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## SYNODALITY – *A Theological Glossary*

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# SYNODALITY

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The word *Synodality* is made up of ten letters. The following is an attempt to state something of the purpose and process of the synodality that is being pursued at present from Pope Francis to the frontiers of the church which are not fixed geographically but flow from hope in the saying of Jesus, ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’ (Matt 18:20). Commenting on the ‘Christian reworking’ of the *skekinah* (the divine presence)’ here John P. Meier states: ‘The church gathers around the person and words of Jesus. The divine presence it experiences in such worship is none other than Jesus himself, Emmanuel, God-with-us, who has promised to be with his people always. Obviously it is the risen Jesus who speaks in v.20 to his church’.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, this verse is preceded by the solemn statement by Jesus, ‘Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven’. The dovetailing of divine presence and providence here deepens the designation of *Matthew* as the ‘Gospel of the Church’.

While this attempt at analysing *synodality* does not approach the systematic statement of John Thornhill’s ‘The Structuring Principles of Particular Theologies’, it is aided by his assertion that it is ‘from the way in which reflection upon the Christ-event has been structured and this will usually come from some aspect of the Christian mystery which captures the attention of the theologian’.<sup>2</sup> The principles that proceed from these ten letters are more like *signposts* than structures, pointers to the pathway being pursued by and in the church, signposts for the journey which may overlap on occasion. This pathway is best seen in the shape of a spiral rather than a linear pattern, as theology very often walks and works on

1 *Matthew* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1983), 206.

2 See ‘Chapter Eleven’ in John Thornhill, S.M., *Christian Mystery in the Secular Age – The Foundation and Task of Theology*, (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, Inc.: 1991), 165 – 221, here 165.

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well-trodden ground. This perspective is supported by Karl Barth's statement that 'in its perception, meditation, and discussion, theology must have the character of a living *procession*'.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, as well as the outer journey from place to place there is also the *inner* journey undertaken by the participants and understood as continual conversion. This is a commitment to what Joseph Ratzinger (Pope emeritus Benedict XVI) calls 'a process that affects one's entire existence – and one's existence entirely, that is, to the full extent of its temporal span – and that requires far more than just a single or even a repeated act of thinking, feeling or willing'.<sup>4</sup> It is the task of moral theology to develop the parameters and practical demands of this process, dovetailing the (moral) human drive to goodness and the (divine) draw to holiness in and by the Holy Spirit. Not exhaustive, these *ten* principles express ethical and ecclesial, evangelical and eschatological elements that are essential to both entering into and evaluating to some extent this endeavour. Thus, the theological perspective presented here is necessarily provisional because, as Karl Adam pointed out, 'theology is always on the way to Christ.'<sup>5</sup>

## SACRAMENTAL

Starting positions can be contested places where one person or group seeks an advantage, conferring a sense of superiority that reflects a relationship of power among participants perceived as opponents. In the political sphere governments generally get the opportunity to fix the date of the next election, depending on opinion polls and focus groups that give the green light to go to the country in the hope of retaining office. While pole position may be the preserve of only a few in the sporting sphere (usually achieved through a preceding contest), the desire for a level playing field from the offset may be down to the luck of the draw. Happily the church does not have to depend on either competition or chance but draws on the grace of the Holy Spirit to galvanize the goodness and generosity of all its members. The challenge for the church in setting out on (and sustaining) a *synodal* pathway is primarily a call of realising its identity first and foremost as a sacramental people. Moreover, the importance of sacramental identity and involvement is highlighted in the wake of isolation incurred in the course of the global Covid-19 pandemic. This experience (endured

3 *Evangelical Theology – An Introduction*, (London: Collins Fontana, 1965), 15.

4 *Principles of Catholic Theology – Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 55.

5 Quoted in Robert A. Krieg, *Karl Adam: Catholicism in Catholic Culture*, (Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press: 1992), 153.

by many) emphasises the need to entwine belief and being together, as expressed by Michael Drumm:

During Christian sacramental worship, we need to foster a sense in which people are consciously present to one another in a way that doesn't happen on a train or in a supermarket or in a traffic jam or at a bar. The liturgical assembly must be retrieved from the clutches of an all too private form of piety ... The church gathering must be different in creating a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. The church does not exist primarily for the spiritual comfort of individuals but rather to build a community that witnesses to the values of the Reign of God that Jesus preached.<sup>6</sup>

On the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord this year, prior to the commencement of a ceremony of baptism, Pope Francis told the parents present 'Do not forget: your children will receive Christian identity and your task will be to guard their Christian identity'.<sup>7</sup> On the same day, at his installation as Archbishop of Tuam, Francis Duffy stated that the future of the church was 'part of the baptism call of every person, not just clergy or religious but of all the baptised'.<sup>8</sup> Given this baptismal basis of belonging to the church it behoves those who bear the badge of belief in Jesus Christ and his Gospel of God's Kingdom to behave in a certain manner, brought out by Matthew in the following scene. After rejecting the appeal of 'the mother of the sons of Zebedee [who] came to him with her sons' seeking a favourable appointment for them Jesus asks, 'Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' (Matt 20:22). In response to the reaction of the other ten disciples, who fear that the two brothers have stolen a march on them, Jesus reiterates a standard of *service* rather than the stance of superiority seen among 'the rulers of the Gentiles'. While the NRSV is aspirational here, 'It will not be so among you', the New Revised Jerusalem Bible is authoritative, 'Among you this is not to happen' (20:26). A sacramental people on its synodal way sets the scene for the following to be expressed and explored.

#### YEARNING(S)

While 'yearning' is not a word heard or seen frequently individual examples are illustrative of its import and impact. On the eve of

6 'From Ballybeg to London: Worship and Sacrament Today', in *Dermot A. Lane (ed.), New Century, New Society – Christian Perspectives*, (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1999), 133-139, here 138-139.

7 Pope Francis, 9th Jan 2022 – My translation.

8 Quoted in *The Irish Times*, January 10th, 2022.

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his first game as manager of the Galway hurling team a profile of Henry Shefflin ('his peerless achievements on the hurling field') referred to the admission 'that in his last season with Kilkenny, when he was no longer starting on the team, he found himself still "yearning" for a word of affirmation from [Brian] Cody' (manager of the so-called 'Cats' with multiple All-Ireland championships to his credit).<sup>9</sup> Una Agnew sees yearning in terms of spirituality as, 'a hunger in the heart for love and meaning, it is a longing for fulfilment implanted in us from birth'.<sup>10</sup> While within Scripture the psalms of lamentation look to a sense of loss, the psalms of longing look to a sense of presence, particularly that of God. Thus the Psalmist expresses a spiritual thirst: 'Like the deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is yearning for you, my God' (Ps 41); 'O God, you are my God, I search eagerly for you. My soul thirsts for you, my flesh yearns for you, in a land parched, and lifeless without water' (63). Commenting on '*yearns for you*' in the latter case, Carmel McCarthy states that 'the Hebrew verb of yearning expresses intense desire, and, together with the image of thirsting, serves to emphasise the all-encompassing nature of the psalmist's search for God'.<sup>11</sup> In the New Testament the Gospel of John takes this image of thirst to its depths in the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well where he offers her the 'living water' which, in 'those who drink', will become 'in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (4:14). A synodal process worth its salt must allow its participants to articulate their spiritual aspiration(s). After all, the journey of the church is always guided by the Spirit toward the horizon of holiness where the divine 'yes' to human yearning waits in the sanctification that is salvation.

## NEW(NESS)

'God is eternal newness'. This statement by Pope Francis seems a novel revelation, especially as he insists that the incessant involvement of God with us "'impels us constantly to set out anew, to pass beyond what is familiar, to the fringes and beyond'.<sup>12</sup> Implying one of his favourite images – horizon – the identification of 'fringes and beyond' indicates that newness is inseparable from evangelisation. The call and challenge to the church is not of newness for novelty sake but the need to realise the Gospel

9 Keith Duggan, *The Irish Times*, January 8th, 2022.

10 'Christian Spirituality', in Anne Hession & Patricia Kieran, (eds.), *Exploring Theology – Making Sense of the Catholic Tradition*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2007), 250 – 259, here 250.

11 *The Psalms: Human Voices of Prayer and Suffering*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2012), 74.

12 *Gaudete et Exsultate – Rejoice and Be Glad*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2018), par. 135.

as the geography of grace which, always going before us, guides us to people and places we might prefer to pass by or prevent participating. Found only in the Gospel of Matthew, the so-called parable of the householder proclaims ‘every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old’ (13:52). Here Matthew’s message to the church is that, just as Jesus did not jettison the old (Law and Prophets) but joined it to the new (Kingdom of Heaven), it must do the same. His exclusion of the saying about the necessity of ‘fresh wineskins’ for ‘new wine’ (Mk 2:22) is more than a matter of exegesis. The evangelist’s exhortation is a case of ‘both ... and’ not ‘either ... or’. Daniel J. Harrington expresses this synthesis succinctly: ‘Both new and old are valued; the new does not make the old useless’.<sup>13</sup> While referring specifically to Lent, Mary T. Brien’s words have a wider appeal: ‘Moving forward to a new place calls for a reappraisal of where one is at on the journey. For us, on our Lenten journey, the advice of Moses is relevant. While our spiritual health-check may point us in new directions, it will also involve a returning to the roots.’<sup>14</sup> More than a check list these words of wisdom call for a discernment of how the journey to date has been made and it will be made beyond the present. This discernment is decisive as it draws on divine desire for, as Francis formulates finely, ‘in a word he [God] wants to give us a new heart’.<sup>15</sup>

#### OPENNESS

Openness to others is *not* an optional extra for those on the synodal way. At one level this hardly needs stating since people are naturally drawn to disclose their thoughts and emotions, hopes and fears to each other, even at times to strangers. Often seen as a symbol of the synodal way, the story of the encounter of Cleopas and his companion with Jesus on the road to Emmaus eminently expresses such openness. If the Queen of Sheba could open ‘her mind freely to Solomon’ (1 Kgs 10:2), the two disciples opened their hearts fully to the stranger who ‘came near and went with them’ (24:15). By opening themselves to him Jesus is offered the opportunity to open himself to them too, telling them that they were foolish and ‘slow of heart to believe all that the prophets declared’ (24:25). As the Revealer of the Absolute Openness of God Jesus represents the willingness of God to walk in the world with a weak and even wilful humanity. The gradual and mutual opening of the disciples

13 *The Gospel of Matthew*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 208.

14 ‘Homilies for March C – First Sunday of Lent’, *The Furrow*, 73(February 2022), 117-122, here 118.

15 *Rejoice and Be Glad*, par. 83.

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to Jesus enables grace to get a hold on their hearts and heads and take over their lives entirely, empowering them to return to Jerusalem where they had jettisoned their yearnings and those who had journeyed with them to that point. As an exemplar of ecclesial space for synodality, embracing speech, silence and sharing, the Emmaus story in the Gospel of Luke expresses and even embodies the hospitality that is at its heart.

God's word opens up the synodal way that is to be walked. In Psalm 139 the evocation of God's omniscience, expressed in the opening verses, ends with the exclamation 'you know all my ways through and through' (v. 3). This is not a statement of terror as if dealing with a God of wrath who is forever keeping account, especially of fault and failure. Instead, the psalmist proclaims a figure of wisdom who, almost womb like, holds the lives of people in a grasp of tenderness rather than a grip of fear. The presence of God is proclaimed as protective and providential throughout the course of life, commencing with conception. Given this guarding and guiding involvement of God in the life of an individual the psalmist intercedes at the end, 'lead me in the way everlasting'. The juxtaposition of 'my ways' and 'the way everlasting' evokes the divine declaration that 'nor are your ways my ways' and 'my ways [are] higher than your ways' (Is: 55:8-9) which envisages the claim of Christ 'I am the way' who communicates both 'the truth and the life' (Jn 14:6). Marianne Meyer Thompson connects these: 'The following explanatory comment ('No one comes to the Father but by me') suggests that the three predicates could better be understood to indicate that Jesus is the Way that leads to the Father, precisely because he himself embodies the truth and life that come from the Father. Thus we might translate, 'I am the way that leads to truth and life'.<sup>16</sup>

Openness is not *only* an intra-ecclesial event but involves others who, in Jesus' words, 'do not belong to this fold' (Jn 10:16). The evangelising comment that follows, 'I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice' means that a church which seeks to be truly synodal must listen for ecumenical echoes in order that the end envisaged by Jesus, 'so there will be one flock, one shepherd' (10:17), may be effected more fully on earth and entirely in eternity. When offering its openness to the world the church remembers that its *raison d'être* is rooted in its evangelical essence. Walter Kasper brings out the integral and important implications of this identity:

'This openness for the problems of the time cannot of course be a wilful, go-as-you-please openness. It is an openness that

16 *John, A Commentary*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 308-309.

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must be called both dialogistic and missionary. The two are not antitheses, and it is really only superficial minds that think so. For true dialogue means communicating to the other person something about oneself – indeed *communicating oneself*. In this sense the church's theology has to strike out specific ways in which the church can become the universal sacrament of salvation for the world of today'.<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately, the object of ecclesial, ecumenical and evangelical *openness* is for Christ's disciples to be able to own and offer to all others the warm and welcoming words of Seamus Heaney, '*the way Is opener for your being in it*'.<sup>18</sup>

### DOCTRINE

Coming immediately after openness the mention of doctrine might sound like the screeching of brakes bringing the synodal train to a dead stop. However, scare tactics (whatever their source) are far from the truth. *Doctrine*, as its Latin origin indicates, deals with teaching(s) and in the church concerns faith and morals. Matthew presents Jesus primarily as a teacher, as many texts throughout the Gospel state. Thus, Jesus repeatedly asserts his authority to teach, 'But I say to you', in the course of the Sermon on the Mount which ends with the response, 'Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes' (7:28-29). The conjunction of 'astounded' and 'authority' articulates the reception Jesus and his teaching received. The marked contrast between his authenticity and the arrogance of the 'scribes' will be consolidated in the course of his ministry as conflicts with them and others become clearer and contribute to the conspiracy to crucify Jesus. Matthew's list of 'Woes against the Pharisees' (much longer than Luke's version and mentioned in passing in the Gospel of Mark) lays down a magisterial marker between Jesus and 'the scribes and the Pharisees [who] sit on Moses' seat' (23:2). Telling his hearers to 'do whatever they teach you and follow it' (23:3), Jesus' intolerance towards the scribes and Pharisees is directed against the dissonance between their doctrines and deeds. This is doubled down on by the declarations to his disciples, 'But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students' and 'nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah' (23:8,10). To avoid lapsing into the

17 '*Introduction: Systematic Theology Today and the Task Before It*', in *Theology & Church*, (London: SPCM Press, 1989), 1-16, here 12.

18 '*At Banagher*', *Opened Ground – poems 1966-1996*, (London: faber and faber, 1998), 441-2, here 442.



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culture of control created and operated by the scribes and Pharisees the followers of Jesus must be continually taught and transformed by surrendering to the grace of the Holy Spirit, that is, converted to the Gospel.

Calling conversion ‘a principle, in the literal sense of *principium* and considering it ‘not, of course, an intellectual principle but an experimental one’, James P. Hanigan expands this in terms of its ‘community and narrative, rational and personal referents[s]’.<sup>19</sup> Hanigan’s treatment of the first of these is foundational: ‘The *community* referent reminds us that Christian conversion entails church membership, that is, association with a normative community, not merely in a voluntary group that constructs its own norms and purposes, or in one that happens to be personally agreeable. God’s call in Christ means that one is called to join the Church.’<sup>20</sup> This statement serves as a caution against considering church doctrine as comparable to the rules of a club while, taken together with the other three, the ‘community referent’ is not a usurpation or undermining of human freedom. From the perspective of moral theology church doctrine is not to be interpreted as an imposition but an invitation, that is, the doctrine in and of the church does not seek to dominate but liberate. Christian conversion is for communion, not control.

There is, in the same volume as Hanigan above, an article entitled ‘Doctrinal Authority for a Pilgrim Church’ by Avery Dulles (taken from his book *The Resilient Church*). The concluding paragraph is worth quoting at length:

My own point of view is governed by the vision of the Church as a pilgrim community renewing itself by creative interaction with its changing environment. The Church, “like a pilgrim in a foreign land”, receives from the risen Lord not a clear vision of ultimate truth but the power “to show forth in the world the mystery of the Lord in a faithful though shadowed way, until at last it will be revealed in total splendour”. Thus the Church may in some sense be called a “Society of Explorers” – to borrow a term from Michael Polanyi’s prescription for the scientific community. The Church, like any other society, needs outside criticism, and depends on all the help that its thoughtful members can provide in the task of discerning the real meaning of the gospel for our time. Faith, then, is not simply a matter of accepting a fixed body of doctrine. More fundamentally, it is a

19 ‘Conversion and Christian Ethics’, in *Introduction to Christian Ethics – A Reader*, Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes OFM (eds.), New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 242-251, here 247.

20 *Ibid.*, 246-247.

committed and trustful participation in an ongoing process. In the course of responsible discussion, certain previously accepted doctrines will be modified.<sup>21</sup>

Coming from such an eminent theologian these words carry considerable weight and communicate a wisdom worthy of synodality. Thus the synodal church seeks to steer a *via media* between the Scylla of relativism and the Charybdis of rigorism, avoiding the reefs where both the ‘doctrine-phobic’<sup>22</sup> and doctrine fixated respectively take refuge.

Jesus’ stinging criticism of the scribes and Pharisees that ‘they tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a lift a finger to move them’ (24:4) contrasts, even conflicts, with the compassionate characterisation of him communicated in the call, ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest’ (11:28). Pope Francis throws his authority behind a pastoral availability of mercy in asserting that ‘it is a matter of reaching out to everyone, of needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community and thus to experience being touched by an “unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous” mercy [for] no one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel!’, affirming that it applies to ‘everyone, in whatever situation they find themselves’.<sup>23</sup>

21 Avery Dulles, ‘Doctrinal Authority for a Pilgrim Church’ in *Introduction to Christian Ethics – A Reader*, 336-349, here 349.

22 Title taken from Carmody Grey, *The Tablet*, 5th February 2022, p. 9.

23 *Amoris Laetitia – The Joy of Love*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2016), par. 297.