

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

Theological Briefing Papers for the Synod 2023

Jos Moons & Robert Alvarez (KU Leuven)

Summary

Participation is a key term in the *Instrumentum Laboris*. (In fact, it has been a key term from the start of the Synod 2021-2024, and is part of the Synod's subtitle.) It is related to other key terms such as the People of God, baptism, charisms and co-responsibility. For example, the IL states that “baptism creates a true co-responsibility among all the members of the Church, which is manifested in the participation of all, with the charisms of each, in the mission of the Church and the building up of the ecclesial community” (no. 20). The seemingly related notion *sensus fidei fidelium* is mentioned infrequently.

All these themes are reflected in the academic literature, too, with one major difference. In the academic literature the *sensus fidei* is mentioned as frequently as baptism, and is therefore much more dominant than in the *Instrumentum Laboris*—or indeed in most other official documents.

In terms of quantity, the academic literature is overwhelming. In what follows we focus on the topic of participation, with a particular interest in the People of God and the *sensus fidelium*. Two types of reflections and insights can be distinguished, one related to the grounds for participations and another that spells out ways to increase participation.

Detailed Analysis

Statistics

The topics in the Table below are structured according to their importance in the academic literature. Note that the total number of references in the academic literature mirrors the relative

importance of each term in the *Instrumentum Laboris*—again, the one exception being the *sensus fidelium*.

| | <i>Instrumentum Laboris</i> : number of references | Academics: hits per 651 documents |
|-------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| particip* | 95 | 6,190 hits in in 568 documents |
| People of God | 66 | 5,223 hits in 550 documents |
| <i>sensus fidelium</i> | 9 | 2,625 hits in 339 documents |
| baptis/z* | 52 | 2,376 hits in 474 documents |
| Coresponsibility¹ | 30 | 1,893 hits in 418 documents |
| charism* | 28 | 1,777 hits in 360 documents |

¹ Search terms were: co-resp*, coresp*, corresp*, Mitverantwort*, responsabilidad compartida, Commune responsabilité, responsabilité commune.

1) The foundations of participation

The first few foundations for participation are theological in nature.

- Firstly, participation is seen as a practical translation of Vatican II’s choice to start the reflection on the Church with the topic of the People of God (see *Lumen Gentium*, chapter 2) and to consider the hierarchy (chapter 3) in that context. Rush speaks of “considering the church as all the *fideles*, before considering the hierarchy who serves them” and considers this one of the Council’s “reversals.” Demel states that “laity and clergy together form the one People of God in which there is true equality among all believers” and specifies that, while this grounds a common responsibility, it does not rule out leadership. Eckholt speaks of “an ecclesiological change of paradigm.” (See also Luciani, Wijlens, and many others.)
- Another, more technical theological ground for participation is the *sensus fidei fidelium*: a somewhat intuitive “sense of the faith” shared by all the faithful, that complements hierarchical teaching. Eckholt speaks of the laity “becoming subjects” of the faith, which means that bishops can only fulfill their office “with” (*con*) the laity. Many authors recall

that, therefore, we cannot simply distinguish any more between a teaching church (the bishops) and a learning Church (the others)—*ecclesia docens, ecclesia discens*. Particularly the participation of the poor should be taken seriously, for “because of their ‘connaturality’ with the suffering Christ they are active subjects of teaching” (Chiron). Relevant too is Vitali’s observation that, historically speaking, the focus on papal primacy in relation to *sensus fidei* is a recent development. Ultimately, the *sensus fidei* relates to pneumatology: it is a way of listening to the Spirit who may speak through all, which requires mutual listening (Rush). It supposes, therefore, a dynamic Church “transcending itself in a posture of openness and receptivity to God’s self-disclosure” (Gaillardetz) and more dialogical notions of God’s revelation (Wijlens).

- A small number of contributions puts different emphases regarding the functioning of the *sensus fidei*. Blankenhorn asserts that holiness is necessary for the development of one’s individual *sensus fidei*. Since our ability to recognize holiness is subject to “reliable ethical criteria” located within the tradition, the *sensus fidei* cannot be appealed to in order to “justify a revolution in the Church’s ethical teaching” (Blankenhorn). Cavadini is concerned about an overemphasis on the ecclesiology of baptism. As he explains, the ecclesiology of *communio* requires clear and distinct roles for the laity and clergy, which reflect their separate functions in the Eucharistic.

The following foundations for participation are more contextual in nature.

- Some authors link participation with developments in society, especially, the rise of human rights and democracy. For example, in a fundamental reflection Madrigal speaks of “the democratic spirit inscribed in the Church’s very essence of being-communion, which is nourished by the evangelical spirit of liberty, equality and fraternity” and Raj states that the Church should “in inculcate the values of democracy and good governance” as she is part of society, with a reference to *Gaudium et Spes*.
- Some authors also identify a need for participation on the basis of the sexual scandals, which indicate structural problems. These authors do not only come from Germany and the context of the *Synodaler Weg*. For example, the French Dominican Legrand wrote on “the systematic dimensions of the abuse crisis in the Church,” and, speaking from the experience in India, Kochuthara pleads for “a new ethical horizon” that recovers a more participatory notion of the Church. Arenas speaks from the experience in Chile (Arenas 2022).

The following foundations are less developed.

- Baptism is often mentioned (see the Table above) and is related to the theological priority of the notion of the people of God, but academics rarely analyze the notion in depth.
- The notion of co-responsibility is regularly mentioned (see the Table above) and is also elaborated. It is not developed here for reasons of shortage of time and space.
- Charisms are regularly mentioned but rarely elaborated. See however Kaptijn, “Charisms as Mediation between Baptism and Ministries in the Church” (2022) and Richi Alberti, “Sinodalidad y carismas en la Iglesia” (2019 and 2020).
- The notion of an “all-ministerial Church,” mentioned 9 times in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, is mentioned very rarely. For example, the Spanish search terms “[iglesia] toda ella ministerial,” “toda ministerial,” “enteramente ministerial,” and “totalmente ministerial” had no more than 14 references in 8 documents. Cf. however Famerée, “Quels ministères pour une Église synodale ?” (2023); Noceti, “El sínodo para la Amazonía y la reflexión sobre los ministerios que «hacen Iglesia»” (2020); Peña García, “Ministerialidad laical en una Iglesia sinodal” (2020); Theobald, “Renouveler la théologie des ministères à partir des communautés” (2023); Trigo, “Una iglesia toda ella ministerial” (2020).

2) Ways to increase participation

- Demel, Peña García, Poothavelithara, Wijlens, and many more argue that canon law needs rebalancing, for its current form canon law is more concerned about the authority of the bishop than about the participation of all. For example, as Wijlens states, in relation to the magisterium’s teaching office, canon law specifies the ways in which the faithful have to obey or submit “without at the same time making any provision for an obligation on the side of the bishops to ascertain the *sensus fidei fidelium*.” Knop argues that taking seriously the lay people’s *sensus fidelium* means involving lay people in meaningful ways in decision making and decision taking. (See also the *Briefing Paper* on Canon Law.)
- Participation requires developing another, more participative style of teaching that incorporates *sensus fidelium*. (See also the *Briefing Paper* on the Practice of Synodality.)
 - Vitali proposes “circularity:” a circular, reciprocal listening process between the magisterium and the People of God that integrates the hierarchical teaching role and the People of God’s participation therein.

- Luciani proposes “restitutio:” a process of magisterial teaching and the People of God receiving it and “giving back” (*restitutio*) what they think. As a process it creates communion and fosters growing towards consensus.
- Chiron speaks of a culture of encounter, for “faith only reveal itself and is only articulated in a context of dialogue.” He highlights the importance of listening to the poor and to popular piety, and allowing for regional diversity. Destivelle stretches encounter to ecumenism.
- Moreover, to increase participation we need to develop a participative culture and style. This requires “a conversion of minds and hearts of the persons involved” (Poothavelithara) to “practices and virtues such as consultation and dialogue (Chiron, Loiero), “honest speaking and mutual listening” (Poothavelithara, and many others), bearing tensions (Eckholt) and welcoming diversity (Chiron), and the circularity and *restitutio* that were mentioned above (Luciani, Vitali). Drawing on secular experiences, Raj pleads for “participatory planning,” that is, involving consultation with all those concerned. (See also the *Briefing Paper* on Practice.)
- Bacher Martinez dwells on participative ways of doing theology that involve the people whom it concerns in the reflection, elaborating a model called *investigación-acción participativa* (IAP).
- On increasing the participation of women: see the separate *Briefing Paper* on Women Participation.
- Finally, Ilo proposes to learn from non-Western ways of consultation and conversation such as the African Palaver and, in that way, to decolonize synodality. Other articles speak of the Idian tradition of “Palliyogam” (amongst others Poothavelithara). Arenas elaborates a secular Western model of “distributed leadership” (Arenas 2020). (See also the *Briefing Paper* on Inculturation.)

Materials: Major Recommended Readings

Arenas, Sandra, “Sin exclusiones: catolicismo, mujeres y liderazgo distribuido,” *Teología y Vida* 61 (2020): 537-553.

———, “The Awakening of Chile: Demands for Participation and the Synodal Church,” *Louvain Studies* 45 (2022): 97-111.

Blankenhorn, Bernhard, “The *sensus fidei* and Synodality: Theological Epistemology and the *munus propheticum*,” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 87 (2023): 311-338.

- Cavadini**, John C., “Could ‘Synodality’ Defeat ‘Co-Responsibility’?,” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 87 (2023): 289-309.
- Chiron**, Jean-François, “*Sensus fidei* et vision de l’Église chez le pape François,” *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 104 (2016): 187-205.
- Demel**, Sabine, “Synodalität als Schutz vor Klerikalismus?: eine Nagelprobe auf Diözesanebene,” in *Synodalität in der katholischen Kirche: Die Studie der Internationalen Theologischen Kommission im Diskurs*, ed. by Markus Graulich and Johanna Rahner (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2020), 274-298.
- Destivelle**, Hyacinthe, “‘Tous, quelques-uns, un’. *Sensus fidei* et dynamique synodale,” *Communio. Revue catholique internationale* 281 (2022): 29-44.
- Eckholt**, Margit, “*Sensus fidelium*. La sinodalidad y el devenir sujeto del laicado,” in *Sinodalidad y reforma. Un desafío eclesial*, ed. by Rafael Luciani, Serena Noceti and Carlos Schickendantz (Madrid: PPC, 2022), 183-202.
- , “‘Sensus fidelium’. Synodalität und die Subjektwerdung der Laien,” in *Synodalisierung. Eine Zerreißprobe für die katholische Weltkirche?*, ed. by Paul Zulehner, Peter Neuner and Anna Hennesperger (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2022), 137-157.
- Gaillardetz**, Richard R., “Die synodale Gestalt des Dienstes und der Ordnung der Kirche,” *Concilium. Internationale Zeitschrift für Theologie* 57 (2021): 202-211.
- , “La forma sinodal del ministerio y del orden en la Iglesia,” *Concilium. Revista internacional de teología* (2021): 267-278.
- , “The Synodal Shape of Church Ministry and Order,” *Concilium. International Journal for Theology* 201 (2021): 98-108.
- Ilo**, Stan Chu, “Exploring the Possible Contributions of the African Palaver towards a Participatory Synodal Church,” *Exchange. Journal of Contemporary Christianities in Context* 50 (2021): 209-237.
- Knop**, Julia, “Decision making – decision taking: Partizipation und Synodalität in katholischer Ekklesiologie,” *Zeitschrift für Pastoraltheologie* 40 (2020): 7-18
- Kochuthara**, Shaji George, “The Sexual Abuse Scandal and a New Ethical Horizon: A Perspective from India,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2019): 931-949.
- Legrand**, Hervé, “Les dimensions systémiques de la crise des abus dans l’Église catholique et la réforme de l’ecclésiologie courante,” *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et théologiques* 104 (2020): 551-587.
- Loiero**, Salvatore, “Synodalité et participation: possibles réalités ou réelles possibilités de l’Église?,” *Lumen Vitae. Revue internationale de catéchèse et de pastorale* 76 (2021): 387-395.
- Luciani**, Rafael, “El corazón de la recepción actual de la eclesiología del Pueblo de Dios. Nuevos caminos en la teología y la práctica del *sensus fidei*,” *Medellín, Teología y pastoral para América Latina y el Caribe* 185 (2022):565-596.
- Madrigal**, Santiago, “Poder y autoridad en una Iglesia sinodal,” in *Sinodalidad y reforma. Un desafío eclesial*, ed. by Rafael Luciani, Serena Noceti and Carlos Schickendantz (Madrid: PPC, 2022), 303-322.

- Peña García**, Carmen, “Sinodalidad y laicado: Corresponsabilidad y participación de los laicos en la vocación sinodal de la Iglesia,” *Ius Canonicum. Revista de la Facultad de Derecho Canónico de la Universidad de Navarra* 59 (2019): 731-765.
- Poothavelithara**, Varghese, “Encouraging and Developing the Participative Bodies for a Synodal Church,” *Asian Horizons. Dharmaram Journal of Theology* 14 (2020): 181-208.
- Raj**, Peter M., “Synodality in the Church: Lessons from Local Governance,” *Encounter: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Reflections of Faith and Life* 12 (2021): 98-117.
- Rush**, Ormond, “Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church,” *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): 299-325.
- Vitali**, Dario, “The Circularity between *Sensus fidei* and Magisterium as a Criterion for the Exercise of Synodality in the Church,” in *For a Missionary Reform of the Church*, ed. by Antonio Spadaro and Carlos M. Galli (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2017), 196-217.
- , “La circularidad entre *sensus fidei* y magisterio como criterio para el ejercicio de la sinodalidad en la Iglesia,” in *La reforma y las reformas en la Iglesia*, ed. by Antonio Spadaro and Carlos M. Galli (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2016), 209-227.
- Wijlens**, Myriam, “‘The Church of God is Convoled in Synod’: Theological and Canonical Challenges Concerning the 2021-2023 Synod,” *Centro Pro Unione Semi-Annual Bulletin* 100 (2021): 86-106
- , “‘Die Kirche Gottes ist zu einer Synode einberufen’. Theologische und kirchenrechtliche Herausforderungen zur Synode 2021–2023,” in *Synodalisierung. Eine Zerreiẞprobe für die katholische Weltkirche?*, ed. by Paul Zulehner and others (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2022), 433-461.
- , “«L’Église de Dieu est convoquée en synode». Les défis théologiques et canoniques du Synode 2021-2023,” *Studia Canonica. Revue canadienne de droit canonique* 56 (2022): 5-39.
- , “«La Iglesia de Dios es convocada en sínodo». Desafíos teológicos y canónicos con relación al sínodo 2021-2023,” in *Sinodalidad y reforma. Un desafío eclesial*, ed. by Rafael Luciani and others (Madrid: PPC, 2022), 35-77.

Italian References

- Riccardo Battocchio, “Fare sinodo. La forma sinodale di chiesa e i soggetti del cammino sinodale,” *Credere oggi* 42 (2022), 27-41.
- Margit Eckholt, “*Sensus fidelium*. La sinodalità e i laici che divengono soggetto,” in *Sinodalità e riforma: una sfida ecclesiale*, ed. by Rafael Luciani and others (Brescia: Queriniana, 2022), 147-161.
- Rafael Luciani, “Teologia e pratica del *sensus fidei*,” *Il Regno. Documenti* 1387 (1.4.2023), 238-249.
- Santiago Madrigal, “Potere e autorità in una Chiesa sinodale,” in *Sinodalità e riforma: una sfida ecclesiale*, ed. by Rafael Luciani and others (Brescia: Queriniana, 2022), 241-254.

Massimo Nardello, “L’ autorità dottrinale del ministero ordinato e il ruolo del popolo di Dio nella comprensione della fede,” in *Quelli della via. Indagini sulla sinodalità nella Chiesa*, ed. by Davide Righi, (Bologna: EDB, 2020), 41-52.

Dario Vitali, “La circolarità tra *sensus fidei* e magisterio come criterio per l’ esercizio della sinodalità nella Chiesa,” in *La riforma e le riforme*, ed. by Antonio Spadaro and Carlos M. Galli (Brescia: Queriniana, 2016), 196-217.

Myriam Wijlens, “La chiesa di Dio è convocata in sinodo’. Sfide teologiche e canoniche sul sinodo 2021-2023,” in *Sinodalità e riforma: una sfida ecclesiale*, ed. by Rafael Luciani and others (Brescia: Queriniana, 2022), 29-61.