

A Synodal approach: Concretizing Communion

Carlos García Andrade, CMF

In the wake of biblical and patristic renewal, Vatican II marked a decisive turning point in the Church's understanding of itself. For centuries a juridical kind of vision prevailed in Magisterial documents that tended to present the Church as a 'perfect society and with particular authoritarian elements. But the Council, instead, emphasized a more theological vision: The Church as People of God, Body of Christ, and Temple of the Spirit. These biblical images in the wake of the covenant history between God and his People that culminated in Jesus and participation in the life of the One and Triune God, served to enlighten and delineate what was then called an 'ecclesiology of communion.'

Understandably, this new vision has been slow to take hold, particularly the notion of the Church as People of God in which all baptized members enjoy equal dignity and contribute to its mission. Chapter two of *Lumen Gentium*, for example, was dedicated entirely to this reality and Joseph Ratzinger wrote clearly in this regard as well. Moving beyond the more juridical models of the past, in order to reach a new and more balanced vantage point, has not been easy.

Considering this new model, how should ministerial authority and decision-making processes be understood and exercised? How, for example, can new modes of expression be developed that are more reflective of an ecclesiology of communion rather than a pyramidal structure, without negating the value of older ideas and frameworks? How can a new balance be found between ordained ministers whose role had grown in importance over the ages, and that of other lay and religious vocations, where the majority are married but for whom their ecclesial function had shrunken to a bare minimum over the centuries (see Paolo Siniscalco's article in this issue)?

There's been a clear and unequal gap in both teaching and practice as it regards the centuries-old, prevailing juridical model. It clearly distinguished between Church 'teachers' and 'students', between pastors and flocks, between those tasked with governance by decree and those called to obey, between celibate living in 'states of perfection' and all others regarded as being in 'states of imperfection.' How can we fully overcome this gap? In reality, for the relational differences ushered in by the Council to take hold, a model capable of articulating unity in distinction is needed. But this model – which is nothing less than the uni-trinitarian life of God to which all are called to participate – had not yet come fully into relief nor been consciously explored in its theory or practice. Prior experiences of communion – some of which are still in use today – drew upon more vertical experiences oriented towards hierarchy and 'superiors,' with very little experience from a horizontal perspective (between vocations, institutions, ecclesial charisms...).

Then, there were other challenges that came along later: How, for example, could the risk of confusing the vibrant practice of communion with mechanisms for political democracy be avoided? How could the Church, as a People, move forward without falling instead into the trap of collectivism or a collectivist mentality?

For this and other reasons, a vision of the Church as People of God has remained somewhat in the background. This was also true for other related and important concepts of recent times, such as the universal call to holiness and the participation of all the faithful in the priesthood of Christ and his prophetic and royal mission. But, gradually, a new Trinitarian theology has developed, together with many other experiences of communion inspired by the Spirit, and this is allowing for an ecclesiology of communion to take root.

On this backdrop, Pope Francis relaunched a vision of the Church as People of God. Using the image of a polyhedron, rather than spherical 'uniformity' to express unity, he explains and values plurality. By speaking of a Church journeying through time, one turned outwards most especially towards the poor and emarginated, it becomes a welcoming and all-loving Church that excludes no one. It is a Church whose vision is that of Christ on the cross, of his universal embrace of all humanity, one that can see God's work everywhere. It gives witness to a synodal Church striving together to discern and prioritize the most important paths to follow along its voyage.

The *Focus* section articles in this issue speak to the value and implications of such a synodal vision as indispensable for furthering communion. Several other articles speak to the pastoral and other fruits of this framework in giving witness to the decisive role of laity, while others illustrate concrete initiatives reflective of a Church called to dialogue with all.