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SYNODALITY AS *KAIROS* IN THE PRESENT ECCLESIAL AND GLOBAL SITUATION

Sinodalidade como Kairos *na situação atual da Igreja e do mundo*

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ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis of the sense of ecclesial unity and the global socio-political disruption, together with other factors, make this moment a *eukairos akairos* – a favorable and at the same time unfavorable moment – for the unfolding of the Synodal Process in the Catholic Church. The article outlines the ecclesial challenges and opportunities for the "Synodal Process 2021-2023". Synodality is a different way of being the Church, not simply a new way of making decisions in the Church. However, *kairos* also means a moment of decision, not of waiting for something to happen and be accomplished automatically. For the Christian community, it also means a moment of possible division and refusal, and not of an ecclesial paradise. The synodal process takes place in a moment in which different challenges accumulate.

KEYWORDS: Synodality. *Kairos*. Pandemic. Globalization.

RESUMO: A pandemia da COVID-19, a crise do sentimento de unidade eclesial e a ruptura sociopolítica global: esses diferentes fatores (e outros) fazem do presente momento um *eukairos akairos* – um momento favorável e ao mesmo tempo desfavorável para o desenrolar do Processo Sinodal na Igreja Católica. Este artigo esboça desafios e oportunidades eclesiais para o "Processo sinodal 2021-2023". A sinodalidade é um jeito diferente de ser Igreja, não simplesmente um novo jeito de tomar decisões na Igreja. Mas *kairos* significa também um momento de decisão,

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não de esperar que algo aconteça e se realize automaticamente. Para a comunidade cristã, significa igualmente um momento possível de divisão e de recusa, não de um paraíso eclesial. O processo sinodal acontece em um momento no qual diferentes desafios se acumulam.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Sinodalidade. *Kairos*. Pandemia. Globalização.

Introduction

During the weekend of October 9-10, 2021 pope Francis launched the "Synodal Process" for the worldwide Catholic Church which will eventually lead to the assembly of the Bishops' Synod planned for October 2023 in Rome. The "Synodal Process" is not just the most important worldwide ecclesial initiative of pope Francis' pontificate, but could be also a periodizing event: something that marks a before and an after in contemporary Catholicism, and especially in the periodization of the reception of the Second Vatican Council. It is therefore important to try and understand the time in which this initiative is taking place: to understand it not just historically, but also theologically, as *kairos*.

1 "Eukairos" *and* "akairos" *in the Second Letter to Timothy*

The term *kairos* is used many times in the New Testament, but in the Second Letter to Timothy we find a particular and unique variation of this term. In the fourth chapter we read:

> In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: [2] proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. [3] For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, [4] and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. [5] As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully (2 Timothy, 4:1-5).

The most important part is in the second verse, *eukairos akairos*, translated in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with "time favorable or unfavorable". The term *eukairos* (*kairos* preceded by the prefix *eu*) is used in other New Testament passages, like in the Letter to the Hebrews 4:16 and [in the Gospel of] Mark 14:11. But we find *akairos* (Kairos preceded by the alpha privative) only in the Second Letter to Timothy. The notable element is that there is no conjunction between the two words, *eukairos*

akairos, as if to say not just "whether the time is favorable or unfavorable" but also something to the effect of "the favorable time is unfavorable, and viceversa, the unfavorable time is favorable"[1].

From the perspective of synodality, it is interesting to note that the strong exhortations contained in the Second Letter to Timothy are addressed to a bishop. But from the historical point of view, it is certain that the Christian communities of which the pastoral letters of the New Testament speak were not led yet by a monocratic episcopate. The leadership model was of a group of pastors in which, in a collegial form of governance, it was difficult to distinguish between presbyters and bishops. At the same time, the Second Letter to Timothy talks about and to a community of believers that are potentially or actually deviant and therefore has become unable to propose again the message of a liberating, kerygmatic announcement of the dead and risen Jesus Christ. In the pastoral letters, "to be an evangelist" means to fight to preserve the "sound doctrine" undermined by false teachers. The core message is: "proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine" (2 Timothy, 4:2-3).

2 Kairos *and synodal events*

It is always dangerous to identify our present time as the *kairos*, as we have seen from the oscillations in the identification of "favorable time" in the life of the Churches in the 20th century – sometimes resulting in tying the mission of the Church with ideological systems or political orders contrary to the Gospel message (CLAYTON, 2002, p. 556–557). This is why we need to be careful in seeing in our time a favorable or unfavorable time for the synodal process opened by pope Francis for a two-year ecclesial conversation until the assembly of the Bishops' Synod on synodality, planned for October 2023 in Rome. Not just history, but also the very complex global nature of Catholicism is warning us today, where the discourse on synodality and the ways in which the synodal processes unfold are influenced by many different factors: endogenous and exogenous factors that influence cultures and models of synodality; different patterns of relations between clergy and laity, between the guidelines of the Vatican and the local Churches; ecumenical and inter-religious exchanges with different traditions of collegial, democratic governance of religious communities; the international situation, included a major war in Europe, with the invasion of the sovereign state of Ukraine by the

[1] I rely here on the reflections offered by Italian Bible scholar Piero Stefani (2021).

Russian Federation; and historical precedents and differing periodizations for the development of synodal cultures of local Churches, also in light of decolonization processes and of different systems of relations between Church and State in different parts of the world.

It is therefore crucial to try and capture how this link between *kairos* and synodal events was perceived in the past, at least in the recent past. In a recent article, Christoph Theobald (2020) analyzed the relationship between Karl Rahner and the post-Vatican II German national Synod (so-called Würzburg Synod) of 1971-1975, one of the most important synodal events in contemporary Catholicism. Rahner offered a socio-theological diagnosis of the situation of German Catholicism and analyzed the role of the Church in the diaspora within a mass consumerist society, pluralistic and dominated by technology and driven by a culture of planning for the future. Theobald (2020, p. 464) highlights "the 'prophetic' capacity of Rahnerian theology to perceive and think about the '*kairoi*' of its time" — the *kairoi* of Rahner's time being the diasporic situation of the Church in the 1950s, his prophetic evaluation of Vatican II already in 1965 as "the beginning of a beginning" of a reform and of a conversion, his defense of the structural change of the Church at the German Synod in 1972, and in the end the anticipation of the unity of the Churches in 1983.

Two of Rahners' insights concerning the German Synod of 1971-1975 are very relevant for us today. The first is that already in 1972 — half a century ago exactly:

> the Jesuit theologian noted that, with regard to the emancipation of women, we find ourselves in a 'time of passage' (*Übergangszeit*) and in very diverse situations on the planet, and "this requires everyone to be patient from the *terminus a quo* and courage in view of the *terminus ad quem*". The criterion of such a "relative ordination" [in French, *ordination relative*], as opposed to absolute ordination, would not be the desire for self-realization of the person or the demand of public opinion, but "the needs, necessities and possibilities of a given community" (THEOBALD, 2020, p. 470).

For the "synodal process 2021-2023" concerning this issue of the role of women in the Church, an important point of reference historically and theologically is the special assembly of the Bishops' Synod for the Amazon region of October 2019 and the post-synodal apostolic exhortation of pope Francis *Querida Amazonía* of February 2, 2020.

The second was Rahner's emphasis on the need to avoid confusion between *diaspora* (a factual situation, typical of contemporary, post-Christendom Christianity) and *ghetto* or *sect* (an intentional way to structure the Christian community) and to justify the New Testament origins of the task of the mission. This echoes very clearly today, when pope Francis' synodal initiative is proposing a message that is clearly different from both the temptations and calls for a retreat of the Church into new forms of sec-

tarianism following a particular ideological "option" and the temptation to see the synodal moment as an opportunity for purely structural and administrative change without a missionary and evangelizing dimension.

On the other hand, there are also key differences between the *kairos* that Rahner saw in the early 1970s and today, especially the culture of planning that is so very different from the presentism of this part of the 21st century. The "synodal process" is a way to explore and give new hope in the future to a Church and a world deprived of positive expectations about the future. We, also in the Catholic Church, thought we had left behind different ideological forms of futurism of the 20th century (Fascism, Communism), but this time also represents a loss of the very sense of the future in general,[2] or is shaped by existential anxiety considering the ecological crisis (THEOBALD, 2019).

3 *Synodality, liturgy, and ecclesiology in the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Rahner's insights about the *kairos* for the Church of his time fifty years ago presents us with a task, which pope Francis opened during the "Synodal Process", to pose this question: what is the *kairos* or, better, the *eukairos akairos* of today?

The first, emerging question concerns the ways in which this great intuition of Francis will relate to the global health crisis of COVID-19. The pandemic is a great interruption in our lives and also in the life of the Church. It has made clear the ruthlessness of the mechanisms of social disintegration for the weakest in our communities. It has adopted the euphemism of "social distancing" to describe the need to keep distance from the body of potential recipients or potential infectious, while in fact it should be called "physical distancing," being social distancing part of the mechanisms of exclusion and much less about the moral responsibility to protect others while protecting yourself. In the Catholic Church, the pandemic has produced new forms of ecclesial distancing between the clergy and the people. This is due not only to the precautions to suspend the celebration of the Eucharist without the participation of the people. The ecclesial distancing is due also to the refusal of most of the clergy to imagine other kinds of online liturgical celebrations such as liturgies of the Word and *lectio divina*, where the Eucharistic fasting (for example, on a weekday) would have made of all the faithful one people in the same situation. This clerical conscious or unconscious refusal to imagine

[2] About this, see the last book by one of the most important Italian philosophers of the 20th century, Remo Bodei (2019, p. 380–387).

something different is one of the most puzzling signs of the reactions of the Church to the pandemic.

But there is something good coming from the ecclesial distancing caused by the pandemic. It has made much more clear the crucial necessity of a synodal process in the Church, at the universal level as well as the local level, for two reasons. The first reason is that there is a deep connection between liturgy and synodality because it helps us understand correctly the liturgy (FAGGIOLI, 2012). Synodality has a liturgical dimension, but the liturgical dimension of synodality is not just the Mass celebrated during a synodal experience. The synodal experience (the assemblies of the Bishops' Synods, the diocesan synods) is liturgical in itself: the synods are not just decision--making moments, but first of all performative moments where the Church affirms itself in all its components, as one people of God. Whether in experiences called synods or something else (the terminology changes significantly in Church history), synodality has a constitutive and indispensable value.

The second reason: the Church will have to respond creatively not only to a new ecclesial situation, but also to a new global situation in which the leadership and magisterium of pope Francis proved really prophetic. This is true not only of the encyclicals *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* (the latter being published on October 3, 2020, during the pandemic), which is particularly evident and urgent, but also Francis' words and deeds about synodality.

Our normal ecclesial life will not resume at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic when the Churches reopen to the celebration of the liturgies with the people. It will last longer – if one looks at the list of ecclesial gatherings that have been postponed in Rome and around the world since 2020. This suspension of our normal ecclesial life could put in danger the development of a new synodal life in the Catholic Church. But it could also represent an opportunity to reshape the synodal processes already en route and to regain trust in preparations that now find many Catholics – clergy and lay — skeptical.

The fact is that the pandemic has cast a light on the need to think about the ways the Church communicates to those who are distant or have become distant for certain reasons. In one of the most insightful works of ecclesiology in the early post-Vatican II period, Patrick Granfield's *Ecclesial Cybernetics* (1973), described the challenge for the Church of a new "ecclesial cybernetics", of the communication problem of the Church in an era of profound social and cultural transformations. The problem Granfield was identifying was the need to understand the need of better systems of communication between all levels in the Church and between the Church and the world, in order to make more effective the Church's corporate witness to the world. "The use of electronic equipment opens up new possibilities for the *consensus fidelium*" (GRANFIELD, 1968, p. 677).

Granfield wrote this in an article published more than fifty years ago, and at least two decades before the internet. As Granfield predicted, ecclesial cybernetics has been transformed by electronic communication. As we can see from the new role taken by independent Catholic media and social media, the new ecclesial cybernetics has brought about a treacherous de-regulation of ecclesial messaging. But this means also new opportunities now that synodality is much more considered necessary than before.

The distancing – of all kinds — produced by the pandemic needs more than a mere return to the celebration of the Mass in the way of pre-pandemic times. Better, in order for the Church to be able to call back to liturgy those who had left the Church before the pandemic and might feel they don't need the liturgy, our communities need to think seriously about starting a synodal process – or the opportunity to rethink it, in case one is underway. Synodality means not just a certain way of making decisions, but a process towards creating a discursive space for all members of the Church, with a communication pattern that is not only vertical, but also horizontal. It must encourage the participation of new ecclesial actors. A serious synodal experience cannot just be something done over a couple of weekends, but must be prepared, celebrated, and received with a long--term perspective. It has a performative, ritual-symbolic dimension that takes time to become flesh and blood of a local Church.

It is true that a wrong synodal model can lead to a deformation of the Church rather than to its reform; but the same can be said for an absence of synodality. In the post-pandemic Church, a measure of catholicity will be not about how many Masses we have celebrated and how, but also about the quality of our synodal life as a people of God recovering from an ecclesial distancing much longer than the declaration of the pandemic at the beginning of 2020. Without formal, ritual validation of ecclesial inputs coming from the people of God in a synodal process, any expectation not only of Church reform, but also of the Church's evangelization mission, will be in vain. This requires accepting and developing the ecclesiology of the people of God and leaving to the history of the Catholic tradition the counter-reformation model of the *societas perfecta*.

It is true that synodality is not aimed so much at reforming the Church as at living out its essence. But on the other hand, the chronological framework in which the synodal process is located – mostly, in the aftermath of at least two decades of revelations of abuse (sexual and otherwise) in the Church, connects synodality with Church reform. In this sense, also the pandemic should have a chapter in the history of the post-Vatican II Catholic Church, because it has made a case about the impossibility of the status quo much more effectively than any ecclesial document or event.

In the world and the Church of today, a pilgrim people need a synodal way. Synodality needs a synodal spirit, but also events and institutions.

Synods are essential to the human and spiritual ecology of the Church. They are "biotopes of hope", as German theologian Bernd Jochen Hilberath (1999) called them already at the end of the previous century, more than twenty years and two papacies ago. After *Laudato Si'*, it is time to care also for our common ecclesial ecosystem.

4 *Synodality and Divisions within the Church*

The synodal process will address, directly or indirectly, one intra-ecclesial aspect: the role of the papal primacy in synodality – papal primacy for synodal events at the universal level, together with episcopal leadership in synodal events at the local and national level. What kind of role has papal primacy in synodality? This is a key question with important practical consequences.

In one of his first and most important speeches on the model of bishop, in September 2013, Francis talked about the bishop in these terms:

> A pastoral presence means walking with the People of God, walking in front of them, showing them the way, showing them the path; walking in their midst, to strengthen them in unity; walking behind them, to make sure no one gets left behind but especially, never to lose the scent of the People of God in order to find new roads (FRANCIS, 2013).

What is the role of the episcopal leadership in the synodal path together with the people of God? Walking in front of them, or walking in their midst, or walking behind them?

From what we have seen from the assembly of the Bishops' Synod for the Amazon region (October 2019) and its aftermath (the apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia* of February 2020), Francis seems to understand his role as the referee of the presence or absence of genuine discernment in a synodal event. This is how Francis phrased it in a note published by the editor of *Civiltà Cattolica*, Antonio Spadaro, SJ, in an important article in September 2020. Francis was referring here to the proposal approved by the Synod for the Amazon region in favor of "the priestly ordination of *viri probati*":

> There was a discussion [at the 2019 Synod] ... a rich discussion ... a well-founded discussion, but no discernment, which is something other than arriving at a good and justified consensus or relative majorities […]. We must understand that the Synod is more than a parliament; and in this specific case the Synod could not escape this dynamic. On this issue the [2019] Synod was a rich, productive and even necessary parliament; but no more than that. For me this was decisive in the final discernment, when I thought about how to write the exhortation [*Querida Amazonia*] (FRANCIS *apud SPADARO, 2020a).*

This way of assessing synodality is more typical of the superior of a religious community going through a process of discernment than of a bishop. Discernment works, if at all, in very rarified spiritual groups. Most bishops have no background or training in it. The same can be said for the people of God which is supposed to be involved in synodality. This does not mean that only a few "experts" are capable of synodality: it simply helps us frame the kind of reference Francis has in mind when he talks about synodality.

It's especially since the late 1990s, also thanks to John Paul II's encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), that we started talking about a new role of the papacy in the ecumenical ecclesiology of Vatican II. In a long article published in the journal *Cristianesimo nella Storia* in 2000, Peter Hünermann, emeritus professor of theology at the University of Tübingen, formulated the concept of the papacy as a "notarius publicus": a constitutive role of the papal primacy in the task of making possible and maintaining the unity of the Catholic faith and of the communion of the Church (HÜNERMANN, 2000). That essay was a commentary on John Paul II's motu proprio *Ad tuendam fidem* (1998) and offered an historical perspective on the development of papal primacy, trying to understand the deep changes in the function of primacy for the Church in modernity. Hünermann noted that the paradigm of Vatican I for papal primacy as primacy of jurisdiction, in stark legal terms, had been overcome not just by the ecumenical outlook of Catholicism, but also by the self-understanding of the papacy as "communicative action". Especially after Vatican II, papal primacy is not really (or no longer) about defining the faith, but about witnessing and confirming the faith of the people voiced in the consensus of their representatives, and in light of Scripture and of tradition.

Hünermann wrote the article well before the papacy embraced synodality, but it is still relevant for the current debate. Of course, the approaches to the issue of the role of papal primacy depend on the kind of synodality we have in mind. Is synodality a way to renew the pastoral style of the Church in the existing institutional and theological system? Or is synodality a moment for addressing issues, such as the role of women in the Church and ministry, open to the possibility of institutional and theological developments?

This is a question that will have to be clarified also in light of the situation of divisions within the Catholic Church during the pontificate of Francis. Contrary to Vatican II, when the council produced some divisions only *concilio durante* and in the aftermath, the calling of the synodal process by Francis took place in the context of an embattled pontificate: and not just from extra-ecclesial actors or the "usual suspects", advocates of dissent from the magisterium, but from some important leaders of the Catholic episcopate and the college of cardinals. At Vatican II, a sense of the unity of the

Catholic Church was a given, the starting point for making of the Church a force for unity between Christians of different Churches and traditions, and unity in the one human family. For the synodal process, the effort of the Catholic Church to operate as a bridge builder in this wounded world has to deal with also with a fractured sense of unity within the Church, which has an impact also on the way many Catholics acknowledge the very legitimacy of Francis' pontificate and therefore also of the synodal process.

Talk of schism has been normalized in the last few years in the Catholic Church, but this crisis of the sense of the unity of the ecclesial communion affects also other Churches. This issue of papal primacy has come back in recent years as an ecumenical issue, if one looks at the role that the concept plays in the intra-Orthodox rifts between Constantinople and Moscow after the concession of the autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeos in January 2019.

The ghost of a universal, pope-like role for the Patriarch of Constantinople is haunting some Eastern Orthodox Churches, but the issue of papal primacy should not be forgotten by Catholics. This issue now tends to be dismissed as irrelevant because of the friendly, genteel style of pope Francis. But if synodality is to be a key aspect of being Church in the future of Catholicism, this means that we need to keep in mind that at some point, in the next few years, there will be a successor to pope Francis. And his way and style to interpret synodality could be very different from Francis'.

5 *Synodality and the Disruption of Globalization* [3]

Ecclesial synodality is something very old and, at the same time, very new. It is integral part of the tradition of the Church. As the report *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* says in the opening section: "'Synod' is an ancient and venerable word in the Tradition of the Church, whose meaning draws on the deepest themes of Revelation" (INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, 2018). At the same time, the theology of synodality, which is now at the basis of pope Francis' push for a synodal reform of the Church, is a post-Vatican II development: the final documents of Vatican II never used the term "synodality", even though the ecclesiology of Vatican II opens to that perspective.

The modern theology of synodality originates chronologically in contemporary theology of the Catholic Church, and geographically within societies in the liberal-democratic order in the Western hemisphere. This is not just a coincidence. A key factor for the future of synodality is the relationship

[3] I will make use here of what I wrote in *La Croix International* (FAGGIOLI, 2021).

between Christianity and the different social and political – and not only ecclesial or theological — traditions around the world, in a community as global as the Catholic Church today.

The connection between the emergence of synodality and the attempt of the Church to rebuild its credibility from the sexual abuse crisis is hard to miss in places like Germany, Australia, and Ireland. There are, in the background, different models of synodality at work: it's a matter of ecclesial models, all of them in a deep relationship with particular kind of arrangements between Church, State, and society.

The "Synodal Path" in Germany reflects the particular role of Catholicism as an established Church enjoying particular constitutional provisions, but also has a precedent in a very important post-conciliar experience in then Federal (Western) Republic of Germany: the national synod, the so-called "Würzburg Synod", of 1971-1975. There is no such institutional ecclesial memory of a recent synodal event, for example, in the USA where the defining national ecclesial assembly is much more the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884 than the post-Vatican II attempts. In Catholicism in the USA, the experience of the 1970s vanished into thin air and the respect for synods declined.

The prospects for a synod for Italy find a historical precedent in the 1970s as well, precisely in the 1976 "ecclesial conference" on evangelization and human promotion organized by the Italian bishops' conference, that is, before the pontificate of John Paul II. This chronological jump back to Paul VI is evident even in the argument made by the Jesuits, who have played an important role in helping the Italian bishops receive the invitation by pope Francis in 2015 to set a national synodal process in motion (SPADARO, 2020b).

Latin America provides a different and unique example, especially the continental assemblies of the Consejo Episcopal Latino-Americano (CELAM) and in particular the assembly of Medellin in 1968 and all the other assemblies up to Aparecida in 2007, in a process that in Latin America has lasted for decades. In Australia the Plenary Council, the first one since the one of 1937, is a response to the sex abuse crisis and must be seen in the context of the ecclesial listening style of the lay-run "Truth, Justice and Healing Council" established by the Australia bishops in response to the "Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse" (2013-2017). But the Plenary Council for Australia can also count on an ecclesial culture that has taken stock of decolonization and inculturation deeper than other Churches in the Anglo-Western hemisphere: the project for a plenary council actually preceded chronologically the "Royal Commission" and preceded even the election of pope Francis. This is one of the reasons that makes the Australian model not dependent on a legislative/parliamentary model.

The picture is different when we try to understand the ecclesial models in the background for the Catholic Church in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. It is an emerging Church, but also often under persecution or pressure as a minority: sometimes in a system of authoritarian secularity, sometimes in a fragile coexistence with the rise of identitarian and nationalist ideologies based on religion, like the particular ideological version of Hinduism pushed in Modi's India. What will synodality look like in a context where Catholicism plays a particular role in the issue of the caste system like India, for example? What will it look like in mainland China and in Hong Kong, where social and political engagement makes religious groups, including Catholics, a target of government repression? Or in Indonesia, where the relations between secular law and Islam are significantly diverse in different areas of that country, the most populous Muslim country in the world? What does it mean to intersect the synodal model and the post-colonial relations between Church and State in a continent like Africa? Or in the Middle East, where the Church is in a situation of fragmentation and fragility augmented by the consequences of thirty years of Western military interventions?

This is important for the future of synodality: the warning of pope Francis to be attentive against the temptation to turn synods into parliaments is not to be interpreted as a defensive attitude by the ecclesiastical institution, but as a realistic take on the situation of the global Church where the parallel synodality-parliamentarism is rife with problems. And it's not just a problem in the Churches of the global south, if one considers the crisis of democracy and of democratic culture also among Catholics in the USA, for example.

Synodal Church means ecclesial processes that are less centered on the clergy and more open to leadership roles for the laity and women. But the *who* of synodality is more complex than that. There are important questions related to synodality: what are the social alliances at the center of ecclesial synodality in the 21st century? What classes or class fragments are allied with the Church turning to synodality? What sections of the Church or specific actors are at the center of the synodal movement? What organizations and networks? What are the ruling models in people's heads and where do they come from? How are they shaped by the class alliances? The owning class, the professional managerial class, the technical-bureaucratic class, the working class, the poor?

For example, pope Francis is a Jesuit and his idea of synodality, with discernment at the center, reflects his Jesuit formation and identity. At the same time, if one looks at the history of the Jesuits, from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first, the evolution of the class alliances of the Society of Jesus is evident: from the European elites in the early modern period to the turn to social and political change in the post-Vatican II period.

It is not just an issue for the global Church far from Europe: to remain in the old continent, the synodal experiences in Germany, Italy, and Ireland are in the context of an established Church. The Church is a pillar of those countries, and even in the context of secularization, it is not going away. Is synodality marking the transformation from pillar to a different form of presence? This is one of the reasons the purely sociological measures to understand the Church remain fundamentally Protestant and Anglo--American and therefore inadequate to comprehend global Catholicism.

Synodality is a way of engaging institutional, ecclesial connections by another means, and this is crucially important in a time of anger and detachment vis-à-vis institutions — at a time when institutions are automatically cast as evil. But the future of synodality depends also on the ability to understand that the preparation, celebration, and reception of a synod for the Catholic Church takes different shapes in an imperial Church (like in the early centuries until the Middle Ages), in a European or colonial Church (as in the early modern and modern period), and today, in a global Church where the relationship between the ecclesial and the social, political, and economic order is composed of many different models.

Pope Francis has warned repeatedly since October 2015 against the temptation to see synods as parliaments of the Church (FRANCIS, 2015). However, the Church today looks like a parliament with many voices: it's not simply the projection of political ideas on the Church. Contemporary man and woman are themselves, each one of them, a parliament with many voices, as German Benedictine theologian Elmar Salmann (2021) said at an important conference on the future of theology organized by the John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute in Rome.

It would be naïve to separate the current Catholic conversation on ecclesial synodality from the sensibility of the *homo democraticus* – men and women steeped in the culture of human rights, communicative dissent, and, most of all, egalitarianism. But this is happening in a global context where the connection between the Church and the culture of participation and inclusion takes significantly different shapes.

Concluding. The Synodal Process: not simply a decision-making process, but a decisive moment

The COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis of the sense of ecclesial unity, and the global socio-political disruption: these three different factors make of this moment a *eukairos akairos* – a favorable and at the same time unfavorable moment for the unfolding of the synodal process.

Synodality comes to the Catholic Church after a long season of insisting on the need of Church reform as a way of being obedient to the legacy of Vatican II. That insistence found an audience and a leader in pope Francis. But we should not forget that the synodal process which started in 2021 is also the result of a failure, during the previous fifty years at least, to imagine a Church less affected by clericalism and hierarchicalism. In some sense, it is a situation similar to the one facing the author of the Second Letter to Timothy with his warning on the need to keep announcing the Word:

> When, within our own community, a group, family and so on, we always insist on a just cause, we are always, by definition, doing that at the right time and simultaneously at the wrong time. The simple fact of insisting sets us in both times. It is appropriate to insist, but this very act underlines the presence of a precedent, untimely failure (STEFANI, 2021, p. 541).

It is true that synodality is a different way of being Church, not simply a new way of making decisions in the Church. At the same time, it is a decisive moment in the life of the Church. The true historical *kairos* has to fight against the objections of those who see in the present ecclesial situation a "*pseudo-kairos*". Allowing the *kairos* in our ecclesial situation requires something similar to an exorcism liberating from the spirit of division, and a new spirit of mutual forgiveness in a divided Church.

Kairos is therefore also a moment of decision, not something that will happen and that will be accomplished automatically: it means for the Christian community also a moment of possible division and refusal. It will not bring in an ecclesial paradise. The synodal process takes place in a moment of "accumulation of different challenges", as Christoph Theobald wrote in a diagnostic of our times, taking a cue from Karl Rahner's courage in the diagnostic of his times. Synodality is about adopting a new style of missionary presence in our societies, and for this the synodal process is a crucial moment:

> Will Christians adopt a sectarian look, more or less advancing grievances, like many minorities (and these are multiplying), or will they succeed in finding ways to make themselves present in line with what the Gospel of God has in mind, trying to reach more or less hardened hearts, while letting the Holy Spirit do its work of transformation? This fundamental question is often overshadowed by indiscriminate use of the means of communication at our disposal. In an increasingly fragmented Christianity and a divided Catholic Church, this stylistic criterion of coherence could find today a new theological plausibility (THEOBALD, 2020, p. 478).

Some local Churches – not just their episcopal leadership, but also the people of God — are still indifferent if not hostile to the "Synodal process". In this sense, there is a need to provoke this reluctance or refusal with the organization of independent para-synodal or peri-synodal initiatives. But they must be part of a *sensus Ecclesiae* that does not reduce synodality to

competing idiosyncratic agendas. Framing the synodal process as *kairos* helps us also see this moment in the life of the Church not as a mirror of our private theological and religious self, but as a door through which to enter a new ecclesial phase with a shared sense and awareness of our time – "whether the time is favorable or unfavorable".

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