to other ecclesial communities.<sup>17</sup> In addition to these spiritualities with historical roots in the Christian tradition, spiritualities developing in response to new times and contexts have potential to become spiritualities of discernment as well.<sup>18</sup> For instance, discernment in Wangari Maathai's eco-spirituality includes care for creation in its attentiveness to those in poverty.<sup>19</sup>

Spiritualities of discernment help the faithful to authentically encounter and respond to the Spirit at work both in their own lives and in the lives of others as well. This means these spiritualities aid discernment of the Holy Spirit not only in spite of, but also through, limitations. In other words, these spiritualities help to identify both the human and the sinful limitations of understanding, and teach church members the need not only to look within but also beyond themselves to encounter the Spirit at work. This necessarily means spiritualities of discernment will also be communal: while they require personal practice and commitment, they draw the faithful into the life of mutuality which is necessary for both listening and witnessing to the Holy Spirit. Finally, discerning spiritualities are transformative, as they conform believers personally and communally more closely to Christ through the Spirit.<sup>20</sup>

Without spiritualities of discernment, the synodal church lacks an essential compass. Receiving and responding to the self-communication of God in Christ, which is the heart of discernment, is what a synodal church must do in order to remain faithful to God as it moves through histories and cultures. Spiritualities of discernment, then, are not extraneous to the church's life, but rather necessary for it. This is not to say the church is without faithfulness where explicit reference to these spiritualities is lacking, nor that the presence of these spiritualities will magically produce consensus in the church. Rather, it is to call for intentional formation of the faithful in these spiritualities, so the church can grow in faithfulness together.<sup>21</sup>

To be sustained, spiritual growth in receiving and responding to the apostolic faith requires ecclesial structures, which act as trellises for discernment in the local church. These discernment structures have two purposes. First, they provide regular opportunities for the faithful to practice discernment together so that "from the Bishops to the last of the faithful" the church may learn to receive and respond to the Holy Spirit and so be one in faith.<sup>22</sup> Second, these structures are a means of creating accountability for discernment. They make shared discernment a regular and normative part of the church's

17. For a brief but illuminating description of one such process, see Marian Cowan, "Communal Spiritual Discernment: An Example," *Sisters Today* 49 (1978): 454–60.

18. Osheim, *Ministry of Discernment*, 203–204.

19. Susan Rokoczy, "Wangari Maathai: Discerning a Call to Environmental Justice," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 145 (March 2013): 90.

20. Osheim, *Ministry of Discernment*, 6–7.

21. Osheim, *Ministry of Discernment*, 187–88.

22. *Lumen Gentium* (November 31, 1964), 22, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

life, and create opportunities for shared prayer, questioning, and authentication among the discerners so they may better arrive at depth of understanding and consensus.<sup>23</sup>

Some structures of the local church can be renovated in order to fulfill the purposes of regular participation in discernment and accountability within discernment processes. An example is diocesan pastoral councils, which could be canonically required, rather than only recommended, and their purposes extended beyond being a means of implementing the bishop's pastoral plan, to being a means of discerning the faith of the local church and collaboratively developing pastoral responses. Certainly diocesan synods provide opportunities for formation and discernment within the local church, though they would need to be held more frequently in local churches in order to be more effective means of synodality. Other synodal structures in the local church may need to be created. For instance, given the increasing numbers of lay ecclesial ministers and lay theologians in many local churches, a structure which draws these two groups together for discussion and discernment may yield particular pastoral and theological insights for the local church.<sup>24</sup>

Conor M. Kelly envisions a particular role for moral theologians in creating "a genuine culture of discernment in the church."<sup>25</sup> He makes this claim in light of *Amoris Laetitia's* emphasis on conscience and the ongoing process of discerning "the most generous response which can be given to God" in light of one's present circumstances.<sup>26</sup> In order to assist the faithful in this process, Kelly writes, "Presuming the reality of uncertainty in the moral life, moral theologians should strive to help the faithful navigate the possibility of doubt so that they can still make moral choices with confidence and not just humility."<sup>27</sup> This moral navigation is personal, and therefore takes into account the particularities of relationship and context in which all persons exercise moral agency.

In Kelly's vision, the relational nature of the moral life necessarily means ecclesial communities will be involved in discernment. These communities will need "a sort of common language that will allow people to explain the processes behind their decisions so that their moral choices do not have to be made alone, but can instead occur in a spirit of communal discernment."<sup>28</sup> Kelly argues moral theologians have a central role to play in helping the church develop and apply this shared language. From this perspective, moral theologians would develop something akin to a lexicon of discernment with the practical end of not only assisting individuals in making moral decisions, but also of having a language of discernment to facilitate shared understandings and outcomes within communities. As noted above, the Christian tradition has rich resources for describing and practicing discernment, and so it seems such a lexicon could be a further creative refinement of these

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23. Osheim, *Ministry of Discernment*, 183–86.

24. Osheim, *Ministry of Discernment*, 189–96.

25. Conor M. Kelly, "The Role of the Theologian in the Church: A Proposal in Light of *Amoris Laetitia*," *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): 923, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563916666824>.

26. Kelly, "Role of the Theologian," 927, quoting *Amoris Laetitia* 303.

27. Kelly, "Role of the Theologian," 931.

28. Kelly, "Role of the Theologian," 944.

traditions for use in moral discernment. While Kelly does not envision moral theologians acting as spiritual directors, developing a language of discernment which is both accessible and meaningful will require moral theologians themselves to be rooted in a community and to accompany it in order to learn and develop its language of discernment.

Kelly's argument provides insight into two important aspects of a synodal church. First, from a practical standpoint, developing common languages of discernment is essential if the synodal church is to have a culture of discernment. Without these languages, the ability to communicate one's discernments to others, and to receive assistance from others in discernment, is inhibited, a problem that is exacerbated when discernment moves from the local to the regional and universal levels of the church. Second, Kelly's focus on moral discernment is a reminder of how deeply connected pastoral contexts and doctrinal teachings are. While it is possible and necessary to notionally separate the pastoral and doctrinal, these categories are not independent of one another, but rather do influence each other: doctrine is discerned and received in the midst of the church's life, and the church's life is in turn guided by doctrine. A synodal church has the responsibility for discerning together how both the pastoral and the doctrinal express the church's apostolic tradition.<sup>29</sup>

Both leadership and mutual responsibility are necessary for ecclesial discernment. While Francis's inverted pyramid metaphor suggests the need for spiritualities, structures, and cultures of discernment within local churches, it is a unidirectional metaphor that may obscure the role of bishops in fostering discernment among the people of God and fail to adequately describe discernment as the responsibility of all the faithful. Positively, authority is not simply official in this metaphor, but rather is given authenticity through listening. This means ecclesial leadership is marked, as Francis indicates, by service, but service of a particular kind. It is a servant leadership whose role is not only to guide and care for the church, but also to cooperate with the Spirit who empowers the baptized to discern personally and communally both God's call and how to respond through their daily lives.<sup>30</sup> In the words of Ephesians, this leadership "is to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry . . . [so that] living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love" (Eph 4:12, 15). Thus in a synodal church bishops cannot simply wait expectantly to hear from the faithful as Francis's metaphor may imply; rather, part of episcopal ministry must be to actively encourage spiritualities of discernment and build the accompanying structures so all the faithful may fulfill their synodal ministry. Further, if the Synod of Bishops is to aid the pope's universal ministry then the pope should in turn aid bishops in empowering local churches for full participation in a synodal church.

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29. See Richard R. Gaillardetz, "Power and Authority in the Church: Emerging Issues," in *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*, ed. Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hahnenberg (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2015), 87–111 at 95. Gaillardetz cautions against considering the *sensus fidelium* "as inchoate doctrine, as if Christian wisdom cannot achieve its maturity until it has been received by the bishops and given normative expression as doctrine."

30. I am indebted to Christopher James of the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, for this insight, as well as the scriptural foundation that follows.



By equipping the faithful for synodal ministries, bishops model ecclesial leadership for both priests and lay ecclesial ministers, while emphasizing for all the faithful the importance of participation in spiritualities and structures of discernment. This means the church's growth in synodality is not up to the bishops alone, but is the responsibility of all the faithful. The ecclesial corollary to bishops empowering local churches is that the faithful must enter actively into discernment practices and structures by embracing the call to be adult daughters and sons of God, and engaging in ecclesial discernment through their own commitment to prayer, formation, dialogue, and daily acts of faith, including both service and justice. Particularly in cultures heavily influenced by consumerism this may require the faithful to reorient their relationship with their church communities: a shift from maximizing what is received *from the church* (and minimizing responsibility as members *of the church*), towards a more communal understanding of themselves as existing in ecclesial relationship *as the church*. Participation in the *sensus fidelium* is part of baptism, though one must embrace one's own part in the Body of Christ in order to be further formed in an ecclesial perspective, which, as Paul tells the Philippians, is to share the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5).

## Methodologies of Synodality

Synodality aims at consensus, and authentic consensus requires the honest sharing of the sense of faith lived within diverse and intersecting contexts: geographical, historical, cultural, racial, political, and economic. It is through and in relationship to these contexts that the church journeys within history.<sup>31</sup> A discernment that obscures these realities risks a shallow or false consensus, and may ignore conflict. Theological methodologies which explicitly engage context will be important for building a synodal church, and must account for the complexity of attending to local churches while discerning consensus regionally, nationally, and universally.

Though not specifically addressing synodality, Natalia Imperatori-Lee argues for a narrative ecclesiology which reorients the church towards the local and particular in a way that complements Francis's inverted pyramid metaphor. She underscores the connection between narrative history and the story of salvation which continues to be told through the lives of the faithful: "In contrast to totalizing metanarratives that erase differences in favor of a unifying story, an emphasis on narratives of particularity allows ecclesiology to avoid the marginalization of nondominant voices, and reveals, in some sense, the invariable core of the Christian message in all its various cultural, historical, and linguistic expressions."<sup>32</sup> Imperatori-Lee avers US Latino/a theology is

31. See Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 116, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html). Quoting John Paul II's *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Francis writes, "The history of the Church shows that Christianity does not have simply one cultural expression, but rather, 'remaining completely true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, it will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root.'"

32. Natalia M. Imperatori-Lee, "Unsettled Accounts: Latino/a Theology and the Church in the Third Millennium," in *A Church with Open Doors*, ed. Gaillardetz and Hahnenberg, 45–63 at 46.

well suited to assist the church in recovering particular voices within global Catholicism. This theology has been attentive to intercultural dialogue precisely because *latinidad* is an intercultural reality.<sup>33</sup> Imperatori-Lee describes *mestizaje*, “the (often violent) process of intermixing of cultures, races, and religious beliefs that occurred during the conquest and brought forth a new race in Latin America,” as well as *mulatez*, “the mixing of African and Spanish blood,” which are essential to understanding the intercultural experience of US *latinidad*.<sup>34</sup>

Through engagement with the historical and present realities of *mestizaje* and *mulatez*, Latino/a theologians are witnesses to power inequalities within and between communities, and uphold a preferential option for the culturally contextualized faith of impoverished and marginalized persons and communities. Drawing on María Pilar Aquino, Imperatori-Lee writes, “To approach ecclesiological method with such an intercultural, liberative purpose would mean to attend to the historical factors involved in erasing narratives of difference from the Catholic story, and then to reorient the story in order to take these narratives into account.”<sup>35</sup> This reorientation involves “accompaniment of the poor and marginalized and the constant attention to the sacredness of the (culturally plural) daily lives of Catholics.”<sup>36</sup>

Imperatori-Lee contends that *mestizaje* is not only critical to understanding *latinidad*, but also offers the global church an ecclesiological method rooted in collaboration. She cites the example of US bishops-sponsored *Encuentro* gatherings to demonstrate the potential for breaking down barriers between lay and clerical pastoral leadership as well as between pastoral leaders and theologians. These gatherings “exemplified how a collaborative process inclusive of divergent voices can foster unity in a diverse church” and in turn became a “crucial collaboration between pastoral work, ecclesiological insight, and doctrine.”<sup>37</sup> Imperatori-Lee underscores the parallel to Latino/a theological methods: “Building bridges between pastoral experience and systematic theology is a cornerstone of Latino/a theology,” which seeks both “fidelity to people’s faith experience and academic precision” through “a collaborative interdisciplinary process.”<sup>38</sup>

Imperatori-Lee is not advocating that the ecclesiological method developed by Latino/a theologians be an addition to the church’s life, but rather be a foundation for it. Her argument suggests Latino/a theological method can be a means of building up the practices and structures of a synodal church. This method’s merit for synodality is its ability to attend to the particular, whether personal or communal, while cultivating collaborative consensus which goes beyond merely acknowledging those who are marginalized to give priority to their experiences and expressions of faith. Further, a methodology that can be at once attentive to and descriptive of multiple experiences

33. Imperatori-Lee, “Unsettled Accounts,” 51.

34. Imperatori-Lee, “Unsettled Accounts,” 52.

35. Imperatori-Lee, “Unsettled Accounts,” 53.

36. Imperatori-Lee, “Unsettled Accounts,” 53.

37. Imperatori-Lee, “Unsettled Accounts,” 54.

38. Imperatori-Lee, “Unsettled Accounts,” 54–55.

and contexts with academic precision is necessary for communicating the sense of the faithful of a local church to other churches, as well as for local churches to receive the universal church well. Without such precision, the sense of the faithful may either be distilled into platitudes or distorted into something unrecognizable as it is communicated and received through various synodal structures beyond the local level, creating a shallow approach to synodality that mistakes uniformity for a truly catholic unity in diversity. This would ultimately prevent the Synod of Bishops from being an authentic site of convergent listening to the sense of the faithful, and present an obstacle to the synod's effective pastoral governance.

O. Ernesto Valiente's study of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) further illustrates the role of bishops' conferences in a synodal church which must have multiple sites of convergent listening. *Lumen Gentium* described national and international bishops' conferences as opportunities for pastoral collaboration reflecting collegiality.<sup>39</sup> Episcopal conferences can be an essential part of the synodal structures of the church by enabling bishops to discern together and articulate for themselves the pastoral needs and responses for their local churches. Valiente's examination of CELAM's reception of Vatican II offers insight into how synodality may operate in bishops' conferences that employ a methodology of particularity and attend to its accompanying sources.

For Valiente, CELAM's reception of Vatican II, at once creative and selective, provided a means for mutual illumination between council documents and the Latin American context: "In heeding Vatican II's call to discern the signs of the times, the Latin American church encounters the poor—the crucified—and in solidarity with them recognizes the stance that still guides its liberating mission: the church's preferential option for the poor."<sup>40</sup> This reception of the universal and the local churches informed the conference's pastoral responses, such as naming the social context of impoverishment and social inequality as structural sin. While Francis's inverted pyramid metaphor may describe the Synod of Bishops' process of receiving local churches, Valiente's study is a reminder this metaphor cannot sufficiently account for reception

39. *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), 23, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html). For a discussion of differing views on whether conferences are exercises of collegiality see Joseph A. Komonchak, "Introduction: Episcopal Conferences under Criticism," in *Episcopal Conferences*, ed. Thomas J. Reese (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown, 1989), 1–22. John Paul II's post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Pastores Gregis* described episcopal conferences as one of several ecclesial structures which can be collegial in "different degrees and in various modalities," and distinguished between "affective collegiality" and "effective collegiality" while reserving commentary on effective collegiality to his discussion of the college gathered in ecumenical council. John Paul II, *Pastores Gregis* (October 16, 2003), \8, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_20031016\\_pastores-gregis.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20031016_pastores-gregis.html) (accessed December 21, 2017).

40. O. Ernesto Valiente, "The Reception of Vatican II in Latin America," *Theological Studies* 73 (2012): 795–822 at 801, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056391207300403>.

in a synodal church as a whole, in which the universal and the local are continually in conversation.<sup>41</sup>

Valiente points out CELAM's reliance on the see, judge, act method developed by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn as chaplain to the Young Christian Workers in Belgium.<sup>42</sup> While the conference's reception of Vatican II was informed by its bishops' experiences of the council, CELAM's vision of the local churches was integrally shaped by its reception of the *comunidades eclesiales de base* (CEBs), or base communities, which were essential to a clear vision of the local churches. Beginning with its meeting at Medellín, CELAM understood CEBs as ecclesial structures that were "an official expression of the renewed Latin American church."<sup>43</sup> Receiving CEBs was an important part of CELAM's use of the see, judge, act method. Valiente writes, "Medellín recognized the CEBs' role as protagonists in the renewal of the Latin American church and thus considered them to be the 'initial cell of the ecclesiological structures' as well as 'the focus of evangelization . . . and the most important source of human achievement and development.'"<sup>44</sup> Engaged discernment from within the church's social and cultural contexts is a crucial way of seeing clearly not only sociological realities, but also how faith is incarnated in the midst of these realities. Without this vision, the further synodal steps of making judgements and forming plans of pastoral action are put at great risk.

With regard to a synodal church, CELAM's emphasis on the importance of CEBs raises the question of what ecclesial cells are present in other local churches, and whether conferences of bishops consciously employ a synodal method which fosters bishops' formation by the experiences of the faithful, particularly those who are marginalized (whether within society or within the church). Answering this question adequately must include consideration of additional or adapted ecclesial structures which would allow the people comprising these ecclesiological cells to discern and communicate their own contextual, theological reflections to the conferences. While a bishop should be formed by and symbolize the faith of his local church, ways must be found for local churches and ecclesial cells to be heard directly by bishops' conferences, so these gatherings may better be sites of synodality. Conversely, local churches and ecclesial cells must also have the opportunity to hear bishops' conferences so the process of mutual, discerning reception characteristic of a synodal church can continue.

Synodal methodologies must also take account of ecclesial communities and media milieux which may fall outside the typical structures of a diocese, and whose entry point into the pyramidal metaphor is less clear. For instance, Kevin Ahern has examined the role

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41. For example, Francis explicitly points to reception and implementation of the Synod's conclusions within the local church as aspects of the Synod of Bishops' process. Yet while he acknowledges the need for inculturation and views the Synod's process as originating with and returning to the faithful of the local church, he does not describe a process of reception and implementation built around discernment with the people of the local church. Francis, *Episcopalis Communio*, 7, Art. 19.

42. Kevin Ahern, *Structures of Grace: Catholic Organizations Serving the Global Common Good* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 27.

43. Valiente, "Reception of Vatican II," 808.

44. Valiente, "Reception of Vatican II," 808, quoting Medellín, "Joint Pastoral Planning," no. 10.

of lay-led international Catholic organizations, and describes an “ecology of reception” which recognizes the “distinct roles of different agents and the need for them to cooperate with one another in discerning the sense of the faith and the call of the Holy Spirit to apply the gospel to a changing world.”<sup>45</sup> Employing a similar metaphor, Stephen Okey considers social media as an ecology in which magisterial teaching is introduced, interpreted, debated, and, potentially, received.<sup>46</sup> These reception ecologies are part of the church’s reality, and so must be methodically incorporated into synodal practices and structures.

Valiente indicates sociological data have also been important for CELAM’s reception of ecclesial contexts.<sup>47</sup> Julie Clague pursues the question of how sociological data inform discernment within the Synod of Bishops, a line of inquiry which has implications for synodal practices throughout the church. While acknowledging the ambiguity of using statistics to determine the sense of the faithful, she argues that without taking sociological data into serious consideration, the Synod of Bishops risks forming a consensus limited to the bishops and pope, which does not represent an ecclesial consensus.<sup>48</sup>

Clague recalls *Apostolica Sollicitudo*’s statement that synods fulfill their purpose in part by supplying “accurate and direct information” on “matters and situations that bear upon the internal life of the church and upon the kind of action that should be carrying on in today’s world.”<sup>49</sup> For Clague, lack of consideration of statistical data contributes to the disjunction between the church’s doctrine and the practices of Catholics. She sees such a disjunction at work during the 1980 Synod on the Family: quantitative data was presented in ways that seemingly fulfilled the goals stated by *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, but not in a manner that addressed the concrete situation of the faithful by integrating sociological data into the bishops’ discerned consensus. She writes,

The Synod bishops provided information, they united around and cooperated with Pope John Paul II and agreement was reached. The bishops could agree upon and unite around the doctrine of the Church on marriage and family life, but only by choosing to ignore the fact that many—possibly most—of the world’s Catholics could not agree with and could not unite around certain aspects of the doctrine of the church on marriage and family life. Unity was forged in terms of the bishops, but not in terms of the Church.<sup>50</sup>

Clague’s distinction between a synodal consensus of bishops versus a synodal consensus of the church is significant. If the Synod of Bishops is a point where listening

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45. Kevin Ahern, “Instruments of Reception and Innovation: Lay Organizations and the Shaping of Social Doctrine.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Milwaukee, WI, April 13, 2015.

46. Stephen Okey, “Reception of Magisterial Teaching in the Ecology of Twitter.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Albuquerque, NM, June 9, 2017.

47. Valiente, “Reception of Vatican II,” 804.

48. Julie Clague, “Catholics, Families, and the Synod of Bishops: Views from the Pews,” *Heythrop Journal* 55 (2014): 985–1008, <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12224>.

49. Clague, “Catholics, Families, and the Synod of Bishops,” 985, quoting *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, part II.

50. Clague, “Catholics, Families, and the Synod of Bishops,” 988.

converges in the church's shared journey, it is not the place where either listening or the pilgrimage ends. Rather, the pastoral responses and teachings resulting from the Synod of Bishops will in turn need to be listened to by the larger church if they are to be received. If the faithful cannot hear a resonance between their own lives and the synod's outcomes, the church's pilgrimage is made more difficult. This is not to say the faithful should never expect to hear a call to conversion in a synod's outcomes, but rather to indicate that church teaching is drawn from and returns to the life of the church, and that pastoral responses must be able to take root in a wide range of contexts. Without learning from the reality of this contextualized faith, including from sociological data, the bishops' ability to effectively teach and govern in collaboration with the pope's universal ministry is diminished.

Clague addresses the problem of the gap between ecclesial and episcopal consensus when she writes, "Synod assemblies cannot do all the work of discernment required of the people of God. New institutional mechanisms must be found to allow the lay faithful to play their full part in the joint task of discerning the *sensus fidei* of the faithful, and in helping to close the gap between theological rhetoric and pastoral realities."<sup>51</sup> Read in conjunction with her emphasis on statistics, this assertion underscores the need for a synodal church to integrate statistical data into its discernment not only at the level of the Synod of Bishops, but also throughout its structures of discernment. Of course, statistical analysis is not generally part of the church's rich tradition of spirituality, and so discerning with statistics may seem a methodological step at once empirical and ambiguous.

Statistics are partial descriptions of the contexts and peoples of a living tradition, and require interpretation. Nevertheless, statistics may help to confirm the experiences of some members of the church, even while the realities statistics help to describe may be quite different than what some discerners experience in their own lives, either personally or communally. Thus one way in which statistics may serve discernment in a synodal church is by awakening those who are listening and discerning to the limitations of their own experiences and perspectives. In this way, statistics can help prompt the church to listen to those whose narratives are missing, marginalized, or excluded. This is essential because discerners ultimately hope to know God, who also transcends our lives and goes beyond our personal experiences. In other words, statistics can act as a critical corrective to a narrow discernment of pastoral realities and create an intellectual opening for discerning God's work among all the faithful.

Further, statistics that differentiate between the experiences, beliefs, and contexts of Catholics help to fulfill a central purpose of discernment, which is to be able to distinguish between these in order to see clearly.<sup>52</sup> Much as glasses help a nearsighted person to distinguish individual branches and leaves on a tree, so may statistics help the church to discern the many members and communities of the people of God in order to consider whose narratives are excluded or overrepresented. Qualitative questionnaires such as those sent to the faithful and young people prior to the 2014, 2015, and 2018 Synods showed an openness to using sociological methods. The importance of finding fruitful

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51. Clague, "Catholics, Families, and the Synod of Bishops," 1004.

52. Osheim, *Ministry of Discernment*, 103.

methods of consultation is underscored in *Episcopalis Communio*, which describes consultation of the Christian faithful in the local church as a normative part of the Synod of Bishops's process.<sup>53</sup> Consultative instruments need further refinement and to be well complemented by statistical data. And, as Clague points out, receiving data and discerning with it are two different but necessary steps for synodal methodologies.

As with all pilgrimages, the church's synodal path will include obstacles. Francis himself describes the temptations each of us may face, in addition to the natural limitations we encounter.<sup>54</sup> Reckoning with these temptations and human limitations is part of a collective growth in holiness which synodality necessarily calls forth. Yet the presence of conflict in the church's synodal path to holiness and unity is a reality unincorporated into the seemingly smooth flowing lines of an inverted pyramid, and which must be accounted for in synodal methodologies. Indeed, a more synodal church may well be one that is more aware of conflict. For instance, in her case study of a New England parish, Susan Crawford Sullivan makes note of the pastor's attempts to reduce polarization as well as the impact of a politically moderate social context in reducing extreme clashes among parishioners. Nevertheless, Sullivan also acknowledges the possibility that moderate and nonpolarized parishes like the one she studied "may be largely composed of relatively uninformed Catholics."<sup>55</sup> Since synodal practices and structures ask each of the faithful to discerningly receive the church's tradition into their own lives, becoming more informed Catholics means synodality may bring with it consciousness of contrast and conflict, both personal and communal. While the greater formation and investment necessary for a synodal church certainly need not result in division, it can be anticipated that points of substantial disagreement may increase in a synodal church.

A danger of conflict, as Hosffman Ospino indicates, is that disagreements which devolve into polemics weary those who do not stand at the poles such that "indifference and lack of involvement emerge as serious alternatives for them."<sup>56</sup> If the faithful engage in synodal practices and structures only to be overwhelmed by conflicts, then the participation that synodality is predicated upon may fail. Further, conflicts are not simply theological; rather they intersect with the contexts of particularity in which the church encounters God and lives out faithful responses to the divine call. The risk of polarization combined with the insights and limitations of particular contexts means the consensus of a synodal church is not reached by getting around conflict. Rather,

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53. Francis, *Episcopalis Communio*, 7; Art. 6.

54. Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Conclusion of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops" (October 18, 2014), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141018\\_conclusione-sinodo-dei-vescovi.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141018_conclusione-sinodo-dei-vescovi.html).

55. Susan Crawford Sullivan, "Whither Polarization? (Non)Polarization on the Ground," in *Polarization in the US Catholic Church: Naming the Wounds, Beginning to Heal*, ed. Mary Ellen Konieczny, Charles C. Camosy, and Tricia C. Bruce (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2016), 46–58 at 53, 56.

56. Hosffman Ospino, "The Unheeded Middle: Catholic Conservative–Liberal Polarities in an Increasingly Hispanic Church," in *Polarization in the US Catholic Church*, ed. Konieczny, Camosy, and Bruce, 130–44 at 135.

synodal methods must be developed in order to create space for conflicts to be shared, acknowledged, and worked through, and this must include understanding the particular contexts and perspectives which shape these conflicts.

What form might synodal methodologies addressing conflict take? Nichole M. Flores contends racism is not only part of the particular context of the United States, but is also an unacknowledged point of conflict within the church. She advocates for the development of aesthetic solidarity which

encourages practices of mindfulness and attention that foster compassion towards others. These practices, bearing affinity with Catholic contemplative traditions, promote attention to human particularity as a means of engaging the other. This particularity is often expressed and encountered through art and beauty . . . The discipline of aesthetic solidarity thus calls individuals to expand our perspectives through aesthetic engagement with the other.<sup>57</sup>

For Flores, creating opportunities for practicing aesthetic solidarity not only builds just relationships within the church, but also translates to the church's work for justice *ad extra*. Flores's argument could help those who are developing synodal methodologies be attentive to aesthetics as a means of both acknowledging conflict within the church and creating opportunities for aesthetic conversion towards justice and solidarity. This means synodal methods would not only be dialogical, but also experiential as church members together encounter and interpret beauty. These shared encounters shape both emotions and imaginations, allowing solidarity to develop.<sup>58</sup>

Raymond Olusesan Aina raises questions about methodologies of conflict within synodal processes. In his reflection on the *lineamenta* for the Second Synod for Africa, he argued the church must both recognize its role in conflict and also provide opportunities for victims of injustices to be heard.<sup>59</sup> Aina questioned whether a special session of the Synod of Bishops was needed, or if instead there should be "An African Palaver where elders and representatives of the continent 'digest' concrete stories—of victimhood, survivorhood, vulnerabilities, anger and love—from some of those who wear the shoes, and so know where the shoes are pinching them. Instead, Africa shall be discussed by our elders (bishops) who must make their intervention in the 'market square' in Rome . . . within seven minutes."<sup>60</sup> Aina's criticism means synodal methods are needed for directly hearing from people impacted by injustice and violence, as well as expanded time for their stories within synodal structures. The development of synodal methodologies throughout the church that deliberately engage with and allow time for stories of conflict to be told may also be fruitfully informed by the experiences of

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57. Nichole M. Flores, "When Discourse Breaks Down: Race and Aesthetic Solidarity in the US Catholic Church," in *Polarization in the US Catholic Church*, ed. Konieczny, Camosy, and Bruce, 101–10 at 106.

58. Flores, "When Discourse Breaks Down," 105.

59. Raymond Olusesan Aina, "The Second Synod for Africa and Its *Lineamenta*: Questions and Suggestions," *African Ecclesial Review* 49 (September–December 2007): 174.

60. Aina, "The Second Synod for Africa," 163.



pastoral ministers, as well as by sociological research into processes of reconciliation and consensus building.

Synodal methodologies attempt to weave stories of salvation within the church into an inclusive ecclesial narrative. Doing this well requires attention be given to those whose stories are often unheard, both within and outside the church, and that a preferential option for the stories of poor and marginalized persons be complemented by methodologies that intentionally amplify these voices and unplug closed ears. Methodologies that decenter the narrative, that intentionally seek to hear from local churches, that encourage the integration of sociological data into discernment processes, and that engage conflict and injustice within the church are all needed in order for synodality to lead to more authentic consensus within the church.

### Ecumenical Gifts of Synodality

The Roman Catholic Church need not create synodal theologies and structures from scratch, but may rather look to other Christian traditions to discern how the Holy Spirit has led their own development in synodality. Thus the journey to a synodal church may become an ecumenical pilgrimage which draws the churches closer together in ecclesial understanding and union. Nicholas Denysenko and Denis Edwards offer insights into the ecumenical gifts of synodality offered by the Orthodox and Lutheran traditions.

Denysenko reviews the work of several Orthodox theologians who describe the “perichoretic ministries of primacy, synodality, collegiality, and reception.”<sup>61</sup> These ministries are rooted in eucharistic ecclesologies such that primacy, synodality, collegiality, and reception arise from the church’s liturgical life. Denysenko first discusses Nicholas Afanasiev’s conception of the eucharistic relationship between bishops and laity as concelebrants of the liturgy who offer the eucharist together.<sup>62</sup> This liturgical collegiality informs an ecclesiology in which bishops teach and laity receive. Yet the laity’s reception is not passive; instead it involves “the crucial lay ministry of examining, judging, and confirming.”<sup>63</sup> Denysenko next turns to Kallistos Ware who describes the “gift of discernment” given to the baptized at Chrismation. For Ware, “The church as the assembly of believers possesses the power of discernment and interpretation and shares this authority with the episcopate, to the extent that the Church as a whole can be considered infallible.”<sup>64</sup> Thus while bishops articulate church teachings, the laity are “guardians” of the faith who give their assent to the bishops’ teachings in their lives of faith. Denysenko finds in John Zizioulas similar commitments to building ecclesiology upon eucharistic theology: the bishop’s eucharistic ministry requires the assembly of the people, and thus “his entire ministry

61. Nicholas E. Denysenko, “Primacy, Synodality, and Collegiality in Orthodoxy: A Liturgical Model,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 48 (2013): 20–44 at 22.

62. Denysenko, “Primacy, Synodality, and Collegiality,” 23.

63. Denysenko, “Primacy, Synodality, and Collegiality,” 23.

64. Denysenko, “Primacy, Synodality, and Collegiality,” 23–24.

requires the *consensus fidelium*, the ‘Amen’ of the people.”<sup>65</sup> Denysenko sees Zizioulas as attempting to “hold together the necessary dialogical character of the one (bishop) and the many (laity) rooted in the eucharist and the Trinity, while insisting on synodality and various levels of primacy exercised by local bishops in communion with one another.”<sup>66</sup> These varying levels of primacy accompany three forms of Orthodox synodality: the bishop in the local church, the metropolitan of the churches of a region, and the patriarch as *primus* of regions.

Denysenko’s own examination of the rite of ordination of bishops and surrounding rituals discovers liturgical patterns for dialogical and collegial relationships between laity and bishops. For example, he indicates prior to the eucharistic liturgy in which the ordination takes place, the bishop-elect makes an affirmation of faith:

The context of the rite of a bishop’s ordination is important, as the liturgical dialogues between the candidate and the bishops in the presence of the laity establish the pattern of dialogical ministry that the bishop will exercise after his ordination. The bishop will discuss theological and pastoral matters and establish his agenda with his fellow bishops (synodality), and the laity will witness to the exercise of his ministry. The structure of the rite thus establishes that collegiality is shared not merely among ordained bishops but is also extended to the laity, since they actively participate in his ordination.<sup>67</sup>

Denysenko acknowledges Orthodoxy’s stronger expressions of synodality occur on the local and regional levels, hence “the rite of a bishop’s ordination accentuates the local quality of ecclesial independence rather than interdependence with others.”<sup>68</sup> This highlights the ongoing ecumenical conversation between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism in terms of what the latter may learn about synodality and collegiality and what the former may learn about universal primacy.<sup>69</sup> He also notes that dialogue, synodality, and collegiality reflected in the ordination rites do not necessarily translate to pastoral practices, such as the selection of bishops for ordination and structures which “invite laity to contribute to the Church’s ministries of teaching and clarifying faith and morals.”<sup>70</sup> Here he notes positively the example of the Metropolitan Council

65. Denysenko, “Primacy, Synodality, and Collegiality,” 25, quoting John Zizioulas, “Primacy in the Church: An Orthodox Approach,” in *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church: “Toward a Patient and Fraternal Dialogue”—A Symposium Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the Foundation for the Society of the Atonement*, ed. James F. Puglisi (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), 115–25 at 119.

66. Denysenko, “Primacy, Synodality, and Collegiality,” 25.

67. Denysenko, “Primacy, Synodality, and Collegiality,” 31.

68. Denysenko, “Primacy, Synodality, and Collegiality,” 37.

69. Denysenko, “Primacy, Synodality, and Collegiality,” 37.

70. Denysenko, “Primacy, Synodality, and Collegiality,” 40. See also Andrew Louth, “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning—an Orthodox Perspective,” in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 361–72 at 368. Louth comments with regard to eucharistic and synodal ecclesiology, “I would beg that we attend to what happens, and not just to theory. Orthodox are just as good as Catholics at paying synodality little more than lip service.”

of the Orthodox Church in America which includes both lay and clerical representations as consultors.

Denysenko's analysis of these three Orthodox theologians as well as his own scholarship raise several questions for synodality in Roman Catholicism. First, the Roman Catholic Church has limited its understanding of collegiality to the college of bishops. It is worth noting that even this claim met with resistance during its formulation in Vatican II debates, in part due to concerns about its lack of scriptural foundations compounded by fears of how collegiality might contradict papal primacy. Further, which ecclesial structures "count" as exercises of collegiality continued to be debated after the council's close.<sup>71</sup> Drawing on Afanasiev's eucharistic theology could lead to an expanded sense of collegiality within Roman Catholicism. For instance, the participation of the people of God in diocesan synods could be envisioned as an expression not only of the church's synodality, but also of the collegiality of an apostolic church, in which all the baptized manifest the church's apostolicity, both in their faithfulness to the tradition of the apostles, and also as themselves apostles sent to the world. In turn, an apostolicity and collegiality inclusive of the laity should be reflected in regional and universal synodal structures.

Similarly, Ware's theology challenges a Roman Catholic tendency to align guarding the faith solely with the role of its episcopal shepherds. To view the *sensus fidelium* as the laity's role in guarding the faith not only highlights the *sensus fidelium*'s role in expressing and maintaining the apostolic tradition, but also gives greater emphasis to the significance of the faithful's discerning reception or non-reception of magisterial teaching. Ziziou's assertion of the importance of the laity's "amen" to the bishop in liturgy provides a liturgical symbol for lay reception, and his outline of three aspects of primacy, each rooted in synodality, may provide a pathway for reconsidering the structures of the church from the local to universal as varying structures of synodality which are mutually dependent upon, rather than subordinate to, each other. This would not only give greater emphasis to practices of synodality within the local church, but also give stronger weight to regional and national synods. Finally, with Denysenko, Roman Catholic ecclesialogists could consider what ordination rituals and eucharistic liturgies illuminate or obscure about relationships in the church, and how these liturgies may be sites of the church's synodality. For instance, how might the dynamics of gathering and sending, offering and reception, in the eucharistic liturgy be the prototype for the mutuality of a synodal church?

Denis Edwards focuses on synodality as an "institutional charism" of one church that a dialoguing church might be "called to receive and take into its own life as a gift of the Spirit."<sup>72</sup> In addition to being offered the gift of synodality through the Orthodox, Edwards believes the dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) offers the Catholic Church the opportunity to receive the more particular gift of lay involvement in synodal

71. See note 39 above on collegiality.

72. Denis Edwards, "Synodality and Primacy: Reflections from the Australian Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue," *Pacifica* 28 (2015): 137–38.

structures.<sup>73</sup> This gift exchange has already begun. Through its dialogue with the Catholic Church, the LCA was offered the institutional charism of the office of bishop, which, after discernment, the LCA received by renaming their office of “president” to “bishop.” Describing this shift in a joint declaration, Roman Catholic dialogue participants expressed hope for the change to be more than nominal: “While this may involve a change of language from president to bishop, the more significant change would be part of that on-going reform, embracing in ever deeper ways the ancient common tradition of the church, in which the bishop was seen as sign and agent of communion in a local church.”<sup>74</sup>

Conversely, Edwards notes Roman Catholics participating in this dialogue have discerned as a gift the LCA’s synodal practices of lay inclusion. The Convention of Synod is comprised of elected representatives from the laity and clergy who assemble every three years as the church’s primary and highest decision-making body. A second synodal structure, the General Pastors Conference, convenes at the same time as the Convention of Synod and advises it “on theological and confessional matters.”<sup>75</sup> Edwards suggests two ways for the Catholic Church to receive this institutional charism of the LCA. The first reception is a reform of the Synod of Bishops such that “Synods become, and are seen to be, a regular and normal way of the church exercising its ministry of teaching and pastoral leadership.”<sup>76</sup> This reform would involve decentralization by recognizing the authority of local bishops and bishops’ conferences with a concomitant reduction in the leadership by the Roman Curia.<sup>77</sup>

Edwards’s second proposal for receiving the LCA’s gift of synodality is to establish a general pastoral council for the universal church. This council would be a translation of the Convention of Synod into the Roman Catholic Church’s institutional structures. The general pastoral council and Synod of Bishops would become a twofold synodal structure. Edwards argues that while parish and pastoral councils exist on the diocesan and parish levels, there is not a structure allowing laity, particularly women, to participate in dialogue on the universal level:

Because they possess the gifts of the Spirit, the [Second Vatican] Council teaches, the lay faithful should make known to their pastors “their needs and desires with that freedom and confidence which befits children of God and sisters and brothers in Christ.” They have “the right and indeed sometimes the duty to make known their opinions on matters which concern the good of the church” and “if possible, this should be done through the institutions set up for this purpose by the church.” If this is to happen at the level of the universal church, then it seems to demand a

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73. Edwards, “Synodality and Primacy,” 139. Francis retains the practice of inviting *periti*, auditors, fraternal delegates from other Christian churches and traditions, as well as special guests to attend the Synod of Bishops, but without voting rights. Francis, *Episcopalis Communio*, 8; Art. 12.

74. Edwards, “Synodality and Primacy,” 140, quoting Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue in Australia, *The Ministry of Oversight: The Office of Bishop and President in the Church* (2000–2007), 129.

75. Edwards, “Synodality and Primacy,” 142.

76. Edwards, “Synodality and Primacy,” 145.

77. Edwards, “Synodality and Primacy,” 145.

new participatory structure that can enable what Pope Francis calls a new form of pastoral dialogue at this level of church life.<sup>78</sup>

While lay participation in synodality at the local and regional levels itself is in need of development, Edwards is helpful in suggesting a forum for lay synodal participation on the universal level. It might be that the proposed general pastoral council could meet in consultative concert with the Synod of Bishops as a means of expressing not only the idea of lay collegiality, but also the *ad intra* exercise of the laity's baptismal vocation. If a general pastoral council were created, the relationship between the vocations of the laity and ordained with regard to Christ's kingly office would need further reflection. This examination would also be a timely way of considering how the kingly roles function in the local church, both within diocesan pastoral councils and parish councils, and between lay ecclesial ministers and the ordained.

Edwards's proposal of a general pastoral council comprised of laity raises two additional points for consideration: representation and resources in a synodal church. Roman Catholicism holds that the bishop symbolizes the local church's faith as well as of the universal church's faith; yet in the Synod of Bishops the bishop is to represent not only his diocese, but also his conference, which in itself creates issues for the representation of the *sensus fidelium* of local churches within the Synod of Bishops.<sup>79</sup> This concern about representation is compounded with regard to the laity, who have not had the same symbolic function in Catholic ecclesiology. A general pastoral council would rightly raise the question of whom the lay members are representing. In addition, time and circumstances may mean it is particularly difficult for some laity to participate in councils, thus diminishing or removing their voices in the universal synodal structure. Resources, both communal and financial, would be needed to aid those who take time away from family and work in order to participate in a general pastoral council. While these issues of representation and resources are not insurmountable, they would require careful theological and practical consideration were the church to implement a universal synodal structure inclusive of the laity. In addition to the LCA, the experiences and theologies of laity and synodality in other Christian traditions, such as the Church of England, may provide further insight into these questions.<sup>80</sup>

Receiving the synodal theologies and structures of other traditions requires discernment, as well as the awareness of the distance between theory and practice. Further, both theologies and structures develop in relation to contexts. This means translation, rather than replication, is required and that understanding both the originating and

78. Edwards, 147, quoting *Lumen Gentium* 37.

79. Francis, *Episcopalis Communio*, 6.

80. Patrick Connolly, "Receptive Ecumenical Learning and Episcopal Accountability within Contemporary Roman Catholicism—Canonical Considerations," in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, ed. Murray, 241–52 at 249. Connolly notes diocesan synods in the Church of England are comprised of laity, clergy, and bishops who exercise deliberative functions. See also Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Gift of Authority* (1998), 34–40, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_12051999\\_gift-of-aurity\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_12051999_gift-of-aurity_en.html).

the receiving traditions' contexts is necessary. Yet, this process of contextualized understanding and adaptation is itself an ecumenical exercise in synodality: listening to the Spirit at work in another's tradition, discerning how that tradition may be received into one's own, and offering one's own gifts in return. As Margaret O'Gara notes, risk is inherent in this exchange: "Churches engaged in serious ecumenical dialogue experience not only the mutuality of gift exchange, but also the refusal of the gift they enthusiastically offer to others. And they experience as well the fear within themselves of receiving a reading of the Gospel which their partner engagingly holds out to them."<sup>81</sup> Yet, it is through this vulnerable process of offer and potential reception that Christian churches learn from each other how to be united.

## Conclusion

What steps are necessary for a more synodal church? The essence of synodality itself dictates that in order to journey together, the people of God must come together to identify and commit to practices, structures, and methodologies which allow for mutual listening, discernment, and decision-making. The theological literature consulted above points to possible steps towards greater synodality, and also provides a sense of the breadth of ways synodality may affect the church's life. As an ecclesiolgist, this leaves me feeling as I used to as an undergraduate on the first day of class: the course might sound interesting, but the syllabus was definitely daunting. In conclusion, then, I offer as consolation three principles for those committed to synodality to keep in mind: time, *ressourcement*, and mission.

Roman Catholics are learning to be a more synodal church: we should expect this will take time, and that there will be mistakes as well as real steps forward (and that telling the difference between the two may be difficult). Further, a synodal church requires time for the people of God to be with one another in prayer and dialogue, to attend to the Spirit's prompting to speak and listen, to seek truth and reconciliation, to build mutuality and trust. Also, once a synodal event has taken place, time is needed to absorb and respond to it. Commenting on the reception process of the first African Synod, Aina writes, "as my Yoruba elders remark: '*A kii kan 'ju l'abe gb'ona*'—'one does not hurriedly lick a hot soup.' The first 'African Synod' is a 'hot soup' that we need to lick with relish and space so that we can soak up its nourishment, aroma, and energy."<sup>82</sup> Indeed, this need for savoring is why synodality is not simply an event, methodology, or structure, but rather a way of being transformed together as the church.

Synodality will also be a retrieval, but not only of the church's traditions of spirituality or synodal structures. Most essentially synodality is a *ressourcement* of the *sensus fidelium* through attentiveness to each person who shares in the common Christian life and contributes to a living tradition and the church's story of salvation. Such a retrieval is a collective re-membling of the people of God. It requires the ecclesial conversion

81. Margaret O'Gara, "Receiving Gifts in Ecumenical Dialogue," in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, ed. Murray, 26–38 at 30.

82. Aina, "The Second Synod for Africa," 161.

that is reform's authentic foundation. Greater synodality will be a means of turning towards one another and thus of turning to God who makes the church Christ's body and the Spirit's temple.

While the church's synodality is important for the mutual care and strengthening of its members, the people of God do not journey for themselves alone, and neither does synodality bear fruit only within the church. Rather than creating a church turned inward upon itself, through synodal practices and structures, the church discerns how to live faithfully in the midst of particular contexts, a necessary part not only of the church's unity, holiness, and catholicity, but also of learning how to live out its apostolic call to encounter others and share the gospel. The grace of journeying together as the people of God does not remove the difficulties of mission, though it provides the hope which comes from being attuned to the presence of the Holy Spirit who abides with the church on its pilgrimage.

### **Author Biography**

Amanda C. Osheim (PhD, Boston College) is Associate Professor of Practical Theology at Loras College in Dubuque, IA, where she is currently the Endowed Professor of the Breitbart Catholic Thinkers and Leaders Program. Her publications include *A Ministry of Discernment: The Bishop and the Sense of the Faithful* (Liturgical, 2016).