

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Can Synodality Ferment an Inclusive Catholicism?

Michele Dillon

Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Class of 1944 Professor of Sociology, University of New Hampshire, USA

michele.dillon@unh.edu

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Abstract

This article discusses the significance of the extensive data-gathering procedures incorporated into recent synodal preparations and how they advance Pope Francis's commitment to forging a church informed by a dialogue between theological ideas and empirical realities. Drawing on my prior case analysis of the Synod on the Family, I argue that despite the limits in place then on lay participation in the formal synod discussions, the diversity of the laity's self-reported experiences penetrated the bishops' deliberations. This achievement is in part a function of the synod communication structure whereby participants are allocated to shared-language groups, thus avoiding self-selection based on a priori doctrinal or country-specific biases; the resulting (forced) dialogue with difference helps foster the gradual development of more inclusive doctrinal framings as seen in the post-synodal *Amoris Laetitia*. In a historic expansion, the Synod on Synodality formally includes lay voting participants and therefore lay perspectives will directly shape the synod proposal outcomes. Like the bishops, lay Catholics do not speak with one voice, and thus the task of finding moral consensus will still necessarily require respectful mutual listening and reciprocal dialogue.

Keywords: Catholicism; synodality; Vatican II; doctrinal development; reflexive dialogue; Pope Francis; synods

The emancipatory achievement of the Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962–1965) was encapsulated by its commitment to doctrinal reflexivity: its sustained willingness to unflinchingly examine well-established church doctrines and institutional practices. This was not merely an academic exercise but a commitment by the church's bishops to adhere to the charge imposed on them by Pope John XXIII: to reflexively examine how the church might be more relevant in the modern world.¹ Sixty years since the conclusion of Vatican II, the church—now in a much more pronounced secular societal context—is once again taking stock of its identity and mission. The Synod on Synodality, 2021–2024, For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission—a remarkable three-year period that includes extensive data gathering, reflection, conversation, and report writing in advance of the formal synodal deliberations that will conclude in Rome in October 2024—presents the church with yet another watershed opportunity for doctrinal and institutional renewal through a reflexive examination of its realities. Intriguingly, the

¹ My discussion of Vatican II in this essay and the specific Vatican II documents I reference draw on prior work. Michele Dillon, *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith and Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).



purpose of this synod—amplified by words from Isaiah 54.2: “Enlarge the space of your tent”² is to discern how well the church is doing in realizing Vatican II’s model of an inclusive, participatory Catholicism attentive to the experiences and voices of the whole People of God.

The Institutional and Legal Context for Synodality

The word *synod* and the related term *synodality* have long-standing origins and use in the church. Synods are legally defined, collegial assemblies of the church’s bishops; collaborative collegiality is a cornerstone of synodality, with the Code of Canon Law (canons 342–48) outlining the format, representational structure, and communication processes to which synods must adhere.³ Synods were common in early church history and in the spirit of Vatican II were formally reinstated by Pope Paul VI in 1965 to foster closer ties and greater consultation between the pope and the world’s bishops. As envisioned by Paul VI, synod assemblies would help the church “to carefully survey the signs of the times and to make every effort to adapt ... to changing circumstances and need of our day.” Accordingly, the synod would institutionalize a structured forum and set of processes that would provide “accurate and direct information” and foster discussion on relevant church and societal issues and offer recommendations on such matters to the pope.⁴

The renewed attention to synodality in the mid-1960s coincided with the church’s transformative shift in its institutional self-understanding, a transformation both on display during and an outcome of Vatican II. The church edged away from the monarchical model that had dominated especially since 1870 with the fall of the papal states and the attendant articulation of the supremacy of papal authority institutionalized by the declaration of papal infallibility. John XXIII’s papacy (1958–1963) was a harbinger of remarkable institutional change. The very act of John XXIII’s convening of Vatican II and the forward-looking intentionality it explicitly conveyed upended the unilateral and aloof understanding of the church’s exercise of its hierarchical authority and the unquestioned expanse of its teachings. A clear indication that if the church were to learn from the lessons of history—an imperative forcefully affirmed by John XXIII—such learning was predicated on his recognition that it must include voices other than the pope and, indeed, other than the bishops: it must include the voices and experiences and expertise of Catholics as a whole. For the church to have relevance in and for the modern world and for it to be in the vanguard of reconstructing “the spiritual ruins”⁵ of a world dehumanized by the atrocities of war and the destructive deployment of science and technology, it would have to embrace a new

² See the graphics illustrating “The Continental Stage,” General Secretariat of the Synod, Synod 2021–2024, <https://www.synod.va/en/the-synodal-process/phase1-the-consultation-of-the-people-of-god/the-continental-stage.html>.

³ General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, “Canonical Codes Concerning the Synod,” <http://secretariat.synod.va/content/synod/en/the-synod/canonical-codes-concerning-the-synod.html>; Francis, *Episcopalis Communio* [Apostolic constitution on the Synod of Bishops], (September 15, 2018), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communicio.html.

⁴ Paul VI, *Apostolica Sollicitudo* [Establishing the Synod of Bishops for the universal church], (September 15, 1965), https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19650915_apostolica-sollicitudo.html. See also Francis, “Address Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops,” October 17, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html. For an elaboration of synodality as a new ecclesial model of inclusive catholicity, consultation, reciprocal listening, and discernment, see Rafael Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 2022).

⁵ “Pope John Convoles the Council,” in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter Abbott (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 703–09, at 704 (John XXIII announcing his decision to convoke Vatican II).

understanding of the church as the whole People of God. And this, of course, is the great achievement—and promise—of Vatican II.

Vatican II's Vision of an Agential, Participatory Church

In a nutshell, Vatican II—a synod of the world's Catholic bishops—explicitly affirmed the shared equality and responsibility conferred by baptism on all members of the church. It elaborated that the ordained and the laity are interrelated participants in the “one priesthood of Christ” and as such constitute “but one People of God” whose diversity and Catholicity contribute to the good of the whole church. Because, as Vatican II dynamically noted, “[m]en and women are the conscious artisans and authors” of culture and community, they are responsible for societal development and for remedying the contradictions and sins within the church itself, and they are expected to draw on their varied personal experiences and professional expertise in this work. The obligations imposed by Vatican II thus require an active, participatory, and discerning laity: “Let the laity ... by their combined efforts remedy any institutions and conditions of the world which are customarily an inducement to sin, so that all such things may be conformed to the norms of justice.” Moreover, in a radically expansive, welcoming gesture, Vatican II declared: “An individual layman, by reasons of the knowledge, competence, or outstanding ability which he may enjoy, is permitted and sometimes even obliged to express his opinion on things which concern the good of the Church.”⁶

These words, though the language is gendered, still resonate strongly today. While Vatican II reaffirmed hierarchical and clerical authority, it also evoked the Catholic Church as a community of shared co-responsibility for the good of the church—and of society—grounded in reciprocal, lay-clerical dialogue, and honest discussion:

Let the layman not imagine that his pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission ... Often enough, the Christian view of things will itself suggest some specific solution in certain circumstances. Yet, it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter. Even against the intentions of their proponents, however, solutions proposed on one side or another may be easily confused by many people with the gospel message. Hence it is necessary for people to remember that no one is allowed in the aforementioned situations to appropriate the Church's authority for his opinion. They should always try to enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity and caring above all for the common good ... [L]et it be recognized that all the faithful, clerical and lay, possess a lawful freedom of inquiry and of thought, and the freedom to express their minds humbly and courageously about those matters in which they enjoy competence.⁷

Through its new understanding of the obligations of lay inquiry and active participation in the church and society, Vatican II marked a highly significant turn that cannot be overstated: it transformed what is entailed in being Catholic and dynamically opened up the interpretive authority in laity-clerical relations. As I elaborate elsewhere, the new framework “sought to balance the supreme authority of the Church hierarchy with an emphasis on respect for lay

⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* [Dogmatic constitution on the church] (November 21, 1964), §§ 36–37, in Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*. See also, Dillon, *Catholic Identity*, 48–52; Luciani, *Synodality*, 45–57.

⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* [Pastoral constitution on the church in the modern world] (December 7, 1965), §§ 43, 62, in Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*. On hierarchical authority, see *Lumen Gentium*, §§ 18–21, 25.

competence and reasoned dialogue among all Church members ... Vatican II thereby shifted, whether intentionally or not, the system of power relations in the Church. The redrawing of interpretive authority validated an understanding of religious identity derived from a more egalitarian, communal sense of Church ownership rather than from the Church hierarchy's universal definitions alone."⁸ And importantly, as Pope Benedict XIV emphasized, Vatican II is in continuity, not discontinuity, with the Catholic tradition.⁹

The Narrow Deployment of Synodality

Although synods are institutional mechanisms to intentionally help the church to monitor the signs of the times, their post-Vatican II deployment has been relatively narrow and circumscribed. This is all the more striking given the complex realities of post-1960s global society, and the ever-more-pressing need for the church to adapt to—and provide a secular-attuned moral voice amid—changing social, cultural, economic, geopolitical, and ecological conditions. There have been several synods since Vatican II—thirteen before Francis became pope—but almost all were relatively inward-looking, focusing on faith and catechesis or episcopal administrative matters. A synod held in 1987 focused on the laity, *The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World*. Its thrust, however, was largely on the laity's role in evangelization rather than on lay participation in the church's everyday organizational and sacramental activities. The 1980 synod on the Christian family stands out as a topic of direct and immediate relevance to the laity. However, that synod led to Pope John Paul II's exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, which, while attentive to the realities of marital breakdown and acknowledging the moral complexity of particular situations, also unequivocally reaffirmed the church's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage and the exclusion from the Eucharist of Catholics in civil unions.¹⁰

The synod held in 1985 to mark the twentieth anniversary of the closing of Vatican II offered a more positive view of the legitimacy of the teaching authority of episcopal conferences than previously (and subsequently) articulated by Cardinal Ratzinger (as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), a gesture that pushed toward inclusive collegiality.¹¹ Ironically though, the 1985 synod also led to the commitment to issue the revised *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.¹² Like the tone of many of the doctrinal declarations and statements issued during John Paul's tenure, the revised *Catechism* leaves relatively little room for the discernment of conscience advanced by Vatican II. Vatican II had elaborated that a person's conscience is their "most secret core and sanctuary," and that individuals should not be coerced into religious behavior contrary to what they, in conscience, believe to be true.¹³ For many Catholics, the first major conscience clash with church teaching came to the fore shortly after Vatican II with Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which reaffirmed the church's ban on artificial birth control. In the wake of Vatican II's affirmation of lay competence and religious freedom, many Catholics, including

⁸ Dillon, *Catholic Identity*, 48.

⁹ Benedict, "What Has Been the Result of the Council?," in *Vatican II: The Essential Texts*, ed. Norman Tanner (New York: Image Books, 2012), 3–13. On how a hermeneutic of reform is in continuity rather than in discontinuity with the larger Catholic tradition, see David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* [Apostolic exhortation on the role of the Christian family in the modern world] (November 22, 1981), www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html#.

¹¹ Francis A. Sullivan, "The Teaching Authority of Episcopal Conferences," *Theological Studies* 63, no. 3 (2002): 472–93.

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dublin: Veritas, 1992).

¹³ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, §§ 16, 41.

priests and theologians, were disappointed that the Vatican chose to reassert its magisterial authority and intrude on a matter of such interpersonal intimacy, one on which—emboldened by Vatican II—the laity believed they were and should be the moral arbiters.¹⁴

This clash had significant ruptures for the relationship of the laity to Rome and was hugely consequential in alerting the laity to the gap between the reality of their lives and the proclamations of church officials. The laity's apprehension of this gap and the attendant assertion of their own moral authority and freedom of inquiry—per Vatican II—subsequently extended to other issues of personal and family life, including marriage, divorce, and same-sex relationships, and to their demands for greater lay participation and authority in the church and its decision-making structures.

Prior to Francis's papacy, the Vatican's response to the laity's claims to its interpretive and participatory authority had generally been to denounce the signs of the times—in particular, the increased secularization of society and of Catholics' lives. In contrast to Paul VI's stated intent that synods would facilitate an adaptive response by the church to changing circumstances in the church and society, they have instead in the pre-Francis era contributed to the issuing of Vatican documents that largely reaffirm the immutability of church teachings. Contextually, as post-synodal documents that reiterate long-established church teaching on sexual morality and access to the sacraments, *Familiaris Consortio* and the *Catechism* convey a church that is hesitant to exploring how it might adapt to changing times and that leans toward excluding rather than integrating the diversity of the laity's lived experiences into the church.¹⁵

Retrieving Synodality in the Service of the People of God

Synods have come to new prominence and vitality during Francis's tenure. In addition to the current Synod on Synodality, Francis previously convened two others on topics of deep significance to ordinary Catholics: the Synod on the Family (2014–2015), and the Synod on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment (October 2018). Additionally, the values threaded into synodality are a defining aspect of Francis's everyday exercise of the papacy and central to his construal of the church and its practices. His synodal approach reflects both his postsecular openness and competence¹⁶ and, theologically, a “bold pneumatology” conveyed by his deep faith in the Holy Spirit's active guidance of the church.¹⁷ From its earliest days, Francis's papacy has marked a substantively significant turn for the church and one that is keenly sociological as amplified by his openness to recognizing the value of the secular. In his first lengthy interview as pope, he unequivocally asserted that God dwells in the secular: “God is in history [and] in [its] processes ... God is certainly in the past, because we can see his footprints. And God is also in the future as a promise. But the ‘concrete’ God, so to speak, is today. For this reason, complaining never helps us find God. The complaints of today about how barbaric the world is—these complaints sometimes end up giving birth within the church to desires to establish order in the sense of pure conservation, as a defense. No: God is to be encountered in the world of today.”¹⁸

¹⁴ These paragraphs draw on Dillon, *Catholic Identity*, 78–83, and Michele Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 20–22.

¹⁵ *Familiaris Consortio*; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

¹⁶ Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*, 37–41.

¹⁷ Jos Moons, “The Holy Spirit as the Protagonist of the Synod: Pope Francis's Creative Reception of the Second Vatican Council,” *Theological Studies* 84, no.1 (2023): 61–78.

¹⁸ Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis,” *America*, September 30, 2013, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>. Elsewhere, I discuss Francis's papacy and the various points outlined here. Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*, 33–66, 81–84, 126–27, 157–59.

Francis frequently repeats this affirmation, reminding Catholics and others that God is present in “everyday affairs” and “concrete activities.” These remarks, well-grounded in the church’s identity as a public church committed to the balancing of faith and reason, reposition the church as affirming of secular society and not simply its critic. While sociologically refreshing, this disposition is also, of course, fully in accord with the core Catholic theological principles of incarnation and immanence, principles that are at the heart of the Catholic imagination. Importantly, it is also a necessary recognition critical to the church’s chances of reforging itself as a relevant and inclusive church.

In this task of retrieving the church’s relevance, it is apparent that for Francis, synodality is key. As with other aspects of his approach to the papacy, Francis was quick to show a certain inventiveness toward the synodal process. His early apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* was an outgrowth of the Synod of Bishops that convened in October 2012 (under Pope Benedict) to discuss evangelization. Contrary to the norms enshrined for synod processes, Francis declined to use the bishops’ synodal report summarizing their recommendations. Instead, he used the opportunity to outline what he called “a new chapter ... for the church’s journey in years to come.” It was apparent, moreover, that the journey forward would necessarily seek to reconnect with Catholics’ lived realities and reengage with the church’s commitment to inquiry and discernment. Reminiscent of Paul VI’s understanding of the adaptive need to keep surveying the signs of the times, Francis elaborated: “In her ongoing discernment, the church can also come to see that certain customs not directly connected to the heart of the Gospel, even some that have deep historical roots, are no longer properly understood and appreciated. Some of these customs may be beautiful, but they no longer serve as means of communicating the Gospel. We should not be afraid to re-examine them. At the same time, the church has rules or precepts that may have been quite effective in their time but no longer have the same usefulness for directing and shaping people’s lives.”¹⁹ With a consistent focus on the everyday realities of people’s lives, *Evangelii Gaudium* and Francis’s other formal and informal statements emphasize a collaborative walking-together, listening-together model of being a church. In this framing, the experiences of the People of God, and not just the voices and assessments of the ordained, are sincerely sought out and with a view toward their incorporation into the ever-evolving, reflexive forging of doctrine amid social change.

Reflexivity and the Imperative of Synodal Honesty

This open approach to discernment is crystallized in Francis’s decision to convene a synod on synodality. How reflexive is that! Against the backdrop of several decades of advocacy by an array of intra-church activist organizations for an inclusive church and amid cumulative decadeslong trends showing Catholics’ diminished credibility in the church’s authority and in church teachings on several issues, the pope is calling all Catholics to come together to talk about their experiences in and of the church. The synod was initially envisioned as a two-year deliberative period that would culminate in Rome in October 2023. But, typical of Francis and his openness to current realities, when he saw the expansive and engaged dialogue that the synod preparatory surveys and conversations were stimulating, he extended the deliberative period for an additional year—the synod will now culminate in

¹⁹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* [The joy of the Gospel] (November 24, 2013), §§1, 43, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html>. See also Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*, 39–41, 126–27; Luciani, *Synodality*; Massimo Faggioli, “From Collegiality to Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis’s ‘Listening Primacy,’” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (2020): 352–69.

Rome in October 2024. From the outset, the purpose of this prolonged conversation has been to come to insights and recommendations that help to make the church more inclusive and participatory, in short, a synodal church.

The call comes, moreover, with the admonition that all should speak honestly! In his remarks opening the synod (October 2021), Francis emphasized the imperative of speaking honestly about lived realities, stating: “The Synod ... is a process of authentic spiritual discernment that we undertake, not to project a good image of ourselves, but to cooperate more effectively with the work of God in history. If we want to speak of a synodal church, we cannot remain satisfied with appearances alone; we need content, means and structures that can facilitate dialogue and interaction within the People of God, especially between priests and laity.” He further emphasized that it cannot be “the usual people saying the usual things ... along familiar and unfruitful ideological and partisan divides ... [and] far removed ... from the concrete life of communities around the world.”²⁰

Francis similarly articulated this synodal attitude and its methodology with elegant clarity in his convening of the Synod on the Family. Opening that synod in October 2014, he implored the bishops to use the opportunity to speak openly and honestly. Synod assemblies, he said “are not meant to discuss beautiful and clever ideas, or to see who is more intelligent.” Forthright dialogue, rather, is what is required:

One general and basic condition is this: speaking honestly. Let no one say: “I cannot say this, they will think this or this of me ...” It is necessary to say with *parrhesia* [truthful candor] all that one feels. After [a previous meeting] ... in which the family was discussed, a Cardinal wrote to me, saying: “what a shame that several Cardinals did not have the courage to say certain things out of respect for the Pope, perhaps believing that the Pope might think something else.” This is not good, this is not synodality, because it is necessary to say all that, in the Lord, one feels the need to say: without polite deference, without hesitation. And, at the same time, one must listen with humility and welcome, with an open heart, to what your brothers say. Synodality is exercised with these two approaches.²¹

To speak truthfully about “the realities and the problems” of the church as Francis envisions the synodal process, shows a remarkable commitment to transparency and intellectual honesty. Telling his fellow bishops not to fear offending him or others with their opinions is a departure from John Paul II who, contrary to the spirit of synodality, reasserted the church’s pre-Vatican II emphasis on communicative deference to magisterial authority—underscored more generally by his instructions to Catholic theologians constraining their freedom of interpretation.²² It is also a rare example of an institutional leader calling out and trying to move beyond the strategic maneuvering that so frequently characterizes intra-church activity and academic, corporate, and political organizations.

²⁰ Francis, “Address of the Holy Father on the Occasion of the Moment of Reflection for the Beginning of the Synodal Journey,” October 9, 2021, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/10/09/211009a.html>.

²¹ These are Francis’s words from, respectively, the Synod’s opening Mass homily, October 5, 2014, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20141005_omelia-apertura-sinodo-vescovi.html; and his Synod Greetings (opening message), October 6, 2014, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141006_padri-sinodali.html. My discussion here and below of the Synod on the Family and its pertinent documents draws on my analysis elsewhere. Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*, 126–55.

²² Dillon, *Catholic Identity*, 68–74.

Francis's interest in finding out the realities and problems of the church was substantiated with the synod on the family, itself another prolonged process (over two years, 2014–2015). It went to remarkable lengths to ascertain the actual realities of Catholics' experiences of family life. The elongated time frame allowed for and encouraged the unhurried, comprehensive gathering of self-report data from ordinary people about their experiences of the many facets of family life. This design aimed to avoid the elitism of a hierarchically ordered church and truly look to the expertise of the People of God. Rather than privileging church teachings on the family over the realities of family life, and rather than relying on priests' and bishops' assessments of family life in their dioceses or parishes, the synod looked to hear the particular, lived, experience-based accounts of people themselves from within their sexual and socio-emotional roles as spouses, partners, and parents.

A full year prior to the synod's first meeting, the Vatican issued a preparatory document which included a series of questions for every Catholic diocese to disseminate and find answers based on experiences in its diocese. The preparatory questions distributed were wide-ranging, and, importantly, recognized *a priori* the diversity of contemporary families. For example, the questionnaire asked about the extent to which Catholic married couples know, understand, and practice church teachings on marriage and on contraception and are aware of the efforts undertaken by the church in marriage preparation, couple formation, and children's religious socialization. It also asked about couples in what church officials call irregular situations—cohabiting, same-sex, and divorced and (non-church sanctioned) remarried couples—situations that contravene church teaching on marriage. The questions probed the prevalence of these situations, the pastoral efforts, and the difficulties encountered by such couples and their children, as well as these families' expectations of the church and the sacraments. Additional questions asked about the broader cultural and political context impacting marriage-related issues in a given diocese or country, thus further conveying that marriage is not merely a universal ideal but is affected by and embedded in a diversity of socio-cultural contexts.

The Synod on Synodality embraces an even more extensive data-gathering structure as it, too, actively seeks out the voices and input of the laity in all their geographical and socio-cultural particularity. The questions for this synod focus mainly on Catholics' experiences of the local church and more generally how they experience inclusion or marginalization in their relationships in and with the church. The synod documents and ongoing promotional materials repeatedly emphasize the importance of lay participation in the synod process, and official church websites (including those of dioceses and parishes) include a prominent tab for individual Catholics to access, and complete multiple sets of probing, thematic questions about their experiences.²³ Beyond websites, many parishes and church activist organizations are also providing in-person small-group opportunities for individuals to share and discuss their experiences and views of the church.

Indeed, the synod's logo—to my knowledge itself an innovation in Vatican communications—conveys the inclusive image of an encompassing and diverse people journeying forward together in unison. The sincerity of the church's intent in encouraging and facilitating ordinary Catholics to share their views of the church is demonstrated by the fact that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, for example, has left the questionnaire for individuals' input accessible on its website beyond the official closing date for responses to be submitted (May 31, 2022) and it will remain open until the synod concludes. This deadline extension further reinforces the synodal attentiveness to realities;

²³ For example, as of this writing, the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) includes a button for "individual synod contributions" with an external link to the survey. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Synod on Synodality," accessed June 10, 2024, <https://www.usccb.org/synod> [<https://airtable.com/app6DJtjQaQoSZPV/shrrDy2af7rD1uumi>].

in this instance, that realities are more important than bureaucratic, procedural deadlines. The website states, moreover, that the bishops “value[s] the ongoing enthusiasm and vulnerability with which the People of God are participating in the synod.”²⁴ It is also noteworthy that bishops’ conferences in other countries (such as Ireland and Germany) have affirmed the long-term value of synodality and a commitment to its practice beyond the synod on synodality, thus pointing to synodality’s lay-inclusive potential in rebuilding the church amid the decline of its credibility due to secular forces and the long shadow still cast by the sex abuse crisis.²⁵

Synodal Praxis: Limits and Strengths

The significance of the unprecedented execution of such vast and prolonged data-gathering exercises by both the family and the synodality synods cannot be overstated. They demonstrate the church hierarchy’s sincerity in wanting to know the realities of Catholics’ lives and give renewed recognition to Vatican II’s appreciation that the laity matter in charting the church’s course. They also substantiate the view that paying attention to the signs of the times is not done in abstraction but is fully situated in the secular trends embodied in Catholic lives and local contexts. Of course, as church leaders have long made plain—and frequently reiterate—Catholic doctrine is not based on opinion polls or sociological studies. Indeed, Francis himself noted in his 2018 document revising synodal procedures that listening to the People of God and discerning the *sensus fidelium*—while integral to synodal processes—should be “distinguished carefully from the changing currents of public opinion.”²⁶ Nevertheless, the findings yielded from synodal data-gathering initiatives do inform the development of pastoral pathways—and, I would suggest, the gradual evolution of doctrinal thinking. The synodal process can be a facilitator of change; its outcomes are not predetermined (regardless of claims to the contrary by conservatives and progressives alike). The process has limits but also strengths.

One limit has been the restricted nature of lay participation in the formal synod meetings; at the Synod on the Family, members of the laity were invited as auditors but they were prohibited from voting on the report recommendations. That synod amplified the growing gap between the data gathered about Catholics’ realities and the incorporation of the breadth of those realities into the bishops’ formal synodal meetings. Although several national surveys elaborated on the concrete circumstantial difficulties that large numbers of Catholics have in accepting or adhering to church teachings, the formal synod chose not to hear firsthand from some such individuals and couples. Instead, synodal officials invited the participation of those for whom church teachings appeared to be relatively unproblematic. Some lay auditors, for example, were employees of bishops’ conferences or conservative religious organizations (and more likely to be aligned with current church teachings); others were advocates of natural family planning, a method favored only by a small minority of Catholics. The evident narrowness of lay representation is all the more striking given the fact that since the 1970s, large Catholic majorities consistently have expressed the view that one can be a good Catholic and use artificial contraception. This is one of the basic realities of Catholic sexual and family life that the synod on the family largely ignored and did so despite its emphasized commitment to engage with “families as they are.”²⁷

²⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Synod on Synodality,” accessed February 14, 2024, <https://www.usccb.org/synod>.

²⁵ See Gerry O’Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis: A Synodal Catholic Church in Ireland?* (Dublin: Messenger, 2019).

²⁶ Francis, *Episcopalis Communio*, §§ 6–7, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html.

²⁷ Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*, 133–36.

The synodal practice of excluding lay voters from the formal synodal discussions and from the report outcomes/recommendations process undermines the very notion of synodality—especially when the questions at issue (such as family life, youth, sacramental participation) directly entwine Catholics’ everyday realities. It contravenes Vatican II’s understanding that lay expertise has a necessary role in remedying the ills of the church. Further, though conceding that the laity have opinions and experiences, it nonetheless delegitimizes their active co-responsibility in arbitrating the church’s identity. Francis expressed awareness of these tensions in his remarks opening the Synod on Synodality in October 2021. Acknowledging the unevenness in the church’s participatory realities, he stated, “we have taken some steps forward, but a certain difficulty remains and we must acknowledge the frustration and impatience felt by many pastoral workers, members of diocesan and parish consultative bodies and women, who frequently remain on the fringes. Enabling everyone to participate is an essential ecclesial duty!”²⁸ Acting on this recognition, in April 2023 Francis expanded the universe of participants for the synod on synodality to include women religious and lay women and men as voting participants (male religious representatives already participated as voters in prior synods). Sociologically and theologically, this is an exciting development; its practical implementation means that seventy non-bishops from across the church’s seven global regions will participate in the synod’s formal deliberations, constituting approximately 25 percent of all participant voters.²⁹

Notwithstanding the transformative symbolism of the inclusion of lay voters, these additional voices cannot be expected to present a unified bloc of Catholic experiences and perspectives. While the laity at large, especially in North America, Western Europe, Australia, and South America, tend to be more progressive than their bishops in their goals for an inclusive church, doctrinal differentiation among Catholics is characteristic of any parish or country context.³⁰ The work of discernment, therefore, and the task of driving toward the ideal, as expressed by Francis, of reaching “moral unanimity insofar as this is possible” on specific questions³¹ will not be made any easier by the inclusion of lay voters per se. However, the synodal consensus that emerges on any specific proposal will have the added credibility of being directly shaped by the actual conjoint dialogue and equal voting power of bishops and laity.

Irrespective of the synodal reforms instituted by Francis, some Catholics (including bishops) remain skeptical about the value of a synod on synodality. Given the many ways in which Catholics feel excluded from the sacraments (for example, divorced and remarried Catholics; Catholics in same-sex civil marriages; women from ordination); from liturgy (as priests and deacons); and in church governance (notwithstanding advances by Francis in appointing women to high-profile Vatican positions), this skepticism is understandable. Yet, it is noteworthy—and fully in keeping with their long-demonstrated commitment to Catholicism—that many individual Catholics and Catholic advocacy groups (such as Dignity USA, Call to Action, Future Church) are participating in the preparatory phases of the synod

²⁸ Francis, “Address of the Holy Father on the Occasion of the Moment of Reflection for the Beginning of the Synodal Journey.” For a broader discussion of the challenges in reforming ecclesial governance and the synodal process, see Faggioli, “From Collegiality to Synodality,” 362–64.

²⁹ Christopher White, “Pope Francis Expands Participation in Synod to Lay Members, Granting Right to Vote,” *National Catholic Reporter*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.ncronline.org/vatican/vatican-news/pope-francis-expands-participation-synod-lay-members-granting-right-vote>.

³⁰ See, for example, Marcia Clemmitt, “Future of the Catholic Church,” *CQ Research* 23, no. 21 (2013): 497–520; Massimo Faggioli, “Catholicism’s Shrinking Horizons,” *Commonweal*, March 16, 2023. <https://www.commonweal.org/synodality-vatican-ii-francis-theology-illiberalism-trump-bishops>.

³¹ *Episcopalis Communio*, article 17.

with the hope that their input will truly matter to steering the church on a more inclusive, participative trajectory. I would argue that their participation is, indeed, worthwhile.

Despite the exclusion of diverse lay Catholic representatives from the formal deliberations of the Synod on the Family, the documented diversity of Catholic views from the synod preparatory surveys and reports is nonetheless still part of the official record of the synod as a whole. Importantly, too, recognition of that diversity seeped into the bishops' small-group discussions at the family synod in a variety of ways, and it was those silently resonating voices in tacit conversation within the bishops' groups that contributed to forging the consensus of the synod's final report. Further, sustained sensitivity to this diversity helped contribute to the gradual, subtle but significant, progression of doctrine discernable in Francis's post-synodal exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, articulating a possible pathway to communion for divorced and remarried couples.³²

A great strength of the synodal process is the communicative structure of its group dialogical process, and in particular the cross-language organization of the groupings. At the family synod, there were four English-language groups, three French-language groups, three Italian-language groups, two Spanish-language groups, and one German-language group. This methodology ensures that same-language conservative and moderate participants are mixed together rather than based on self-selected doctrinal alignments. Similarly, because the shared-language groups also encompass a mix of countries, the intra-group dialogue ensures that there is forced attentiveness to the geographical-cultural diversity of experiences. In short, the group dialogical process requires conversation with difference and the working out of such differences. This process was visibly enacted at the synod on the family; the ensuing conversations were not necessarily easy, but they were productive in making the gradual shifts toward the pastoral and sacramental inclusion eventually forged.

Remedying Structures of Exclusion

The occurrence of a synod on synodality sharply foregrounds the unavoidable question: Can the synod further advance the realization of Vatican II's overarching vision of inclusivity and co-responsibility? The formal synod, even with the historical inclusion of seventy non-bishop members, is still legally and procedurally a synod of *bishops*. Because bishops will account for approximately three-quarters of the voting participants, any theology of inclusion will need to be championed by at least some bishops. Midway through the three-year process (March 2023), one strong American voice emerged. Informed by the national synodal data summary reports giving extensive attention to the exclusions experienced by Catholics, Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego argued that the church needs to face these exclusions head on. In remarkably candid statements early in 2023, he called in particular for the exploration of a new theology of sex and sin. As he argues,

The effect of the tradition that all sexual acts outside of marriage constitute objectively grave sin has been to focus the Christian moral life disproportionately upon sexual activity. The heart of Christian discipleship is a relationship with God the Father, Son and Spirit rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The church has a hierarchy of truths that flow from this fundamental kerygma. Sexual activity, while profound, does not lie at the heart of this hierarchy. Yet in pastoral practice we have placed it at the very center of our structures of exclusion from the Eucharist. This should change ... The distinction between orientation and activity cannot be the

³² Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*, 136–48, 157–60, outlines the doctrinal disagreements and dialogically achieved accomplishments of the synod on the family that I reference in this and the next paragraph.

principal focus for such a pastoral embrace because it inevitably suggests dividing the L.G.B.T. community into those who refrain from sexual activity and those who do not.³³

McElroy's sentiments echo those uttered by Francis early in his tenure as pope when he named what he called the church's "obsession" with sexual sins.³⁴ McElroy, in a subsequent statement, further elaborated on why a Eucharistic theology should not be one that multiplies barriers to reception of the Eucharist based on the church's moral teaching that any and all sexual sins (such as contraception, non-marital sex) are objectively grave. He was more circumspect on the question of women's exclusion from ordination and invoked a distinction between pastoral as opposed to doctrinal impediments to change. In calling for productive pathways for women's inclusion he writes, "we should admit, invite and actively engage women in every element of the life of the church *that is not doctrinally precluded*" (my emphasis).³⁵

Sociologically, McElroy's differentiation between doctrinal and pastoral matters might be seen as what Pierre Bourdieu calls an arbitrary distinction, an arbitrariness used to uphold the religious capital of church leaders and their hierarchical authority in determining the rules of the "Catholic game."³⁶ Nonetheless, setting aside women's ordination, it is clear that McElroy wants his fellow bishops to tackle the work of institutionalizing sacramental inclusivity. This is a doctrinally and politically difficult task, as evidenced by the public responses of some of his colleagues who outrightly disagree with his reassessment of sexual sins and who seem to foreclose dialogue on what they regard as a settled and immutable theology of sin.³⁷ In the months prior to and during the synod's formal deliberations, the doctrinal politics at issue will likely play out across many venues. A lesson from the synod on the family is that despite intensive doctrinal disagreements, pastorally inclusive change, however limited, was accomplished, as conveyed by *Amoris Laetitia*. The synod on synodality can build on that precedent and, if the synod's dialogue groups, now comprised of bishops and female and male lay and religious Catholics, can maintain attentiveness to the diversity of Catholics' experiences, those conversations may help the synod to productively facilitate the development of a refined theology of sacramental inclusion.

Conclusion

Synods are an important institutional resource at the church's disposal, purposively intended to aid the church in discerning and responding to societal change. Francis's papacy has seen both a revitalized use of synods and their structurally significant reshaping. Their expansive deployment fits well with his articulated commitment to ensuring a dynamic reflexive dialogue between theological ideas and empirical realities in charting the church's

³³ McElroy, "Cardinal McElroy on 'Radical Inclusion' for L.G.B.T. People, Women and Others in the Catholic Church," *America*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/01/24/mcelroy-synodality-inclusion-244587>.

³⁴ Francis, "A Big Heart," September 30, 2013.

³⁵ Robert McElroy, "Widening Our Tent: The Synodal Imperative for Radical Inclusion," Second Annual Bergoglio Lecture, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, March 2, 2023, <https://www.sacredheart.edu/news-room/news-listing/cardinal-mcelroy-lectures-about-church-inclusiveness/>.

³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field," *Comparative Social Research* 13, no. 1 (1991): 1–44. See also Michele Dillon, "Pierre Bourdieu, Religion, and Cultural Production," *Cultural Studies: Critical Methodologies* 1, no. 4 (2001): 411–29.

³⁷ Brian Fraga, "Illinois Bishop's Provocative Essay Suggests Cardinal McElroy Is a Heretic," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 1, 2023, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/illinois-bishops-provocative-essay-suggests-cardinal-mcelroy-heretic>.

forward journey. The ambitious aim of the Synod on Synodality is to apprehend Catholics' experiences of the church in their various encounters with and within it. It thus actively engages with Vatican II's intentional vision of an inclusive, participatory church in which the laity have active co-responsibility along with the clergy in remedying the contradictions within the church and society, and enhancing its relevance not only for Catholics as faith-believers and secular citizens but also as a public moral voice in secular society.

The crises, controversies, and challenges that the church has experienced in the decades since Vatican II and the unevenness in the implementation of the emancipatory principles it eloquently affirmed, may stoke defeatism that its promise is beyond reach. Yet, as Vatican II itself found, doctrinal reflexivity and the conversation between faith and reason that is at the heart of Catholicism can open the church to new realities and to new ideas. The synodal church envisioned by Francis requires the sincere discernment of his fellow bishops, other clergy, and the laity in all its multilayered diversity. The synod on synodality offers an unprecedented opportunity for all the voices of the church to be in dialogue, to be heard, and—marking a hugely symbolic and materially significant milestone—for the laity to directly shape its outcomes because of the inclusion of lay participants as voters. Synods do not have predetermined outcomes, and synodal procedures, notwithstanding their limits, have a dialogical structure that tends to foster, if not force, sustained engagement with the diversity of Catholics' experiences. These processes nudge along the gradual development of doctrine and pastoral practice toward greater inclusivity. It is an empirical question whether the synod on synodality will build on the human and doctrinal resources at its disposal and find a way to institutionalize a more encompassing theology of inclusion befitting the current era.

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