

5. Social Justice and Synodality

Theological Briefing Papers for the Synod 2023

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Summary

In his programmatic speech on the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis highlighted listening to the poor as a key element of a synodal Church: “to listen to God, so that with him we may hear the cry of his people; to listen to his people until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us.” This option for the poor structures Francis’ conception of synodality and is explicitly developed in the *Instrumentum Laboris* worksheet B 1.1 (on the issues of poverty, care for our common home, migration, and political polarisation).

In the academic literature, the reflection on these themes of social justice and synodality is limited. However, the contributions that do explicitly focus on these topics stress the foundational relevance of the option for the poor for synodality. They then apply this principle to not only the various issues outside the Church (*ad extra*), but also apply it to the Church itself (*ad intra*). Therefore, the Detailed Analysis is divided into two sections: first, the option for the poor as criterion of synodality; second, key issues of social justice.

Detailed Analysis

Statistics

- Social justice and synodality is a broad topic. Articles and chapters can focus on anything from gender, ecology, to neoliberalism and poverty. As such, it is difficult to get a sense of the scope of its reception in the corpus. “Poor” seems to be the best term to gauge this, appearing in 37% of sources (241/651).

1) The option for the poor as criterion of synodality

- According to Grieu and Trigo, we cannot recognize God's will without the option for the poor; thus, it is a criterion for revelation and synodality. Grieu explains that the Church is only a communion if it addresses itself to the suffering parts of the body. Their suffering is both God's call to the Church and standard by which the Church is measured as a communion. Grieu also expands the category of "poor" to include those not allowed to speak, either by legal or cultural conventions. He argues that any synodal process must pay particular attention to these excluded peoples. (See also Trigo.)
- Social justice concerns have a broader meaning than "the poor" and are not only pastorally relevant outside the Church. They also pertain to other types of exclusion and marginalization than poverty. Moreover, these other types of exclusion and marginalization may occur inside and outside the Church. Silber and Gruber (2020) both discuss the layered nature of the Church's pastoral activity, questioning the simplistic categories of the Church *ad extra* and *ad intra* while insisting on the criterion of the option for the poor in both. Intra-ecclesial questions like *virī probati* (Gruber 2020) and inculturation (Odinot) are measured too by this option for the marginalised.
- The option for the poor has to do with conversion. Championed by Pope Francis, the concept of pastoral conversion is rooted in the ecclesiological reception of the People of God in Latin America after Vatican II (Luciani, also Costadoat). As Grieu indicates, the *call* and *response* structure of revelation implies the act of *conversion*, which necessarily implies *reconciliation*. Silber follows upon this concept of reconciliation, discussing how, in order to be truly synodal and missionary, the Church must address injustices *ad intra* as well as *ad extra*.

2) Key issues of social justice

- Both Silber and Faye discuss gender issues within the Church. For Silber, the Church's ability to address discrimination against women within the Church is a test for the credibility of synodality. (For a more in depth-treatment, see the *Briefing Paper* on Women Participation.)
- Hinze addresses the structurally enabled sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy. In so doing, he proposes complementing synodality with restorative justice in order to promote the healing of the victims. He also explores how the Church might minister to young,

disaffected Catholics who have left the Church because they no longer see it as a credible witness of the Gospel.

- Pastwa offers an in-depth treatment of migration. Recognizing that migration is not just a temporary issue but a structural phenomenon in society, Pastwa follows the principle of *ius sequitur vitam* (law follows life) to argue that synodality offers both the ethical imperative and the practical resources to respond to the migrant crisis.
- Miller discusses how society also structures the Church, particularly how colonial and neoliberal values have come to dominate relations between Catholics. He links this with the “throw-away” culture denounced by Pope Francis and insists that synodality should be considered as a way to witness proper relationships within the Church, relationships which then radiate outwards, providing an example to society. (Cf. the *Briefing Paper* on Inculturation.)
- Gruber (2020) espouses concerns that modern Catholic culture considers dissent an “extraordinary” event rather than a constitutive element of being Church. In contrast, she argues that the marginalised will only have a voice if a theology of dissent is permitted to within synodality.
- Finally, both Gruber (2022) and Miller analyse the ecological crisis from the theme ecological interconnectedness. By linking these concepts, they seek to break with the European legacy of colonial extraction and exploitation, opening the Church to learning from cultures outside of its European heritage.

Materials: Major Recommended Readings

Costadoat, Jorge, “Conversión pastoral a los signos de los tiempos,” in *Reforma de estructuras y conversión de mentalidades. Retos y desafíos para una Iglesia Sinodal*, ed. by Rafael Luciani and Carlos Federico Schickendantz (Madrid: Khaf, 2020), 145-171.

Faye, Anne Béatrice, “La sinodalidad en femenino: nuevos espacios de discernimiento y de colaboración en la Iglesia,” in *Sinodalidad y reforma. Un desafío eclesial*, ed. by Rafael Luciani, Serena Noceti and Carlos Schickendantz (Madrid: PPC, 2022), 203-227.

Grieu, Étienne, “Les plus pauvres au cœur de l’Église?,” in *Les derniers seront les premiers. La parole des pauvres au cœur de la synodalité*, ed. by François Odinet (Paris: Éditions de l’Emmanuel, 2022), 32-50.

Gruber, Judith, “Consensus or Dissensus?: Exploring the Theological Role of Conflict in a Synodal Church,” *Louvain Studies* 43 (2020): 239-259.

- , “Die Amazonien-Synode in der Rezeption der Weltkirche. Ökologische Dimensionen – postkoloniale Perspektiven – ekklesiologische Konsequenzen,” in *Laboratorium Weltkirche*, ed. by Judith Gruber and others (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2022), 253-262.
- Hinze**, Bradford E., “Can We Find A Way Together?: The Challenge of Synodality in a Wounded and Wounding Church,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85 (2020): 215-229.
- Luciani**, Rafael, “Reforma, conversión pastoral y sinodalidad. Un nuevo modo eclesial de proceder,” in *En camino hacia una iglesia sinodal. De Pablo VI a Francisco*, ed. by Rafael Luciani and Teresa Compte (Madrid: PPC, 2020), 165-188.
- Miller**, Vincent J., “Synodality and the Sacramental Mission of the Church: The Struggle for Communion in a World Divided by Colonialism and Neoliberal Globalization,” *Theological Studies* 83 (2022): 8-24.
- Odinot**, François, “Synodalité et inculturation,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 144 (2022): 232-246.
- Pastwa**, Andrzej, “‘Accompanying Migrants’ as a Touchstone of the Realisation of the Synodal Church Idea: A Canonist’s Remarks,” *Ecumeny and Law* 9 (2021): 7-40.
- Silber**, Stefan, “Synodalität als ekklesiologisches Prinzip ad intra und ad extra: Lernen von der Bischofssynode für Amazonien,” *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 105 (2021): 34-47.
- Trigo**, Pedro, “Sinodalidad con el pueblo,” in *La sinodalidad en la vida de la Iglesia: Reflexiones para contribuir a la reforma eclesial*, ed. by Rafael Luciani and María del Pilar Silveira (Madrid: San Pablo, 2020), 213-242.

Italian References

- Giacomo Canobbio (ed.), *Libertà di parola e sinodalità. Tra diritto e responsabilità* (Rome: AVE, 2017).
- Ugo Sartorio, *Sinodalità tra democrazia e populismo. Oltre ogni clericalismo* (Padova: Messaggero, 2022).