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Synodality –
A Theological
Glossary
(Part 2)

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APOSTOLATE

‘Apostolate’ offers the opportunity to ask, address and articulate the vision for mission which the church is called to adopt and act upon. *Apostolate* is an assurance that the church does not become absorbed in its own issues and even interests, only looking at its life *ad intra*. This involves the danger described by Henri Nouwen as “‘spiritualising” spirituality’, available to all those ‘who have the luxury of the time and space needed to develop inner harmony and quietude’, adding that the awareness of ‘living as Christians in our contemporary world, with an open eye and an open heart for the real problems of people, challenges us to break out of our individualism and elitism and start listening to the Bible with new ears’.¹ Thus popes have regularly highlighted the church’s mission in and for the world, as evidenced most recently in Pope Francis’ emphasis on evangelisation as encounter and engagement with people everywhere. Apostolate is not an option for the church but an opening to the world, offering it ‘the word of life’ (1 Jn 1:1), which originating in Jesus’ mission from the Father, is offered through his paschal mystery and outsourced through the Holy Spirit. Indeed, *apostolate* as articulating and actualising the church’s mission in and for the world is one arm of accountability of Synodality itself.²

The church has always had an apostolate, arising from the mission/ministry of Jesus, and is arrayed across a broad range of

1 ‘Foreword’, in Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells – The Spiritual Journey of a People*, (London: SCM Press, 1984), xiii-xxi, here xvi-xvii.

2 For an analysis along these lines see Vincent J. Miller, ‘Synodality and the Sacramental Mission of the Church: The Struggle for Communion in a World Divided by Colonialism and Neoliberal Globalization’, *Theological Studies*, 83(1): 8-24.

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activities, from communications to clinics, education to ecology, development to dialogue. The fiftieth anniversary of the Second General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (1971) occurred in the first year of preparation for the forthcoming XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Its declaration – *Justice in the World* – is an invaluable resource for both reflection and renewal in the road leading to 2023 and beyond. Probably best known for its proclamation that ‘action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel’, it called for a coherence between the life of the church *ad intra* and *ad extra*, emphasising the primacy of witness which Pope Saint Paul VI was to speak so passionately of after the subsequent Synod of Bishops (1974) in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. With powerful statements, such as ‘our awareness of the Church’s vocation to be present in the heart of the world by proclaiming the Good News to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, and joy to the afflicted’ and the church ‘has a proper and specific responsibility which is identified with her mission of giving witness before the world of the need for love and justice contained in the Gospel message, a witness to be carried out in Church institutions themselves and in the lives of Christians’³, *Justice* reasserts the teaching of the Old Testament prophets and personified by Jesus (particularly in the Gospel of Luke) that, in the succinct statement of Seán Freyne, the church now sees ‘a concern for issues of social justice as part of Christian faith itself’.⁴ Of particular relevance is the ‘principle of participation and profession’: ‘The Church recognizes everyone’s right to suitable freedom of expression and thought. This includes the right of everyone to be heard in a spirit of dialogue which preserves a legitimate diversity within the Church’.⁵

In continuity with the tenor and teaching of *Justice in the World* Jenny Sinclair suggests that ‘by reading the political and cultural signs of the times we can understand the fundamental purpose of this Synod. It is nothing less that God’s way of preparing the Church to save the world’.⁶ This soteriological emphasis adds an extra gear to the ecclesial engine that is driving the synodal journey. Reference to the ‘signs of the times’ need not be dismissed as a talking shop where lip service is paid in the preamble to another Vatican document which will be filed away and fulfilled

3 *Justice in the World*, in Joseph Gremillion (ed.), *The Gospel of Peace and Justice – Catholic Social Teaching Since Pope John* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976), pars. 5, 36

4 ‘The Quest for the Historical Jesus – Some Theological Reflections’ in *Texts, Contexts and Cultures*. (Dublin: Veritas, 2002), 106-121, here 118.

5 *Justice in the World*, par. 44.

6 ‘A Synod for the World’, *The Tablet*, 1st January 2022, 6-7, here 6.

only in footnotes for other documents. Referring to the inspiration of the Gospel and information from ecclesial experience across the world and drawing on ‘centuries of tradition and natural law’, Sinclair states that Catholic Social Teaching, ‘sometimes called the theology of the Holy Spirit in practice’, is able to help us discern our way through the Synod process’.⁷ While agreement on the ambit of the church’s apostolate might be difficult to achieve, its axiological accent will assure a basis for dialogue at least and allow a space for the Holy Spirit to act. After setting out the social and spiritual, service and salvific terms of the synodal process Sinclair states starkly that ‘if we can’t walk together on this road, the Church will continue to decline and fail to live out its vocation’.⁸ The Church can only hope to avoid this end by accepting that the agenda for its apostolate is God’s way for the church to act and advance towards the goal of the Kingdom of God.

LOVE

‘L’ could be listed as law or liturgy. ‘Synod’ in the *Index* of the *Code of Canon Law* (prepared by the Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland) is sub-divided into sections respectively headed ‘Bishops’ and ‘Diocesan’. Under the first, c. 334 covers the ‘cooperative assistance’ bishops can give to the Pope, ‘among which is the synod of bishops’. The previous canon states that the Pope, ‘in fulfilling the office of supreme pastor of the Church has the right, according to the needs of the Church, to determine the manner of exercising this office’.⁹ Obviously, the decision to call the present synod into existence is a pre-eminent pastoral exercise of the Pope’s care for the universal church. Reference to ‘right’ dovetails with the earlier declaration that the Christian faithful ‘according to the knowledge, competence, and prestige which they possess, have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful, without prejudice to the integrity of faith and morals, with reverence toward their pastors, and attentive to common advantage and the dignity of persons’.¹⁰ A commentary on this cautions against any abuse of this right ‘which violates the virtue of charity’.¹¹ *Mutatis mutandis*, this caveat covers the

7 Ibid., 5.

8 Ibid., 6.

9 *Code of Canon Law*, Latin-English edition, The Canon Law Society of America, (Washington, D.C.:1998), c. 333.2

10 Ibid., 212.3

11 *The Canon Law – Letter & Spirit*, The Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), p.121.

complete church. Reference to ‘the virtue of charity’ raises the relation between love and law which will be looked at below.

Liturgy obviously permeates the synodal journey, formally and informally, personally and communally. It plays into the synodal process, connecting its first two pillars, *communion* and *participation*. In its *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* the Second Vatican Council stated that ‘it is very much the wish of the church that all the faithful should be led to take that full, conscious, and active part in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy’ and that ‘in the restoration and development of all the sacred liturgy the full and active participation by all the people is the paramount concern, for it is the primary, indeed the indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit’.¹² Carrying over these terms and conditions—*full, active, conscious*—of *participation* to the synodal journey is a call and challenge to the complete church. Helpfully (and hopefully) this harks back to the sacramental identity of the church (opening ‘S’ of synodality) and heralds a longer, lasting linkage between liturgy and life.

The selection of ‘love’ signifies a moral-theological rather than canonical or liturgical stance. This is brought out in the decree of the Second Vatican Council that ‘the improvement of moral theology ... drawing more fully on the teaching of holy scripture, should highlight the lofty vocation of the Christian faithful and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world’.¹³ This image of bearing fruit is transposed into the intimacy of interpersonal relations in the Gospel of John where the ‘indicative – imperative’ of Christian morality is issued. Richard A. McCormick interprets the spiritual and moral implications of this call/commandment:

Christ said, ‘I am giving you a new commandment: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you too must love one another’. I want to concentrate on the ‘as I have loved you’. Raymond Brown points out that this phrase emphasises that Jesus is the source of Christians’ love for one another. In this sense it is effective; it brings about their salvation. Only secondarily does it refer to Jesus as the standard of Christian love.¹⁴

12 *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 14, in Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II, The Basic Sixteen Documents*, (Dublin: Dominican publications, 2007).

13 *Optatam totius – Decree on the Training of Priests*, 16, in Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II, The Basic Sixteen Documents*.

14 *Health and Medicine in the Catholic Tradition*, (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1985), 37.

Jesus' commandment to his disciples is not a condition for continuing to live in the love of God but a call to celebrate and communicate it with others. Pheme Perkins captures this premise perfectly: 'Love among Christians is the "proof" that they possess the divine life which they claim'.¹⁵ If, as Philip Larkin confesses at the conclusion of his poem *An Arundel Tomb* 'what will survive of us is love'¹⁶, then Christian love, because of its divine component, will continue without end.

Saint Anselm of Canterbury is well known both for his philosophical theology and atonement theory of redemption. The following, favouring 'ground hurling', is found in one of his letters, '*Take care of each other in love on the journey*'. Anselm's appeal is not only affective but apostolic, a reminder of the Gospel announcement that, 'after this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go' (Lk 10:1). In tune with the Irish proverb, '*Giorraíonn beirt bóthar*' (two shorten the road), this evangelical support and strategy is echoed in the expression of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that 'No one remains on his [her] own as a disciple'.¹⁷

If *synodos* – walking together – is to become *synoptikos* – seeing together – there is a need for all making the journey to commit themselves to an ongoing conversion that considers the challenges and changes that concern the common good. Moreover, charity as the hallmark of the church does not confer any preferential option for office holders among the people of God. This horizontal and not hierarchical stance holds true to the end as hailed by Ulrich Luz in his commentary on the eschatological judgement scene in the 'Gospel of the Church': 'Matthew was concerned to show that the Christian church has no special privilege in the final judgement, but rather will be asked by her Lord, the Son of Man, only about her deeds of love, no different from all other humans'.¹⁸

INCULTURATION

If 'liberation' has been linked particularly with the church in Latin America in the past few decades 'inculturation' has been identified

15 'Johannine Literature: From Text to Community', in John J. Collins and John Dominic Crossan (eds.), *The Biblical Heritage in Modern Catholic Scholarship*, (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1986): 184-201, here 200.

16 *Collected Poems*, (London: faber and faber, 1990): 110-111, here 111.

17 Quoted in Eamonn Bredin, *Rediscovering Jesus – Challenge of Discipleship*, (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1986), 131.

18 'The Final Judgment (Matt 25:31-46): An Exercise in "History of Influence" Exegesis', in David R. Bauer and Mark Allan Powell (eds.), *Treasures New and Old: Recent Contributions to Matthean Studies*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 271-310, here 309.

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as the primary issue in Africa and Asia. (These are complementary aspects of the church's apostolate in these continents, with inculturation itself interpreted as a form of liberation.) Inculturation is the assertion and articulation of ecclesial identity among people(s) who have accepted and actualised the Gospel message. Asking nearly forty years ago what will a 'world church be like', Thomas P. Rausch answered:

First, it will be pluralistic. A church which will be inculturated in Africa and Asia, in South America and in Islamic regions will of necessity develop different expressions of its worship and theology, even of its proclamation ... Second, the church of tomorrow will have to be truly universal, catholic in the original sense. It will have to represent a true community of peoples in a deeply divided world.¹⁹

Balancing and bridging the local and global, the relation(s) between the particular and universal church (and between particular churches themselves) are not political but prophetic actions, proclaiming a common faith, practising a compassionate charity and possessing a shared hope. Rausch's ultimate challenge to an inculturated church, 'to represent a true community of peoples in a deeply divided world' is an even greater and more urgent an undertaking today (and tomorrow) than it was forty years ago, despite – or perhaps due to – globalisation in its many dimensions. Only ecclesial communities who are secure enough in their own identity can enter into and enable a unity that is, in the words of Vatican Two 'a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race'.²⁰ This unity does not come about through either a cosy comfort or crafty compromise of a 'live and let live' climate but through a consensus created by living out Christian love. The Western Church needs the wisdom of Asia, the witness of Latin America and the wholesomeness of Africa if what Karl Rahner called 'a world-Church which is present to a varying extent in all parts of the world and everywhere becoming a genuine element of all cultures and nations' is to come into being.²¹ In this regard there are many roads to the Father's house and a universal synodal worth its salt will welcome this ecclesial map. Moreover, identifying inculturation as 'more than

19 'The Church Tomorrow', Chapter 11 in Thomas P. Rausch, S.J., *The Roots of the Christian Tradition*, (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1986), 206-218, here 207.

20 *Lumen gentium – Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 1, in Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II, The Basic Sixteen Documents*.

21 'The Future of the Church and the Church of the future' in *Concern for the Church* (Theological Investigations XX, (New York: Crossroad, 1986);103-114, here 105.

a matter for missionary churches’, Bernard Häring insisted that while ‘every part of the Church bears, consciously or otherwise, an enormous burden of more or less successful inculturations, of used and unused opportunities for inculturation in the past, still more, the whole texture and every dimension of the Church as it actually exists calls for fundamental revision in keeping with the extent and nature of cultural and other changes’.²²

THEOLOGY

In recent years I have taught a module to both clerical and lay students at Maynooth entitled *What is Theology?* Based and built on selected readings that cover mainstream subject areas, it is intended to familiarise students with the spectrum of theological topics and themes, touching on history, terminology and methodology. An element of assessment has asked the students to answer the title question in their own words through a twitter type text. My own effort is along the following lines: *seeking to express its understanding of God’s self-communication in the Christ-event (esteeming scripture as the Word of God and tradition as the wisdom of its elders): its undertaking of a mission to the world as herald, steward and witness of the Reign of God; its undergoing transformation through the grace of the Holy Spirit.* Mindful that not everything can be said (here) about the tasks of theology, *understanding*, *undertaking* and *undergoing* underline the three legs of systematic, moral theology and theological anthropology which support an ecclesiology envisioned in terms of the models of proclamation/herald, servant/steward and sacrament/witness. These three ‘legs’ of theology are underpinned by the theological virtues: *understanding* minded by faith, *undertaking* measured by love and *undergoing* maintained by hope. Theology in a synodal church will take these not only as points of departure but as constant points of reference. Reference to scripture in relation to theology is self-evident and the role of tradition is well captured in the remark of Brendan McManus that ‘Being part of tradition means that there are checks and balances. There is a sense of accumulated wisdom and learning from the past, especially when it comes to what have proven to be dead ends’.²³

With the church as the subject (and not simply the subject matter) of such a theology, there is need for a self-critical, even self-corrective element within it. This element is exactly the exercise of synodality which saves the energy of the church for evangelisation. Synodality does not aim at being a substitute for subsidiarity which

22 *My Hope for the Church – Critical Encouragement for the Twenty-First Century*, (Chawton, Hampshire: Redemptorist Publications, 1999), 58.

23 ‘Endnote’, *The Furrow*, 73(March 2022), 142.

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‘means that decisions, policies and their implementation ought to be handled at the lowest practical level since this level would more likely be better informed about the concrete needs and realities of the situation and able to deal with them more effectively than at a much higher level’.²⁴ Furthermore, the respective role of and relation between *magisterium* and *sensus fidelium* is a fundamental question calling for deep(er) study.²⁵ Identification of issues involving governance and ministry in and for the church needs to be integrated into this inquiry in an imaginative and inclusive manner. In this regard Richard A. McCormick’s proposal for persistence in dialogue is both positive and pressing: ‘If stay we ought and must, then it may be of help to propose a set of “rules for conversation”, the observance of which could nudge us towards more communicative conversation’.²⁶

A number of marine metaphors might help to make clear the options that the present synodal pathway is opening up and offering. *Firstly*, is this, in Brutus’ words, ‘a tide which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune’ or ‘omitted’, offers only a life ‘bound in shallows, and in miseries’?²⁷ *Secondly*, would a ‘flood’ be ecclesiological equivalent to a theological tsunami that tears away moorings? *Thirdly*, are there ideological currents already involved and identifiable in the synodal process? *Fourthly*, is there a mid-way between riptide and a ripple? *Fifthly*, how can synodality serve mission, the sending out of disciples ‘into the deep water’ (Lk 5:4)? This imaginative inquiry is intended, changing to a sporting metaphor, to avoid ending in either a free-for-all or a collapsed scrum.

YES

- to Walter Brueggemann’s exhortation that ‘what we are about is serious conversation leading to blessed communion’²⁸;
- to the prophecy of Isaiah, ‘I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert’ (43:19);

24 James T. Bretzke, *Handbook of Roman Catholic Moral Terms*, (Georgetown University Press: Washington DC, 2013), 227.

25 See Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, S.J., *The Magisterium and Morality – Readings in Moral Theology No. 3*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1982) and Charles E. Curran and Lisa A. Fullam, *The Sensus Fidelium and Moral Theology – Readings in Moral Theology No. 18*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2017).

26 ‘Rules for Abortion Debate’, in *How Brave A New World?*, (London: SPCM, 1981), 176-188, here 177.

27 William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 4, Scene 2, 270-274, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, second edition, (London: W.W.Norton, 2008), 1602.

28 Quoted in Donald Cozzens, *Notes from the Underground – The Spiritual Journal of a Secular Priest*, 12

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- to a Church that is the Pauline Body of Christ and not a political bureaucracy that promotes and pursues a business model as its mission;
- to the vision of Pope Saint John Paul II that ‘the most valuable gift the Church can offer to the bewildered and restless world of our time is to form within it Christians who are confirmed in what is essential and who are humbly joyful in their faith’;²⁹
- to the wisdom of Meister Eckhart: ‘There is no stopping place in this life. No, nor was there ever one for anyone – no matter how far along the way they’ve come. This then, above all things: be ready for the gifts of God and always for new ones’;³⁰
- to Jesus, Son of God and Saviour ‘in whom is always ‘Yes’. For in him every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes’ (2 Cor 1:19-20).

CONCLUSION

The *ten* signposts suggested in the characters constituting *Synodality* can be subsumed under the terms of the Official Logo for the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: *Communion* covers Sacramental and Yearning, Love and Yes; *Participation* plays to Newness, Openness and Theology; *Mission* mediates Doctrine, Apostolate and Inculturation. While there may be a question of the location of these three ‘legs,’ i.e. placing *Participation* before *Communion*, it is the outcome(s) of the overall journey that is obviously important. While this may be outlined to some degree it cannot be wholly observed *ab initio* or *in via* because its course can only be charted, in the words of Vatican II, ‘in the light of the Gospel and of human experience’.³¹ The goal of *Synodality* is not to generate groupthink but to gather and be guided by the Holy Spirit in discerning to go a definite, perhaps a different, way.

This *Glossary* began with ‘S’ standing for *Sacramental*, signifying the identity of the church *ab initio* as people of God in the course of their journey towards the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew). Writing almost forty years ago as *Editor* of a series entitled *The Message of the Sacraments*, Monica K. Hellwig’s insistence on the vitality of this identity is even more important, both ecclesiological and experientially, in the contemporary context and course of *Synodality*:

29 *Catechesi Tradendae – Catechesis in our Time*, (Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1979), par. 61.

30 Quoted in Adrian Hastings, *Robert Runcie*, (London: Mowbray, 1991), 31.

31 ‘*Gaudium et spes – Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*’, 46, in Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II, The Basic Sixteen Documents*.

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The Church seems to be poised today at a critical juncture in its history. Vatican II reopened long-standing questions about collegiality and participation in the life of the Church, including its sacramental actions, its doctrinal formulations and its government. The Council fostered a new critical awareness and raised hopes which the Church as a vast and complicated institution cannot satisfy without much confusion, conflict and delay. This makes ours a particularly trying and trusting time for those most seriously interested in the life of the Church and most deeply committed to it. It seems vitally important for constructive and authentically creative community participation in the shaping of the Church's future life, that a fuller understanding of the sacraments be widely disseminated in the Catholic community.³²

32 'Editor's Preface' in Thomas A. Marsh, *Gift of Community – Baptism and Confirmation*, (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1984), 9-10, here 9.

The Spiritual Life. In spiritual life one of the big traps is assuming that things will happen miraculously in a spectacular fashion, and that it will all happen in one dramatic, unrepeatable moment. Many of us think of St Paul being struck blind, falling off his horse and making a dramatic shift from Pharisee to believer in one moment. The problem with this approach is that it seems to limit God's action to special people, in special places and times, and makes faith inaccessible for the majority of people whose lives don't reflect this magic and drama. It often comes as a surprise to people to learn that there was a ten-year gap between Paul's fall and his becoming an apostle; it appears that he still had to go through the slow human process of learning and making sense of his experience with the help of other believers.

– BRENDAN MCMANUS AND JIM DEEDS, *Discover God Daily*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2022) p. 5.