

The Synodal Process in the Light of the Second Vatican Council

Towards a listening Church in dialogue

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Written from a German perspective, this overview places the synodal process initiated by Pope Francis against the background of the reform of the Second Vatican Council and, in particular, the pontificate of Paul VI. Thus, the epochal significance of this ongoing process emerges. We thank our sister magazine Das Prisma, at Neue Stadt publishing house, for this contribution. The article is adapted from a lecture marking the 60th anniversary of the priesthood of Dr. Wilfried Hagemann, former spiritual assistant of the Central Committee of German Catholics and long involved in priestly formation. Peter Klasvogt directs the Kommende Dortmund Social Institute and Schwerte Catholic Academy in the Archdiocese of Paderborn, Germany.

The situation is not rosy. According to a recent survey, the number of Catholics in my native Germany may drop by half within the next fifteen years. The consequences of decades-long, progressive secularization, accentuated in the Catholic sphere by multiple crises, cannot be ignored.

Instead of cursing unjust fate, entrenching ourselves in contempt, or remaining in our own comfort zone, it was a courageous step to seek dialogue among German Catholics by facing the great challenges directly and embarking on a “synodal path”. In this way, then, the undeniable movement toward change (*transitus*), into a moment of decision, a *kairòs*, can be undertaken. There is considerable resistance on all sides: from those warning of abandonment, the loss of inalienable elements of ecclesial identity, and fear of a particular Church going it alone without taking the universal Church into account; to those for whom reform and transformation do not go far enough or are too slow, or who remain disappointed, protest loudly, or leave silently.

Shaking the dust from Peter’s throne

For some time, the Catholic Church finds itself in an extremely uncomfortable situation and not only in Germany. The erosion of religion started as early as the 1950s and led to a divide that British Church historian, Hugh McLeod, compared to divisions among Christians in the 16th century.¹ In this context, it is noteworthy that two reform-oriented popes undertook determined attempts with the Second Vatican Council to face the challenges of the Enlightenment and the changing conditions of modern times. “We must shake off the imperial dust accumulated on the throne of Saint Peter,” John XXIII told a diplomat at the Holy See. It is no surprise, therefore, that he audaciously convened the Council - almost

single-handedly – in order to initiate an epochal change. Even then, there were those who were confused, people “who, though burning with zeal, can see nothing but prevarication and ruin in this modern age.”² With the start of the Council, defensive self-isolation was broken, despite the first session concluding (and the death of Pope John XXIII) with no Council text yet adopted. The situation would only change with his successor: Paul VI, who Cardinal Walter Kasper refers to as “one of the most important reforming popes of modern times”.

With Paul VI's election in 1963, the Council and the entire Church experienced a fundamental process of renewal that the new pontiff harmonized programmatically - as he wrote in his inaugural encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* - in the two key words of “dialogue” and “service.” Paul VI was aware that the “split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time” (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, 20), and the Church's response could only be to “evangelize man's culture and cultures (not in purely decorative way, as it were, by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots), [...] taking the person as one's starting-point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God.” (*ibid.*).

For all intents and purposes, it was an epochal change in which the Pope did not limit himself to bombastic appeals, but consistently translated the Council's theology of communion into structures to bring substantial changes in Church organization. Indeed, “new theological insights and changed socio-cultural conditions require more than just a change of mentality. They require structural and personal consequences: more communion, more subsidiarity, more cooperative leadership.”³ And so it happened. If the Catholic Church was previously perceived as a uniform, monolithic, Rome-centered institution, with a cumbersome administrative apparatus, the establishment of national bishops' conferences and Pontifical Councils for dialogue soon showed early tendencies towards decentralization and differentiation. New organizational structures were created at all levels of the Church and in every world region. The paradigm of a Church united in diversity became a dogmatic and organizational response to the challenges of a pluralistic world; at the same time, it was more in line with the self-awareness of the Church itself and its universal mission.

Healing the rupture between Gospel and culture

With extraordinary dynamism, the Catholic Church later became a valued actor in the global community and effectively presented its vision, experience and expertise on major political and social issues, development and peace, health and the protection of creation. Paul VI was the first pope to address the United Nations (4 October 1965) in an historic speech: “No more war, no more war!” With the encyclical *Populorum Progressio, On the Development of Peoples* (1967), he expanded the Church's peace mission to include a commitment to reconciliation between the North and the South, a call for global economic justice and the overcoming of tension between rich and poor nations as a prerequisite for peace.

Already in 1964, Paul VI had stated in a message to the World Council of Churches that he was aware that the papal ministry was the greatest obstacle on the road to ecumenism. While the Council was still in progress, he went on a “pilgrimage” to the Holy Land (January 4-6, 1964). It was the first time in Church history that a Pope visited the places of Jesus. In the context of this visit, there was also the historic meeting of Paul VI with the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople. An embrace and a joint prayer in Latin and Greek marked a first step towards the cancellation of mutual excommunications

from the memory of the Church (December 8, 1965), and the revocation of the schism of 1054 between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, after more than 900 years!

It seemed a world organization had come back to the fore on the world stage after centuries of self-isolation, a global actor actively fighting for justice and peace on the basis of Christian values. But only a few “were aware that reforms and changes require decades of hard work in terms of persuasion, organization and relationships. If, after accumulating problems for more than 300 years, the floodgates are opened, only the naive will not take into account that there will be flooding.”⁴ Paul VI must have been well aware of this when, in his Closing Address to the Second Vatican Council, he made this appeal: “From this Catholic center of Rome, no one, in principle, is unreachable; in principle, all men can and must be reached. For the Catholic Church, no one is a stranger, no one is excluded, no one is far away. [...] This, our universal greeting, goes out to you, men who do not know us, men who do not understand us, men who do not regard us as useful, necessary or friendly. This greeting goes also to you men who, while perhaps thinking they are doing good, are opposed to us. A sincere greeting, and unassuming greeting, but one filled with hope and, today, please believe that it is filled with esteem and love.” (8 December 1965).

With his spiritual and universal attitude, the seriousness of his thinking, speaking and acting in a dialoging, synodal and missionary manner, his humble yet firm adherence to the fundamental convictions of the faith, enabled Paul VI to not only set a personal example, but also laid the foundations for a Church that emerged from the reform of the Council strengthened and returned to the world stage as a respectable player.

A Church focused outwards towards the world’s peripheries

The election of Jorge Maria Bergoglio as Pope Francis on March 13, 2013, marks another turning point in the recent history of the Church. For the first Jesuit and Latin American to occupy the chair of St. Peter, the central message of God’s mercy is an interpretative principle and the benchmark of style for ecclesial action and for Church structures in general. Both Paul VI and Francis care about a Church which “goes forth” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 24), aimed at “fostering a dynamic, open and missionary communion,” (EG 31) in order to “go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel.” (EG 20).

Francis clearly underlined what he means by “going out” with his first trip to Lampedusa, the landing place of so many refugees. Almost always, his trips are directed towards areas of crisis and show in a paradigmatic way what the Church’s mission consists of. They are also, at the same time, places where he meets the leaders of the main religions and denominations under the banner of fraternity. The *Document on Human Brotherhood* (Abu Dhabi, 2019) co-signed with Grand Imam el-Ṭayeb is considered a milestone in Christian-Muslim dialogue along with his groundbreaking socio-ecological encyclical *Laudato Si’* and its urgent call “to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.” (LS 49), Pope Francis has set standards - crucial at the World Climate Summit in Paris in 2015 - and challenged Christianity to a fundamental change of mindset. In the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic, Francis opened a new chapter of social doctrine with the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* on fraternity and social friendship, which decisively rebels against any logic of political and economic power that despises human beings and calls for “a social and political order whose soul is social charity” (FT 180). This political call stems from a spiritual impulse, as Francis makes

clear in perhaps his most personal book *Let Us Dream*: "To act in a Samaritan way in a crisis means letting myself be struck by what I see, knowing that suffering will change me."⁵

Synodality - key word in the process of church reform

A Church that rediscovers its mission within the horizon of universal fraternity and assumes its responsibility for the common good of the world must inevitably allow itself to be questioned also about its "self-organization": whether the ideal of "social friendship" is also lived within it and whether the dynamic of the Spirit of God finds space in its actions. "Synodality" then becomes a key word in the reform process initiated by Francis, who puts into concrete practice the spirit of the Second Vatican Council which had made an "aggiornamento" ("updating") and breakthrough inspired by the Holy Spirit in its own time. With the "synodal process" solemnly inaugurated on October 9, 2021, Pope Francis is, in a sense, carrying forward what Paul VI began with the Council: "The Synod was Paul VI's dream."⁶ What began as a wide-ranging participatory process among all the world's Catholics is turning out to be the central project of Pope Francis' pontificate: "From the beginning of my ministry as Bishop of Rome, I sought to enhance the Synod, which is one of the most precious legacies of the Second Vatican Council. For Blessed Paul VI, the Synod of Bishops was meant to reproduce the image of the Ecumenical Council and reflect its spirit and method."⁷

According to Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium*, what is of fundamental importance for a synodal conception of the Church are "four principles related to constant tensions present in every social reality" (EG 221) that must be taken up and resolved in order to accompany and direct the process of internal reform in the Church. A first principle: "We must initiate processes rather than occupy spaces. God is manifested in time and is present in the processes of history."⁸ With these words Pope Francis already sparks, in the early days of his ministry, nothing less than a cultural change calling for a response to pluralism and of leading contradictions through dialogue toward a process of clarification and agreement, rather than hastily drawing boundaries and authoritatively suspending discourse. Conflicts and tensions are inevitable but, according to Francis, they must be resolved in accordance with previous agreement in fundamental convictions, because "unity is greater than conflict" (EG 226-230). However, we must not lose sight of the fact that "realities are greater than ideas" (EG 231-233). We think in terms, structures and conceptual elaborations which "are at the service of communication, understanding and praxis." (EG 232). But when ideas become detached from reality, they become ideologies. And as much as confrontation is necessary, we must not lose sight of the fact that "the whole is greater than the parts." (EG 234-237) And finally, it is to see the greater whole - to widen the view and recognize the greater good that benefits all - and at the same time be rooted in the concrete.

Cultural change: Towards a listening church

With the 2021-2024 synodal process, Pope Francis is implementing what was already implicit in his programmatic statement, "Precisely the path of synodality is the path God expects from the Church of the third millennium."⁹ Francis is making it a personal mission. With the motto *For a Synodal Church: communion, participation and mission*, the Pope invites all 1.4 billion baptized Catholics to take part in a worldwide, bottom-up process of participation, a realistic assessment of where the Church is today and how it must develop in the future. In an unparalleled process, millions upon millions of people participated and from this survey, all these contributions resulted in the preparation of a working paper entitled *Enlarge the Space of Your Tent*.¹⁰ In it, is restored "what has been experienced,

thought, and heard about synodality in other local churches throughout the world, so that a dialogue between local, continental and world levels can arise and develop.”¹¹ The continental assemblies each drafted a final document, which flowed as input into further consultations at the universal Church level (First Session of the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023).

Although the process continues in the Second Session of the Synod (October 2024), the most important substantive issues will be explored in depth in ten study groups. A profound cultural change has already begun, as manifested in the round tables around of the October 2023 Synod Assembly, and especially in the composition of Synod members at tables and in the unprecedented “conversation in the Spirit”¹² method that was adopted for the work. On the eve of the Synod, Pope Francis clarified that this method is not just conversational technique or procedural from the Synod Secretariat. Rather it fundamentally reflects the spirit of a listening Church in dialogue: “To be synodal is to welcome one another like this, in the knowledge that we all have something to share and to learn, gathering together to listen to the “Spirit of truth” (John 14:17) in order to know what the Lord ‘is saying to the churches’ (Rev. 2:7).” Therein lies the crux of change, of the turn toward a listening Church, *without any limitations on thinking*. For Pope Francis, this is the heart of the process of Church reform and of fundamental importance for the success of the entire Synod.

Many may not yet realize the historic significance of this fundamental process of reform of the Catholic Church. However, for Francis there is no question that there is still much need for reform: “It is true that the Vatican is the last absolute monarchy in Europe, and that there is often ... reasoning and court maneuvering going on in here, but these patterns need to be definitively abandoned and overcome,” he said in his book-interview *LIFE. My Story through History*. Fortunately, however, it was the majority of cardinals present at the general congregations before the 2013 conclave “who called for such a reform” and elected him for this. Francis’ writings resonate as a continuation of the mission of the conciliar Pope Paul VI: “But I continue to cultivate a dream for the future: that ours be a meek, humble, and servant Church, with the attributes of God, and therefore also tender, close, and compassionate. We need to move forward with this new approach, with so many projects.”¹³ A Church in reform mode, recovering its spiritual dimension, and with a perspective that instills courage and hope.

¹ Cf. H. McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, p. 1; cf. F.X. Kaufmann, *Katholische Kirchenkritik*, Edition Exodus, Lucerna 2022, pp. 164-175. Cf. Th. Großbölting, *Der verlorene Himmel Glaube in Deutschland seit 1945*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2013.

² *Address at the Opening of the Second Vatican Council* (Oct. 11, 1962), 4, 2-4, AAS 54 (1962), p. 789. Significantly, Pope Francis quotes this passage extensively in his programmatic inaugural apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (no. 84). Cf. P. Klasvogt, *Kirche neu(er) finden*, Bonifatius, Paderborn 2022, p. 89.

³ A. Schavan (ed.), *Dialog statt Dialogverweigerung. Impulse für eine zukunftsfähige Kirche*, Butzon & Bercker, Kevelaer 1995, p. 36.

⁴ H. Häring, *Zwischen Hoffnungen und Enttäuschungen. Ein Blick in die nachkonziliare Zeit* (Conversations of June 6, 2009; most recent update July 13, 2017).

⁵ Pope Francis in conversation with Austin Ivereigh, *Let us Dream. The Path to a Better Future*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2020, p. 3.

⁶ Interview in “*Vida Nueva*,” August 4, 2023.

⁷ *Address for the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops*, Oct. 17, 2015.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

⁸ Interview with Rev. Antonio Spadaro, SJ, in “*La Civiltà Cattolica*,” 19 settembre 2013, p. 468.

⁹ *Address for the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops, cit.*

¹⁰ <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continental-EN.pdf>.

¹¹ M. Wijlens, in *“Theologische Quartalsschrift”* 202 (2022), p. 435.

¹² According to the method of community discernment, developed by the Jesuits in Canada, the dialogue is preceded by a time of individual prayer by the participants.

¹³ Pope Francis with F. Marchese Ragona, *LIFE. La mia storia nella storia*, Harper Collins, Milano 2024, pp. 311-312. [Available now in English in Kindle Edition; to be published March 2025 in book form.]