

1. The Practice of Synodality

Theological Briefing Papers for the Synod 2023

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Summary

Official documents for the Synod 2021-2024 stress that synodality is not only an ecclesiological theory but also a practice: a “journey,” “a process,” and a “concrete experience” (e.g., *Instrumentum Laboris*, no. 17-18). As such, it requires attitudes and a synodal style: “if it is not embodied in structures and processes, the style of synodality easily degrades from the level of intentions and desires to that of rhetoric, while processes and events, if they are not animated by an adequate style, turn out to be empty formalities” (*Preparatory Document*, no. 27). Typical virtues that characterize a synodal style are listening, openness, discernment, and maintaining communion while bearing tensions (cf. IL 19-31). The documents note that this style and these virtues presuppose conversion.

In the academic literature, one finds frequent references both to general notions (such as attitudes, practice and style) and to specific notions (such as listening and openness). The relevant terms are varied: attitudes, conversion, culture, dialogue, discernment, humility, mindset, listening, obedience, openness, practices, virtues, etcetera. Nonetheless, sustained reflection on synodal practice is rare.

As it is impossible to elaborate all the relevant aspects, this paper develops two key aspects of a synodal style, namely, listening and discernment, and one example of a recent synodal practice, namely the Australian Plenary Council.

Detailed Analysis

Statistics

- A word search with the terms practice and style yields 3,085 hits in 86% of the documents (562 out of 651). Adding neighboring terms such as attitude, mentality, and spirituality leads to over 90% of the documents.
- Materials with practice-focused titles are usually in fact about ecclesiological concepts, such as Legrand’s article “Synodality is a Matter of Practice” (2021) that was also published as “La sinodalidad es práctica,” “Synodalität als Praxis,” and “La synodalité est d’ordre pratique,” Luciani’s book on synodality as “A New Way of Proceeding in the Church” (2022), and Thiel’s article “Une culture synodale et fraternelle peut-elle refréner la culture des abus?” (2022).
- A word search for the more concrete term listening and hearing yields over 7,400 hits in over 90% of the documents (604 out of 651). A word search for another specific term, to discern / discernment, yields almost 4,500 hits in 75% of the documents (487/651).

1) Listening

- From the top 10 papers several mention familiar aspects from Pope Francis’ teachings on synodal listening without much further elaboration: mutual listening amongst the baptized, including between bishops and lay faithful; a mutual listening that is ultimately a listening to the Holy Spirit; honest and open speaking (parrhesia); the relationship between listening and encountering; openness to new or unfamiliar perspectives; and a willingness to learn. These papers are not included in the list of Reading Materials below as these are familiar. (Cf. Moons “A Comprehensive Introduction to Synodality” (2022), Renken, “Synodality: A Constitutive Element of the Church” (2018), Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid” (2017).)
- Estevez & Martínez-Gayol and Silber (who suggests listening is a *nota ecclesiae*) elaborate the act of listening against the background of power structures. Silber focuses on kenotic listening that includes accepting criticism and seeking conversion. In light of old power structures that focus on men, Europe and North America, and prosperity, he makes a plea for listening to women, non-Western contexts, and the poor. Estévez & Martínez-Gayol do the same from a feminist perspective. They suggest listening to the variety of voices from

the margins, especially women voices, is a way to overcome colonial, patriarchal, and hierarchical thinking and is an example for synodality.

- Plattig details the rich variety of essential spiritual attitudes, such as self-knowledge, silence, prayer, a willingness to be transformed by what has been heard and to act, being in contact with the signs of the times and ordinary daily life (*der Alltag*), abstaining from judging, relativizing my own ideas, etcetera.
- Ndongala Maduku draws attention to the example of Cardinal Malula (+1989), “the bishop who listens” (*l’évêque à l’écoute*), who started in the Archdiocese of Kinshasa (Congo) a culture of conversation that allowed him to know of people’s issues and needs and to search for solutions together with them, thus avoiding a top-down approach.

2) Discernment

- Discernment is considered important, but the concept is not clear. Osheim calls it “an essential compass” for a synodal Church and Haers speaks of “an excellent tool to put synodality into practice.” Cuda, Haers, and Moons elaborate the Ignatian version of discernment as a spiritual practice of humble listening to the Holy Spirit that comes with “the enemy” who plants temptations such as formalism, intellectualism, rigid thinking, and so on. Haers stresses that discernment is apostolic (i.e., related to mission) and involves listening to ‘the world’ that we serve and from which we learn. Moons explains that it differs from the Benedictine tradition, which focuses on *discretio* as wisely seeking moderation, because of its affective dimension. Other articles do not specify discernment. Their implicit understanding is discernment as reflecting and searching for wisdom, usually in dialogue (Osheim, Sawa, see also most other articles).
- Discernment is a communal affair. As such it is the opposite of an authoritarian, rationalistic, and closed style (all the above authors). There is a difference in perspective between Sawa and the other authors. Sawa states that bishops discern, which they can only do well after listening to the desires, experiences, and thoughts of the laity. The other articles stress that *all* the faithful discern.
- Discernment is not a given. Osheim suggests we need to develop a modern, understandable vocabulary for discernment. Temptations were mentioned already (Cuda, Haers, Moons). Cuda stresses the participation of those from the peripheries. Osheim pleads for developing “spiritualities, structures and practices of discernment” that involve both dialogue and listening and statistics. Sawa underlines that bishops must want to listen and that the

faithful must respect the bishops' role to decide. One finds references to formation in all contributions.

3) An Example: Australia's Plenary Council

- The Fifth Plenary Council of the Church in Australia (2018-2022) is work in progress: “an emerging practice” (McEvoy) and “a learning experience” (Rush). Moreover, is a slow process during which it is crucial to respect all voices for “all the baptized have equal access to a personal relationship with God” (Rush).
- Prayer and spiritual conversation were felt to be important (McEvoy, Rush). After the first assembly, Rush noted that participants “talked of the importance of the prayerful mode in which the group listening, dialogue, and discernment took place” and after the second assembly McEvoy commented that spiritual conversation “proved immensely fruitful . . . , with many members speaking of it as a transformative experience.” McEvoy argues that it is spiritual conversation that makes the difference between power play – a characteristic of democracies – and listening to the Spirit through listening to one another – a defining mark of synods.
- The Plenary Council was an example of growing towards consensus amidst diversity and tensions, not a “gladiatorial contest” with winners and losers (Lennan 2023). Lennan notes two complementary types of participation. The laity shared their real-life faith experience, challenges, and opportunities, while bishops exercised their leadership in contact with the people and their lived faith. McEvoy elaborates how the bishops initially did not accept two motions on women, which first led to great distress and then to new motions that were adopted almost unanimously. He suggests that the initial grief brought to the attention of the bishops something they had not yet been aware of.
- From a different perspective, two authors warn for focusing on the inverted pyramid (McGregor) and a “an overemphasis on governance” (Zimmermann), for the Church is also the mystical body of Christ led by God and by the hierarchy.
- Especially Lennan makes recommendations for (more) successful synodality:
 - Fleshing out the role of periti.
 - Promoting conversation between canon lawyers and theologians.
 - Cultivating a hermeneutic of trust towards the *sensus fidei* of the faithful.

- Making a seating arrangement that facilitates encounter between the bishop and his flock.
- Developing a theology of the bishop as “part of rather than apart from.”

More general recommendations are:

- Promoting that theologians are in touch with the pastoral reality.
- Bishops engaging sufficiently with grassroot level faith life.
- Ongoing theological formation.
- The Plenary Council is not the only example of synodal practice. Too large to be elaborated here is the synodal tradition in Latin America and the Caribbean (see, e.g., Luciani’s many contributions). The various religious spiritualities and cultural traditions are other obvious examples (see, e.g., Stan Chu Ilo on the African “palaver” tradition, or Gregory J. Polan on the Rule of Saint Benedict).

Materials: Major Recommended Readings

Cuda, Emilce, “Caminar del Pueblo de Dios y sinodalidad,” *Medellín. Teología y pastoral para América Latina y el Caribe* 48 (2022): 35-60.

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- Polan**, Gregory J., “Synodal Elements in the Rule of St. Benedict,” *The American Benedictine Review* 73 (2022): 1-9.
- Sawa**, Przemysław, “Synodality, graunment, Catholic Movements,” *Ecumeny and Law* 7 (2019): 115-141.
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