

# Learning on the Way: Receptive Ecumenism and the Catholic Synodal Pathway

Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham University 22–23 June 2023

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## Briefing Paper: Catholic Church

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### 1 Introduction

*This paper is intended to introduce symposium participants to the emerging understanding of ‘synodality’ in the Catholic Church, the current worldwide synodal process, and the principles of ‘Receptive Ecumenism’ as they relate to listening and learning in a synodal church.*

*The sections outline, and indicate further possible reading, regarding:*

- *The use of the term ‘synodality’ in the contemporary Catholic Church.*
- *The 2021-2024 Synodal process.*
- *A selection of themes and challenges emerging from the synodal journey so far.*
- *Receptive Ecumenism, and its relevance to the synodal process.*

‘Synodality’ in the contemporary Catholic Church is both a matter of *ressourcement* and of *aggiornamento*. *Ressourcement*—returning to the sources—not only because it requires a careful reading of scripture, history, and the spiritual and theological tradition, but also as a renewed reception of the Second Vatican Council, in particular the rich ecclesiology of the People of God. *Aggiornamento*—making fresh for today—because synodality is not simply a matter of looking to the past for answers, but of recognising “something new”:

Thus people speak of synodality as a “constitutive dimension” of the Church or tout court of the “synodal Church”. This linguistic novelty, which needs careful theological clarification, is a sign of something new that has been maturing in the ecclesial consciousness starting from the Magisterium of Vatican II, and from the lived experience of local Churches and the universal Church since the last Council until today.<sup>1</sup>

Pope Francis, for whom, ‘the “path of synodality” is what God desires for the church in the third millennium’, has exercised his particular ministry to open a space for the whole church

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<sup>1</sup> International Theological Commission (ITC), *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2 March, 2018), #5, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html)

to explore, recover, and develop this constitutive element of being church, but it would be inaccurate to see it as a personal initiative of the Pope alone.

The commitment to become a more synodal church is reflected not only in the synodal process taking place from 2021-24, which is being regarded as the most significant ecclesial event for the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council, but also in a desire for conversion and renewal – we might say *trans-formation* or *trans-figuration* – of institutional forms and modes of thinking and acting precisely so that the gospel shines out more clearly in all the church does today. In words echoing Pope John XXIII’s speech at the start of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis situates synodality within a horizon of always-necessary ecclesial conversion:

As had happened many other times in the Church’s history, so too in our own time, we felt called, as a community of believers, to conversion. This process is far from complete. Our current reflection on the Church’s synodality is the fruit of our conviction that the process of understanding Christ’s message never ends, but constantly challenges us.

The contrary of conversion is ‘immobility’, the secret belief that we have nothing else to learn from the Gospel. This is the error of trying to crystallize the message of Jesus in a single, perennially valid form. Instead, its form must be capable of constantly changing, so that its substance can remain constantly the same.<sup>2</sup>

Within this sweeping universal framework, the Durham symposium focuses on the *ecumenical* and *local* perspectives of learning to be a more synodal church in a particular cultural context.

## 2 Synodality in the Catholic Church

### 2.1. *The People of God, Journeying Together*

Numerous resources regarding synodality and the synodal process are gathered on the website [www.synod.va](http://www.synod.va), including the following distillation of some key principles regarding what synodality means in current Catholic discussion:

Synodality denotes the particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church’s ordinary way of living and working.

Synodality, in this perspective, is much more than the celebration of ecclesial meetings and Bishops’ assemblies, or a matter of simple internal administration within the Church; it is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/december/documents/20221222-curia-romana.html>

People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission.<sup>3</sup>

This short and deceptively simple presentation indicates several dimensions to a Catholic understanding of synodality which are significant for the symposium:

First, it is an ecclesiology in which the normative character of the church as the People of God has been recovered.<sup>4</sup> While the roots of this identification are to be found in the scriptures, in a Catholic context this language also calls to mind the Second Vatican Council. People of God is a dominant ecclesiological motif within the Vatican II documents, exercised both as *ressourcement* of scriptural and patristic tradition, and as development (*aggiornamento*) of the church's self-understanding in order to better enact its mission in the world. It is as a 'pilgrim' people that the church recognises the need for ongoing purification and reformation of life and structures.<sup>5</sup>

The current synodal process both recovers an ecclesial awareness of the need for this ongoing conversion, and is itself a highly significant moment in the realisation of the spiritual and practical changes needed in our own time. As such, it is both a *kairos*<sup>6</sup> and an *ecclesiogenesis*.<sup>7</sup>

Second, synodality is oriented not only inwardly, reordering the way the church does things *ad intra*, but also *ad extra*. A synodal church is not simply one which has reordered its internal processes, even in a certain 'synodal style' but which has done so for the goal of evangelising mission. The etymology of synod (*syn-hodos* = journeying alongside) nicely evokes the communal, journeying of the people of God, with the listening and learning which are often characteristic of pilgrimage. But usage of 'synod' in church history reminds us that this people is called together not simply as a human learning community, but as *ekklesia/qahal* – assembled by God for participation in mission.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.synod.va/en/what-is-the-synod-21-24/about.html>

<sup>4</sup> Raphael Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (Paulist, 2022), 45-50.

<sup>5</sup> Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, #8,

[https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html); Decree on Christian Unity, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, ##3,4,6,

[https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html).

<sup>6</sup> Several commentators, including the International Theological Commission, view the call to synodal conversion as a *kairos* for the church.

<sup>7</sup> See Raphael Luciani, Chapter 7, 'Ecclesiogenesis' in *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding*; also, Sr Nathalie Becquart: 'This vision of synodality presents the Church in its historical dimension in a state of permanent birth, in an on-going process of reform. That is to say, it is a Church that takes people into account, starting below from the bottom-up of the people in a generative approach that sees the Church constantly being born and starting anew. This vision of a Church in emergence from and in the midst of the 'people of the earth' can be connected with the concept of ecclesiogenesis or ecclesiogenetics. It lets us perceive that the identity of the Church is a dynamic identity, not a static one', Becquart, 'The Pandemic, a Kairos to Foster Synodality as a Way to Implement Laudato Si', *UISG Bulletin* 73 (2020), 15-20.

<sup>8</sup> 'The principle of synodality is the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God ... The gift of the Holy Spirit, which is one and the same in all who have been baptised, is manifested in many forms: the equal dignity of the baptised; the universal call to holiness;

*Synodality* thus ‘reveals and gives substance to’ two pillars of post-conciliar Catholic ecclesiology: the church as *communion* and the church’s *mission*.<sup>9</sup> The current synodal process, outlined in Section 3 below, reflects a tripartite relationship in its theme: *For a Synodal Church: Communion-Participation-Mission*.

Third, synodality is not the same as ‘synodical governance’. Although concrete structures and processes are necessary to realise a synodal church (which must be ‘effective’ as well as ‘affective’), and existing structures will need to be renewed or new structures developed at all levels from the parish and diocese to the Synod of Bishops itself,<sup>10</sup> institutional elements such as synods remain expressions of a more fundamental synodal ‘style’. This style is a way of living and working in which attentive discerning and communal listening are habitually-exercised virtues, and goals of formation for ecclesial bodies and individual missionary disciples.

Nor is it a synonym for episcopal collegiality, although in literature prior to 2015 the two terms overlap and were sometimes used to refer to relations between bishops (both within the Catholic Church, and between Catholic and Orthodox particular churches) rather than the whole people of God. In a key text for understanding the synodal vision, Pope Francis emphasises that:

In a synodal Church, the Synod of Bishops is only the most evident manifestation of a dynamism of communion which inspires all ecclesial decisions ... an expression of *episcopal collegiality* within an entirely synodal Church. Two different phrases: ‘episcopal collegiality’ and an ‘entirely synodal Church’.<sup>11</sup>

Central to the realisation of a fully synodal church are the actions of listening, learning, and conversion:

A synodal church is a listening church, knowing that listening ‘is more than feeling.’ It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. Faithful people, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: we are one in listening to others; and all are listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), to know what the Spirit ‘is saying to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7).<sup>12</sup>

Finally, synodality is above all a spiritual process:

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the participation of all the faithful in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Jesus Christ; the richness of hierarchical and charismatic gifts; the life and mission of each local Church.’ ITC, *Synodality*, #46.

<sup>9</sup> For example, ‘Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that *communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion.*’, Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (30 December 1988), #32.

<sup>10</sup> ITC, *Synodality*, Section 3, ‘Implementing Synodality: Synodal Subjects, Structures, Process and Events’

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html)

<sup>12</sup> Pope Francis, *Address commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17 October, 2015), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html)

For there to be synodality, the presence of the Spirit is necessary, and there is no Spirit without prayer.<sup>13</sup>

the Synod is not a parliament or an opinion poll; the Synod is an ecclesial event and its protagonist is the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit is not present, there will be no Synod.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.2. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church (2018)*

A more detailed and systematic presentation of the background to contemporary Catholic synodality is The International Theological Commission (ITC) paper, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*. This gives a concise historical and scriptural background to the notion of synodality, showing how it is both a principle with deep roots in the tradition, but also in its contemporary reception, a development of doctrine and practice for the Catholic Church. Thus, the church must ‘cross a threshold’ in receiving ‘a momentous and new teaching’ of the magisterium, a development based on ‘ecclesial consciousness’ and lived experience since Vatican II.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to providing a synopsis of the historical and scriptural background to synodality, pneumatological, anthropological, and ecclesiological perspectives on synodality are grounded in the key theological concept of the sense of faith given to all baptised believers (*sensus fidei*), particularly when exercised corporately (*sensus fidelium*). *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* benefits from being read alongside the similarly named ITC document, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2017).<sup>16</sup>

## 2.3. *Synods, Structures, and Style*

One of the most useful aspects of the working description of synodality in the ITC document is the description of three ‘levels’ to implementing a more synodal church. In decreasing levels of importance, these can usefully be abbreviated as **Style, Structures, and Synods**. These are taken up in the Preparatory Document for the Synod and are worth quoting in full:

In the prayer, reflection, and sharing prompted by the fundamental question, it is opportune to keep in mind three levels on which synodality is articulated as a ‘constitutive dimension of the Church.’

- the level of the **style** with which the Church ordinarily lives and works, which expresses its nature as the People of God that journeys together and gathers in assembly summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. This style is realized through ‘the community listening to the Word and celebrating the Eucharist, the brotherhood of communion and

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<sup>13</sup> *Working Document for the Continental Stage of the Synod* (DCS) #72

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html>

<sup>15</sup> ITC, *Synodality*, citations from #2, #5, #9,

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html)

the co-responsibility and participation of the whole People of God in its life and mission, on all levels and distinguishing between various ministries and roles;’

- the level of ecclesial **structures and processes**, determined also from the theological and canonical point of view, in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed in an institutional way at the local, regional, and universal levels;
- the level of **synodal processes and events** in which the Church is convoked by the competent authority, according to specific procedures determined by the ecclesiastical discipline.

Although distinct from a logical point of view, these three levels refer one to the other and must be held together in a coherent way, otherwise a counter-testimony is transmitted, and the Church’s credibility is undermined. In fact, *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.*<sup>17</sup>

This conceptual breadth is mirrored in the scope of the Durham symposium. All three of these levels are in scope as sites of potential ecumenical learning and ecclesial conversion, and the important caution regarding holding the levels together in a coherent way is noted. The legitimate diversity in how any one of these levels might be instantiated in a particular church and culture is also worth bearing in mind, even when focussing on the local context. The Continental Stage working document (see below) is useful in this regard.

Finally, and despite the expanding ecclesial, academic, and popular literature on the topic, synodality remains somewhat underdefined, and in part this is intentional. The whole synodal process is a communal exploration and discernment of what it is to be a synodal church, not an exercise in applying a pre-defined template. The fuller understanding of what synodality is comes precisely in the process of walking together, up to and including the 2023-24 Synod of Bishops, and beyond.

### 3 The Synodal Process, 2021-24

#### 3.1. Learning through Doing

In the synodal process to date, the principal means by which the Catholic Church is learning about synodality is not through the production of theological papers, valuable though these may be, but through the experience of a huge listening process which forms the synodal pathway, *For a Synodal Church: Communion-Participation-Mission*, which will come to significant punctuation with the two Synod of Bishops<sup>18</sup> meetings in October 2023 and 2024.

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<sup>17</sup> *Preparatory Document*, #27, emphasis added, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-preparatory-document.html>.

<sup>18</sup> The Synod of Bishops was established by Pope Paul VI in 1965, responding to the desire of Council Fathers to keep alive the spirit of collegiality they had experienced at Vatican II. An Ordinary Synod is convoked every three or four years for treating some aspect of concern to the Catholic Church worldwide. Voting delegates are

This process has undergone several revisions and has been extended well-beyond the initial idea of a ‘synod on synodality’ that was planned for 2022. In its current form, the process takes places over 4 phases. At its heart is the principle that the bishops need to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit in the whole faithful *before* meeting in (episcopal) synod. Something of this was experienced in the 2014-15 synods on the family, where a questionnaire was circulated (initially to clergy, but later to laity as well). The current process however recommends against questionnaire formats and prioritises instead the importance of being present to each other in meeting and dialogue, where participants can mutually listen and learn. The centrality of listening is a defining characteristic of this synodal process. One of the significant experiences for people who have taken part in the synod at any level has been the methodology of ‘spiritual conversation’ for the listening stage as a way of proceeding that allow everybody to be listened to and discern:

Spiritual conversation focuses on the quality of one’s capacity to listen as well as the quality of the words spoken. This means paying attention to the spiritual movements in oneself and in the other person during the conversation, which requires being attentive to more than simply the words expressed. This quality of attention is an act of respecting, welcoming, and being hospitable to others as they are. It is an approach that takes seriously what happens in the hearts of those who are conversing. There are two necessary attitudes that are fundamental to this process: Active listening and speaking from the heart.<sup>19</sup>

As with the practice of historical synods, seen most clearly in the Second Vatican Council, the aim of a synodal gathering is not for one side to advance an agenda over another, and ‘win the argument’ (as in a parliamentary model). Nor is it to unduly privilege a majority view. The aim rather is to attempt to discern both the ‘mind of the church’ and what the spirit is asking of us at this time. The inherent tensions between the institutional and (free-) charismatic dimensions of such an aim are one area which has been recognised as a challenge for creative theological thinking. The fundamental question which the synodal pathway set out to address is:

A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, ‘journeys together.’ How is this ‘journeying together’ happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our ‘journeying together?’<sup>20</sup>

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elected from episcopal conferences, together with heads of dicasteries of the Roman Curia, and representatives of (male) conferences of religious life. The Pope also appoints a small number of non-voting delegates, including consultants on a topic and ecumenical observers. The 2023 synod will for the first time include non-bishops (clergy, Religious, and lay women and men) as full voting members. Canonically, the Synod has a consultative role, but provision is made for the Pope to grant it deliberative power, with decisions ratified by the Pope. For an overview of the Synod, and the most recent refinements to it instituted by Pope Francis, see his apostolic constitution *Episcopalis Communio*, <https://www.synod.va/en/documents/episcopalis-communio.html>.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/document/common/resources/The-Spiritual-Conversion.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> *Preparatory Document*, #26.

### 3.2. Questions during the Initial Stage

In order to assist this process, ten discussion questions were suggested for the initial phase. Dioceses could adopt or adapt some or all of these to provide their own tailored set of question suitable to local needs and resources. These are listed in Appendix A.

Particularly at the beginning of the process, many asked whether the synodal gathering could discuss any topics, or if some were off the table. The Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales (CBCEW) replied that:

Pope Francis says ‘what is under discussion at synodal gatherings are not the traditional truths of Christian doctrine. The Synod is concerned mainly with how teaching can be lived and applied in the changing contexts of our time.’

Therefore all topics can be raised but it is important to realise that not all will form part of the ongoing discussion.<sup>21</sup>

Although several groups and individuals raised concerns that controversial topics would be ‘airbrushed’ from the discussion as the synodal process progressed, in fact diocesan, national, and continental stage syntheses have retained issues such as the role of women in preaching and ordained ministry, the experience of LGBTQ+ members of the church, and the clergy sexual abuse crisis.

As the process has progressed, the ‘living voices’ of the faithful have begun to refine and shape the questions arising and the agenda for the subsequent phases. The adaptability of the synod organisers to develop the synodal process in via, as learning and challenges emerge from the lived experience is a notable feature of the current synodal pathway.

### 3.3. Phases of the Synodal Journey

The process has four phases:<sup>22</sup>

The **Diocesan Phase** (Sept 2021-Mar 2022), in which every diocese was required to create a synod team and process, and engage in a listening process, resulting in a diocesan synthesis to take forward to the next phase. In parallel, institutes of religious life and other church organisations were invited to facilitate similar processes and forward their syntheses to the bishops, or direct to the Vatican. Dioceses were encouraged to try and include in this process those who are marginalised in any way.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/bishops-conference-synodal-process-q-and-a/>

<sup>22</sup> For more detail on these phases, see <https://www.synod.va/en/synodal-process.html>

<sup>23</sup> In some synodal texts, ‘marginalised’ refers to those on the edges of the institutional expression of church (‘ecclesial margins’). The CBCEW synthesis names the following as “Marginalised Groups” in this sense: women; LGBTQ+; young people; divorced and remarried; the Traveller community; those with additional needs; people of colour, and; [liturgical] traditionalists. A more typical usage is also used (e.g., by Pope Francis), namely, the ‘marginalised’ as those on the peripheries of human flourishing and society, who are struggling or oppressed. The two usages may coincide, but clearly do not do so in every case.

The **Episcopal Conference Phase**<sup>24</sup>, where the relevant bishops discern in a spiritual process how to capture the living voice of the faithful from their episcopal area in a synthesis document. The synthesis document for England and Wales can be read here: <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2022/06/synod-national-synthesis-england-wales.pdf>.

The **Continental Phase** is not so much a separate body or phase, as an additional opportunity for discernment, with the needs of particular geographical areas in mind.<sup>25</sup> To aid reflection, a ‘Working Document for the Continental Phase’ (DCS) has been produced, which takes its title, a leitmotif for the synodal discernment thus far, from Isaiah: *Enlarge the Space of your Tent*.<sup>26</sup> This was developed by the Synod Office and a group of experts: bishops, priests, consecrated women and men, and lay women and men, from all continents and with diverse disciplinary expertise, brought together in prayer and discernment to draft the DCS. After appropriate discernment, using these documents, each continental assembly produced a final report in March 2023, listing priorities for the October 2023 and October 2024 Synods. The General Secretariat for the Synod will prepare a formal Working Document (*Instrumentum Laboris*) to guide the Synod of Bishops, drawing on these Continental Phase reports. However the Continental Phase reports are not merely building blocks for the Universal Phase but represent a genuine record of discernment for a particular region.<sup>27</sup>

For Europe, about 200 people attended the first part of the Continental Assembly (5-9 February) in person. Each national delegation consisted of the president of the episcopal conference and three other people. An additional 44 people were present as invited guests, with a further 390 participating online (10 from each bishops' conference). The presidents of the 39 episcopal conferences for the European area then participated in the second part of the Assembly (9-12 February).<sup>28</sup>

Among a rich variety of perspectives and concerns, the Final Report for Europe proposed the following priorities for the Synodal gathering in October 2023:

- deepen the practice, theology and hermeneutics of synodality.
- address the question of an all ministerial Church, as the horizon of a reflection on charisms and ministries (ordained and non-ordained) and the relationships between them;

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<sup>24</sup> Strictly, the ‘Episcopal Conference and Oriental Synod of Bishops’ phase, representing the different (synodal) governance exercise in the Eastern Catholic churches.

<sup>25</sup> The continental groups are: North America; Europe; Asia; Middle East; Latin America and Caribbean; Africa and Madagascar; Oceania.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/20221025-ENG-DTC-FINAL-OK.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> The Continental Stage Reports are available here: [https://www.synod.va/en/synodal-process/the-continental-stage/final\\_document.html](https://www.synod.va/en/synodal-process/the-continental-stage/final_document.html)

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2022-12/looking-for-the-catholic-way-of-synodality.html>.

- explore the forms of a synodal exercise of authority, i.e. the service of accompanying the community and safeguarding unity;
- clarify criteria for discernment on the synodal process and which decisions belong on which level, from the local to the universal;
- take concrete and courageous decisions on the role of women within the Church and on their greater involvement at all levels, also in decision-making and decision-taking processes;
- consider the tensions around the liturgy, so as to synodally re-understand Eucharist as the source of communion;
- foster the formation to synodality of the whole People of God, with particular regard to the discernment of the signs of the times with a view to carrying out the common mission;
- renew a lively sense of mission, bridging the gap between faith and culture to bring the Gospel back to people's feelings, finding a language capable of articulating tradition and *aggiornamento*, but above all, walking with people rather than talking about them or to them. The Spirit asks us to listen to the cry of the poor and the earth in Europe, and in particular the desperate cry of the victims of war who demand a just peace.

The **Universal Phase** is currently being developed. By June 2023, the working document for the Synod should be in preparation by the Secretariat for the Synod. Whereas the other phases have all been instances of synodal ecclesiality, the *Synod of Bishops* exercises the episcopal synodality reserved to their particular role of governance and discernment in the church. This 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will be held in Rome over two sessions, spaced one year apart in October 2023 and 2024. After the synod it is expected that the Pope will issue a post-synodal apostolic exhortation.<sup>29</sup>

In March 2023, the Vatican announced a number of amendments to the composition and process for this synodal assembly compared to previous synods. The changes include: replacing 10 ordained men representing religious orders with 5 men and 5 women from the institutes of Religious Life; and including 70 non-Bishop members (replacing the role of auditors in previous synods). Both these new groups will be full members of the synod and able to vote. This is significant, not least in making a voting role possible for women, although the Pope has been careful to state that the synods retains a 'specifically episcopal nature' and that the non-Bishops are not there as representatives of a particular constituency. Nonetheless, this model is not the final word on how synodality might be made concrete in this particular synodal structure: 'The Assembly will have the

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<sup>29</sup> Pope Francis has previously used these documents both to consolidate the discussion and decisions of the synods and to offer his own teaching, reflection, and direction: e.g., in *Evangelii Gaudium*, and *Amoris Laetitia*.

opportunity to reflect on its own concrete experience with a view to formulating proposals on how to proceed in the future'.<sup>30</sup>

### *3.4. Other National and Diocesan Synodal Activities*

Prior to the current synodal process, several regional or local synodal activities were already underway using different, even divergent, modes of listening and discerning. Both the German Synodal Way, and the Australian Plenary Assembly emerged in response to national reports on clergy sex abuse, and considered issues of church practice and doctrine, as well as pastoral concerns. The Synod for the Archdiocese of Liverpool was a pastoral synod, along the lines of the current synodal process in terms of listening to a wide range of voices and creating a synthesis, which has been followed up with a pastoral plan. A national synod for Ireland is also in progress. All of these are providing valuable insights outside of the formal 2021-24 synodal process.

Although this formal process concludes with the Synod of Bishops (and any post-synodal documentation and decisions), the conversion of the Catholic Church to a more synodal reality in both attitude and practice is intended to continue as a constitutive element of 'being church'. The ongoing ecclesiological, missiological, institutional, and ecumenical implications of this offer a rich field of exploration.

## **4 Emerging Themes from the Synodal Process to-date**

At every stage of the current synodal process one of the challenges has been producing a synthesis which is more than simply a report of what was said, and which balances necessary conciseness with appropriate depth and diversity of insight. Nor is this a simple matter of numbers – the Holy Spirit might speak through just one person in a gathering of a hundred.

The pathway from local to universal can be illustrated by considering the Catholic Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle (covering North-East England from the Tees to the Tweed, including Durham):

- Parishes and partnerships (clusters of parishes working together) held listening and discernment activities. Some had only a handful of people and discussed a limited range of topics, others held multiple meetings and actively reached out to engage those on the periphery. 10-20% of parishioners are estimated to have taken part.
- Submissions were made to the diocese by 15 out of 18 parish partnerships.

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<sup>30</sup> [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2023-04-26\\_punto\\_stampa/2024.04.26\\_EN\\_FAQ\\_Partecipanti\\_Assemblea.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2023-04-26_punto_stampa/2024.04.26_EN_FAQ_Partecipanti_Assemblea.pdf)

- The diocesan synthesis<sup>31</sup> became one of 22 diocesan reports (totalling 700+ pages) which informed the CBCEW synthesis for England and Wales.<sup>32</sup>

By the start of the Continental phase, the Synod Secretariat had received contributions from:

- 112/114 episcopal conferences (including CBCEW);
- 15/15 Oriental Catholic churches;
- 17/23 dicasteries of the Roman Curia;
- Reflections from religious superiors, from institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, and from associations and lay movements;
- Over a thousand contributions arrived from individuals and groups as well as insights gathered through social media via the ‘Digital Synod.’

To try and represent even these syntheses as potential areas for discussion in the June Durham symposium is fraught with the risk of over-simplification, not to mention appearing somewhat presumptive regarding the work of the continental assemblies and the Synod of Bishops. However, it can perhaps be seen as a contribution of the synodal task of academic institutions, identified in the DCS, to deepen the theological insights that synodal experiences and practices bring.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4.1. Five ‘Generative Tensions’

Although summarising the diverse input from all of this cannot be done in the space available, if at all, across the different stages certain themes have been identified which recur across geographies and are accompanied by spiritual insight and depth. The DCS groups these around 5 ‘generative tensions’ which might be summarised as:

##### a.) *Listening as Openness*

There has been a genuine sense of learning through the *experience* of synodality. Those participating in the process grasped a ‘taste’ of what a synodal church might be. Many contributions are rooted in the ‘dignity of all the baptised’, and an awareness of the diverse

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<sup>31</sup> <https://diocesehn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Hexham-and-Newcastle-Synod-final-submission.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2022/06/synod-national-synthesis-england-wales.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> ‘All Church institutions, as fully participatory bodies, are called to consider how they might integrate the call to synodality into the ways in which they exercise their functions and their mission, renewing their structures and procedures. A special case in point is represented by universities and academic institutions, which will be able to develop research addressing questions of synodality, helping to innovate in the design of educational and formation programmes. In particular, theological faculties will be able to deepen the ecclesiological, Christological and Pneumatological insights that synodal experiences and practices bring.’ DCS, #80.

charisms distributed across the whole of the People of God. How these are to be harmonised with the institutional elements of the (Catholic) Church is ‘a great challenge’ (#70).

*b.) Orientation to Mission*

There is a connection between deepening communion through synodality, and strengthening and renewing mission (#99). ‘Synodality is a call to walk together with the whole human family’ (#43) and requires ‘enlarging our tent’ (#42). This includes an effective living of the Gospel, a joyful kerygmatic proclamation, compassionate service and advocacy for justice, and the daily effort to build a world in which all can flourish Can a more synodal church offer a more *credible* witness and be a more effective agent for liberation and flourishing in the world?

*c.) Radical Inclusion*

Across diverse cultures and contexts, the desire for a church which is welcoming and inclusive was strongly discerned. The challenge is now to turn inclusive listening into inclusive hospitality. This affects both institutional structures and everyday synodal style.

Specific areas for greater inclusion named the youth, disabled members, LGBTQ+, and those excluded from the full sacramental life of the church. The participation of women, who are the majority of both the church and the synodal consultations, but who are a tiny minority of the decision-makers and leaders in the church, was named as a ‘critical and urgent issue’. Many reports requested more women in leadership roles; authorisation of women to preach at mass; and a female diaconate. The question of ordination of women to the presbyterate remains disputed, but was raised.

*d.) Institutional Reform*

Proposals for concrete change in addition to those already mentioned included:

- Suitable formation for clergy and laity – in synodal spirituality but also in the practical skills needed for listening and working co-responsibly in mission and decision-making.
- Structural changes to existing bodies may be needed: pastoral councils, and by extension other assemblies such as parish councils, are called to be ‘increasingly institutional places of inclusion, dialogue, transparency, discernment, evaluation and empowerment of all’.
- Combatting clericalism. Note that the tone of responses in general was supportive of priests, and not anti-clerical, but anti-clericalism.

The common dignity of all the baptised, and the radical example of Jesus forms the basis of concrete reforms.

The reports express a deep desire to recognise and reaffirm this common dignity as the basis for the renewal of life and ministries in the Church. They affirm the value of all vocations in the Church, and above all, invite us to follow Jesus, returning to his style and way of exercising power and authority as a means of offering healing, reconciliation and liberation. (#57)

The degree to which concrete changes arising from the synodal process will actually be effected in the church nonetheless remains a significant concern for many who participated in the synodal process. Others are concerned that synodality represents a move to governing by majority-rule, or using a secular model of decision-making, although this has been repeatedly and explicitly ruled out by Pope Francis and by those involved in the process.

#### *e.) Liturgy*

Both theologically and in practice, the liturgy – especially Sunday Eucharist – is for many Catholics at the heart of their experience of church. The importance of this has emerged in many reports. However, ‘shortcomings of the actual celebratory praxis, which obscure its synodal effectiveness’ are also identified:

- the risk of the passivity of the wider liturgical community when the priest is the main (or only) liturgical protagonist;
- poor preaching (‘the quality of homilies is almost unanimously reported as a problem’), including a gap between sermon content, the beauty of faith, and the concreteness of life;
- a separation between the liturgical life of the assembly and the family network of the community. (#93)

Although diversity of rites and cultures is universally seen as a positive, tensions regarding the use of particular rites (especially the pre-Vatican II (1962) form in Latin) cause division where there should be greatest unity. This contradiction of eucharistic unity and experience of division is also an ecumenical issue (#92). In addition, there is a need to address those excluded for other reasons (#94).

#### *4.2. Challenges arising regarding the Synodal Process*

Without attempting to be comprehensive, below are some recurrent and potentially persistent challenges experienced in the process at various stages, which may be valuable sites of reflection and discussion prior to and at the June symposium.

On the surface it may appear that the most original and challenging issues of the 2021-23 worldwide process of listening would relate to the complexity of collecting and synthesising responses from the world’s Catholics. This indeed presented formidable practical challenges,

including a sense of there never being enough time to do it thoroughly. More fundamental than that, however, is the nature of the process focussed on listening to each other and to the Holy Spirit. Some challenges that this raised (and continues to raise) include:

- Deep-seated instincts to view synodality (positively or negatively) through the lens of an existing paradigm (e.g., communion ecclesiology, or the experience of Anglican synodal governance).
- Similarly, a temptation to view synodality (positively or negatively) as a move towards parliamentary democracy in the church.
- Keeping in mind Pope Francis' image of unity as a polyhedron rather than a sphere, the methodology has resisted imposing a single theological model on the notion of a synodal church. Rather than seeing synodality as a new singular ecclesiological model, at least at the present stage of the process, it is holding lightly to any specific ecclesiology and could support a plurality of theological interpretations and understandings as valid. This may have significant implications for *ecumenical* understandings and practices of synodality.
- The parish remains the fundamental site of knowingly “being church” for most Catholics in England and Wales. However, at the parish level, priests—intentionally or not—were often the effective gatekeepers to the level and style of synodal experience of parishioners, and the extent to which the invitation was opened to the ecclesial margins. For many, the disposition and skills of the priest – which can be affected by cynicism or indifference regarding the synodal process, weariness, overwork, and other positive and negative factors – thus have a significant effect on the quality of synodality at the local (parish) level.

The above issues also highlighted the need for certain skills and dispositions. There is a need to avoid: ‘the temptation to be self-referential in group meetings so that this mutual listening, which finds its foundation in prayer and listening to the Word of God, will lead to opening ourselves to others with a view to proclaiming the Gospel.’<sup>34</sup>

- The need for formation, not just in scripture and teaching of the faith, but in accompaniment and listening.
- Learning to do synodal listening in a prayerful and spiritual environment.
- The need to listen to the Holy Spirit has been widely recognised—but what does this mean in practice?

Issues of trust have been evident from the beginning, although the evidence alike of diocesan, episcopal conference, and continental stage documents is that an unprecedented diversity and locality of voices have been preserved to a remarkable degree at each stage. Nonetheless, worries have regularly been expressed, especially in the diocesan phase:

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<sup>34</sup> Vatican press release, ‘The Synodal Process: an Initial Assessment’ (7 Feb 2022), <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-synodal-process-an-initial-assessment.html>.

- Concern that the ‘gatekeepers’ at various stages would remove the voice of the people;
- Issues regarding both the substantive difference in roles between the voice of the faithful and the bishops, and the language used to describe that distinction (some bishops considered ‘discernment’ to be their role alone, or principally);
- Concern as to whether the synod would achieve anything worthwhile, either because of exclusion or watering down of certain voices, or through a permanent state of listening and discussion without turning to action.

The exceptional multi-year complexity and resource investment of this synodal pathway process has raised issues regarding how synodality can become a routine part of the Catholic Church’s regular ways of living and acting:

- How to embed synodality into stable structures and processes, which still maintain the synodal style of encounter which takes time and particular virtues.
- ‘The church’ is frequently viewed as other (e.g., in the sense that the church is spoken of as needing to listen to the people) and often refers to the hierarchy or the clergy, rather than something in which the faithful are living and functioning as constituent members.
- Time-poverty is recognised (for some) as an issue for England and Wales, not just in relation to synodal processes but in relation to the practice of being missionary disciples.
- Despite the efforts of Pope Francis and diocesan organisers, it was recognised that many did not participate, with the relative absence of voices from the youth and from those on the margins of ecclesial institutions and groups a particular concern. This challenge remains to be addressed in ongoing synodal activities.

In the reports for England and Wales, and from Ireland, significant areas in Catholic pastoral teaching did *not* feature significantly in the voices captured in diocesan reports and national syntheses:

- ecumenism and interfaith relations;
- care for creation, as modelled by Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si*;
- the sacramental life of the church, except for the eucharist, which featured prominently.

Finally, the process itself has been in a state of constant evolution through 2021-23 and those holding responsibility for it have been careful not to lock-down the methodology too soon, whilst recognising that a clear understanding of the methodology is nonetheless needed to continue the synodal pathway after 2024. This willingness to instantiate the principle that ‘time is greater than space’—that it is better to initiate processes than to possess spaces and hold fixed positions in ways that serve to classify and constrain others—remains counter-intuitive to many of those formed in ecclesiastical and theological habits. Becoming comfortable with a developing process as well as potential developments in practice, mission,

and teaching requires a degree of spiritual trust and intellectual and emotional flexibility which cannot always be assumed.

## 5 Synodality and Ecumenism

### 5.1. *A Call to Ecumenical Conversion*

Synodality is rooted in a theological understanding of the People of God as encompassing all the baptised. The Synodal Pathway is thus also a call to ecumenical conversion. As early as the 1976 ARCIC document, *Authority in the Church*, the co-chairs were able to suggest that,

the Roman Catholic Church has much to learn from the Anglican synodical tradition of involving the laity in the life and mission of the Church.<sup>35</sup>

This line of reasoning is echoed and amplified in the 2017 ARCIC agreed statement, *Walking Together on the Way*, which looks particularly at structures and processes of governance and participation in the Catholic and Anglican traditions, not with a view to harmonization, but to ‘receptive learning’ from the other tradition in order to address shortcomings in understanding, practice, or culture in one’s own tradition.<sup>36</sup> Such learning forms an important dimension both to the current synodal process and to the fuller understanding and realisation of synodality to which that process is oriented. Of the ten areas suggested in the *Preparatory Document* for discussion in the Diocesan Phase, one was dedicated to ecumenism:<sup>37</sup>

***#7 The dialogue between Christians of different confessions, united by one Baptism, has a special place in the synodal journey.***

- What relations do we have with the brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations?
- What areas do they concern?
- What fruits have we drawn from this ‘journeying together’?
- What are the difficulties?

### 5.2. *Ecumenical Perspectives in the Working Document for the Continental Stage (DCS)*

In 2015, Pope Francis noted that the commitment to build a synodal church has significant ecumenical implications,<sup>38</sup> and this connection between the synodal journey and the ecumenical journey is outlined in the 2017 ITC paper.<sup>39</sup> After two years of listening,

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<sup>35</sup> <https://iarccum.org/doc/?d=4>.

<sup>36</sup> ARCIC III, *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be Church—Local, Regional, Universal* (SPCK, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> *Preparatory Document*, #30.

<sup>38</sup> Pope Francis, *Address on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*.

<sup>39</sup> ITC, *Synodality* (##115-117).

discerning, and synthesising in the synodal pathway, the most recent synod document, the DCS, records a desire among the faithful to ‘breathe new life into the ecumenical journey’ and for greater *depth* to ecumenism in a synodal church (#47), including:

- Deeper ecumenical encounter and formation (#22);
- Ecumenical (and inter-faith) response to social and environmental challenges (#45);
- Ecumenical commitment as more than just social action (#48);
- Interchurch families (#44);
- Liturgical implications of disunity (#92);
- The benefit of encountering diverse spiritualities (#87);
- Finally, ‘fraternal delegates from other Christian denominations’, are named among those to whom special attention must be given for inclusion in the continental assemblies in order to make them ‘ecclesial and not merely episcopal’ (108).

The synodal pathway’s ecumenical potential is given a more systematic outline in a recent letter from Cardinal Grech and Cardinal Koch (Dicastery for Promotion of Christian Unity):

**Firstly**, if ‘a synodal Church is a Church which listens’, this listening should concern the totality of those who are honoured by the name of Christian, since all the baptized participate to some degree in the *sensus fidei*.

**Secondly**, as ecumenism can be understood as an ‘exchange of gifts’, one of the gifts Catholics can receive from the other Christians is precisely their experience and understanding of synodality.

**Thirdly**, the synodal shaping of the Catholic Church at all levels has significant ecumenical implications as it makes it a more credible dialogue partner.

**Finally**, the synodal process itself is an opportunity to further foster ecumenical relationships at all levels of the Church, since the participation of ecumenical delegates has become the customary practice, not only in the Synod of Bishops, but also in diocesan synods.<sup>40</sup>

A **fifth** area might also be added which asks whether synodal *practice* might learn from ecumenical experience of listening and dealing with reconciled diversity. Many of the dynamics of synodality within the Catholic Church bear remarkable similarities to those of ecumenical dialogue: walking together as *syn-hodos* requires a kind of internal ecumenism, living together in communion and working together in mission – all within an appropriate reconciled diversity (unity not uniformity). Might there also therefore be opportunities for learning about synodal listening and walking and working together by applying *ad intra* some ecumenical practices, especially where there are differences which pull us away from each other *within* the Catholic Church?

Given that synodality is constitutive of being church (not auxiliary to it), learning ecumenically about synodal life and mission is not simply a matter of instrumental

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/2021/2021-10-29-letter-of-cardinals-koch-and-grech.html>.

appropriation of practices (although simple practical learning is by no means excluded) but about learning to be more perfectly and fundamentally the Church of Christ. ‘Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church’ as participation-communion-mission is participation in *Christ’s* life (as communion), *Christ’s* mission, in *Christ’s* Church. Furthermore, learning from the ‘experience and understanding’ of other Christians applies at all three dimensions of a synodal church: *synodal style*; *synodal structures* and *processes* of listening and discerning; and actual *synods* and decision-making *events*.

### 5.3. Ecumenical Synodal Listening at the Universal Level

The Dicastery for the Promotion of Christian Unity (DCPU), the Vatican department responsible for interchurch relations, has held two symposia in Rome to learn about synodality and to listen in synodal style, with Orthodox and Eastern Christian traditions under the title *Listening to the East*.<sup>41</sup> Video recordings of the events (in English) are available online:

- Orthodox Churches (5 videos):  
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL7XKk3rDrdN0SRkRHe-Mb5E1zd39zNt2A>
- Syriac Orthodox and Church of the East:
  - part 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2eiPgl5Cghs>
  - part 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t84yxO-WNfk>

A further symposium, *Listening to the West*, began in 2023 to learn about the synodal approaches in mainline and free churches in Western traditions<sup>42</sup>:

- 26-28 Jan: Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, and Old Catholic tradition:  
<http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/2023/2023-01-30--listening-to-the-west--anglicani--luterani--riformati.html>
- 16-18 Feb: Disciples of Christ  
<http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/2023/2023-03-10-all-ascolto-dell-occidente.html>
- 15 March: Pentecostal Churches  
<http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/2023/2023-04-28-listening-to-the-west-pentecostal-churches.html>

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/2022/2022-10-25-simposium-sinodalita.html>. A short summary of the event is available at <https://ocf.org/pro-orientale-angelicum-conference-in-rome-important-orthodox-impulses-for-the-catholic-church/>.

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/2022/symposium--listening-to-the-west-.html>.

#### 5.4. Receptive Ecumenism

The Durham symposium is also an exercise in ‘listening to the West’, and specifically to six of the major traditions to be found in England and Wales. To do this it makes use of a particular ecumenical approach known as **Receptive Ecumenism**.<sup>43</sup>

The basic principle of Receptive Ecumenism is that of attending to the ecclesial wounds of one’s own tradition by receiving with integrity from one’s ecumenical others. This involves a commitment to critical — but constructively-oriented — discernment in one’s own community or tradition, combined with a constructive — yet appropriately critical — reception of key aspects of the understanding and practice of other churches and traditions in service of promoting fruitful growth, reparative healing, and greater Christian and human flourishing. In these critical-constructive interactions, the faithful hope is that new ways of growing together might become possible, even where apparently insurmountable obstacles currently exist. The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) has adopted this approach under the rubric of ‘receptive learning’, with its first agreed document ‘profoundly shaped by the insights of receptive ecumenism’. At the heart of Receptive Ecumenism is a double dynamic: on the one hand, acknowledging specific deficiencies in one’s own tradition and desiring to heal them; on the other hand, recognising the graced potential of another Christian tradition as a source of learning and healing.

The most obvious way in which Receptive Ecumenism and synodality are being put to work in close relationship with each other in the process around the Durham symposium is that it consists in a focussed exercise in Catholic listening to and seeking to learn from the differing experiences and understandings of synodality, and the like, in six significant Western Christian traditions with presence in England and Wales. Prior, however, to this functional relationship, Receptive Ecumenism and the opening of the Catholic Church to more synodal ways of being, relating, and working can be seen to have an intrinsic resonance and affinity.

The approach of Receptive Ecumenism has several important affinities with Pope Francis’ synodal vision, and is similarly rooted in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council:

- *Transformative Learning*: Receptive Ecumenism focusses not on criticism of others, but on examining one’s own tradition, and looking to *listen and learn* from the other.
- *Healing Wounds*: Receptive Ecumenism explicitly seeks to identify and *treat the wounds* and dysfunctions of the church.

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<sup>43</sup> As a distinct approach, Receptive Ecumenism was initiated through the wirings of Paul D. Murray, beginning in 2005, and has since been developed through six projects at Durham University, a series of five major international conferences, and a growing body of academic and pastoral literature. For an overview of its adoption, see Ryan, ‘The Reception of Receptive Ecumenism’, *Ecclesiology* 17/1 (2021), 7-28, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455316-bja10008>.

- *Dreams and Visions*: in this therapeutic work, Receptive Ecumenism resists the urge to be satisfied with present limitations, but urges the ‘*dreaming of dreams*’.<sup>44</sup> If one were to replace ‘synod’ with ‘ecumenism’ in this passage from Pope Francis, it would neatly encapsulate much of what Receptive Ecumenism is about:

We recall that the purpose of the Synod is not to produce documents, but to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands.<sup>45</sup>

- *Time is Greater than Space*: Both synodality and Receptive Ecumenism are *indirect methods* for solving problems, deliberately patient as regards addressing the ‘hardcore’ issues, and instead focussing on changing the landscape. They each instantiate the principle that ‘time is greater than space’ (*Evangelii Gaudium* ##222-225): that it is better to initiate processes than to possess spaces and hold onto definitions and power.
- *Affective and Effective*: The synodal scope of ‘Style, Structures, and Synods’, and for ‘Renewing mentalities, attitudes, practices and structures in order to be ever more faithful’ is mirrored in Receptive Ecumenism’s explicit attention to interior conversion and transformation of attitudes and culture, as well as learning in regard to lived ecclesial practice and procedures, and specific institutional structures and theological understandings.<sup>46</sup>
- *Reconciled Diversity*: Receptive Ecumenism and synodality approach unity as a ‘polyhedron not the sphere’ (Pope Francis) in which local diversity is respected and valued, not lost in uniformity. A goal of Receptive Ecumenism is to deepen one’s own ecclesial identity through situating it in a reconciled diversity – an approach described as ‘committed pluralism’.<sup>47</sup> In synodality,

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<sup>44</sup> ‘[Receptive Ecumenism] might be best expressed in terms of: (1) the dreaming of dreams; (2) the testing of such dreams for their viability; and (3) the discerning together of what might either hinder or promote their embodied ecclesial realization. These are the three voices ... the poetic, the analytic, and the pragmatic or, alternatively, ... the imaginative-constructive, the critical-constructive, and the practical-organizational.’ Paul D. Murray, ‘Preface’, in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning* (OUP, 2008), i–xv, ix–xv (xi).

<sup>45</sup> Pope Francis, *Address at the Opening of the XV Ordinary Synod of Bishops* (3 October 2018), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20181003\\_apertura-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html).

<sup>46</sup> Receptive Ecumenism in a Catholic context is concerned with ‘the kind of institutional virtues, habitus, procedures, and, in some cases, structural implications which are required if Catholicism is going to be able to live catholicity differently through long-term disagreement without this necessarily leading to fracture or alienation.’ Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs’, *Louvain Studies* 33 (2008), 30–45.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Synodality is at the heart of the ecumenical commitment of Christians: because it represents an invitation to walk together on the path towards full communion and because – when it is understood correctly – it offers a way of understanding and experiencing the Church where legitimate differences find room in the logic of a reciprocal exchange of gifts in the light of truth.’ ITC *Synodality* #9.

What emerges is a profound re-appropriation of the common dignity of all the baptized. This is the authentic pillar of a synodal Church and the theological foundation of a unity which is *capable of resisting the push toward homogenization*. This enables us to continue to promote and make good use of the variety of charisms that the Spirit with unpredictable abundance pours out on the faithful.<sup>48</sup>

- *Leaning into the Spirit*: Whilst much more could be said on this topic, suffice to note that both synodality and Receptive Ecumenism, despite their attention to methodology and theological resources, both depend explicitly and ultimately on the action of the Holy Spirit, and on an intentional concern to exist in a mode of listening and cooperating with that Spirit.

At a practical level, Durham University and the Centre for Catholic Studies have many years of experience in using this method at local, regional, and universal levels.

## 6 Conclusion: What does conversion to a synodal church mean?

In carrying out her mission, the Church is called to constant conversion, which is a ‘pastoral and missionary conversion’, too; this involves renewing mentalities, attitudes, practices and structures, in order to be ever more faithful to her vocation.<sup>49</sup>

This means a Church that *learns from listening* how to *renew its evangelizing mission* in the light of the *signs of the times*, to continue offering humanity a way of being and living in which *all can feel included as protagonists*. Along this path, the lamp to our steps is the *Word of God*, which offers the light with which to reread, interpret and express the *experience that has been lived*.<sup>50</sup>

Walking together as the People of God requires us to recognize the need for continual conversion, individual and communal. On the institutional and pastoral level, this conversion translates into an equally continuous reform of the Church, its structures and style, in the wake of the drive for continuous ‘aggiornamento,’ the precious legacy of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>51</sup>

The June Durham University symposium, ‘Learning on the Way: Receptive Ecumenism and the Catholic Synodal Pathway’, is an opportunity for Catholic listening and learning in all these dimensions of living synodality, and to share with Pope Francis a ‘*conviction that the process of understanding Christ’s message never ends, but constantly challenges us.*’ The Continental Stage working document reflects on a scriptural image which we might keep in mind throughout the symposium:

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<sup>48</sup> DCS #9, emphasis added.

<sup>49</sup> ITC, *Synodality*, #104.

<sup>50</sup> DCS #13, emphasis added.

<sup>51</sup> DCS #103.

*Enlarge the space of your tent, spread out your tent cloths unsparingly, lengthen your ropes and make firm your pegs (Is 54:2).*

Listened to today, these words of Isaiah invite us to imagine the Church similarly as a tent, indeed as the tent of meeting, which accompanied the people on their journey through the desert: called to stretch out, therefore, but also to move. At its centre, stands the tabernacle, that is, the presence of the Lord. The tent's hold is ensured by the sturdiness of its pegs, that is, the fundamentals of faith that do not change *but can be moved and planted in ever new ground*, so that the tent can accompany the people as they walk through history. Finally, in order not to sag, the structure of the tent must keep in balance the different forces and tensions to which it is subjected: a metaphor that expresses the need for discernment. This is how many reports envision the Church: an expansive, but not homogeneous dwelling, capable of sheltering all, but open, letting in and out (cf. Jn. 10:9), and moving toward embracing the Father and all of humanity.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> DCS #27.

## Select Bibliography

Symposium participants are not expected to read these texts in preparation, but may find it a useful starting points to explore any of the topics under discussion in greater detail.

### Synodality

In addition to documents produced specifically for the current synodal process, key texts are:

- Pope Francis, *Address commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17 October, 2015),  
[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html)
- Pope Francis, *Episcopalis Communio*, Apostolic Constitution on the Synod of Bishops (15 September 2018),  
[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco\\_costituzione-ap\\_20180915\\_episcopalis-communio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html)
- International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2 March, 2018),  
[https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_2018\\_0302\\_synodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_2018_0302_synodalita_en.html)

From the growing academic and pastoral literature on synodality, the following are useful reference points:

- A short and accessible overview of synodality in the Catholic Church is Moira McQueen, *Walking Together: A Primer on the New Synodality* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2022);
- A good theological introduction is Rafael Luciani, *Synodality: A New way of Proceeding in the Church* (Paulist Press, 2022);
- Eamonn Conway, Eugene Duffy, and Mary McDaid have collected a wide range of valuable articles in *The Synodal Pathway: Where Rhetoric Meets Reality* (Columba Books, 2022);
- See also *Concilium* 2021/2, dedicated to ‘Synodalities’.
- A substantial collection of academic essays directly or indirectly bearing becoming a more synodal church can be found in Antonio Spadaro and Carolos Maria Galli, *For a Missionary Reform of the Church* (Paulist Press, 2017) [Original Italian, 2016].

Two particularly useful journal articles, on the role of the *sensus fidei* in synodality are:

- Ormond Rush, ‘Inverting the Pyramid: The *sensus fidelium* in a Synodal Church.’ *Theological Studies* 78.2 (2017), 299-325;
- Myriam Wijlens, ‘Reforming the Church by Hitting the Reset Button: Reconfiguring Collegiality within Synodality because of *sensus fidei fidelium*’, *The Canonist* 8 (2017), 235-261.

## Synod 2021-24 Process

- <https://www.synod.va/en/resources/official-documents.html>

## Receptive Ecumenism

- ARCIC III, *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be Church—Local, Regional, Universal* (SPCK, 2018)
- Paul D. Murray, Gregory A. Ryan, & Paul Lakeland (eds.), *Receptive Ecumenism as Transformative Ecclesial Learning: Walking the Way to a Church Re-formed* (OUP, 2022)
- A comprehensive list of books, articles, and resources relating to Receptive Ecumenism can be found here: <https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/catholic-studies/research/constructive-catholic-theology-/receptive-ecumenism-/resources-and-publications/>
- Details of the Durham CCS research projects in Receptive Ecumenism can be found here: <https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/catholic-studies/research/constructive-catholic-theology-/receptive-ecumenism-/>

## Appendix A: Guiding Questions for Diocesan Phase

### **1. THE JOURNEYING COMPANIONS:** *In the Church and in society, we are side by side on the same road.*

- In your local Church, who are the ones ‘journeying together’?
- When we say: ‘our Church,’ who is part of it?
- Who is asking us to journey together?
- Who are the road companions, including those outside the ecclesial perimeter?
- What persons or groups are left on the margins, expressly or in fact?

### **2. LISTENING:** *Listening is the first step, but it requires having an open mind and heart, without prejudices.*

- To whom does our particular Church ‘need to listen to’?
- How are the Laity, especially young people and women, listened to?
- How do we integrate the contribution of Consecrated Men and Women?
- What space is there for the voice of minorities, the discarded, and the excluded?
- Do we identify prejudices and stereotypes that hinder our listening?
- How do we listen to the social and cultural context in which we live?

### **3. SPEAKING OUT:** *All are invited to speak with courage and parrhesia, that is, integrating freedom, truth, and charity.*

- How do we promote a free and authentic style of communication within the community and its organizations, without duplicity and opportunism?
- And in relation to the society of which we are a part?
- When and how do we manage to say what is important to us?
- How does the relationship with the media system (not only Catholic media) work?
- Who speaks on behalf of the Christian community, and how are they chosen?

### **4. CELEBRATING:** *‘Journeying together’ is only possible if it is based on communal listening to the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist.*

- How do prayer and liturgical celebration inspire and direct our ‘journeying together’?
- How do they inspire the most important decisions?
- How do we promote the active participation of all the Faithful in the liturgy and the exercise of the sanctifying function?
- What space is given to the exercise of the ministries of the reader and acolyte?

### **5. CO-RESPONSIBLE IN THE MISSION:** *Synodality is at the service of the Church’s mission, in which all her members are called to participate.*

- Since we are all missionary disciples, how is each Baptized person called to be a protagonist in the mission?
- How does the community support its members committed to service in society (social and political commitment, in scientific research and teaching, in the promotion of social justice, in the protection of human rights, and in caring for the Common home, etc.)?
- How do you help them to live out these commitments in a logic of mission?
- How is discernment about mission-related choices made, and who participates in it?
- How are the different traditions that constitute the patrimony of many Churches, especially the Oriental ones, integrated and adapted, with respect to the synodal style, in view of an effective Christian witness?
- How does collaboration work in territories where different *sui iuris* Churches are present?

**6. DIALOGUE IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY:** *Dialogue is a path of perseverance that also includes silences and sufferings, but which is capable of gathering the experience of persons and peoples.*

- What are the places and modes of dialogue within our particular Church?
- How are divergences of vision, the conflicts, the difficulties addressed?
- How do we promote collaboration with neighbouring Dioceses, with and among religious communities in the area, with and among lay associations and movements, etc.?
- What experiences of dialogue and shared commitment do we have with believers of other religions and with non-believers?
- How does the Church dialogue with and learn from other sectors of society: the world of politics, economics, culture, civil society, the poor...?

**7. WITH THE OTHER CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS:** *The dialogue between Christians of different confessions, united by one Baptism, has a special place in the synodal journey.*

- What relations do we have with the brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations?
- What areas do they concern?
- What fruits have we drawn from this ‘journeying together’?
- What are the difficulties?

**8. AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATION:** *A synodal Church is a participatory and co-responsible Church.*

- How do we identify the goals to be pursued, the way to achieve them, and the steps to be taken?
- How is authority exercised within our particular Church?
- What are the practices of teamwork and co-responsibility?
- How are lay ministries and the assumption of responsibility by the Faithful promoted?
- How do synodal bodies function at the level of the particular Church?
- Are they a fruitful experience?

**9. DISCERNING AND DECIDING:** *In a synodal style, decisions are made through discernment, based on a consensus that flows from the common obedience to the Spirit.*

- By what procedures and methods do we discern together and make decisions?
- How can they be improved?
- How do we promote participation in decision-making within hierarchically structured communities?
- How do we articulate the consultative phase with the deliberative one, the process of *decision-making* with the moment of *decision-taking*?
- How and with what tools do we promote transparency and accountability?

**10. FORMING OURSELVES IN SYNODALITY:** *The spirituality of journeying together is called to become an educational principle for the formation of the human person and of the Christian, of the families, and of the communities.*

- How do we form people, especially those who hold roles of responsibility within the Christian community, to make them more capable of ‘journeying together,’ listening to one another and engaging in dialogue?
- What formation do we offer for discernment and the exercise of authority?
- What tools help us to read the dynamics of the culture in which we are immersed and their impact on our style of Church?