

SYNODALITY IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH: A CALL FOR ECCLESIASTICAL DEMOCRACY?

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Abstract

One of the most important occasions engaging the Catholic world today is the upcoming event of the Synod on Synodality. While the Church has always had synods, the upcoming synod reflects on the nature of synodality itself. This particular synod reflects on the meaning and operations of synods. No wonder, it hinges on the tripod of communion, participation and mission. The synod emphasizes journeying together and carrying everyone along. The stress is on collaboration wherein the clergy, the consecrated persons and the laity are expected to walk and work together to achieve the evangelizing mission of the Church. Ever since the announcement of this synod, questions are agog as to whether the church is about becoming a democracy in the real meaning of it. This study seeks to understand the meaning of democracy in the light of the essence of the Synod on Synodality. It finds that the Church is actually a Kingdom and cannot be a democracy in the secular understanding of the political system as she is expected to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit as mediated by a hierarchical structure rather a majoritarian and popular perception.

Keywords: Synod, Synodality, Democracy, Mission of the Church

1. Introduction

The 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops referred to as the synod on Synodality will take place in October 2023 and has as its theme: ‘For a synodal Church: communion, participation and

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mission'. 'Synodality, according to Pope Francis, is a style, it is a walk together, and it is what the Lord expects from the Church of the third millennium.' The International Theological Commission describes synodality as 'the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God.' Synodality is commonly understood as a process by which the Church undergoes discernment on a variety of issues. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the synod on Synodality intends that by its fruits, the laity, priests, bishops, and religious each use their own gifts and charisms to help the Church make decisions. The most basic question, however is 'How does this 'walk together,' relate to or differ from the idea of democracy or popular participation holding sway in secular governance today? Is the communion or participation as emphasized by this synod to be understood in terms of evolving a democracy? Can the Church ever be democratic in her efforts to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to her? Indeed, to what extent will synodality reflect the notion and practice of democratic ethos in our world today?

1. Meaning of Synod

The word 'synod' comes from the Greek word *συνδος* (*synodos*) which means 'assembly' or 'meeting'. This is also equivalent of the Latin *concilium* or English 'council'. Taken separately as preposition (*συν* – *syn*), meaning 'with' or 'together' and noun (*ὁδος* – *hodos*), meaning 'road', 'way' or 'path', *synodos* connotes a journeying together on the same road or path. In either way, synod has to do with the coming together or meeting of people for a common purpose. In the Catholic Church, the Synod of Bishops, considered as an advisory body, is one of the ways in which the bishops render cooperative assistance to the Pope in exercising his office.² The synod of bishops is a group of bishops who have been chosen from different regions of the world and meet together at fixed times to foster closer unity between the Roman Pontiff and bishops, to assist the Roman Pontiff with their counsel in the preservation and growth of faith and morals and in the observance and strengthening of ecclesiastical discipline, and to consider questions pertaining to the activity of the Church in the world³. The powers of the

² Code of Canon Law 1983, Canon 334.

³ Canon 342

pope with regard to synods are enormous. The synod of bishops is directly subject to the authority of the Roman Pontiff who: 1) convokes a synod as often as it seems opportune to him and designates the place where its sessions are to be held; 2) ratifies the election of members who must be elected according to the norm of special law and designates and appoints other members; 3) determines at an appropriate time before the celebration of a synod the contents of the questions to be treated, according to the norm of special law; 4) defines the agenda; 5) presides at the synod personally or through others; 6) concludes, transfers, suspends, and dissolves the synod.⁴ The pope may also appoint participants of his own choosing, their number limited to 15% of the other delegates who participate either *ex officio* or as elected representatives of episcopal conferences or the Union of Superiors General. The procedures followed at assemblies of the Synod of the Bishops are indicated in the *Order of the Synod of Bishops*, originally issued in 1969, the latest revision of which was published on 29 September 2006.

Be that as it may, the earliest synods can be traced to meetings held by bishops from various regions in the middle of the 2nd century A.D. Although originally synod was restricted to the meeting of bishops, which to some extent is still the case today, yet following the spirit of *aggiornamento* and collaborative ministry of Vatican II, the universal Church has extended the holding of synods to the local Churches, thus making it possible even for parishes, deaneries, dioceses and ecclesiastical provinces to hold their synods whenever needs arise. The synodal process therefore is no longer exclusively an assembly of bishops but a journey of all the faithful, in which every local Church has an integral part to play. This makes it possible for the teaching authority of the Pope and the bishops to be in constant dialogue with the *sensus fidelium*, that is, the living voice of the people of God. With regard to the present synod the Church's intention is to carry all segments of the Church along in the final deliberation of bishops in Rome during their synod next year.

⁴ Canon 344

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3. Inauguration, Theme and Objectives of the Synod on Synodality

The Holy Father Pope Francis inaugurated, on universal level, the synod on Synodality in Rome in October 2021 and used that occasion to encourage as well as exhort the local churches all over the world to key into the spirit and theme of the synod. The theme of the Synod is: ‘For a Synodal Church – Communion, Participation and Mission’. The three dimensions of the theme are very much interrelated because they are vital pillars of a synodal Church. The *communion* we share as the people of God flows directly from the love and unity of the Holy Trinity. As people of diverse cultures and contexts we listen to the word of God through the living tradition of the Church and share in the *sensus fidei*. In *participation* we are all called upon to exercise deep and respectful listening to one another. Participation creates room for relevance of every child of God and eschews disinterestedness, monopoly and redundancy. In *mission* we are called upon to recapture the very nature of the Church as a missionary entity born out of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. In creating the opportunity for listening and dialogue, Pope Francis is calling on the Church to rediscover its synodal nature as a Church in the 3rd millennium. It is highly recommended that the listening process takes place in a spiritual setting that supports openness in sharing as well as hearing. As a guide to the local churches, the universal church has come out with a Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality to assist the local Churches in listening and discerning in the specific local circumstances and contexts.⁵

Whereas recent synods have examined such themes as the Church in Africa, new evangelization, the family, young people and the Amazon, the present synod focuses on the theme of synodality itself. The objective of the synod is to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church; and the starting point for this is listening to the word of God in Sacred Scriptures and the living tradition of the Church and also listening to one another, especially those at the margins of the society and discerning the signs of the times. The whole process is to foster a lived experience of discernment, participation and co-responsibility, so as to harness the

⁵See Vademecum on the Synod and Synodality
<<https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html>> Accessed 19th March 2020.

charisms and talents of individual members of the Church for mission *ad gentes*. Thus, the overriding purpose of the current synod is to foster ecclesial communion. Is the communion or participation as emphasized by this synod to be understood in terms of evolving a democracy? Can the Church ever be democratic in her efforts to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to her? Indeed, to what extent will synodality reflect the notion and practice of democratic ethos in our world today?

4. Meaning of Democracy

Democracy as a term lacks universally acceptable definition, the reason being that people from different backgrounds and experiences defined the concept in accordance to their experiences and backgrounds, thus making the term somehow ambiguous in the contemporary political analysis, attracting to some extent positive, as well as antagonistic interpretations and contradicting practices as we find in Nigeria. Notwithstanding the divergences to the definition of democracy, Blankson asserted that any meaningful definition of democracy must proceed from the ancient definition of democracy as people's rule.⁶ To this end the ancient Greeks who originated the term democracy in the 1st half of the 5th century BC compartmentalized the word into two; that is *demos* and *kratia* which in Greek means people and rule or authority respectively. Thus, democracy refers to rule by the people, and so begins what Robert Delhi calls the transformation from the rule by few to rule by many.⁷ In an address, delivered at the dedication of the soldiers' National Cemetery on November 1863 in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Lincoln asserted that 'all men are created equal', and in the light of this, democracy is defined as government of the people.⁸ The definition makes the people the subject and object of democracy or what has been termed 'the *raison d'être* of governance.'⁹

⁶Ukana Blankon in Adeyinka Theresa Ajayi and Emmanuel Oladipo Ojo, *Democracy in Nigeria. Problems and prospects* [2014] <www.iisteorg> accessed. 19th March 2020.

⁷ A Robert Delhi, *Democracy and its Critics* (New York and London: Yale University Press 1989)1.

⁸ Adeyinka Theresa Ajayi and Emmanuel Ohadipo Ojo (n2) 108.

⁹ Ibid.

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Democracy is a system of government in which all the people of a country can vote to elect their representatives.¹⁰ Democracy provides alternatives as well as platform for actualization of democratic principles through the instrumentalities of political parties. Thus, under these scenarios political parties are allowed to evolve and compete through election for the control of the apparatus of power periodically.¹¹ Put in another words, democracy is simply a system of government where the citizens directly exercise their powers and have the right to elect government representatives who collectively create a government body for the entire nation.¹² Nwabueze contends that the underlying idea of democracy is the popular basis of government, the idea that government rests upon the consent of the majority of the governed by means of election at periodic intervals of time, which the franchise is universal for all adults and that it exists for this benefit.¹³ Rousseau sees democracy as the government of the people for the general will of the people. Rousseau argues that to provide general will of the people, government must give liberty under the law, must create a system of public education by which children are accustomed to regard their individuality only in its relation of the body of the state.¹⁴ Democracy also thrives on the principle of separation of powers.

From the explanations above, democracy implicitly portends equality of all human beings emanating from creation. Equality denotes absence of

¹⁰AS Hornby, (eds) Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (9th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015) 408.

¹¹Abdulkadir B Sule-Gambari, 'The Role of Traditional Institutions in a Democratic System', in MM Gidado, CU Anyanwu and A O Adekunle (eds.) Constitutional Essays, Nigeria Beyond 1999: Stabilizing the Nigeria Polity through a Constitutional Re-Engineering. (In Honour Obola Ige) (Enugu: Chenglo Ltd 2004) 209.

¹²Vanishnavi Patil, 'What are the Different Types of Democracy [October 2016] <<https://www.science-abc.com/social-science/different-types-democracy-direct-representatives-parliamentary.ihtm>> accessed 22nd October, 2019.

¹³Ben Nwabueze in MO Unegbu 'Democratization and Development in Nigeria' in Uba SF Nnabue (ed) Thematics on the Law of Development (Owerri: Applause B Multi-Sector Ltd 2017) 163 – 164.

¹⁴Rousseau in Chalie Nwekeaku 'The Rule of Law, Democracy and Good Governance in Nigeria' <www.ea-journal.org> accessed 15th February 2020.

special favouritism of any specie of man rather, all and sundry in a state have equal access to social welfare, justice, job or power and other principles of democracy. For example, access to political power in accordance to justice must emanate through a credible free and fair election. In view of this, Gamble describes a democratic state as ‘the republic of equals’. This is because democracy implies that there should be a substantial degree of equality among men both in the sense that the adult members of a society ought to have, so far as is possible, equal influence on those decisions which affects important aspects of the life of the society, and in the sense that inequalities of wealth, social status, access to education and knowledge, and others not be so considerable as to result in the permanent subordination of some group of men to others.¹⁵ Away from the concept of democracy, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) acknowledges the following as core characteristics of democratic governance: participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, census orientation, equity, effectiveness and efficiency and strategic vision.¹⁶

Despite the benefits of democracy, it did not go without some disadvantages. Accordingly, Malemi, enlists the following as the criticisms or disadvantages of democracy.

- i. Imposition by the political parties of candidates who are not the popular choice of the people.
- ii. Elected officers are more interested in the welfare and programmes of their parties than those of the people.
- iii. Desperation to win election may compel parties and candidates to thuggery and election malpractices.
- iv. Democracy may endanger corruption in the system.
- v. Corruption, violence and dirty politics scares away responsible and honest citizens from politics, paving the way for the wrong persons to assume political leadership.
- vi. That democracy is too expensive to operate.

¹⁵ Adeyenka Theresa Ajayi Emmanuel Oladikpo Ojo (n2).

¹⁶Lanre Olu-Adeyemi, ‘The Challenges of Democratic Governance in Nigeria’ [March 2012] <www.ijbssmef.com/journals> accessed 2nd February 2021.

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- vii. That party politics is too monetized, creating room for money bags to hijack the process.
- viii. That democracy creates a large and unwieldy government which shows down decision making and implementation process¹⁷

5. The Catholic Church and Democracy

It has long been believed that there is a relationship between a society's culture and its ability to produce and sustain democratic forms of government. The ancient Athenians maintained that their democracy depended, in part, on the fostering of 'civic virtue' or democratic culture. Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and J. S. Mill also maintained that culture and democracy were related, and a wide variety of social scientists have come to broadly similar conclusions. For example, the cultural argument appears in S. M. Lipset's highly influential explanation of how democracy arises and is sustained¹⁸. Lipset claims that democracy 'requires a supportive culture, the acceptance by the citizenry and political elites of principles underlying freedom of speech, media, assembly, religion, of the rights of opposition parties, of the rule of law, of human rights, and the like'¹⁹ He even claims that cultural factors appear to be more important than economic ones in accounting for the emergence and stability of democracy²⁰. Similarly, Almond and Verba argue that a certain 'civic culture' is necessary for the establishment of democracy, and that this sort of culture is not easily transferable to non-Western countries. Such conclusions have been echoed by many other writers and researchers²¹ It follows from the

¹⁷Ese Malemi in MO Unegbu, 'Democratization and Development in Nigeria' in Uba SF Nname (ed.) *Thematics on the law of Development* (Owerri: Applause B Multi-Sector Ltd 2017) 164.

¹⁸S. M. Lipset, 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy.' (1959) *American Political Science Review* 53: 69-105.

¹⁹ S. M. Lipset, 1994, 'The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited: 1993 Presidential Address. *American Sociological Review* 59,1: 3

²⁰ Ibid, 5

²¹E.g., Kennan, George 1977 *The Cloud of Danger: Current Realities of American Foreign Policy*. Boston: Little, Brown, 41-43; Bendix, Reinhard, 1978

cultural argument that some national cultures and religions are more conducive to democracy than others. For instance, it is commonly believed that British culture and its derivations are especially supportive of democracy²². Likewise, Protestantism is often thought to be well-suited to democracy, while Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Confucianism are frequently seen as being inimical to it.²³

Kings or People: Power and the Mandate to Rule. Berkeley: University of California Press, 430; Tumin, Jonathan 1982 'The Theory of Democratic Development.' *Theory and Society* 11 (1), 1: 151; Inglehart, Ronald 1988 'The Renaissance of Political Culture.' *American Political Science Review* 82: 1203-30; Putnam, Robert D. 1993 *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Granato, J., R. Inglehart and D. Leblang 1996 'Cultural Values, Stable Democracy, and Economic Development: A Reply.' *American Journal of Political Science*. 40: 680-96. : 115).

²²Weiner, Myron 1987 'Empirical Democratic Theory.' Pp. 3-34 in *Competitive Elections in Developing Countries*. Edited by M. Weiner and E. Özbudun. Durham: Duke University Press, 20; Bova, Russell 1997 'Democracy and Liberty: The Cultural Connection.' *Journal of Democracy* 8, 1: 120, 124; Lipset, S. M., Kyoung-Ryung Seong, and John Charles Torres 1993 'A comparative analysis of the social requisites of democracy.' *International Social Science Journal* 136 (May): 155-75.

168; S. M. Lipset, 1994, 'The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited: 1993 Presidential Address. *American Sociological Review* 59,1: 5)

²³Davis, Kingsley 1951 'Political Ambivalence in Latin America.' Pp. 224-47 in *The Evolution of Latin American Government*. Edited by A. N. Christensen. New York: Henry Holt, 240; Lipset, S. M. 1959 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy.' *American Political Science Review* 53: 85, 92-93; Lipset 1990 'The Centrality of Political Culture.' *Journal of Democracy* 1, 4: 82; 1994: 5; Lipset, S. M., Kyoung-Ryung Seong, and John Charles Torres 1993 'A comparative analysis of the social requisites of democracy.' *International Social Science Journal* 136 (May): 169; Almond, Gabriel A., and Sidney Verba 1963 *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: 10; Gellner, E. 1991 'Civil Society in Historical Context.' *International Social Science Journal* (Paris: UNESCO) 129: 509-10; Lenski, Gerhard, Patrick Nolan and Jean Lenski 1995 *Human Societies: An Introduction to Macrosociology*. Seventh Edition. Toronto: McGraw-Hill: 310-11; Waterbury, John 1994 'Democracy Without Democrats? The Potential for Political Liberalization in the Middle East.' Pp. 23-47 in *Democracy Without Democrats? The Renewal of*

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6. The Catholic Church is a Kingdom, not a Democracy

Hawkswell writes that political democracy works as a system of government because fallen, fallible humans cannot be trusted with absolute power over others, but the head of the Catholic Church is Christ, God the Son, standing behind his vicar, the Pope.²⁴ The Catholic Church is often attacked as ‘authoritarian’ and ‘undemocratic.’ Even loyal Catholics feel they have to defend the Church against this charge, as if it constituted a blot on her record. Democracy is a system of government in which we decide among our options by majority vote. However, we abandon it wherever we have a better way. For example, we settle mathematical disputes by logic, legal disputes by the sworn evidence of witnesses and the application of law, scientific disputes by experiment, historical disputes by documents and artifacts. In such matters, no one would expect to find the right answer by consensus or majority vote. And the same is true in matters of faith, or belief, and matters of morals, or behaviour. We have a better way, for Christ, before he left us, founded his Church and endowed it with his authority. Christ’s Church is authoritarian. She has the authority of Christ, ‘handed over’ to him by his Father. Accordingly, her teachings are binding on anyone who wants to live ‘in the Spirit.’

The head of the Church is a King (not a prime minister or chairman), represented on earth by a regent, or vicar. This King is ‘triumphant’ and ‘victorious’: he has conquered his enemies, not merely beaten them temporarily at the polls, and now he shall ‘command’ peace to the nations. We could never learn about God by consensus or majority vote. In fact, we could never work it out for ourselves at all, for it is ‘hidden’ from the ‘wise and the intelligent.’ We learn it, like ‘infants,’ from the Church, to which Christ ‘chose’ to ‘reveal’ it. The Catholic Church accepts democracy as the preferred way of conducting political life and safeguarding human rights. It ‘ensures the participation of citizens in

Politics in the Muslim World. Edited by Ghassan Salamé. New York: I. B. Tauris. 1997 ‘Fortuitous By-Products.’ *Comparative Politics* 29, 3: 383-412).

²⁴Vincent Hawkswell, *The Church is a kingdom, not a democracy*, <<https://bccatholic.ca/voices/fr-vincent-hawkswell/the-church-is-a-kingdom-not-a-democracy>> Accessed 19th March 2020.

making political choices'.²⁵ It 'guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate.'²⁶ However, there are two fundamentally different reasons for embracing democracy. Some people value it because they think we are all equally qualified to govern, others because they think that no fallen, fallible human can be trusted with absolute power over others.

The head of the Catholic Church is not a fallen, fallible human being, but Christ, God the Son, standing behind his vicar, the Pope. We can trust him implicitly: first, because he wants our eternal happiness, and, second, because he knows perfectly what will constitute it. Jesus imposes his 'yoke' on us not to prevent our happiness, but to ensure it. 'Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest,' he says. 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' Yes; Christ's yoke is easy for those who accept it. We find it hard only if we try to follow him without wearing his yoke: to do his will and at the same time provide for the desires of 'the flesh,' like someone trying to swim with one toe on the ground. That is not only hard, but impossible.

7. Why the Catholic Church is not a Democracy

The Catholic Church has been entrusted by God with handing on the truth, a truth that does not change by popular vote. The Catholic Church remains one of the longest lasting institutions that do not operate as a democracy. Individual members of the Church are not given an option to vote on matters of faith and morals, or even elect the next pope.²⁷ Instead, the Catholic Church is led by the Holy Spirit, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains. Because the Holy Spirit is the anointing of Christ, it is Christ who, as the head of the Body, pours out the Spirit among his members to nourish, heal, and organize them in their mutual functions, to give them life, send them to bear witness, and associate

²⁵Pope St. John Paul II, Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, 1991.

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷Antoine Mekary *Why the Catholic Church isn't a democracy?* | ALETEIA | I.MEDIA Philip Kosloski - published on 10/09/21

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them to his self-offering to the Father and to his intercession for the whole world. Through the Church's sacraments, Christ communicates his Holy and sanctifying Spirit to the members of his Body.²⁸ More specifically, it is the magisterium of the Church whom the Holy Spirit guides in order to protect the deposit of faith.

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone, the magisterium. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome. Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith.²⁹ The Church did not make up Catholic teaching, but only passed on what she had received from God. This is why the magisterium can neither function like a democracy nor simply take a poll to see which teachings are good, and which ones need to be dropped. The Catholic Church does not operate with a referendum. The truth is unchangeable as it comes from God, not humans.

8. Conclusion

The Synod on Synodality in its preparatory document affirms the non-democratic nature of the Catholic Church. 'The consultation of the People of God does not imply the assumption within the Church of the dynamics of democracy based on the principle of majority, because there is, at the basis of participation in every synodal process, a shared passion for the common mission of evangelization and not the representation of conflicting interests'. In other words, synodality is an ecclesial process that can only take place 'at the heart of a hierarchically structured community.' No wonder after the Second Vatican Council, St. Paul VI

²⁸ CCC 739

²⁹ CCC 85-86

lamented that many Catholics thought that the Council changed Church doctrine, when it did not. Since the Catholic Church is a divine institution and not a human one, it will never become a democracy. The Church protects and guards the truth, making sure that it is passed on to the next generation.