

Methodological Justification

Theological Briefing Papers for the Synod 2023

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Introduction

The *Theological Briefing Papers* summarize in an accessible format the academic conversation on topics related to the Synod 2021-2024. They are meant for all those who want to be informed about the academic conversation on synodality, particularly the participants in the Synod 2023.

Objectives

These *Papers* have two objectives.

- First, they are a way to make the academic voice part of the synodal process. While theologians are part of the people of God, their thoughts are sometimes not accessible. People may not have access to academic material, they may not have the time to read long articles, or these materials may be too abstract. Therefore, these *Papers* present a survey of the academic conversation in an accessible, short format.
- Second, these *Papers* may support the synodal conversation and discernment process. Concepts, developments, and tensions that have been discussed in academic research may shed light on what is happening and thereby help the conversation and discernment process move forward.

The Selection of Literature

The *Theological Briefing Papers* are based on a bibliography that was put together for this specific purpose, and that can be consulted online.¹ It includes a substantial methodological justification

that can be consulted online also. In summarized form, the key criteria and considerations are the following:

- To avoid a narrow focus on one language, the bibliography includes English, French, German, and Spanish literature. Italian turned out to be not feasible because many journals are not available online, requiring one to search manually through libraries.
- This already points at an important practical consideration: with limited time, it is unavoidable to make choices.
- The biography contains only academic literature. This rigorous focus has the advantage of resulting in a biography with a clear focus. The disadvantage of excluding pastoral material by bishops, outreach publications, such as *America Magazine* or *Stimmen der Zeit*, and blog posts, is that less voices are represented. Here, time constraints play a role: without the focus on academic materials, the number of contributions to be collected and processed would have been enormous. We are also aware that non-Western voices are underrepresented in academic literature. Therefore, we have sought to find as much non-Western material as possible.
- The time span has been limited to 2013-2023, that is, from Pope Francis. Arguably, Pope Francis has given synodality a significant impulse. While the twists and turns of the reception of Vatican II in the post-conciliar period are important and interesting, including that in the Papers is simply impossible—except when the 2013-2023 authors speak about it, which they do.
- Finally, we have only selected material that deals with Roman Catholic synodality. Therefore, ecumenical voices on, e.g., Anglican synodality are included if they also relate to the Roman Catholic Church. Similarly, reflections on, e.g., the role of women in the Church are only included if they address synodality.

The Bibliography contains 750+ titles. We estimate that it is 90% complete (except for 2023).

Database

The research has been done with the help of software; this seems the only way to review the entire corpus. Therefore, we have had to work with a database. The database contains some 650 pdf files and scans. This suggests that some 100 titles are not included. In fact, the number of not-included literature is higher, as book chapters (or groups of chapters) have been uploaded to the database

separately. We estimate that some 150 titles are not included in the database. This is due to time constraints or practical issues such as books or journals not being available.

Choice of Topics

The topics have been chosen on the basis of the *Instrumentum Laboris*. Since the descriptions of the “worksheets” in the IL are typically broad, but a *Theological Briefing Paper* needs focus, it is not possible to achieve a 100% overlap between the IL and the papers. In what follows we indicate our topics and how they relate to the IL.

1. The Practice of Synodality

This relates closely to “A. For a synodal Church. An integral experience” and to various worksheets, such as 3.2 (on developing discernment practices and decision-making processes).

2. Participation, the People of God, and the *Sensus Fidelium*

These topics are all part of the very foundation of the Synod 2021-2024. The topic of participation is part of the subtitle of the Synod (“Communion, Participation, Mission”) and is a key element in topic B 3 (“Participation, governance and authority”). The People of God and the *sensus fidelium* are included since, especially in the academic literature, both undergird the theology of participation.

3. The Bishop in a Synodal Church

This relates to the topic of “Participation, governance and authority” (B 3) and to various worksheets: 2.4 (on ordained ministry in relation to baptismal ministries), 2.5 (on renewing and promoting the bishop’s ministry), 3.1 (on the service of authority), 3.3 and 3.4 (both on structures for synodality), and 3.5 (on reforming the Synod of Bishops).

4. Canon Law & Structures for Synodality

This relates to the topic of B 3, which as its subtitle “What processes, structures and institutions are needed in a missionary synodal Church?” Worksheets 3.3 and 3.4 (both on structures for synodality), and 3.5 (on reforming the Synod of Bishops) all speak about structures and canon law.

5. Social Justice and Synodality

Topic B 1 (“A Communion that radiates”) implies respecting and integrating the poor, which means a commitment to social and ecological justice, see 1.1 (“How does the service of charity and commitment to justice and care for our common home nourish communion in a synodal Church?”).

6. Inculturation and Synodality

Topic B 1 (“A Communion that radiates”) implies respecting and integrating cultural diversity, as worksheets 1.5 elaborates (“How can we recognize and gather the richness of cultures and develop dialogue amongst religions in the light of the Gospel?”).

7. Women Participation

This relates to topic 2.3, “How can the Church of our time better fulfil its mission through greater recognition and promotion of the baptismal dignity of women?”

8. Formation for Synodality

Formation is mentioned extensively at the end of the introduction of the IL (no. 58-59), and it is mentioned as a subtopic in many worksheets (1.1, 1.5, 2.1, 2.2., 2.4, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3).

9. Liturgy and Synodality

Although mentioned in the *Instrumentum Laboris* (cf. 2.1), this is not a major topic. It was chosen as a “try out,” as it is a relatively small topic. Over time its importance has increased, see the Working Document for the Continental Stage, no. 88-97.

For practical reasons of shortage of time we may not be able to prepare papers for

1. A Welcoming Church

Topic B 1 (“A Communion that radiates”) implies a welcoming church 1.1 for LGBTQ, those who are discriminated for their race or caste or culture, migrants, etc. This is treated in 1.2. Producing a *Theological Briefing Paper* would require narrowing down the focus.

2. Diversity and Unity

Topic B 1 (“A Communion that radiates”) implies a positive take on the diversity within the Catholic church and with other churches (1.3 and 1.4).

3. Ecumenism

Topic B 1 (“A Communion that radiates”) implies an ecumenical commitment, as worksheet notes 1.4 (“How can a synodal Church fulfil its mission through a renewed ecumenical commitment?”).

Research Method

For each *Briefing Paper*, the research includes the following.

- First, we explore the official documents related to the Synod 2021-2024. This gives a first idea of the topic. It also helps to see how the topic is presented in the official documents, which prepares for the subsequent analysis of the academic material. However, this exploration is mainly to provide context and not the main focus of the Papers.
- Second, we perform a thorough quantitative analysis of the database with the help of the software program, MAXQDA. This helps to see how often a given term is mentioned and in what combinations, which helps to determine the likely top papers. Sometimes, reading through the materials suggests recalibrating the quantitative analysis. For example, the search term “liturgy” does not exhaust all papers with a liturgical focus, as a fair number of papers speaks about the “Eucharist” without using the word “liturgy.” In such cases, additional searches are needed.
- Thirdly, we do a qualitative survey of the top sources. Depending on the topic, this means reading (almost) all the materials, or a selection thereof. For example, in the case of women participation, the number of publications is limited, so we read (almost) everything. However, in the case of the Paper on the bishop(s) over 180 documents have 50 references or more to the terms bishop(s) and episcopal, so we have to make a selection. Criteria for choosing which top sources we read are: Does the paper elaborate views relevant to the Paper under consideration? (A paper make make frequent references to, e.g., listening, without elaborating these.) Does this paper broaden the languages represented in the paper? (After three English papers, we prefer a Spanish one.) Does it make a point that was not represented so far? (In this way, minority views are included also.)
- While reading, we think about ways to present the materials. What way of structuring the variety of views gives insight to the reader while being faithful to the materials? This is a creative process of going back and forth between the structure that is being developed and the materials of the database.

- Finally, the research has included extensive consultation. All through the first year (from May 2022 onwards), we consulted with a Scientific Committee. Members included, amongst others, Kristin Colberg (Saint John's School of Theology), Anne-Béatrice Faye (Association des théologiens africains), Arnaud Join-Lambert (Université Catholique de Louvain), Christina Kheng (East Asian Pastoral Institute), Rafael Luciani (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello (Venezuela), Boston College). Throughout, Professor Judith Gruber (KU Leuven) has been supervising the project.

Presentation

Each *Theological Briefing Paper* consists of three sections.

- A short summary offers a first orientation.
- After that, a detailed analysis provides some statistics and structures the literature under a couple of relevant headings.
- Finally, a selection of relevant reading materials facilitates personal exploration. These materials have usually been mentioned in the detailed analysis.

Note that some Italian titles have been added afterwards, with the kind help of Serena Noceti, to help out those who do not read English, French, German or Spanish.

We strive for publication in four languages: English, which is the language in which we have worked, and the three languages that are represented in the literature: French, German, and Spanish.

Standards

The *Briefing Papers* aims to hold up the following standards:

- The papers want to be clear and understandable.
- Great care has also been taken to be short, with a maximum of five pages.
- Finally, the papers mean to present the material without manipulating and without ignoring certain perspectives or voices.

Authors

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ⁱ Jos Moons, “Synodality and the Roman-Catholic Church. An Academic Bibliography 2013-2022” (Cahiers Internationaux de Théologie Pratique, série ‘Documents’ n° 17), accessible at https://www.academia.edu/98525943/2023_Synodality_and_the_Roman_Catholic_Church_An_Academic_Bibliography_2013_2023_Cahiers_Internationaux_de_Th%C3%A9ologie_Pratique_s%C3%A9rie_Documents_n_17_2nd_edition.