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A New Vocabulary: Delta, Omicron, Co-responsibility, Synodality

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We live in a very new world. Covid has radically reshaped the structure of our society. We have had to get our head around not only new vocabulary such as Delta and Omicron but we have to recognise that the way we live and the way we interact with others will be very different to what we once considered normative. Similarly, within the Catholic Church, new vocabulary has appeared, notably the terms ‘Synodality’ and ‘Co-responsibility’ and it is reasonable to assume that if these take root there will be seismic changes in the life and structures of the Church. Getting one’s head around these new terms and their implications for how we function as a church will require significant up-skilling and unpacking.

In preparing for this article, I was struck how quickly Delta, itself an interloper from a previous variant, had been overtaken and effectively demoted by the new kid on the block, Omicron. I see parallels in the fact that ‘co-responsibility’ like Delta has largely been sidelined by the arrival of the new buzz word within church circles, ‘Synodality’. Pope Francis has stated that it is ‘constitutive’¹ of the Church. His authoritative voice has certainly

1 “To walk together is the constitutive way of the Church; the figure that enables us to interpret reality with the eyes and heart of God; the condition for following the Lord Jesus and being servants of life in this wounded time.” Pope Francis, *Address to the Italian Episcopal Conference*, Synod Hall (22 May 2017, emphasis original).

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contributed to making it the dominant buzz word as the Church launches its worldwide listening and consultation process. Many will not engage because they disapprove of this new direction (it is estimated that at this point in time up to 50% of American dioceses have not begun any synodal preparations, mainly because of episcopal opposition to the direction that Francis is advocating)², others because of sheer disinterest, still others because they believe it is merely a cosmetic exercise that does not take seriously genuine co-responsibility on the part of the laity.

In order for it to be coherent, It could be argued that synodality implicitly includes co-responsibility. However, in this short article, I am going to argue that ‘co-responsibility’, as pioneered by a former Pope, Benedict XVI, is in danger of being demoted or ignored in the current process. Such is the dominant focus on synodality, *co-responsibility* could easily be consigned to an historical, whimsical, theological reflection, fade into the shadows of church life, and quickly disappear from view. Out of sight, out of mind!

My contention is that it needs to be made much more *explicit*, not just in language or aspiration but by deed and action. It *too* deserves to be centre stage in this synodal dialogue and should also be seen as ‘constitutive’ of the Church.

POPE BENEDICT XVI: CO-RESPONSIBILITY

In 2009, in an address to the clergy of Rome Pope Benedict initiated the debate on co-responsibility. He underlined the need to “improve pastoral structures,” so that the “co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God ... is gradually promoted.” Such a shift, he wrote, “demands a change of mindset, particularly concerning lay people. They must no longer be viewed as ‘collaborators’ of the clergy but truly recognized as ‘co-responsible’ for the Church’s being and action.”³

In a 2012 message to THE SIXTH ORDINARY ASSEMBLY OF THE INTERNATIONAL FORUM OF CATHOLIC ACTION he returned to the same topic, essentially repeating the same message, although again he did not actually define co-responsibility.

“Co-responsibility demands a change in mindset especially concerning the role of lay people in the Church. They should not be regarded as “collaborators” of the clergy, but, rather, as

2 Colette Dulle / Doug Giradot, *America*, Jesuit Review, October 18th 2021

3 Opening of the pastoral convention of the diocese of rome on the theme: “church membership and pastoral co-responsibility, address of his holiness benedict xvi, basilica of saint john lateran, tuesday, 26 may 2009

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people who are really “co-responsible” for the Church’s being and acting.”⁴

Dr John Cavadini (Director of the McGrath Institute at Notre Dame) explores Benedict’s comments with some interesting observations;

“the concept of lay ecclesial ministry” is not broad enough to “give a full account of lay leadership in the Church” and “ironically supports a culture of clericalism” that characterizes a pre-Vatican II ecclesiology... “I don’t intend to underestimate the work of lay ecclesial ministers, and we need to support their work better, and their leadership is admirable,” ... Nevertheless, lay ecclesial ministry is “construed as a ‘paradigm of collaboration, in which a lay person is collaborating in a ministry that is not his or her own,” but is “proper to the ordained.” In this paradigm, “the leadership of lay people is always a subordinate participation” in the leadership of the ordained. Therefore, “you’re not really carving out a space for lay leadership,” he said. “You’re really in some ways just perpetuating clericalism: the mission of the Church belongs primarily to the hierarchy, the Church primarily is the hierarchy, and we collaborate in that mission as lay people.”⁵

PARISH PASTORAL COUNCILS

A similar vestige of that older theology can be found in the way the Church sees Parish Pastoral Councils. Following on from *Christus Dominus* n.27⁶ ‘where it is highly desirable for the Bishop of a diocese to have a Diocesan Pastoral Council to advise him on pastoral matters’, many parish priests, operating on the trickle down theory, assume a similar role for their Parish Pastoral Council. A Diocesan Pastoral Council is advisory and consultative *only*; it is dissolved on the death of the Ordinary and is duly reconstituted by the new incumbent. Likewise, for many Parish Priests who see the Pastoral Council as theirs, to convene and to disband. The fact that such councils still come under the remit of the Congregation for the Clergy would seem to be a serious anomaly that needs urgent revisiting at a time when parishes no longer have resident priests and co-responsibility is being advocated. In the present and certainly more likely in the future, the life and vibrancy of

4 Message of his holiness pope benedict xvi on the occasion of the sixth ordinary assembly of the international forum of catholic action, august 10, 2012

5 <https://mcgrath.nd.edu/conferences/academic-pastoral/called-co-responsible-summer-seminars-for-church-life-renewal/>

6 *Christus Dominus*, Pope Paul VI, on october 28, 1965

parishes will depend heavily on committed laity in Parish Pastoral Councils who will have to make informed leadership decisions without a ‘father’ in charge. Perhaps it is time to consider a change of Dicastery to adequately recognise the new dispensation that is currently unfolding. Moreover, *Christus Dominus* itself is now quite dated (1965) and it may be an appropriate time to revisit and update it, given the radical way both church and society have evolved since the mid sixties. Concrete changes in such integral diocesan and parish structures would make lay co-responsibility much more tangible and believable.

PROPHETIC GLIMPSES OF THE SPIRIT

There are some dramatic *developments* in the world of Catholic education and Catholic health ministries that may well be harbingers of how the Spirit is driving the wider church into recognising what is now unfolding. Since the rapid decline in religious personnel numbers, congregations have been struggling to maintain a qualified and competent leadership to protect the catholic ethos that would be core to their ministries. They have had to search for novel structures to address the new reality. This has necessitated the appointment of laity to key leadership roles that heretofore would have been manned by religious priests, brothers or sisters. New education trusts have been created in Ireland such as ERST, CEIST, LE CHEILE, to name but a few, and these have been established as Public Juridic Persons with laity, *de facto*, the ones entrusted with preserving charisms and ethos. Even more dramatic has been the emergence of Ministerial Juridic Persons (MJP) within Catholic Healthcare such as Hospitaller Ministries (created in 2012) that is now entrusted with the ministry of the St John of God Brothers in Ireland, UK and Malawi.⁷ It is fascinating that the canon law of the Church has adapted so rapidly to create such a new vehicle, MJP, in order to address the urgent reality within Catholic Healthcare. Historically, leadership of a PJP was entrusted to the Bishop or Congregational Leader. In the immediate future, leadership in these ministries and undoubtedly, in other facets of Church life, will almost certainly be exercised by a layman or laywoman.

7 I sit on the Board of Sponsors for this new reality. The Board comprises ten members, four of whom are religious brothers and six of whom are laywomen and laymen. The current chair is a religious brother but he is likely to be the last religious incumbent and the Board will become increasingly lay in character. The same membership sits on two boards one which administers the civil responsibilities called HSG (Hospitaller Services Group) and the other which attends to canonical responsibilities called HSM (Hospitaller Services Ministries).

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INSPIRATION OF RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

It is important to recognise that these new initiatives have been the result of sustained promptings by the religious congregations who have been walking the synodal path with committed lay members for decades and have been consciously trying to enact genuine co-responsibility in their ministry.

Traditionally, such congregations have been prophetic voices, pushing the Church towards change and innovation, and it appears to me that this is yet another example of them responding generously to the Holy Spirit, recognising the signs of the times and calling forth from the institutional church an appropriate response. As the then Cardinal Ratzinger said at a seminar on New Ecclesial Movements in Rome in early 2000, “*organisation must follow life, not the other way around.*”⁸

Currently, in this transition period, most MJP’s and PJP’s are still accountable to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CIVCSVA). Up to the present time, it has acted as the competent ecclesiastical authority at the level of the Holy See. However, given the emerging lay character of leadership within these new entities, the competent authority to whom they will be accountable will have to change to acknowledge the new status quo. These are current examples of emerging co-responsibility within the structures of the Church in core ministries and subsequently they will require significant structural change to accommodate the voice of lay leadership as ‘organisation follows life’.

COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM

These terms, synodality and co-responsibility, may appear novel but in fact they are part of our tradition dating back to the very early church when their existence and their application would have largely been taken for granted. One could cite the early Council of Jerusalem circa 50 A.D. as a good example. The Council was debating whether Gentiles could become members of the Church without undergoing circumcision and without adhering to the mosaic laws and customs that were part of Judaism. The majority view, led by James and supported by Peter when he came

8 This was a conference on the New Ecclesial Movements In Rome in early 2000 which I attended. I recorded this comment in my notes. The question posed from the floor was that currently there were three states of life within the church and was it possible that a fourth state, as lived by members of these new movements, could emerge. The then Cardinal Ratzinger replied that he didn’t think so but “organisation must follow life, not the other way round.”

to Antioch, asserted that they would have to comply with these regulations (Galatians 2:11) but Paul challenged him ‘to his face’ and in the subsequent listening and debating within the Council the prophetic, charismatic but lay voice of Paul persuaded the leadership and the other participants that this was part of God’s unfolding plan. As we read in Acts 15:28-29, James and the leadership recognised the authentic voice of the Spirit in Paul’s presentation and changed their position;

“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.”

THEOLOGICAL SHIFTS

Within a wider church lens one can see that the theology around ministry has taken a seismic switch. This has radically affected current ecclesiology, the nature and mission of the church and the ministries required. Pneumatology’s emergence from the shadows has seen a burgeoning awareness of baptism as the primordial sacrament and this has created significant tension between it and the sacrament of ordination. Rather than starting with the sacrament of orders and relating all other ministries to that, we now start with baptism and communion, local eucharist and shared ministries, be they ordained, (bishop, priest, deacon) installed, (pastoral associate, director of Religious Education etc) or commissioned (lector, eucharistic ministry, Pastoral Council member). The repercussions of this shift in emphasis are still unfolding.

HISTORY LESSON – PARADIGM SHIFT

In a paper delivered at the American Academy of Religion, Atlanta 21st-24th November 2015, at the seminar “What’s the point of Synods?”, Luigi Gioia condensed Pope Gregory’s VII epic reforms of 1075 into four concise principles.

- ▶ The path of the papacy is that which the Church should adopt in the second millennium;
- ▶ Papacy is the constitutive dimension of the Church;
- ▶ It is necessary to promote centralization;
- ▶ It is necessary to affirm and strengthen the papacy.

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He contended that these principles shaped the course of the Church's trajectory for the second millennium. He further suggested that historians may look at Pope Francis' statement of 2015 as heralding a *similar* historical impact on the church of the new millennium. He condensed Francis' principles as follows

- ▶ “The path of synodality is that which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.
- ▶ Synodality is a constitutive element of the Church. ...
- ▶ I am conscious of the need to promote a sound decentralization.
- ...
- ▶ [It is] urgent to think about a conversion of the papacy”.⁹

CULTURE CHANGE NEEDED

Co-responsibility is easier said than done in church circles. Having worked with numerous priest conferences over many years and witnessed the selfless generosity of so many elderly priests during the pandemic I want to acknowledge my genuine appreciation of their rich and compassionate ministry, one that has meant so much to me and many others. These men are witnesses of a noble profession that cannot fail to touch hearts and inspire people. That said, one has to acknowledge a less complimentary dimension that stubbornly persists in some quarters. We are coming from an embedded culture which at its worst reeks of clericalism and even at its best, unfortunately, still tends to embody a benign paternalism where ‘father knows best’. Laity are often only too willing to abdicate responsibility and collude with such thinking. As Pope Benedict said this requires a change of mindset not just from clerics but *also* from laity who need to appropriate fully the call of their baptism to be priest, prophet and king.

As the eminent canon lawyer, James Coriden, points out, Synodality needs to be viewed through the lens of subsidiarity and not just as a means of decentralisation. Growth in synodality requires a strengthening of the Synod of Bishops, conferences of bishops, diocesan pastoral councils and parish pastoral councils. Lay voices should be heard in each of these and real progress needs to be made not only on communal decision making but on shared decision taking.¹⁰

9 Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17th October 2015)

10 James A. Coriden, *The Holy Spirit and an Evolving Church*, Orbis Books, 2017, p.166.

THE GERMAN 'SYNOD'

The German 'synodal process' is a current live example.¹¹ It has engendered much debate and no little controversy. The granting of deliberative voting rights to lay participants has provoked both applause and outcry in equal measure. Although it is fraught with potential danger it is also pregnant with future promise for a new awakening for the Church. It is one attempt at concretely en fleshing co-responsibility in the midst of an ongoing synodal process. It is a fascinating example of the local church in action and it has caused more than a little concern within the universal church about how its deliberations and decisions will impact on not just the local church but also the global universal church. It raises again the profound ecclesiological dilemma as to which comes first, the universal church or the local church. How one answers that questions largely determines one's ecclesiological outlook.

Certainly, at a global level, more substantive work needs to be done in defining 'co-responsibility'; it was pitched into church dialogue by Pope Benedict XVI but left to others to make concrete and real. It has not yet been fully embraced by clergy or laity, nor has it received the theological attention which it deserves. It is the view of the writer that without genuine co-responsibility such as was recognised at the Council of Jerusalem, the Church will be unable to truly walk the synodal path that is 'constitutive' of the Church in the third millennium.

CONCLUSION – EXAMPLE FROM FAMILY LIFE

I am the father of four adult daughters and together with my wife, Jacinta, we had the co-responsible role of parenting them. Lots of things my wife did much better than me, some I was better

11 Cf An explanation by Coleen Dulle, taken from America on June 24th 2021. ' In brief, the "synodal way" or "synodal path" (German: "Synodaler Weg") is a group of 230 people gathered to discuss what they see as some of the most pressing issues facing the Catholic Church in Germany. The group includes every German bishop, plus representatives from religious orders, lay movements, dioceses and parishes, universities, consultants from other churches and experts in the fields being discussed ... The bishops and lay representatives wanted laypeople to be able to vote on decisions in the synodal process, so they eschewed the usual synodal structure in favour of one in which both lay people and bishops could vote and be represented in equal numbers. Because church law does not allow laypeople to impose a decision on a bishop, the synod's decisions will be, at most, recommendations. Each bishop will have to decide on his own whether and how to implement the group's decisions in his own diocese Of course, there will be pressure on the bishops from the lay faithful to enact the changes after such a long consultative process. As Dr. Juliane Eckstein, a researcher at the Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology in Frankfurt, Germany, and a participant in the forum on women's roles in the church, said pithily: "Legally, it is not binding; morally, it is."'''

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suiting to handling. What was inescapable for us was that this was an equal, joint, responsibility which we couldn't shirk. We knew we were co-responsible; we had to work together recognising our shared gifts and our shared responsibility to always act in the best interests of our children. Parents understand this. Co-responsibility was visible and very concrete. It wasn't notional or aspirational but real and shared in the good times and the bad.

For laity to believe in this calling to be co-responsible for the Church, we need to see this theology enfolded in shared, equal, respectful, decision making. It needs to be actualised. We need to be recognised as equal partners, recognised and affirmed as competent decision makers who have a rightful, authoritative voice in exercising solicitude and care for the Church and its flourishing.

I am reminded of the debate that raged in the 1990's as to who could be involved in ministry. A dominant view held sway that, 'ministry' was to be reserved for the ordained or consecrated; laity did not qualify. By way of refutation of that particular school of theology, I remember being struck by the Second Eucharistic Prayer, 'Lord we give you thanks for being worthy to be in your presence and *minister to you*'. One can readily recall, '*lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*' - *the law of prayer, is the law of faith, is the law of life*- or more colloquially *what we pray is what we believe is what we live*. What we profess in our liturgy we are called to live out in our lives. By virtue of our baptism and as enshrined in our liturgical celebrations we are all called to ministry. We are all pilgrims on the road together (*Syn - hodos*) and we have legitimate co-responsibility for the church's being and action. You can't have one without the other.