

THE PNEUMATOLOGY OF SYNODALITY: CATHOLIC SYNODAL PROCESS AND THE RISK OF FORGETFULNESS OF THE SPIRIT

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Abstract

At the heart of the synodal process is the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit as the animator of the synodal process, the consequence would be a mere sociological process of deliberation aimed at arriving at some levels of consensus regarding church life, or at most, a system of political organization and power re-distribution in the church. Against this backdrop, this article seeks to critically examine the pneumatological content of the ongoing synodal process with the view to questioning its adequacy. To do this, I shall proceed in three clear steps. First, I will explore the relationship between ecclesiology and pneumatology since synodality constitutes a form of ecclesiology. Second, I shall examine specifically the role of the Holy Spirit within the discernment process of synodality. Finally, I shall, upon reviewing the pneumatological content of some of the synodal documents, articulate a spirituality for synodal engagement modeled after the proposed method of spiritual conversation. The goal is to caution against a possible Geistvergessenheit within the complex matrix of the current engagement on the Synod on Synodality (2021-2024) in the Roman Catholic Church.

Keywords: Synodality, Holy Spirit, Pneumatology, Forgetfulness, *Geistvergessenheit*, Ecclesial

1. Introduction: On the Spirit's Primordiality

The theological significance given to the role of the Spirit at creation as well as the manifestation of the Spirit in every place, including very unusual places, demonstrate that the being (*esse*) and action (*agere*) of the Spirit cannot be excluded from any context or subject matter,² and even more specifically ecclesiology. At creation, two images of the Spirit best indicate the Spirit's creative function. First, is the image of the Spirit as the creative 'life-breath' (*neshamah*). In the biblical priestly account, after creating humans, God's breath was necessary for them to live (Gen. 2:7). The Spirit as *neshamah* is a gift of life at creation. Human beings' common experience of life is an essential part of the acceptance of

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² Gary D. Badcock, *Light of Truth and Fire of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 131. This has been previously argued by Jürgen Moltmann in his *The Spirit of Life*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1992), 1ff.

a common origin. In affirming humanity's common paternity, and by extension the communal nature of the church, the action of the Spirit as the gift of life is deeply recognized as the animator of ecclesial dynamicity. The second, is the image of the Spirit as wind, *ruah Elohim* (Gen. 1:2), that hovered over the waters at creation.³ Both instances make the forgetfulness of the Spirit (*Geistvergessenheit*) a logical impossibility, yet the bracketing of the Spirit can happen in the absence of an openness that guarantees the operation of the Holy Spirit within individuals as well as within the church.

The Spirit's presence at creation and eternally in the created order serves to show the critical importance of pneumatology for a church that is on pilgrimage (*synodoi*). If creation is an act of divine self-diffusion⁴, then the experience of God within it depends on the openness and embrace of the Spirit. Experience of the divine happens on the basis of openness both on the part of the object of experience (namely, God who opens up Godself) and the human subject who experiences. God as the object freely and willingly opens up Godself to be encountered in meditation, contemplation, devotion and prayer. God makes Godself present to the devotee, but also among the pilgrim people of God since each is a 'faithful', a devotee capable of experiencing the Spirit. This explains why the incarnation is not an isolated event of the Son or just the Son and the Father. Incarnation took place by the power of the Spirit. Through the incarnation, the Son established communion with humanity, who are at once the beneficiaries of the Spirit's salvific action. According to Gilles Emery 'Christ the incarnate Son, procures salvation through the Spirit that he pours out with the mediation of his holy humanity; the Holy Spirit communicates salvation by incorporating human beings into Christ.'⁵ This theological background already confirms the relationship between ecclesiology

³Correlates of this translation could be found in '*spiritus Dei*' (VULGATE) and '*der Geist Gottes*' (LUTH 1545). Translations differ: 'the Spirit of God'³ (RSV, KJV), 'God's wind' (CEB) or 'a wind from God' (NRSV). Given the ambiguity of the term as evident in biblical interpretations, there are about four senses in which the usage could be articulated: a) that the cosmic *ruah* was part of the primordial chaos that was restored to order by God's creative alteration; b) that the *ruah*, as a precursor to the 'voice' of God, has a theophanic character, hence it is described as 'mighty'; c) that the *ruah* is an instrument of creation, since with the wind, God restrained the chaotic waters to establish order; or d) that the *ruah* is God's spirit that was set upon the cosmos at creation.³ The last two interpretations validate the eternal presence of the Spirit in creation. See, George T. Montague, 'The Fire in the Word: The Holy Spirit in Scripture,' 35-65 in Bradford E. Hinze and Lyle D. Dabney, eds., *Advents of the Spirit: An Introduction to the Current Study of Pneumatology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 37.

⁴ Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis ad Deum*, Ch. 6, 2.

⁵ Gilles Emery, *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God*, trans. Matthew Levering (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 191.

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and pneumatology. The reality is that the church as the ‘universal sacrament of salvation’ established by Christ (*Lumen Gentium* §48, 9) cannot function without the Holy Spirit who mediates salvation. Proceeding from this theological background, we shall briefly explore the relationship between ecclesiology and pneumatology, then assess some of the documents of the Synod on Synodality before proposing a spirituality that ought to guide a truly synodal church.

2. Ecclesiology and Pneumatology

The Second Vatican Council is quite profound in its articulation of the pneumatological character of divine revelation. It is the Holy Spirit that assists us in the recognition of divine revelation (*Dei Verbum* §8). Through the Spirit of God, the message of Christ continues to resound in the church throughout history without being limited to any group in the church. Individual members of the church come to the knowledge of Christ and the gospel through the Holy Spirit. Openness to Christ thus implies, at once, an openness to the Holy Spirit, while prayer becomes a way of maintaining this openness. American Catholic ecclesologist, Richard Gaillardetz remarks that this openness to the Holy Spirit is ‘equally dependent upon the engagement of the human processes by which all humans inquire after truth.’⁶ Human search for truth ought to be understood in the context of sustaining the faith. An inevitable tension, however, arises regarding the Spirit’s action or role in the relationship between the Magisterium and the charisma of members. The theological task in this instance is the need to avoid the danger of either reducing the activity of the Holy Spirit to merely human processes or insisting that the Spirit’s operations are restricted to the Magisterium.⁷ A healthy balance between both extremes is needed to maintain the Spirit’s diversity of gifts at the service of the common mission of the church.

While interpreting St. Paul (2Cor. 12:13), Yves Congar identifies communion, *koinonia*, as the specific function of the Holy Spirit in communicating life within the church. By being the source of vivification in the church, the Holy Spirit assumes a normative function as the principle of ecclesial unity. According to Congar, ‘the Holy Spirit then, who is the indwelling law of the distribution of life to the different members, is, besides, the law of their communion in unity.’⁸ What

⁶ Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997), 143.

⁷Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority*, 44.

⁸Yves Congar, *The Mystery of the Church* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1965), 25. Fuchs is therefore wrong to have claimed that Congar never mentioned the role of the Holy Spirit in his writing on fellowship or communion. Fuchs, *Koinonia and the Quest*, 106, footnote 193. Congar’s ecclesiology is heavily Trinitarian, Christological, eschatological and pneumatological. His pneumatology is further addressed in his, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 3 vols., trans. by David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1983).

we find in Congar's ecclesiology, therefore, is an early initiative to 'shift from an overly juridical model of the church to one which saw the church as a community of the Holy Spirit.'⁹ Such a conception of the church creates the necessary opening for internal reform and also for reconciliation of a divided church. It requires dialogue in the attempt to re-engage communion and fellowship. Congar would therefore ridicule any idea of communion that excludes dialogue.¹⁰ Participation of others through dialogue, whether in the internal reform of the church or in the repair of broken relationships with those 'outside', is necessary for reclaiming the very nature of the church as communion. It is precisely within the framework of this participatory dialogue that pneumatology and synodality get resolved in ecclesiology. It is precisely the Holy Spirit that makes ecclesial participation (as a *koinonia*) possible, and consequently, there can be no synodality without the co-participation of all baptized.

3. Synodality and the Holy Spirit

What operative hermeneutic can we find in synodality? The search for such a hermeneutic must be grounded in two important agents, namely the Holy Spirit and the constitutive elements of the People of God that make up the church. Deeper theological reflections on synodality that emerged following the 2018 *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* published by the International Theological Commission¹¹ already refer to such interpretative keys. Theologically, the document grounds synodality in a Trinitarian ecclesiology of communion with its manifest 'anthropological, Christological, pneumatological and Eucharistic dimensions' (SLMC §48). In practical terms, the theology of synodality rests on Vatican II's theology of the 'People of God' and their participation in the Church—through the threefold offices: priestly, prophetic, and teaching (*Lumen Gentium* [LG], chapter two). The participation, sharing, reciprocity and co-responsibility of the People of God are safeguarded by the doctrine of *sensus fidei* (SLMC §64),¹² which essentially does not threaten the hierarchy of the Church but may perhaps re-conceive it in what Pope Francis referred to as an 'inverted

⁹ Dennis M. Doyle, 'Journet, Congar, and The Roots of Communion Ecclesiology,' *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 461-479; 476.

¹⁰ Yves Congar, *Diversity and Communion* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1985), 174.

¹¹ International Theological Commission (hereafter in text, SLMC), *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2 March 2018), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html (accessed 10 April 2024).

¹² For detailed study on *Sensus fidei* (the sense of faith) see, Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2009).

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pyramid.¹³ Given the *sensus fidei/fidelium* (sense of/for the faith), participation of the People of God remains deeply pneumatological since it ‘is based on the fact that all the faithful are qualified and called to serve each other through the gifts they have all received from the Holy Spirit’ (SLMC §67). Re-echoed in this statement are the teachings of Vatican II (LG §13, *Unitatis Redintegratio* [UR]§2, *Gaudium et Spes* §32). In that sense, authentic synodality means therefore ‘to move forward, in harmony [*walk together*] under the impulse of the Spirit.’¹⁴

Ormund Rush proposes *sensus fidei* as a form of hermeneutical skill since it implies ‘a sense for’ understanding, interpreting and applying the faith through time.¹⁵ It is ‘the antenna for sensing those surprises and provocations’ that uncover the ‘ways of understanding the eschatological character of Christian truth.’¹⁶ Synodality takes on the ongoing nature of the Christian truth in the sensing, interpretation, understanding and conversation that both engenders. Contrary to a narrow understanding that limits the interpretative framework or *sensus fidei* to the baptized (often unconsciously but erroneously limited to the laity), Rush recognizes a hermeneutical network in the church’s encounter with the truth of divine revelation. According to him, ‘the church’s interpretation of divine revelation can be imagined as a circle, a hermeneutical circle, of understanding. And around the circle are the five constitutive points of reference: Scripture, tradition, the *sensus fidelium*, theology, and the magisterium.’¹⁷ Of course, the Holy Spirit provides access to this circle as long as it constitutes the lived experience of the church.

In clarifying the final arbiter in questions of faith and morals, Rush appears to prioritize the magisterium over the *sensus fidelium* in a way that seems to place the magisterium outside the *sensus fidelium* (and by extension outside the direction of the Holy Spirit) in the strict sense. Similar interpretation could be given to John Burkhard’s cartography of the relationship between synodality, *sensus fidei* and the ‘signs of the times’. According to Burkhard, ‘there is no synodality where the

¹³ Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html, (accessed 21 April 2024).

¹⁴ Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), ‘Church’s Synodal Functions,’ *L’Osservatore Romano*, 24 January 1996, 9-11; 9.

¹⁵ Ormond Rush, ‘The Church as a hermeneutical Community and the Eschatological Function of the Sensus Fidelium,’ 143-154 in Bradford Hinze and Peter C. Phan, eds., *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei* (Eugene: Pick Wick Publications, 2016), 145.

¹⁶ Rush, ‘The Church as a hermeneutical Community,’ 146.

¹⁷ Rush, ‘The Church as a hermeneutical Community,’ 152.

‘sense of the faith of the faithful’ is not respected. There is no ‘sense of the faith of the faithful’ where the faithful are not seen as endowed with many gifts and charisms.¹⁸ Some sort of restriction of the meaning of the ‘faithful’ that closely equates it with the laity appear highlighted in the text. For synodality, there is no benefit in pitting the components of the People of God or the faithful against one another. Sometimes, it is more beneficial to be clear about who or which component is being excluded. And in doing so, the functional role of the magisterium should also be seen as guided by the Holy Spirit for the proper ordering of the church toward its mission in the world. Meanwhile, the Frascati document, ‘Enlarge the space of your tent’ (2022), presents a rather clearer perspective: ‘In the Catholic Church, the charismatic gifts freely bestowed by the Holy Spirit, can help ‘rejuvenate’ the Church, are inseparable from the hierarchical gifts which are linked to the Sacrament of Order in its various degrees.’¹⁹ The text, however, recognizes that the ‘great challenge of synodality’ as evident in most reports ‘is the harmonization of these gifts, without pitting them against each other, under the guidance of the pastors, and thus without opposing the Church’s charismatic and institutional dimensions.’²⁰ The question is whether it is really necessary to harmonize these gifts. If ‘tensions’ are part of the mechanisms of spiritual alertness (as implied in the Frascati document §30), one wonders what the consequence of resolving a healthy spiritual paradox would be. As a caveat, the so-called tension or paradox must not constitute a recipe for a non-evangelical conflict and disaffection within ecclesial life.

As an ecclesiological hermeneutic synodality is directed by the Holy Spirit to both the *life* and *structure* of the church, both to *sensus fidelium* understood as a collective, as well as to the representative components of the People of God (laity and clergy). Addressing the members of the International Theological Commission on 29 November 2019, Pope Francis underscores that the ‘soul’ of synodality is the Holy Spirit. According to him, ‘without the Holy Spirit there is no synodality.’²¹ He considers the task of the theologians as that of ‘listening to what the Spirit is saying to the Church.’ Meanwhile, on the 50th anniversary of the synod of bishops in 2015, the Pope reminded his audience that, ‘A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening ‘is more than simply hearing.’ It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn.’ The Pope

¹⁸ John J. Burkhard, *The Sense of the Faith in History: Its Sources, Reception, and Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2022), 321.

¹⁹ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, ‘Enlarge the space of your tent’ (1s 54:2): *Working Document for the Continental Stage* (Rome: Vatican Press, 2022), §70.

²⁰ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, ‘Enlarge the space of your tent’ §70

²¹ Francis, Address to Members of the International Theological Commission (29 November 2019), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/november/documents/papa-francesco_20191129_commissione-teologica.html (accessed 27 April 2024).

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explains further: 'It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of Truth' (Jn. 14:17), in order to know what he 'says to the Churches' (Rev 2:7). The Synod of Bishops is the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church's life.'²² In other words, the Holy Spirit guides, animates, and operates in and through the various elements of the hermeneutic circle, each according to its specific function toward the construction of a truly synodal church.

4. Seeking the Holy Spirit in the Drafts

The concern about the (in-) adequacy of pneumatology in the ongoing Synod on Synodality emerges first from the tendency in some circles to limit the ecclesial conversation to addressing the grave crises that led to the synod. Of course, while the sins of the church and its leaders can lead to a synod, the synod must be recognized as a spiritual event and not a co-operate mechanism for fixing failures. There is also a second point that has to do with the transference of political divides and polarizations into the synod which further diminishes the spirituality of the synod. In a setting where participants are only interested in pushing through their demands and agenda, the synod is converted into an arena of political contestations and maneuvers. Interestingly, even subjective interests may be ascribed as the voice of the Spirit without proper communal discernment. On yet a third ground, the question of pneumatology becomes necessary because of those who consider the synodality as a single event, a synod that comes and goes, rather than a *lifestyle* of the church. And as a lifestyle, it would require a lifelong commitment of the ecclesia. It is thus important to examine if the documents that guide this process do really pay attention to the Holy Spirit as well as the synodal spirituality that arises consequently. Here we examine some documents that have emerged from the Synod on Synodality. The intention is not to be exhaustive but to point out and remark on the pneumatological content of some of these texts.

The Vademecum's 'Adsumus Sancte Spiritus'

Adsumus Sancte Spiritus is a prayer attributed to St. Isidore of Seville (c.560-636) and has always been invoked during ecclesial synodal meetings in the church, including every session of the Second Vatican Council. It was therefore not surprising to find it at the beginning of the *Vademecum* of the Synod on Synodality. The idea of starting with this prayer is not only symbolic but emerges from a deep understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in making synodality possible. Not

²² Pope Francis' Address, Commemorating the 50th 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 (accessed 27 April 2024)

only does prayer involve a penitential surrendering of the ecclesia to divine direction, but a recognition that the ‘newness’ that is sought at every moment of reform/renewal is already present in God. The fourth stanza of this intensely synodal prayer is very instructive: ‘Let us find in you our *unity* so that we may *journey* to eternal life and not stray from the way of truth and what is right.’²³ Tacitly, the prayer recognizes that every reform is a risk in the absence of the Holy Spirit, with possibility of sliding into deepened disunity, domestication of ‘truth’ and relativism. This danger sometimes is because of the well-intentioned but often ill-guided desire to completely change everything at once, impatience, and the reduction of every crisis to the inefficiency of structures of governance.

Many questions raised in the *Vademecum* refer to the awareness of the role of the Holy Spirit. The *Vademecum* recognizes that synodality is essentially a spiritual process; a journey directed by the Spirit of God. According to it, ‘the Holy Spirit leads us deeper into communion with God and one another.’ Communion is contrary to the division that might emerge when the Synod is reduced to democratic forms of conversation like in a parliament. Such reduction ‘confuses synodality with a ‘political battle’ in which in order to govern one side must defeat the other’, the *Vademecum* warns.²⁴ Listening, discernment, prayer, and dialogue that form aspects of synodality are to be guided by the Spirit. In fact, the *Vademecum* suggests ‘spiritual conversation’ as the methodology of the conversation of the synodal process and describes how this should work in practical terms.²⁵ Later on, I shall propose the ‘spiritual conversation’ as the appropriate spirituality that should guide the process given its continual nature. In fact, the guideline and framework laid out in the *Vademecum* are well captured seminally in the preceding prayer of St. Isidore.

‘Biblical Resources for Synodality’

This text is one of the important documents of the Commission on Synodality and it is aimed at facilitating the understanding of the synodal process from a biblical perspective. The text which was prepared by the Commission’s Biblical Sub-Group in March 2022 provides a general outline of select biblical resources of synodality, and in the process makes two significant points in its methodology. First, it was written in a very clear language that is accessible to anyone irrespective of biblical literacy or not, and an approach that I consider very deliberate in keeping with the synodal principle of inclusion. Second, the subject matter was approached in a pedagogical style such that it could be used for catechetical purposes.

²³ Italicized words are mine.

²⁴ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality* (Rome: Vatican Press, 2021), §2.4:8.

²⁵ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, *Vademecum*, Appendix B:8.

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Meanwhile, the spirituality advanced in the text differs from what we shall propose later. It proposes ‘contemplative imagination’, which is focused on the reader and the *Lectio Divina*, and a pneumatology that does not incorporate the other as an active agent in the spiritual bubble. Nevertheless, the text makes points out the elements of relationality and communion in the synodal process.

The references to the Holy Spirit are however quite instructive of the pneumatological content. Upon emphasizing the idea of ‘ecclesial spirit’ that accompanies the synodal process, the text links the impact of the Holy Spirit to the first church, at the time composed of Mary and the Apostles. In fact, Mary is presented as embodying the model of relationship with the Holy Spirit, which is critical for synodality. She is the one who presents the ideal way of listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit; ‘She is also the one who knows and recognizes the Holy Spirit, therefore in some way she is a touchstone for discernment and she is certainly there as the guide for discipleship.’²⁶ Following the first cenacle, the Ephesian church is also considered synodical as a result of ‘the work and presence of the Holy Spirit’. This is already made clear in the Christological hymn that introduces the Letter to the Ephesians (1:3-14). Accordingly, the text recognizes that ‘it is the Spirit that impels the Church in mission and empowers it through the gifts which it bestows to nourish the community of the new life of the Kingdom. The Holy Spirit gathers and sustains the community and is the ‘pledge’ or ‘down-payment’ that hope in Christ is not empty. In some sense, the Spirit’s indwelling in the believer and in the Church is already the beginning of eternal life and future glory. If knowledge and understanding are among the principal gifts which the Spirit bestows upon the apostles, it is a profoundly experiential ‘wisdom’ and it is given in virtue of the apostolic service to the whole community, to preserve it in the truth of Christ. Ephesians is a great testimony that Pentecost was not simply the event through which the Church comes into being; it is a reality which continues to unfold.’²⁷ The passage reconfirms the understanding that ‘the ‘koinonia’ or fellowship/communion’ in the church ‘is the work of the Holy Spirit’²⁸ it is the transforming power of the Holy Spirit that keeps the church on course its apostolic mission of evangelization. It is the Holy Spirit ‘who gathers the community, confirms, and sustains it and drives its mission to announce Christ to all nations.’²⁹

²⁶ Commission on Synodality, Biblical Sub-Group, *Biblical Resources for Synodality* (Rome: Vatican, 2022), 56.

²⁷ Biblical Sub-Group, *Biblical Resources for Synodality*, 85.

²⁸ Biblical Sub-Group, *Biblical Resources for Synodality*, 78.

²⁹ Biblical Sub-Group, *Biblical Resources for Synodality*, 83.

Nonetheless, some sort of reductionist understanding appears in the text where it poses the pedagogical question ‘what can the process of synodality teach the community? What may the Holy Spirit inspire in the community that can remain after a synod is over?’³⁰ Implied here is the notion of temporality in the meaning of synodality. While it is understandable that a synod is a time-bound event in the church, synodality is but a way of being church. Every synod is an aspect of the synodality, but synodality is more than any synod. So, it can sometimes be a bit confusing when a synod is focused on synodality. To be clear, the synod cannot teach the church what the church has never known in its Tradition, rather the Holy Spirit can bring about a renewal of what has always been there in the light of present challenges. This further explains the necessity of the synod on synodality in helping the church to come to a better awareness, recognition, and acknowledgment of how the life of the church, in its everydayness, ought to be synodal. What the Holy Spirit will teach the church in a post-synodal period is what the Holy Spirit has always taught the church in the post-resurrection period to date. The difference lies in (in-)fidelity of the church to its identity and mission, as well as in our renewed awareness through actively listening to the Holy Spirit of God and to one another.

‘Enlarge the space of your tent’

The above is the title of the *Working Document for the Continental Stage* that was released by the General Secretariat of the Synod on 24 October 2022. The document otherwise called the Frascati document brings together the various national syntheses to provide a guideline for the intercontinental phase of the synod. There is a profound theological interpretation that was given to the national reports, and it moves beyond the nominal presentation of the Holy Spirit in the texts to an espousal of the spirituality of the Synod and of ecclesial life. Of course, the forgetfulness of the Spirit can happen in a situation of nominal reductionism that serves only theological convenience. The Frascati text clearly avoids such reductionism and emphasizes a spirituality that is framed within the context of both the personal conversion that is required of the faithful in a synodal church as well as the ‘vision’ that is emerging from synodal consciousness. Accordingly, ‘this new vision will need to be supported by a spirituality that will sustain the practice of synodality, avoiding reducing this reality to technical-organizational issues. Living this vision, as a common mission, can only happen through encounter with the Lord and listening to the Spirit. For there to be synodality, the presence of the Spirit is necessary, and there is no Spirit without prayer.’³¹ An absence of prayer does not annul the presence of the Spirit since the cosmic forgetfulness of the Spirit

³⁰ Biblical Sub-Group, *Biblical Resources for Synodality*, 79.

³¹ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, ‘Enlarge the space of your tent’, §72.

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is an absolute impossibility as I have already made clear. Prayer does the function of opening us up to the Holy Spirit without whom synodality cannot exist or thrive.

Moving further, a form of spiritual discernment is present in the text as it cautions against two fundamental ‘spiritual temptations’.³² The first involves the risk of losing the ‘sense of the whole’ and the subsequent ‘fracture into sub-identities’ as is evident in the Anglican model of provincialism. This temptation emerges when ideological camps are set up in defining the interests of sub-groups with disregard for the unity of all. What emerges is a synodality of *walking together with our likes rather than with all*. The second temptation involves developing immunity to spirituality in a way that is indifferent to the tension of our lived experience as co-pilgrims. Tensions are never to be ignored in the church. They are to be lived through under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is what discernment (spiritual, communal) is all about.

Fostering discernment requires the methodology of ‘spiritual conversation’ that was already present in the *Vademecum*. The objective of this method which is reiterated in the Frascati document is to ‘integrate the spiritual dimension within the ordinary life of ecclesial institutions and their governance structures.’³³ To be clear, the praxis of spiritual conversation should not be seen as an *additum* or reduced to the function of integration, rather it must be expressive of the spiritual nature of a synodal ecclesial life. It is the proper disposition of a ‘learning church’ and allows itself to be led ‘in the direction that the Spirit is pointing.’³⁴ The collective ‘we’ of the church is felt in the movement alongside one another as well as in the exercise of co-responsibility, which emerges as a natural response to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.³⁵

5. Spiritual Conversation and Synodality

If synodality is not purely concerned with the bureaucratic negotiations and formalities that define the organizational spaces of the public sector, then its process must be defined by another form of discourse. Since the Holy Spirit remains the driving force of the synodal process – in mutual listening and collective discernment – then the form of conversation that should guide it ought to be spiritual as well. Hence, we can talk about spiritual conversation as a methodology in synodal dialogue in the church, following the *Vademecum* and the Frascati document. Spiritual conversation emerges in the Ignatian tradition as closely associated with sacramental confession and the spiritual exercises. Yet it goes well

³² Secretaria Generalis Synodi, ‘Enlarge the space of your tent’, §30.

³³ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, ‘Enlarge the space of your tent’, §86, see also §109.4.

³⁴ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, ‘Enlarge the space of your tent’, §101.

³⁵ Secretaria Generalis Synodi, ‘Enlarge the space of your tent’, §66.

beyond these. It involves a form of dialogue that elevates the other as a condition of one's self-transcendence. Spiritual conversation is grounded by the same key principles of synodality, particularly the act of listening and discernment. Spiritual conversation has been described as 'a form of dialogue between two or more people, which focuses on uncovering the presence of God in the narrative shared by one person.'³⁶ The presupposition is that the dialogue happens in cycles where at each point the narrative of each person becomes the focus of the spiritual attention at each moment. The disposition of interlocutors is authentic, loving, nonjudgment and searching. Spiritual conversation is an important factor in the tradition of Christian spirituality with many instances in the gospel. Take for instance the narratives of Jesus' conversation with various individuals (cf. Jn.3:1-21; 4:4-30; Lk.19:2-10; 24:13-35) which provide interesting examples for reflection.

The praxis of spiritual conversation has been sustained by the Society of Jesus, particularly in the Ignatian Exercises. In fact, the 'golden rule of Ignatian conversation' is captured in these words: 'Be slow to speak and only after having first listened quietly, so that you may understand the meanings, leanings and desires of those who speak. You will thus know better when to speak and when to be silent.' Interestingly, St. Ignatius addressed these words 'to the Fathers attending Council of Trent' in 1546, and it essentially articulates the disposition to spiritual conversation in a synodal context. According to German Arana, this Ignatian principle represents 'the rule of loving attention, empathic, patient (sic) that facilitates understanding the other's internal knowledge.'³⁷

In terms of listening, Ignatian conversation points to the elements of words and silence. Silence is the space in-between conversation partners, as well as the moment between a speaker and his or her thoughts. It is the space of meditation and mediation. On the one hand, one contemplates the words of the other not as a paid listener or a debater who is only interested in offering a well-organized country response. The space is not intended "to tolerate" strategically the other's monologue, not to dispense stereotyped forms of a studied commercial sympathy.'³⁸ It is rather designed as a moment of meditation on both the words and context of the other, as well as on what the Spirit is communicating. On the other hand, it is a space for mediation given that in meditation the Holy Spirit mediates

³⁶ Luz Marina Díaz, 'Spiritual Conversation as Religiously Educative,' *Religious Education* 112, no.5 (2017): 477-490; 477.

³⁷ German Arana, 'Spiritual Conversation: A Privileged Apostolic Instrument of the Society of Jesus,' *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* XXXVI, no. 1 (2005): 22-49; 43.

³⁸ Arana, 'Spiritual Conversation,' 43.

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the wisdom of God. Through this mediation, listening becomes an act of love and hope.

The Ignatian way of expressing what we refer to as mediation is ‘movements of the Spirit’ that points to how God stirs our interiority. The ‘movements are the deep desires of the soul. God speaks to us through these desires, opening the path to which God invites us.’³⁹ Listening to the ‘movements’ requires deep reflection to reach that depth of spiritual encounter. This is so because it is ‘not a matter of extraordinary intelligence or linguistic achievement.’⁴⁰ This is important because of the presence of contrary spirits that can distort the conversation process. One key criterion is that the Holy Spirit accompanies the ‘movements’ with the elements of consolation. These would include ‘love of God and neighbour, tranquility and peace, inner joy; increased desire to live a life dedicated to the common good; and feeling close to God even in difficult times, such as amid sadness and loss.’⁴¹

In terms of discernment, the conversation process is not guided by subjective meanings but is orientated towards the good. As such discernment relates to the criteria laid down in the scriptures – a corpus of revelation. In other words, it is a search that goes beyond the subjective self. According to Arana, ‘spiritual conversation is at the service of the search of the will of God, which only becomes transparent as an act of freedom; it orientates the individual towards existential fullness to which he is called...it implies the reorientation from the individual to the existential fullness to which (sic) is called.’⁴² Related to synodality, discernment refers not just to ‘walking alongside one another’ (*Evangelii Gaudium* [EG] §244) but a movement of God’s people through the pathway of God’s will, and towards God-willed salvation of all. The absence of the eschatology element renders it something strange (*das fremde*), and ultimately disconnected from the primary mission of the church.

Going further, an interesting aspect of the spiritual conversation is how closely it is linked to the idea of conversion which is critical in a synodal process. Both concepts are spiritual acts and habits that are intrinsically related to each other. Pope Francis talks of the necessity of missionary and pastoral conversation, both of which are related to ecclesial conversion. Ecclesial conversation emerges in the

³⁹ Luz Marina Díaz, ‘Spiritual Conversation as the Practice of Revelation,’ *The Way* 55, no.2 (2016): 43-54; 44.

⁴⁰ Hans Zollner, ‘Making Life-decisions According to the Ignatian Method of Discernment (Criteria),’ *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* [http://www.sjweb.info/ documents/cis/pdf/english/200511008en.pdf](http://www.sjweb.info/documents/cis/pdf/english/200511008en.pdf) (accessed 20 April 2024).

⁴¹ Díaz, ‘Spiritual Conversation as the Practice of Revelation,’ 45.

⁴² Díaz, ‘Spiritual Conversation as the Practice of Revelation,’ 44.

Second Vatican Council ‘as openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ’ (EG §26; UR §6). Renewal is a product of conversion, and within the church, is required by pastoral conversion. The objective of pastoral reorientation of the church is to make it more missionary.

Meanwhile, the etymological relation between conversation and conversion presents an interesting case. Both have the same Latin root ‘*conversare*’, which means ‘to turn about’. In fact, Arana contends that ‘to converse is to get converted to the mystery of the other one; it is to get converted to alterity.’ Furthermore, conversation means ‘to leave the fence of one’s own interior cloister and of its defense mechanisms; to become a servant of the other person, with what will be a more human, more subtle, more immediate and more universal, more illuminated and stronger weapon...’⁴³ Ecclesial conversation does not happen in the abstract but involves an on-going conversation within the communion that is the church. It is a process that is guided by the Spirit on the *way* of evangelizing mission. Already the references by various national synods to the guidance of the Spirit remains in order if it is conceived as a never-ending process. The never-endingness of the Spirit’s guidance transforms synodality into a form of spirituality. Being a synodal church invariably becomes a way of being; an ecclesiology rather than an ecclesiological moment. The idea of an ecclesiological moment, if defined in absolute terms, historicizes synodality as an event that is in discontinuity with ecclesial Tradition. From an ecclesiological perspective, this would be a recipe for disaster because it essentially dismisses the Trinitarian communion that is at the foundation of the church.

6. Conclusion

Theological correctness can never miss out on the role of the Holy Spirit in any ecclesiological question. While this may be insufficient for lived ecclesiality, it remains the starting point in organizing an ecclesiological process like the Synod on synodality. There is sufficient evidence to suggest the adequacy of the pneumatological content of the synodal process, but this claim can only be made insofar as the documents are concerned. Of course, there are some documents that show poor emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit where the Spirit is almost only associated with the hierarchy as well as those that appear to interpret openness to the Spirit in a narrow way, namely in an unqualified openness to contemporary times. It must be admitted, however, that the Frascati document of the Continental stage did an excellent job in presenting a pneumatological that is beyond notional and theologically crafting a spiritual framework that should undergird a synodal ecclesial praxis.

⁴³ Arana, ‘Spiritual Conversation,’ 46.

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Overall, there is a grave need for caution against the possibility of *Geistvergessenheit* not in the text but most importantly in ecclesial lived experience. Reasons for this are still related to the important issues that emerge and are emerging, from the synod. Even in the pre-synodal period, the crises that provoked the attention to synodality in the church, namely the clergy sexual abuse crisis, the question of women's participation, the exclusion of LGBT individuals, and others, point to real issues that are likely to be considered as purely structural rather than spiritual. Addressing issues that are perceived to be purely structural within the context of a spiritual process of synodality may prove difficult for some faithful. Meanwhile, the involvement of 'experts', particularly those that are not necessarily convinced practitioners of the faith, could present challenges that appear to neglect the role of the Holy Spirit in practical terms. This is even as the idea of the 'sense of the faith of the faithful' could be loosely applied as a defense for the intervention of those who are outsiders to lived ecclesiality. Certainly, the church ought to be open to what the Spirit could be saying from those 'outside' since these are also included within a more expansive definition of catholicity, yet this must be received with a cautioned discernment. Burkhard shares a similar concern where the 'sense of the faith' is invoked as a theological explanation for expert knowledge. For him, although the 'knowledge' that emerges from the *sensus fidei* is considered 'real' in itself, it substantially 'differs from the knowledge that is available on the basis of strictly discursive reasoning.'⁴⁴ Thus, in a time when liturgical celebrations are becoming more functional than spiritual, where parochial and diocesan meetings hardly begin and end with prayers, there is a need for caution on the synodal process. The crisis of spirituality that grounds the communion of the church remains the most critical problem to be addressed if synodality is to function effectively in the project of ecclesial renewal. In this project, losing the presence of the Spirit is to lose it all.

⁴⁴ Burkhard, *The Sense of the Faith in History*, 323.