


Pope Francis on the Practice of Synodality and the Fifth Australian Plenary Council

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Abstract

This article argues that Pope Francis adopts a practice-focused approach to synodality, and it examines key elements of that approach, including the practice of ecclesial discernment, and the requirement that the church read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel. In this light, the article reflects on the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, showing both how it has learned from Francis's teaching on synodality and how it can contribute to the developing practice of synodality in the Roman Catholic Church.

Keywords

Australian Plenary Council, ecclesial discernment, Pope Francis, signs of the times, spiritual conversation, synodality

The ministry of Pope Francis has borne fruit in many facets of Catholic life in Australia. The impact of *Laudato Si'*,¹ for example, has been widespread, including the development of educational programs on integral ecology offered in Catholic primary and secondary schools, and even the design of new schools, both architecturally and educationally, based on the encyclical's key principles.² It is,

1. Francis, *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.
2. See, for example, St Francis of Assisi College, the *Laudato Si'*-designed school at Renmark, South Australia, <https://www.assisi.catholic.edu.au/>.

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however, Francis's teaching on synodality that has made the greatest impact on Australian Catholic life. The Fifth Plenary Council of Australia (2018–2022, hereafter referred to as the Plenary Council) illustrates this impact.³ This article examines Francis's teaching and practice on synodality in the light of the Plenary Council. It begins with an account of his approach to synodality, and then reflects on the operation of the Plenary Council in that light, with two key foci: first, the process of "spiritual conversation," around which the Plenary Council was structured; and second, the necessity that the church accurately read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel.

An Approach to Ecclesial Discernment and the Development of a Synodal Church

Over the last decade, Francis has placed the practice of synodality at the center of the life of the Catholic Church, with synods on marriage and family in 2014–2015, on young people in 2018, for the Amazon region in 2019, and on synodality, planned for October 2023–2024. Alongside the preparation for synods, the events themselves, and the national synods that have ensued, synodality has been a constant aspect of Francis's teaching, redefining the meaning and purpose of synods themselves. His address marking the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops states his commitment most clearly: synodality is "a constitutive element of the Church" and "the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry."⁴

Yet, as I hope to show below, Francis's is not a "theory driven" approach to ecclesial life, seeking to implement an already-espoused conception of a synodal church. He is fundamentally a pastor, a spiritual and ecclesial leader, and a Jesuit, and these roles orient his approach to synodality. His homily to open the 2021–2024 synodal process exemplifies this approach. Reflecting on the story of Jesus's encounter with the rich young man (Mk 10:17–27), Francis emphasizes Jesus's journey with the man, and his listening to and encounter with him. Against that background, Francis asserts that "participating in a Synod means placing ourselves on the same path as the Word made flesh. It means following in his footsteps, listening to his word along with the word of others." He explains that "the Synod is a process of spiritual discernment, of ecclesial discernment, that unfolds in adoration, in prayer and in dialogue with the word of God. . . . That word summons us to discernment and it brings light in that process. It guides the Synod, preventing it from becoming a Church convention, a

3. See <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/>.

4. Francis, "Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops" (Rome, October 17, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

study group or a political gathering, a parliament, but rather a grace-filled event, a process of healing guided by the Spirit.”⁵

Several scholars evaluate Francis’s approach similarly. Rafael Luciani emphasizes pastoral conversion: “What is novel in the vision of Francis is not synodality itself; it is his conviction that synodality can be made a reality only through pastoral conversion.”⁶ Massimo Faggioli observes that Francis “always stresses the spiritual, non-institutional dimension of the synodal movement.”⁷ Antonio Spadaro traces Francis’s approach to its Ignatian roots (sketched in my next section) and argues that to oppose the spiritual and the institutional in Francis’s thought is to misunderstand him. Rather, “the driving force of the pontificate is not the ability to do things or to institutionalize change always and in every case, but to discern times and moments of an emptying so that the mission lets Christ be seen more clearly. It is discernment itself that is the systematic structure of reform, which takes the shape of an institutional order.”⁸

What each of these scholars identify is what I want to call the pastoral or practice-focused approach evident in the manner of Francis’s teaching on synodality, which invariably responds to the concerns of particular situations—that is, it is contextual.⁹ My argument is that such a focus on practice and ecclesial discernment can resolve the tensions and seeming contradictions that scholars find in Francis’s teaching—for example, the perception that “synodality is not about institutional reform”¹⁰ when,

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5. Francis, “Homily at the Opening Mass of the Synodal Path” (Rome, October 10, 2021), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-ome-lia-sinodo-vescovi.html>.
 6. Rafael Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church*, trans. Joseph Owens (New York: Paulist Press, 2022), 29.
 7. Massimo Faggioli, “Synod and Synodality in Pope Francis’s Words,” *The Way* 59, no. 4 (October 2020): 89–100 at 100.
 8. Antonio Spadaro, “Francis’s Government: What Is the Driving Force of His Pontificate?,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 4, no. 9 (October 14, 2020), <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/francis-government-what-is-the-driving-force-of-his-pontificate/>.
 9. The term “pastoral” can often be taken to mean the application of doctrinal or canonical norms to a particular situation. But Francis’s approach is far more sophisticated: it has a circular dynamic. Because the theology of synodality is an account of ecclesial life, the evidence that such a theology expresses the faith of the community will be found in the quality of ecclesial life that the theology articulates and enables. This dynamic has much in common with the “principle of pastorality” that Christoph Theobald identifies at work in the later stages of Vatican II, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*, §44. See Christoph Theobald, “The Principle of Pastorality at Vatican II: Challenges of a Prospective Interpretation of the Council,” in *The Legacy of Vatican II*, ed. Massimo Faggioli and Andrea Vicini (New York: Paulist Press, 2015), 26–37. On Pope Francis and the “pastorality of doctrine,” see Richard R. Gaillardetz, “The Pastoral Orientation of Doctrine,” in *Go into the Streets! The Welcoming Church of Pope Francis*, ed. Thomas P. Rausch and Richard R. Gaillardetz (New York: Paulist Press, 2016), ch. 8.
 10. See Faggioli, “Synod and Synodality,” 99, summarizing the approach Francis takes in *Querida Amazonia*.

clearly, it is reforming the institution of the church and, indeed, part of the reform mandated by Vatican II.

Yet such an approach, one that focuses on the pastoral, does not undermine the need to develop a comprehensive theology of synodality. The relationship between a theology of synodality and the practice of ecclesial discernment is two-way. Theological reflection on synodality, particularly as it was lived in the first millennium, will inform our emerging synodal practice. Yet, our emerging practice will, in turn, help to develop the theology of synodality, enabling it to become more clairvoyant about what it means for us to live as a synodal church today. Unsurprisingly, Francis's pastoral approach is heavily indebted to his Ignatian heritage, as I will now show.

Francis, Synodality, and the Ignatian Practice of Communal Discernment

Francis's addresses and homilies preparing for and following synods, as well as his direct teaching on synodality, are replete with the primary themes of Ignatian spirituality. He makes that connection himself in the early months of his pontificate. When asked in September 2013 about what it means for a Jesuit to be Bishop of Rome, he spoke of discernment as central to Ignatius's life and foundational for "real and effective change" in the church, insisting that synods and consistories be inherently consultative: "We must, however, give them a less rigid form. I do not want token consultations, but real consultations."¹¹

In a detailed study of Francis's teaching on synodality, Belgian Jesuit Jacques Haers argues that an understanding of synodality and of the Ignatian practice of common apostolic discernment are intertwined in the pope's teaching.¹² Haers sees them as parallel approaches, and argues that a burgeoning body of Jesuit literature and significant letters by each of the last four Jesuit superiors general on common apostolic discernment form the background to the connection Francis makes with synodality.¹³ Haers identifies the following common dynamics: "The need for indifference, the journey with Jesus, the challenge to feel with the church (*sentire cum ecclesia*), the criterion of inner joy and consolation in processes of decision-making, the regular practice of the examination of conscience, trust in the word of the Spirit in individuals and communities, and determination of religious superiors to act in concord with their appointed counselors."¹⁴

11. Francis, "Interview with Antonio Spadaro" (Rome, September 21, 2013), 8, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html.

12. Jacques Haers, "A Synodal Process on Synodality: Synodal Missionary Journeying and Common Apostolic Discernment," *Louvain Studies* 43, no. 3 (2020): 215–38 at 224. There are, of course, other Christian approaches to discernment, including that of the Benedictines, as well as those practiced by the many other religious congregations.

13. Haers, "A Synodal Process," 221–22.

14. Haers, "A Synodal Process," 216. For an insightful account of the affective dimension of discernment in both Ignatian spirituality and the practice of synodality, see Jos Moons, "Synodality and Discernment: The Affective Reconfiguration of the Church," *Studia Canonica* (forthcoming).

While these dynamics are threaded through Francis's writings of the past decade, his address to open the Amazonian synod gives prominence to several of them, with a particular emphasis on synodality as missionary, and journeying with Jesus under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He urges the synod to approach the peoples and cultures of the Amazon "on tip-toe" and interpret their reality with disciples' eyes. This interpretation, he says, will be born out of prayer, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is the reality of synodality:

We have come here to contemplate, to comprehend, to serve the peoples. And we do so by taking a synodal path. . . . Synod means walking together under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the primary actor of the synod. . . .

I ask you to pray, a great deal. Reflect, dialogue, listen with humility. . . . And speak with courage, with *parrhesia*.¹⁵

Reading the "Signs of the Times"

The ecclesial discernment that Francis urges on the church is anything but inwardly focused: it is engaged, it is missionary. He insists that "the programmatic significance" of *Evangelii Gaudium* is that the entire church be "permanently in a state of mission."¹⁶ Oriented in that way, the believing community is both actor and acted upon. In each culture, the church must find expression for the good news of Jesus Christ (*EG*, §§68–75), but it must also, at every moment, "distinguish clearly [in the culture] what might be a fruit of the kingdom from what runs counter to God's plan" (*EG*, §51).

The latter task, of distinguishing between fruits and distortions of the kingdom, is what *Gaudium et Spes* calls "reading the signs of the times in the light of the gospel"¹⁷—a significant development in Catholic teaching. John O'Malley points out that Vatican II was more historically conscious than any previous council, in that it attempted to take seriously the historical dimension of religious truth.¹⁸ The council came to the understanding that historicity is an intrinsic dimension of the way in which God acts in the world.¹⁹ Because God chooses to reveal God's self in history—most particularly

15. Francis, "Address to Open the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region" (Rome, October 7, 2019), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/october/documents/papa-francesco_20191007_apertura-sinodo.html.

16. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §25 (November 24, 2013), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (hereafter cited as *EG* in the text).

17. *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), esp. §§4, 11, and 44, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (hereafter cited as *GS*).

18. See John W. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," *Theological Studies* 32, no. 4 (1971): 573–601 at 584.

19. I have set out this argument in detail in James Gerard McEvoy, *Leaving Christendom for Good: Church–World Dialogue in a Secular Age* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2014), 76–80.

in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—history has intrinsic significance for humanity's salvation. With the phrase "reading the signs of the times," *Gaudium et Spes* conveys that the church, in continuing the mission of Christ, must be attentive to "the happenings, needs and desires which this People has a part along with [all people] of our age" in order that it might "decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose."²⁰

While the phrase "the signs of the times" appears infrequently in Francis's writing, the concept pervades his teaching on ecclesial life. Peter Hünemann observes that, although the phrase has its origin at the time of the council, Francis has "deepened and operationalized the use of these *signs of the times* in the assessments of social situations and positions."²¹ Chapters 1, 3, and 5 of *Laudato Si'* examine the various manifestations of, causes of, and possible responses to the ecological crisis, a reading of the signs of the times in that context.²² Chapters 1, 3, and 5 of *Fratelli Tutti* draw out both the deep challenges and the strengths of a global culture under the influence of neoliberalism.²³ Similar readings of the times provide a frame for much of Francis's writing.

The dynamics of this approach are spelled out most clearly in Francis's address to theologians of the Mediterranean region, in which he speaks of a dialogical way of proceeding: "a dialogue capable of integrating the living criterion of Jesus' Paschal Mystery with that of analogy, which discovers connections, signs, and theological references in reality, in creation and in history." He explicates this in terms of movements from below and from above:

Both movements are necessary and complementary: a *bottom-up* movement that can dialogue, with an attitude of listening and discernment, with every human and historical instance, taking into account the breadth of what it means to be human; and a *top-down* movement—where "the top" is that of Jesus lifted up on the cross—that allows, at the same time, to discern the signs of the Kingdom of God in history and to understand prophetically the signs of the anti-Kingdom that disfigure the soul and human history.²⁴

Two *signs of the times* that hold Francis's attention, and that are germane to the Australian Plenary Council, are the place of women in society and the church, and the

20. GS, §11. Vatican II's phrase "reading the signs of the times" reflects the view of history developed in twentieth-century Thomistic theology. See Marie-Dominique Chenu, "The History of Salvation and the Historicity of Man in the Renewal of Theology," *Renewal of Religious Thought*, ed. L. K. Shook (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 153–66; Christophe Potworowski, *Christianity and Incarnation: The Theology of Marie-Dominique Chenu* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001), 83–115.

21. Peter Hünemann, "Foreword," in Rafael Luciani, *Synodality*, ix.

22. Francis, *Laudato Si'*, chs. 1, 3, and 5.

23. Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (October 3, 2020), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

24. Francis, "Address on Theology after *Veritatis Gaudium* in the Context of the Mediterranean" (Naples, June 21, 2019), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco_20190621_teologia-napoli.html.

meaning of contemporary secularization. Over the past decade, Francis has strongly affirmed the need for the church to recognize women's and men's equal dignity. This involves not only fostering women's roles in the church or, as Francis puts it, the task of creating "still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church" (*EG*, §103); it also involves the imperative that the church better appreciate the meaning of women's lives for ecclesial life—that we "work harder to develop a profound theology of the woman."²⁵

While the latter point has drawn strong criticism, alleging that the pope is ignorant of the well-developed field of feminist theology, perhaps his point is neither a critique of, nor is ignorant of, feminist theology but is, rather, a reading of the contemporary ecclesial landscape. Let me explain. Since the late eighteenth century, western culture has been transformed by what Pierre Rosanvallon calls the principle of social equality.²⁶ Emerging through the French and American revolutions, this principle has resulted over time in the establishment of universal suffrage in democracies and, since the 1960s, has exploded across western culture, transforming employment practices, domestic roles, university education, and almost every other sphere of social life. Giving expression to the principle of social equality, the lived practice of the equal dignity of women and men has progressively been established, although it is far from being fully realized. It has occasioned a large cultural shift, including a broadly shared understanding that women's equal dignity entails their participation at every level of social and political life, including that of leadership. Perhaps Francis's point is that such an understanding and lived practice of women's equality (a "more profound theology") is not yet achieved across the whole Catholic community. Such a claim would seem to me undeniable.

In addressing a second "sign," secularization, Francis contrasts two ecclesial approaches to the phenomenon: a "negative view" and a "discerning view," and he cautions strongly against falling prey to pessimism or resentment in understanding the shifting place of religion.²⁷ He argues that secularization must be understood in the context of the broad social shifts of recent centuries. And in concluding, he cites Charles Taylor's magisterial work, *A Secular Age*: "If we consider this aspect [the broad social shifts of recent centuries] of the question, we come to realize that what is in crisis is not the faith, but some of the forms and ways in which we present it. Consequently, secularization represents a challenge for our pastoral imagination, it is 'an occasion for restructuring the spiritual life in new forms and for new ways of existing.'"²⁸ A discerning reading of secularization should bring to birth new, imaginative, and faithful ways of living the Gospel.

25. Francis, "Interview with Antonio Spadaro," 14.

26. Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Society of Equals*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

27. Francis, "Homily at Vespers in Basilica of Notre-Dame de Québec" (Québec, July 28, 2022), 2, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220728-ome-lia-vespri-quebec.html>.

28. Francis, "Homily at Vespers," 3. Interior quote from Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 437.

I turn now to show how these two themes of ecclesial discernment and reading the signs of the times are at play in the recent Australian Plenary Council. But first, I provide an overview of the key emphases that characterize Francis's thought on synodality.

A Developing Theology of Synodality

In his *Magna Carta* on synodality, the address on the fiftieth anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Francis not only commits to make that body more central to the life of the Catholic Church, but he also depicts synodality as the dynamic reality at every level of ecclesial life, and therefore to be fostered at each of those levels. A large part of the address discusses the synodal activity of the various bodies—local churches or dioceses, ecclesiastical provinces and episcopal conferences, and the Synod of Bishops itself—yet the metaphors that govern his descriptions of those bodies are of “walking together” and “listening,” activities of the entire people:

A synodal Church is 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” (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he “says to the Churches” (Rv 2:7).²⁹

What invests listening with such significance here is the sense of the faith possessed by the whole people. Francis cites *Lumen Gentium* in support of this: “The whole body of the faithful, who have an anointing which comes from the holy one (cf. 1 Jn 2:20, 27), cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people of God.”³⁰ Synodality, therefore, must involve the whole people of God in discerning their sense of the faith in the circumstances of their time. And, Francis adds, the task of discernment is not inwardly focused. It is directed toward a lived, evangelizing faith, since “all the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization.”³¹

It is clear that Francis's approach to synodality has institutional or structural implications for the church, yet the process of institutional change is fundamentally one of ecclesial discernment of the whole church, and not exclusively of its leadership. Only through the discernment, at every level of ecclesial life, will we learn “what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rv 2:7), and be able to make institutional changes accordingly.

29. Francis, “Address at the Ceremony.” Interior quote in first sentence from *EG*, §171.

30. *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), §12, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

31. Francis, “Address at the Ceremony.” This citation is entirely from *EG*, §120.

It is instructive, in this context, to note the contrast example to which Francis frequently recurs in explaining the dynamics of synodality—"that the Synod is not a parliament."³² He often extends this contrast, on one occasion adding "or an opinion poll,"³³ and on another "not a parlor; it is not demonstrating who has more power in the media and who has more power on the web."³⁴ Rather, "the Synod is an ecclesial event and its protagonist is the Holy Spirit."³⁵ His contrast between synod and parliament works at several levels. At the most obvious level, synods exist in the ecclesial sphere and parliaments in the political sphere, and those spheres have different purposes and, therefore, function in different ways. At this level, what gives weight to Francis's contrast is that generally in the West, parliamentary democracies provide the primary frame of reference for most people's experience of communal decision-making.

Yet Francis's contrast seems to be working at another level: that what characterizes parliamentary democracies is that they are public forums in which private interests or opinions clash, and in which coalitions of power are forged. However, while democracies, in their present parlous state, sometimes function in this way, this is a very limited view of democracy. Greater clarity about democracy itself, and its contrast with synodality, may not only result in a richer view of democracy and the functioning of parliaments, but also may help to identify more accurately the dynamics that corrode the operation of synods. Discussion of the recent Australian Plenary Council will help clarify these matters.

The Fifth Australian Plenary Council

The Fifth Australian Plenary Council (2018–2022) was an extraordinary event in the life of the Catholic Church in Australia.³⁶ An event of this kind was first proposed to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) as early as 2002 by the then-Archbishop of Adelaide, Philip Wilson (1950–2021). He envisaged an assembly planning for the future of the Australian church and was convinced that the model of a Plenary Council provided the most appropriate structure. Yet, at that time, he was unable to attract sufficient support from fellow ACBC members. The immediate stimulus for the decision to call the Fifth Plenary Council came from Archbishop Mark Coleridge's participation in the 2015 Synod on Marriage and Family, where he heard Pope Francis's address on the fiftieth anniversary of the Synod of Bishops. Powerful

32. Francis, "Address to Open the 2023 Synodal Path" (Rome, October 9, 2021), 1, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html>.

33. Francis, "2023 Synodal Path," 1.

34. Francis, "Amazon Synod," 3.

35. Francis, "2023 Synodal Path," 1.

36. See Massimo Faggioli's view of the Plenary Council as "one of the most significant ecclesial experiences for Pope Francis's vision of a synodal Church"; Massimo Faggioli, "The Plenary Council Begins Now," *International La-Croix* (July 26, 2022), <https://international.la-croix.com/news/signs-of-the-times/the-plenary-council-begins-now/16447>.

motivating factors were the hearings and findings of the Australian Government's *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* (2013–2017),³⁷ and the follow-up independent report on church governance commissioned by the ACBC, *The Light from the Southern Cross* (2020).³⁸

The council was held in four phases. The first, "Listening and Dialogue" (2018–2019), asked Australian Catholics what the Spirit was saying to the church, and 222,000 people responded either in groups or individually, offering 17,457 submissions.³⁹ From these submissions, six key themes were identified and papers written,⁴⁰ with these forming the basis of the small-group discernment process that was the second phase, "Listening and Discernment" (2019–2021). The third, or "Celebratory" phase occurred over two assemblies. Approximately 280 members, thirty percent of whom were women, met for the First General Assembly in October 2021, held online because of the pandemic, and for the Second General Assembly, held in Sydney, July 3–9, 2022, which would vote on the council's motions and decrees. The fourth, or implementation phase, will follow Vatican recognition of the council's decrees.

A great deal can be learnt about synodal processes from the Australian experience, including the intensive preparation required.⁴¹ However, in light of the tenth anniversary of Francis's pontificate, I suggest that reflection on two elements can best contribute to the global conversation on synodality: the process of "spiritual conversation" and the task of reading the signs of the times.

The Process of Spiritual Conversation

Integral to the Plenary Council's second phase, and to both the first and second assemblies, was a process of "spiritual conversation," an adaptation for groups of the Ignatian practice of spiritual discernment. This is a significant departure from the standard practice of synods, for example the 2015 Synod of Bishops, which was structured around individual interventions and smaller language discussion groups of about thirty people. In Sydney, each of eight spiritual conversations (two per day) considered a biblical passage and a set of motions about one of the assembly's eight key themes, taking each in turn. Tables of ten, including a facilitator, engaged in each spiritual conversation for forty-five to sixty minutes.

37. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report*, 17 vols. (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report>.

38. Implementation Advisory Group, *The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia* (August 2020), <https://catholic.org.au/governance>.

39. See Trudy Dantis, Paul Bowell, Stephen Reid, and Leith Dudfield, *Listen to What the Spirit Is Saying: Final Report for the Plenary Council Phase 1: Listening and Dialogue* (Canberra: National Centre for Pastoral Research, 2019).

40. See <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/discernment/>.

41. For Faggioli's seven "takeaways," see Faggioli, "The Plenary Council Begins Now."

The primary aim of this process was to discern what the Holy Spirit was saying through the group's prayer, reflection, and discussion.⁴² The reading of the scriptural passage was followed by five minutes of silent meditation, then three rounds of members' contributions. First, without comment from other members, each one shared what they had heard in their own prayer and how that left them feeling. Second, and again without comment, members shared what they had discerned the Spirit saying through the voices of the group and how that left them feeling. Third, an open conversation ensued about the import of the group's sharing for the motions under consideration.

While there is certainly room for development in the use of this process as a tool for synods, it proved immensely fruitful for the second assembly, with many members speaking of it as a transformative experience, one that could usefully be employed at every level of diocesan and parish life. One self-described reserved young mother from the Diocese of Cairns in Far North Queensland spoke of the process calling her "to speak boldly." She went on to say:

My professional work as a counselor and mental health worker has given me the very privileged experience of hearing many, very personal, stories of hardship, discrimination, abuse, exclusion, and struggle. The Spirit drove me not to speak for any individual or with any agenda but to speak from the heart, messages of love, inclusion, community, and healing.⁴³

Some members expressed their initial skepticism about the process, thinking it cumbersome and not directly addressing the motions under consideration, only later to see it enabling them to appreciate and learn from views not their own. Any initial reticence was certainly erased by the disruptive event of Wednesday, July 6: the deliberative vote on Part Four, "Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men," which will be discussed below.

The significance of the spiritual conversation process can be sharpened by discussion of Pope Francis's refrain that a synod is not a parliament. This is an important distinction since, as noted earlier, parliamentary democracies provide the main frame of reference for most people's experience of communal decision-making. And further, as also noted earlier, parliamentary decision-making is often understood in terms of the clash of private interests and the forging of coalitions of power. Yet further reflection is required here. This interest-based and power-based account of parliamentary democracy is extremely limited and corrupting of democracy. Indeed, it is one that

42. The process is explained for participants in Phase 2 in: Plenary Council 2020, *Let's Listen and Discern*, https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Final-Draft-Listen-Discern_2.pdf. This second phase recommended setting aside two hours for the process whereas a period of forty-five to sixty minutes was allocated at the second assembly.

43. Tanya Rodney, "Reflections on the Plenary Council," Talk at the Diocese of Cairns feedback session on the Plenary Council, St. Monica's Cathedral, Cairns (August 14, 2022), unpublished manuscript.

political theorists seek to overcome, framing what is desired in terms of deliberative democracy.⁴⁴

Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls have developed influential accounts of deliberative democracy. To overcome the “private, interest-based” view, they see the process of “public reason” as one of giving and receiving reasons for different policies or positions.⁴⁵ In Habermas’s version, the aim is that citizens, observing the formal conditions of communicative reason—what he refers to as “the ideal speech situation”—come to a common understanding of their problems and ideals.⁴⁶ The emphasis here is on the process or procedure for giving and receiving reasons. However, thinkers in the civic republican tradition, including Michael Walzer, Michael Sandel, and Charles Taylor, argue that attention to procedural reason alone cannot guarantee democratic equality; rather, such deliberation must also attend to the cultures, social life, and concerns of the community.⁴⁷ Only against a richly informed account of a community’s cultural background and concerns can decisions be made about its present and future.

However brief the above sketch, two questions arise immediately: first, what can be learnt from scholarship on deliberative democracy about Francis’s contrast between synods and parliaments? And second, how best to foster the good functioning of synods? For the first question, if interest-based and power-based conceptions of the functioning of parliaments give inadequate accounts of that to which democracies aspire, those conceptions are even more inadequate for the good functioning of synods. This is what I take to be the main point of Francis’s contrast: that synods are not forums in which ecclesial factions seek to talk down to or “out vote” each other. They aspire to discern where the Holy Spirit seeks to lead the ecclesial community. In this light, the

44. For an extensive account of this approach, see André Bächtiger, John S. Dryzek, Jane Mansbridge, and Mark Warren, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). For a critique of some views of deliberative democracy and the development of a view of “communicative democracy,” see Iris Marion Young, “Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy,” in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 120–35.

45. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols., trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); Habermas, *Philosophical Introductions: Five Approaches to Communicative Reason*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), ch. 4; John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). For a development of Rawls’s approach, see Joshua Cohen, *Philosophy, Politics, Democracy: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), esp. chs. 1, 5, and 9.

46. See Jürgen Habermas, “Interview with Jürgen Habermas,” in Bächtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge, and Warren, *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, 871–82.

47. Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987). For important accounts, from a civic republican perspective, of contemporary challenges to democracy, see Michael Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: A New Edition for Our Perilous Times* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2022); and Craig Calhoun, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor, *Degenerations of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

forging of coalitions of power, however tempting, must be seen as antithetical to ecclesial discernment. Political lobbying has no place here. Both speaking with courage and listening with humility are *essential* virtues for members.⁴⁸ For the second question, the scholarship on deliberative democracy indicates that, at their best, democracies aim to value all voices in the community equally (the Habermas–Rawls–Cohen accounts), and citizens must hear those voices against the background understandings and concerns of the community (the Walzer–Sandel–Taylor accounts). And while parliaments operate in the political sphere and synods in the ecclesial, the second can be seen as analogous to the first. Synods seek to listen for the action of the Spirit *through the voices of all*, and to understand the Spirit’s movement *against the cultural background and social concerns* of the community in light of the Gospel, which Vatican II has framed in terms of “reading the signs of the times.”

Before turning back to the Plenary Council, I note a difficulty with Francis’s formulation. While the intent of his contrast seems clear, in light of the above discussion, his framing of parliaments solely as a foil for his argument about the nature of synods does not really do justice to that to which democracies aspire. Indeed, Francis himself has a more exalted view of political leadership. In *Fratelli Tutti*, when discussing the populism that is currently damaging democracies, Francis offers this account of true political leaders: they are “those capable of interpreting the feelings and cultural dynamics of a people, and significant trends in society. . . . The service they provide by their efforts to unite and lead can become the basis of an enduring vision of transformation and growth that would also include making room for others in the pursuit of the common good.”⁴⁹ In light of this appreciative view of political leadership, the contrast to synods that would better serve Francis’s interests is not parliaments, but rather interest-based and power-based approaches to political life.

The Signs of the Times: The Equal Dignity of Women and Men

Francis’s “bottom-up” movement—“an attitude of listening and discernment, with every human and historical instance, taking into account the breadth of what it means to be human”⁵⁰—was evident throughout the Plenary Council process, and was clearly articulated in many of the council’s decrees.⁵¹ Decree 3 on missionary discipleship states at the start that such discipleship “requires loving attention to our world, which

48. See Francis, “Amazon Synod.” On “speaking well and listening well” as the “requisite habits” for dialogue in the church, see Bradford Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2006), 252–54. From a philosophical perspective, see Stephen Mulhall, *The Conversation of Humanity* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007).

49. Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §159.

50. Francis, “Address on Theology after *Veritatis Gaudium*.”

51. The Plenary Council Decrees can be found on the council’s website, <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/>.

is marked by both sin and grace, prayerfully reading the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel, seeking to grasp the meaning of things and to discern God's will under the guidance of the Holy Spirit." The discussion of formation for ministry in Decree 6 begins with Francis's point that we are living in a change of epoch rather than an epoch of changes and asserts that this new context calls the church to reassess models of formation. Other readings of the signs of the times can be found in the decrees on reconciliation with Australia's First Nations peoples, on integral ecology, and on participation and ecclesial governance.

It is in the context of "reading the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel" that the disruptive event on the third day (Wednesday) of the second assembly can best be understood. The previous afternoon, the motions on the equal dignity of women and men suffered a mixed fate in the whole assembly (consultative voters), with the key provisions—including the representation of women in decision-making structures—achieving a qualified majority (just more than the two-thirds required). The second motion, on fostering new opportunities for women in ministry, failed. The following morning, both motions failed the deliberative vote (bishops and others with that level of authority), with almost 20 percent voting against the major motion, and 25 percent voting *placet iuxta modum* when further amendments were not being received. The response was immediate—not loud or demonstrative, but the hall was grief-laden. Tears flowed, the distress and disbelief unmissable. In Archbishop Coleridge's words, "I was certainly sharing a sense of distress. A powerful sense that something had to be done."⁵²

With the skilled leadership of the council's vice-president, Bishop Shane Mackinlay, the steering committee appointed an ad hoc group to prepare a new draft of the motions. And while the language of the new document was improved and clearer than the original, it contained the same content, now set out in five motions, including the content of the motion that failed the initial consultative vote. Two days later, those five motions received almost unanimous approval from the deliberative voters. One must ask, then: What happened? What caused the shift in the bishops' voting? Because voting was by secret ballot, it is difficult to offer a comprehensive account of the shift. One element of an answer may be found in the decision made by the bishops not to use the *placet iuxta modum* category, but that does not explain the almost total agreement. While some see the pivotal factor being the cleaner lines of the new draft,⁵³ again, that does not explain the almost total agreement when the content of the motions remained the same. In my judgement, Coleridge's statement about the disruptive vote is particularly illuminating about what occurred: "I'm not sure that the bishops, and here I speak about myself, understood the full implications of what was happening. How crucial the issues that gather around the theme of women really are to the life of the church.

52. Mark Coleridge, "Interview with Geraldine Doogue," *Plenary Matters* (July 8, 2022), <https://plenary-matters.zencast.website/episodes/plenary-matters-s3-friday-8th-july>.

53. See, for example, the view of the council's secretary, David Ranson, in Geraldine Doogue, "After the Plenary Council," *Eureka Street* (July 24, 2022), <https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article/after-the-plenary>.

They are absolutely central.”⁵⁴ The grief of members on July 6 was unforgettable. It made clear that, if left at that vote, the council would have nothing to say about the equal dignity of women and men. Coleridge’s statement suggests that the highly charged response on July 6 brought to the attention of the bishops the significance of the issue of equal dignity. The task of accurately reading the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel is more than simply desirable for the church; it is essential for its credibility.

A significant background factor here is the polarization of the Australian public sphere over women’s social place. At times, polarization gets entangled with the political lobbying into which synodal processes can descend (as discussed earlier). It is this to which Archbishop Patrick O’Regan referred in reflecting on what was learned from the council: “We learnt that the Holy Spirit does not like games being played; we learnt that ‘perfect love casts out fear’ (1 Jn 4:18).”⁵⁵

Pope Francis and the Australian Plenary Council

Through Francis’s leadership, the theology and practice of synodality is being drawn into the center of Catholic life and finding new meaning there. In offering an account of his approach to synodality, this article has sought to show that the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia can contribute to this developing practice in at least two ways. First, in the hope of moving beyond interest-based and power-based approaches to communal decision-making, the practice of spiritual conversation offers a process for the community to discern what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Yet this process cannot be the final word, since having prayed and shared, synod members may need time to craft wording that expresses their common understanding. While in the final twelve months of the Plenary Council’s operation there were at least three opportunities for members to propose amendments to draft documents, at the second assembly it seemed that further opportunity was desired. Nonetheless, it was an inspired decision to make the process of spiritual conversation central to the council’s reflection.

Second, the disruptive event of July 6 exposes the difficulty the ecclesial community has in reading the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel. While the biblical witness to human equality is clear, it has taken the eighteenth-century revolutions and the social shifts since that time to teach both society and church what social equality entails, especially the equal dignity of women and men—although even now, that equality is not in any sense fully realized. Francis’s teaching shows that he has a keen sense of the importance of this issue for the life of the church. Yet it was difficult for the Plenary Council to agree on a set of motions articulating how that teaching might be better embodied in Australian ecclesial life. One factor at work here is the church’s enmeshment in the polarization of western societies. To live its faith more fully today, the ecclesial community must learn from the social movement of equality and find

54. Coleridge, “Interview with Geraldine Doogue.”

55. Patrick O’Regan, “Adelaide Members Reflect on the Final Assembly,” *The Southern Cross* (August 2022), 2.

expression for the truth of the Gospel in this context—it must read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel.

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