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Realising Synodality: A Typology for the Prospects and Challenges of Implementation

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Abstract

Following the conclusion of the 'Synod on Synodality' and the promulgation of the *Final Document*, the prospects for realising synodality as 'a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary' remain uncertain. Looking towards the 'implementation phase', this contribution offers a theological reflection on those prospects with special attention to questions of authority and responsibility within synodal endeavours, using the 'synodality typology' to analyse the question. Reflecting a significant orientation towards the 'recontextualisation' subtype, the *Final Document* affirms a vision for realising a synodality that is characterised by mutual listening, shared responsibility, and collective discernment of the signs of the times and the voice of the Spirit. Yet there is also unique emphasis given separately to the participation of the faithful and the discerning role of the episcopate. This theologically rich and complex vision for synodality presents important challenges for implementation.

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Keywords

synodality – Pope Francis – dialogue – recontextualisation – apostolic tradition – *sensus fidelium* – authority

1 Introduction

Following the conclusion of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops and the promulgation of the *Final Document*: *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*, the prospects for realising synodality as 'a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary' remain uncertain and require ongoing theological reflection.[1] While some might seek to realise the inclusive dimensions or the procedural aspects of dialogue, others might see in the *Final Document* a call to a new ecumenical imperative for the episcopate or new unrealised missiological dimensions for the question of the gospel in the diverse and changing world of today.

Looking towards the 'implementation phase', this contribution offers a theological reflection on those prospects for realisation, using a typological framework for reading the 'compass direction' of the *Final Document*. This typology holds two synodal dimensions in tension – the apostolic tradition and the *sensus fidelium* – and elaborates four subtypes at work within synodal endeavours as those two dimensions interact. Each subtype is described by its assumptions, priorities and fundamental attitude towards authority and responsibility in discerning the voice of the Spirit and interpreting the tradition through those synodal endeavours.

This contribution proceeds in five parts: an elaboration on the tensions between the apostolic tradition and the *sensus fidelium* in synodal endeavours, an introduction to the 'synodality typology', a critical analysis of the *Final Document* in light of those subtypes, a theological reflection on the findings, and a synthesis of pastoral and theological implications. It is beyond the scope of this contribution to analyse the specific priorities that surfaced during the synod for subsequent reflection and development (e.g. lay leadership, priestly formation, and so forth). Instead, our intention is to reflect

1 Francis, *Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* (November 2024), §28. https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG—Documento-finale.pdf.

theologically on the realisation of synodality itself in the hope that this approach will contribute both to other analyses of the outcomes of the synod and to the prospects for implementing the kind of synodality that the *Final Document* expresses.

2 Synodal Tensions Between *Sensus Fidelium* and Apostolic Tradition

Even at the outset of the present synodal initiative – perhaps *the* 'signature pastoral initiative' of Pope Francis – theological questions were already evident regarding the synodal interactions between the episcopate as guarantors of the apostolic tradition and the *sensus fidelium* among all the baptised faithful as people of God.[2] In whose voices and interpretations, theologically speaking, can the 'truest' readings of the signs of the times be found? In which communities can the voice of the Spirit be encountered most intimately? To what extent can synodality orient the church towards the future while simultaneously (re)rooting it in its tradition, in its collective search for the understanding that faith seeks and the mission that such faith expresses? In short: who bears the authority and responsibility for discerning the voice of the Spirit and interpreting the faith tradition in response to that discernment?

A common response at the outset – and even during the synodal period – to questions about the interpretation of synodality was that 'one learns by doing', a reflection in part of the significant 'novelty' of broadly engaging the Christian faithful in listening and discernment. This kind of inductive approach was exemplified in remarks like those of Christina Kheng Li Lin of the Commission on Methodology for the Synodal Process:

> [I]n this process of learning and doing synodality, everyone is learning as we go along. And sometimes it's trial-and-error. What's key about the *sensus fidei fidelium* is that theologically we know what it is. We can actually talk about it and describe it. But this is the first time we are actually trying to harness it even on a worldwide basis.[3]

2 M. Faggioli, 'Synodality and the "Synodal Process": Challenges and Opportunities, from the Episcopal Collegiality of Vatican II to the Catholic Church of Today', *Verba Theologica* 1 (2023), pp. 7–19, at p. 7. https://doi.org/10.54937/vt.2023.22.1.7-19.

3 C. Kheng, as cited in B. M. Reis, 'Synod on Synodality: Harnessing "Sensus Fidei Fidelium"' in *Vatican News* (28 November 2022). https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2022-11/synod-synodality-meeting-continental-stage-taskforce-interview.html.

Similarly, other prominent scholars like Massimo Faggioli acknowledged that the implementation of synodality in the present era would be a new realisation of extant theology that implicates 'the whole people of God and [would do so] at all levels (universal, continental, national, diocesan, parochial)'.[4] In fact, throughout much of the scholarship and pastoral reflections on synodality, a common theme has emerged: that of opening up (new) perspectives on authority and responsibility within both the *apostolic tradition* and the *sensus fidelium* and the interaction between them. Early on in the present synodal endeavour, the International Theological Commission observed this attention to both factors:

> In conformity with the teaching of *Lumen Gentium*, Pope Francis remarks in particular that synodality 'offers us the most appropriate framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself' and that, based on the doctrine of the *sensus fidei fidelium*, all members of the Church are agents of evangelisation. Consequently making a synodal Church a reality is an indispensable precondition for a new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God.[5]

These (new) theological intersections also brought forward a heightened awareness of the careful discernment of the Spirit in synodal endeavours, further nuancing the question of locating authority and responsibility. Analysing the 'bold pneumatology' of Pope Francis in his references to synodality, the (new) synodal process, and the identity of the synod (of bishops), Jos Moons observed that Francis frequently comments on the Spirit's agency within a synodal culture, indicating a 'creative reception' of the theological perspective of *Lumen Gentium*.[6] Relatedly, the International Theological Commission points to 'the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God' as descriptive of

4 M. Faggioli, 'Synodality and the "Synodal Process"', p. 10.

5 International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (March 2018), §9. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html. Cf. Francis, *Address on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17 October 2015), §107.

6 J. Moons, 'The Holy Spirit as the Protagonist of the Synod: Pope Francis's Creative Reception of the Second Vatican Council', *Theological Studies* 84/1 (2023), pp. 61–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639221151167.

a synodality that is 'the living expression of the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God'.[7]

Coming not only in relation to the 'novelty' of broadly involving all the Christian faithful in a synodal initiative, this same (new) question of locating authority and responsibility would therefore also imply the need to reflect on the role of the episcopate. In the analysis of Eamonn Conway:

> Pope Francis is attempting to revitalise the Synod of Bishops by embedding synodal assemblies within an operative culture of synodality that characterises the very mode of being of the Church (its *modus vivendi et operandi*). Collegiality among bishops, that is a shared spirit of communion and collaboration that finds expression in synodal assemblies, is being anchored within a deeper and more fundamental ecclesial synodality, that is, the synodal journey of the pilgrim of God as they journey through history.[8]

Now at the formal conclusion of the synodal period, one can look to the promulgated *Final Document* not only for a refined interpretation of the meaning of synodality but also for clearer indications of the location of authority and responsibility both for pneumatological discernment and for interpreting the tradition within synodal endeavours.

3 The Synodality Typology: Four Subtypes in Tension Amid a (New) Interaction

For an eventual analysis of the *Final Document* and related sources, this contribution makes use of the 'synodality typology' and its four ideal-subtypes generated by the intersection of two axes. One axis indicates the degree to which the *sensus fidelium* plays a participative role in synodal endeavours, characterised by rich diversity (identities, lived experiences, spiritualities, interpretations of the faith tradition) – with maximal participation indicated at the upper-right limit of the typology ('northeast') and minimal participation at the lower-left limit ('southwest'). The perpendicular axis then denotes the extent to which the role of the *apostolic tradition* is also participative in

7 International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, §46, 58.

8 E. Conway, 'Pope Francis' Vision for a Synodal Church', *New Blackfriars* 104/1113 (2023), pp. 511–525. https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12861.

the same synodal endeavours, characterised by its safeguarding of the distinctiveness and integrity of the Catholic faith tradition (dogmas and doctrines, sacred scriptures, sacramental practices, moral code) – with the upper-left limit of the typology ('northwest') indicating maximal participation and the lower-right limit ('southeast') indicating minimal participation. On both axes, it is possible that such participation can be minimised to the extent of being only implicitly present or inactive altogether, but that degree of analysis would take us beyond the present discussion. Here instead, only degrees of active participation are considered.

The four subtypes can then be identified as those two dimensions interact. Where maximal priority for the apostolic tradition meets a minimal emphasis on the *sensum fidelium* (left quadrant, 'west'), the *kerygmatic subtype* results. Horizontally opposite this subtype (right quadrant, 'east'), at the intersection of a minimal role for the apostolic tradition and a maximal emphasis on the *sensus fidelium*, the *active-plural subtype* emerges. Where both dimensions intersect in a maximal way (upper quadrant, 'north'), the *recontextualising subtype* is identified; and where both dimensions are minimised (lower quadrant, 'south'), the *formal-tolerant subtype* can be found. Thus, depending then on the degree to which the apostolic tradition and the *sensus fidelium* participate in an active and explicit interaction, four subtypes of synodality can be differentiated, each with distinct assumptions and priorities, and each revealing its own underlying attitude towards authority and responsibility in discerning the Spirit and interpreting the tradition (Figure 1).

3.1 *Kerygmatic Subtype*

The kerygmatic subtype of synodality emphasises fidelity to the apostolic tradition and is oriented towards bold proclamation of the gospel, aimed ultimately at calling all the faithful to know Christ and live as church as interpreted authoritatively through the ecumenical councils and teaching authority of the church. In service to the gospel, this subtype prioritises commitment to Catholic tradition over openness to diversity and engaging with difference. The authority and responsibility for discernment and interpretation is thus situated within the magisterium (alone).

In this kerygmatic subtype, synodality is appreciated as an opportunity for consultations in the service of a renewed evangelisation and catechesis, affirming that collaboration in the church serves the purpose of proclaiming anew the timeless gospel. Broad dialogue about the meaning and interpretation of Catholic teachings and practices is minimised in favour of pastoral initiatives towards unity in relation to a cohesive and univocally articulated faith tradition. An example of this subtype is the bishop who hosts listening

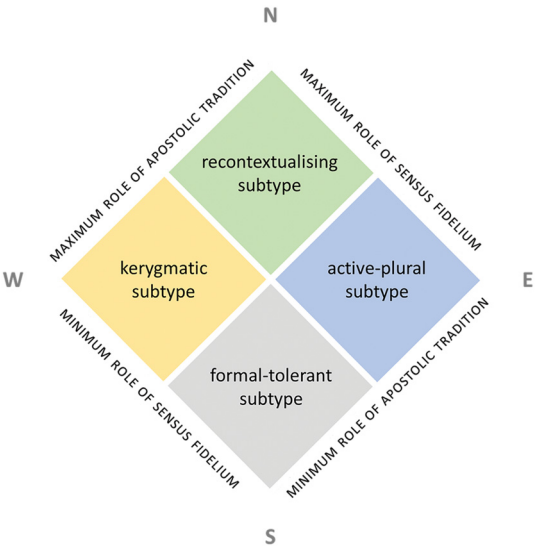

FIGURE 1 The synodality typology.A diamond-shaped diagram oriented like a compass, with N, S, E, and W labels at each point. The diamond is divided into four quadrants, each representing a subtype, and each colour-coded differently. The four axes of the diamond are labelled along their edges. The upper-left edge reads "Maximum Role of Apostolic Tradition" the upper-right edge reads "Maximum Role of Sensus Fidelium"; the lower-left edge reads "Minimum Role of Sensus Fidelium"; and the lower-right edge reads "Minimum Role of Apostolic Tradition." The four quadrants are: at the top (North), the green "Recontextualising Subtype"; on the left (West), the yellow "Kerygmatic Subtype"; on the right (East), the blue "Active-Plural Subtype"; and at the bottom (South), the grey "Formal-Tolerant Subtype." The diagram appears to map theological subtypes according to how much weight they give to two contrasting sources of religious authority: Apostolic Tradition on one axis, and Sensus Fidelium (the sense of the faithful) on the other.

sessions with laity in parishes, while having already concluded that the episcopate alone will legitimatise the voice of the Spirit.

This orientation is open to encountering 'diversity' and engaging in 'dialogue' but from an *a priori* standpoint of confidently (re)asserting the church's teachings, with the perspective that all are called to share in Christ's truth as (already) interpreted magisterially across the ages of the faith tradition. Diversity (to some extent) within the church is tolerated but not to the point that it would compromise doctrines and practices already defined elsewhere. In this subtype, the question of authority and responsibility for pneumatological discernment and interpretation of the tradition remains solely within

the magisterium as protectors and interpreters of the faith handed down from the apostolic age. 'Dialogue' with the People of God is (merely) an asymmetrical consultation towards the proper expression of that truth and the proper living of that tradition in the world today.

Extending from the assumption that such authority and responsibility are located within the episcopate alone, one of the risks inherent to this subtype is that diversity is tolerated more than valued in its mutuality. Listening can be experienced as monodirectional: the episcopate teaches and shepherds while the laity learns and follows by translating that teaching into living witness. Views and lived realities that challenge orthodoxy or orthopraxis may be viewed as threats and resisted – a kind of attempt at insular protection of gospel truth against the buffeting winds of social change. Some other examples of this kerygmatic subtype include: (a) pastoral consultations to develop more effective avenues for evangelisation, with an emphasis on doctrines, moral teachings and church praxis as strongholds for Christian faithful living in a secularised world; (b) collaborations with ecclesial movements and educational institutions that enthusiastically promote orthodoxy and fidelity to the magisterium; and (c) resistance to those calling for pastoral and theological dialogue which engages with lived experiences that challenge established teaching on controversial issues like sexual ethics, viewing such dialogue as compromising of gospel truth.

3.2 *Active-Plural Subtype*

The active-plural subtype of synodality focuses on expanding decentralised participation, listening, and patient dialogue towards consensus-building among the diversity of viewpoints intentionally included. Emphasising the value of diversity and grounded in a sense of fundamental equality flowing from baptism, this subtype horizontalises collaboration. Typologically the opposite of the kerygmatic subtype, this subtype prioritises engaging multilaterally with diversity over deference to privileged authority in the apostolic tradition. Discerning the Spirit and interpreting the tradition results from this attention to democracy-like participation among the baptised faithful.

In this subtype, the focus of synodality centres on openness to diversity and maximally inclusive participation. The aim is for all voices to be welcomed, engaged with, and valued. In order to enable such inclusivity, this subtype emphasises decentralisation in the church and equalises the contributions of ordained and lay, marginalising any sense of preference or privilege derived from hierarchical structure. Consensus-based discernment among 'equals' and symmetrical dialogue are paramount, founded in the conviction that the Spirit speaks through the *sensus fidelium* of all the baptised.

Further towards the creation of a space in which all contributions can be heard, the distinctiveness of Catholic beliefs and practices is de-emphasised. Historic tensions between unity and diversity lean strongly toward plurality in both *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi*.[9] This approach towards synodality is sceptical of a centralised teaching authority claiming access to special truth. Instead, the active-plural subtype rests on diversity as a good in itself, calling for patient listening and seeking mutual understanding amid divergent views. A typical practice includes grass-roots organisations using synodal-like processes within their structures to maximise participation and decentralise decision-making.

This subtype operates from the assumption that the voice of the Spirit is discerned and the tradition interpreted through the democratic participation of all the faithful. As such, this risks the dilution of the apostolic tradition in favour of horizontality and egalitarianism. The teaching and custodial responsibilities of the hierarchy are still valued, yet the content of that teaching and the shape of church practices is influenced more broadly by all the faithful in collective decision-making. At the same time, this subtype is fundamentally oriented towards the inclusion of voices from a wide range of identities and lived experiences among the faithful – perhaps even with special attention given to those whose voices are in tension with commonly taught norms of Christian identity. Other examples of the active-plural subtype include: (a) networking among grass-roots church reform groups lobbying for increased democratisation, transparency and accountability in ecclesial governance; (b) collaboration with ecumenical and interfaith partners on social issues, at times downplaying Catholic theological distinctiveness in those efforts; and (c) calls to update Catholic moral teaching on social matters such as contraception, homosexuality, divorce, bringing such teaching into closer dialogue with modern individual consciences.

3.3 *Recontextualising Subtype*

The recontextualising subtype focuses on the creative (re)expression of the millennia-rooted faith tradition in new cultural and social contexts. This is achieved through co-responsible listening to the Spirit, in dialogue between the episcopate and the *sensus fidelium*, resulting *a posteriori* in the development of mutually informed doctrine and pastoral practice within the hermeneutic of continuity. Discernment and interpretation is thus achieved co-responsibly within that shared dialogue and spiritual reflection.

9 International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, §6.

Located typologically at the intersection of maximal value for the apostolic tradition and maximal value for the *sensus fidelium*, this subtype reflects a positive integration of the other subtypes. Yet its distinctiveness as a subtype centres on realising new (re)expressions of the faith and its tradition in new contexts through co-responsible dialogue and spiritual discernment – and not (merely) on a kind of dualistic realisation of the other subtypes. Akin to the spirit of *aggiornamento* evoked during the Second Vatican Council, there is a renewed focus in this subtype on a mutual (and mutually critical) dialogue between the gospel and the world and lives of people today. Alongside such dialogue, deep listening, self-reflection, discernment and collaboration are also supportive of this effort, and are oriented towards that openness to the (ongoing) development of doctrine and practice that characterises this subtype.

This regard for new (re)expressions is not for its own sake but is deeply rooted in a hermeneutic of continuity through a continual (re)encounter with Christ, (re)reading of the gospel and (re)discovery of truths known over the ages. A typical example of the recontextualising subtype is an open and reflexive mutual dialogue between the episcopate and all the people of God, weighing a variety of factors regarding (for example) how people in irregular relational situations (e.g. persons who remarried after divorce) can be more fully integrated into the life of the church – before sacramental policies are discerned. At a foundational level, there is in this way a fundamental openness to new insights into God's revelation during the 'being together' of dialogue and prayerful discernment. This subtype is willing to reconsider church practices and teachings if the Spirit so guides; and in this way there is a mutual and interconnected emphasis on both terms when speaking of *creative fidelity* to the gospel and the apostolic heritage.[10]

Because the voice of the Spirit is discerned and the tradition interpreted in the dialogue between pastors and the people of God listening together to that Spirit, an important awareness for all is that this subtype risks fragmentation if not pastored effectively. That risk is heightened when too few in the church appreciate the distinctiveness of the recontextualising orientation and too many align themselves in polarised ways with the 'camps' of the kerygmatic and active-plural subtypes. Yet this recontextualising subtype has the potential to hold everyone together, since diversity is necessary for the effective functioning of dialogue and discernment. Additional examples of the subtype include: (a) efforts to incorporate insights from human sciences like

10 G. Marcel, 'Le témoignage comme localisation de l'existentiel', *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 68/2 (1946), pp. 182–191.

psychology and sociology to develop new pastoral approaches on issues like divorce and remarriage; (b) theological debates weighing developments like female deacons or blessing persons in same-sex unions, seen as potential new applications of the pastoral ministry of the Church; and (c) constructive dialogues between bishops and lay reform groups advocating for decentralisation and women's leadership in the church.

3.4 *Formal-Tolerant Subtype*

The formal-tolerant subtype centres on the structural aspects of collaboration, transparent governance, and participative decision-making through representative mechanisms, aimed at making the church an efficient, well-functioning institution tolerant of pluralism. Discerning the Spirit and interpreting the tradition are not priorities, as such, in this subtype, although there may be the assumption that such discernment and interpretation cannot otherwise happen without the proper functioning of the mechanisms for cooperation.

Finally, a formal-tolerant form is typologically possible in the position where there is a de-prioritisation of dialogue and spiritual discernment on the part of both the apostolic tradition and the *sensus fidelium*. This subtype is oriented towards the development of procedures, structures and institutionality, expressing the idea of church as an organic organisation with efficient processes.

The application of 'co-responsibility' in this subtype means prescriptions for shared governance within institutional channels, collective decision-making, and transparency. In a large organisation such as the church, methods for participating in decision-making are outlined in constitutions, policies and procedures: members may participate by electing representatives and consultations may be held to foster well-functioning bureaucracies.

Efficiency and management 'best-practices' borrowed from secular institutions characterise this administrative approach. There is tolerance of pluralism, but emphasis lies on effective structures and formalised processes for dialogue. The development of good policy replaces the need for pastoral sensitivity. The focus here is on efficient decision-making with minimal emphasis on discernment of the Spirit's guidance, by either the faithful or the episcopate.

A typical expression of this subtype is the management structures of parish councils that act as (representative) corporate boards to oversee policies, finances and strategy, but who simultaneously avoid delving into theological or pastoral disputes within the community. Doctrine, ecclesiology, scriptural interpretation, sacramentology – these fade into spheres apart from the

purview of parish management. Concrete results, measurable strategic goals, policy deliverables, and visibly 'getting things done' are what matter most.

When this subtype is prioritised over the others, this risks reducing 'synodality' to formalities detached from spiritual discernment. At the same time, complex organisations like a parish or diocese – not to mention large institutions like the church worldwide – require aspects of this kind of structure and formality in order to ensure equitable participation, efficiency, and transparency. Some other examples of the formal-tolerant subtype include: (a) restructuring parishes into efficient mergers overseen by parish management teams with CEO-pastors; (b) bishops relying heavily on consultative diocesan councils for administrative policies but not doctrinal or pastoral discernment; and (c) networks of Catholic professionals advancing managerial best practices for running churches as businesses.

4 The Synodal Compass of the *Final Document*

With the above typology as a compass-like framework, it can then be asked: towards which direction does the *Final Document* point? As a collective reflection on both the current experience of and future prospects for synodality, the *Final Document* orients the church's understanding towards recontextualisation to a significant extent – capturing not only the co-responsible integration of both the apostolic tradition and *sensus fidelium*, but also signalling the kind of 'newness' that is distinctive of recontextualisation. While this is perhaps not surprising, what is also important to observe is how this demonstrable orientation also interacts with aspects of the other three subtypes – highlighting in particular, the integration of and tensions between the active-plural and kerygmatic subtypes.

The *Final Document* is, in our analysis, replete with language that indicates a recontextualising orientation towards creative re-expressions of the faith tradition in new contexts and in hermeneutical fidelity to what has come before. This is perhaps most immediately evident in *Part I: The Heart of Synodality* (§13–48) which, importantly, includes a description of the 'meaning and dimensions of synodality' (§28–33). It is here that participation, dialogue, discernment, and mission are characterised as mutual and constitutive of synodality:

> Oriented towards mission, synodality involves gathering at all levels of the Church for mutual listening, dialogue, and community discernment. It also involves reaching consensus as an expression of Christ rendering

> Himself present, He who is alive in the Spirit. Furthermore, it consists in reaching decisions according to differentiated co-responsibilities. Along these lines, we can understand better what it means to say that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church (cf. ITC 1). In simple and concise terms, synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ.[11]

Both the *sensus fidelium* and the apostolic tradition have an integral and interdependent participative relationship in this dialogue, discernment and mission. Through baptism, 'all believers [...] possess an instinct for the truth of the Gospel [and] an aptitude to grasp intuitively what conforms to the truth of Revelation in the communion of the Church'.[12] At the same time, §22 notes that '[t]he exercise of the *sensus fidei* must not be confused with public opinion. It is always in conjunction with the discernment of pastors at the different levels of Church life'. Furthermore, §33 (re)affirms that this 'authority of pastors "is a specific gift of the Spirit of Christ" [...] and places them at the service of the holy People of God in order to safeguard the apostolicity of the proclamation and to promote ecclesial communion at all levels'. Consistent with Francis' intentions for some reform of the episcopate in a context of expanded synodality, the same paragraph (re)asserts that '[s]ynodality offers "the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself"'.[13] Moreover, in interpreting the intersection between *sensus fidelium* and apostolic tradition, §33 concludes that '[s]ynodality, therefore, invites the whole Church, including those who exercise authority, to conversion and reform'.

This insistence on integrated participation and renewal of church life and mission is extended and nuanced throughout the *Final Document*. Broadly speaking, there is frequent attention to 'togetherness' and 'mutuality', for example emphasising church as 'the walking together [...] with Christ and towards God's Kingdom' (§28) and an 'exchange of gifts between different

11 Francis, *Final Document*, §28. Cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, §1.

12 Francis, *Final Document*, §22.

13 Francis, *Final Document*, §33. Cf. Francis, *Address Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (October 2015). https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

vocations (communion)' (§147). Mutuality amid diversity in the church also finds various expressions throughout themes such as 'mutual love' (§34), 'mutual care' (§48), 'mutual trust' (§80, 82, 90); and an entire section (§49–78) is devoted to developing the theme of togetherness in relationships, in community, and for mission. Summarising that emphasis on togetherness in discernment, the *Final Document* notes:

> Ecclesial discernment is not an organisational technique but rather a spiritual practice grounded in a living faith. It calls for interior freedom, humility, prayer, mutual trust, an openness to the new and a surrender to the will of God. It is never just a setting out of one's own personal or group point of view or a summing up of differing individual opinions. Each person, speaking according to their conscience, is called to open themselves to the others who share according to their conscience. In this sharing, they seek to recognise *together* "what the Spirit is saying to the Churches" (Rev 2:7). As ecclesial discernment entails the contribution of everyone, it is both the condition and a privileged expression of synodality, in which communion, mission and participation are lived.[14]

This overarching emphasis on integral and inter-dependent participation in dialogue, discernment and mission appears thus to be the frame within which attention to the various constituencies is given. For example, in relation to the theme of 'participation', there is also an emphasis on broad inclusion of the (diverse) Christian faithful, perhaps given the 'newness' of this in the current synodal endeavour. One passage in particular focuses this attention:

> As ecclesial discernment entails the contribution of everyone, it is both the condition and a privileged expression of synodality, in which communion, mission and participation are lived. The more everyone is heard, the richer the discernment. Therefore, it is essential that we promote the broadest participation possible in the discernment process, particularly involving those who are at the margins of the Christian community and society.[15]

However, this should not be understood as a kind of 'active-plural' orientation for synodality in the perspective of the *Final Document*. Instead, this emphasis

14 Francis, *Final Document*, §82. Emphasis ours.
15 Francis, *Final Document*, §82.

is contextualised within a larger orientation towards integral participation, dialogue and discernment.

At the same time, while there is evidence of emphasis on broad participation in dialogue and discernment among all the Christian faithful (like the active-plural subtype), the unique role of the episcopate is also emphasised (like the kerygmatic subtype). This latter focus comes in several layers, most notably with attention to the Synod of Bishops 'as one of the most evident places where synodality and collegiality are to be practised' both internally and in relationship with '[t]he whole holy People of God [who] participate fully in the synodal process, each according to their proper function.'[16] Elsewhere, §92 goes on to (re)affirm that '[i]n a synodal Church, the authority of the Bishop, of the Episcopal College and of the Bishop of Rome in regard to decision-taking is inviolable as it is grounded in the hierarchical structure of the Church established by Christ'. Thus, bishops retain a specific role in communal discernment, in authoritative teaching, and in co-responsible mission.

On balance, the *Final Document* offers a vision that notably orients synodality towards 'recontextualisation' through the mutual and integrated emphasis on broad participation among diverse Christian faithful, while simultaneously reaffirming the role of the episcopate as carriers and safeguards of the apostolic tradition. In this way, the authority and responsibility for discerning the Spirit and interpreting the tradition within synodal endeavours is not found among bishops alone (kerygmatic subtype) nor within a democratisation of all the baptised (active-plural subtype), but is centred within the dialogue and discernment among co-responsible parties, each according to their function, reading together the signs of the times and listening together to the Spirit.

5 Recontextualising Synodality as a New Realisation of Vatican II

Inherent in the meaning of recontextualisation is its regard for both past and future, its reference to both continuity and discontinuity, its awareness of both historicity and contingency. In this way, it is akin to the developmental aspect of doctrine within the Catholic faith tradition, which – guided by the Spirit – leads the church to 'make the once and always incarnate Son of God [cf. John 1:14] contemporary at all times [and to tell] its truth in the face of

16 Francis, *Final Document*, §136.

[*vis-à-vis*] changing cultures, languages and worldviews'.[17] Through ongoing communal reflection, the faithful come to grasp truths in new ways and in the contexts of new eras and new cultures, yielding new expressions that speak to new realities and new identities.

Likewise, the spirit of Vatican II exhorts the church to read the signs of the times – the world's constantly evolving circumstances – and interpret them in light of the gospel. For the apostolic faith to remain living and life-giving, it must speak meaningfully to people in their ever-new particular contexts. For the gospel to fruitfully take root, it must interact in a reasoned way with particular worldviews and existential questions – and what was once well-reasoned contextually in one period may not communicate in another. For synodality to be plausible today, it must provide a unified space in which diversity can participate and be heard with its contextual specificity – thereby opening new paths for the church's reflection.[18] Such synodality fosters deep listening and dialogue with cultures in order for the faith to translate meaningfully. Translating the gospel anew into new contexts is fidelity to the missionary mandate.

At the same time, it is also necessary that such translation *de jure* occurs in continuity with scripture and tradition (cf. 'in light of the gospel') in order to retain legitimacy. As diversity and various contextual interpretations are heard, such plurality requires the development of a 'hermeneutical capacity', such that differing perspectives can be engaged while simultaneously reinvigorating the evangelising commission of the church.[19] In this way, recontextualising synodality fosters this kind of creative fidelity through retelling the ancient story in new languages while remaining grounded in its core narrative.

This intersection of hermeneutical capacity and creative fidelity is also evident in Pope Francis' own vision. Writing on evangelisation several years prior to announcing the synod, Francis describes the efforts and effects of such recontextualising qualities:

17 M. Seewald, *Theories of Doctrinal Development in the Catholic Church*, trans. David West (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 184. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009271974.

18 International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (June 2014), §127. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html.

19 Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis* (Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020), §196.

> Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always 'new'.[20]

Moreover, in his own reflections at the solemn opening of the 2021–2024 Synod of Bishops (a timeline which also, importantly, includes the consultation moments conducted in local churches and extends into the 2023–2024 episcopal gatherings), Francis speaks about the Spirit-led 'newness' to which recontextualisation is necessarily open:

> I want to say again that the Synod is not a parliament or an opinion poll; the Synod is an ecclesial event and its protagonist is the Holy Spirit [...] May we experience this Synod in the spirit of Jesus' fervent prayer to the Father on behalf of his disciples: 'that they may all be one' (Jn 17:21). [...] In the one People of God, therefore, let us journey together, in order to experience a Church that receives and lives this gift of unity, and is open to the voice of the Spirit. [...] The Holy Spirit guides us where God wants us to be, not to where our own ideas and personal tastes would lead us.[21]

Invoking the influential theology of Yves Congar, Francis characterises the horizon as that of 'a *different* church' and affirms that synodality implies 'a Church open to the newness that God wants to suggest'.[22] This 'newness' is not (merely) a matter of reclaiming or re-formulating ancient expressions of Christian identity nor that of re-framing those same expressions in the languages and cultures of today. Instead this 'newness' boldly underscores an eschatological awareness of the not-yet-fully-realised and a prophetic orientation towards calling the church and the world to 'dream with God' and work

20 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (November 2013), §11. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

21 Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synod* (9 October 2021), introduction. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html.

22 Francis, *Address for the Opening of the Synod*, conclusion. With reference to Y. Congar, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église*, second edition (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968).

towards a life not yet realised.[23] Such is the 'newness' inherent in the meaning of recontextualisation as distinctive from the other subtypes.

Furthermore, the recontextualising orientation of synodality offers a space of balance and integration that limits the risks of the other subtypes. A kerygmatic orientation, with its bold focus on proclaiming truth through the apostolic tradition, risks becoming rigid; thus it can benefit from recontextualisation's attention to discerning how enduring truths speak to and through new cultural paradigms, and from its openness to developing new expressions of faith amid changing contexts. An active-plural orientation, decisively focused on inclusion, participation and horizontalisation in dialogue, risks diluting the apostolic tradition that should ground synodality in continuity with millennia of the faith tradition; thus recontextualisation provides a counterbalance through its emphasis on co-responsible discernment focused on creative fidelity to core teachings in order to avoid fragmentation when developing new expressions. The formal-tolerant subtype, which emphasises the importance of collaborative structures and managerial 'best practices' to sustain an efficiently functioning institution, risks reducing synodality to formalities devoid of spiritual discernment with no prominent or unique role for either the apostolic tradition or the *sensus fidelium*; thus this subtype is in need of recontextualisation's prioritisation of communal discernment in the Spirit and the question of how to apply the gospel through changing pastoral practices.

In sum, the recontextualising orientation seeks to integrate openness to development with faithfulness to tradition. It holds the *sensus fidelium* and the apostolic heritage together in co-responsible authority through dialogue, and it maintains the mutually dependent values of unity and diversity. For synodality to fruitfully serve the church and (through the church) the world, it must prudently recontextualise the gospel in the present while remaining grounded in revelation. This vision is neither achieved through a kerygmatic or active-plural orientation, nor through an integrated emphasis on co-responsibility alone, but through a (new-found) co-responsibility oriented towards creatively faithful expressions in new contexts.

23 R. Bieringer and M. Elsbernd, *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010).

6 Pastoral and Theological Implications

Both the 'synodality typology' itself and the orientation of the *Final Document* towards recontextualisation offer insights into the opportunities and challenges ahead. At a fundamental level, the typology alone provides a theoretical framework for understanding the diverse tensions at work in current and future realisations of synodality. By analysing the ways in which apostolic tradition and *sensus fidelium* interact with each other, the typology brings additional layers of theological nuance to synodal initiatives. Such nuance enhances the ongoing theological reflection about what synodality means, what structures and theologies it involves, and wherein authority and responsibility lie. This can help to surface areas of agreement and disagreement, to identify common ground and divergent views, and to foster a more honest and productive dialogue about the future prospects of synodality.

A recontextualising orientation to synodality encourages the church to strive for balance and integration between fidelity to the apostolic tradition and openness to the *sensus fidelium*, seeking to hold together continuity and creativity, unity and diversity, the universal and the particular. This is no easy task; it requires constant discernment, dialogue, and a willingness to be led by the Spirit into new and sometimes uncomfortable places. Yet at the same time this synodal orientation is a new reception of the Second Vatican Council's theology of reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in light of the gospel. It embodies Francis's desire for a church that is not self-referential but outward-looking, a church that is not afraid to get its hands dirty in the complexities of the world.

A recontextualising view synodality raises important implications for pastoral leaders and all the Christian faithful. For example, it calls forward the need for significant investment in formation, both for clergy and laity, towards cultivating the spiritual and intellectual habits necessary for genuine discernment in a co-responsible manner, mutually asymmetrical dialogue, and creative fidelity in relation to the faith tradition. Synodality itself is not the focus of such formation but rather the whole of Christian life: prayer, sacraments, scripture study, theological reflection, and active engagement in the world. As another example, new, renewed, or reformed structures and processes will likely be necessary to enable synodality to continue along its recontextualising path. This may involve reforming existing institutions (such

as parish councils, diocesan synods, and episcopal conferences) or creating new ones. It will certainly require greater attention to the principle of subsidiarity in the church's own pastoral leadership.

At the same time, pastoral leaders are well-advised to remain vigilant of the risks and pitfalls of the recontextualising orientation. There is a danger, as noted above, of fragmentation and disunity if the process is not carefully guided. This requires both the active development of each person's hermeneutical competence as well as the ability to discern the essential from the accidental in the faith tradition. Certainly, this remains the special responsibility of the episcopate as guarantors of the deposit of faith, called to ensure that the church's teaching is re-rooting itself ever anew in the gospel. Yet there is also a (new) call to exercise this responsibility in a way that is attentive to the *sensus fidelium*, that is open to dialogue and discernment, and that resists temptations towards self-protectionism or authoritarianism.

At a theological level, the implications are likewise significant. Theology, as the church's reflection on faith, plays a vital role in synodal endeavours. It helps to articulate the apostolic tradition, to interpret the signs of the times, and to discern the *sensus fidelium*. Yet theology must also be open to being transformed by these same reflections on synodality.[24] Five avenues of transformation offer a vision for such a theology that is attentive to recontextualising synodality:

1. *Theology in constant dialogue with the world, open to new insights and perspectives, and willing to re-examine its own presuppositions and methods.* This is a theology that is not afraid to reason with the social sciences, with the arts and humanities, and with the lived experiences of the faithful. It is a theology that is both critical and constructive, that is able to distinguish between the essential and the accidental, and that is always oriented toward the evangelising mission of the church.[25]
2. *Theology that is collaboratively interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary.* As such, it requires theologians to work meaningfully with experts in other fields, with pastors and lay leaders, and with the wider community of the

24 In recent years, the reflections emerging from the *Réseau Théologique Méditerranéen* demonstrate a unique and relevant openness to such transformation. The implications for theology described in this present contribution bear significant resemblance to the insights put forth in Réseau Théologique Méditerranéen, *Manifesto: For a Theology from the Mediterranean* (September 2023), pp. 1–15. https://icm.catholique.fr/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Manifeste-english.pdf.

25 Francis, *Apostolic Letter Ad Theologiam Promovendam* (November 2023), §3–4. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html.

faithful. Such an integration of various theological and pastoral disciplines is necessary to ensure that the church's reflection on faith is holistic and comprehensive.[26]

3. *Theology attentive to the diversity of the people of God.* Such theology seeks out voices from the margins, learns with and from the experience of the poor and the oppressed, and incorporates wisdom from a variety of cultures and traditions, both ecumenically and interreligiously.[27] It is not a monolithic theology, but one that allows for legitimate plurality within the unity of faith.
4. *Theology that searches for new expressions in creative fidelity to the faith tradition.* It does not seek novelty for its own sake, but strives to be faithful to the apostolic heritage handed down through the ages. It is a theology in continuity with the great thinkers and saints of the past, even as it seeks to articulate that faith in new ways for new contexts.
5. *Theology at the service of the church's evangelising mission.* This is a theology that helps the church to discern its way forward, to navigate the complexities of the modern world, and to proclaim the gospel with renewed vigour and creativity. It is a theology that is not content to remain in the academy, but that seeks to engage with the real lives and struggles of the faithful.[28]

7 Conclusion

The result of a significant pastoral initiative, the *Final Document* affirms a vision for synodality that is oriented towards mutual listening, shared responsibility, and collective discernment of the signs of the times and the voice of the Spirit. This integrative emphasis on a participative role for both the *sensus fidelium* and the apostolic tradition positions the authority and responsibility for pneumatological discernment and interpretation of the tradition among co-responsible parties engaged in dialogue and listening to that Spirit. Realising this orientation further requires the development of a hermeneutical space in which to hold together continuity and creativity, fidelity to tradition, and openness to the new. At the same time, the complexities of recontextualisation can lead to fragmentation if theological reflection on the

26 Francis, *Apostolic Constitution Veritatis Gaudium* (December 2017), §4. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html.

27 Réseau Théologique Méditerranéen, *For a Theology from the Mediterranean*, p. 11.

28 Francis, *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, §3.

tensions amid these factors is not maintained. For that purpose, the 'synodality typology' offers a framework for such ongoing reflection as pastors, theologians and all the Christian faithful look not only to the 'implementation phase' regarding the outcomes of the synod, but also to realising synodality as 'a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary'.

Conflict of interest

The authors report that they have no competing interests to declare.