

*Prof. Gerard Francisco Timoner, Magister Generalis OP
Master of the Dominican Order,
member of the International Theological Commission*



EUCCHARIST AND SYNODALITY IN THE CHURCH

Introduction

“For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission” is the theme of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. This forthcoming synod is remarkably unique on account of its theme i.e., it will be a synod about a synod, and its process which is truly participative in its scope i.e., it will involve the participation of many persons from the level of a diocese to the level of the universal Church over a period of two years, from October 2021 till October 2023. Pope Francis is profoundly convinced that “it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium” and that “what the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word ‘synod’”.¹

We recall that the goal of a synod, especially the Synod of Bishops, is to deepen and strengthen communion² in the Church. One can discern clearly the importance of Eucharistic spirituality for a synodal Church because the grace (*res tantum*) of the Eucharist is communion with God and with one another.³ Thus, we can say that the *synodal* nature of the Church is *ordinarily* realized and expressed in the Eucharist, “*the source and summit of Christian life*”.⁴ This is the simple nexus which I hope to explore in this talk.

Synodality: “Walking-Together” Towards Communion

Synodality is the Church’s *modus vivendi et operandi*,⁵ it is a way of discerning what is good for the Church in its pilgrimage through time

and space, through history and cultures. *Synodality* is a characteristic of a pilgrim Church that moves in communion towards the Father, in fidelity to Christ, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Ignatius of Antioch, in his letter to the community in Ephesus, says that members of the Church are *σύνδοιοι*, “*companions on the way*”, by virtue of the dignity of baptism and their friendship with Christ.⁶ It seems useful, at this juncture, to distinguish between:

- a) “*synodal spirit*” (“*affective synodality*”) i.e., an overarching ethos animating Church communion at all times; manifested in an ordinary, but profound way, in the Eucharistic assembly.
- b) “*synodal moments*”, “*synodal events*” (“*effective synodality*”) or the concrete manifestation of such spirit when an ecclesial community (parish, religious congregation, local or universal Church) is convoked by legitimate authority (parish priest, superior, bishop, Pope) to decide on contentious issues (e.g., heresies in the early centuries) or to discern together what is good for the community (renewal etc); and then for the legitimate authority (religious superior, council, bishop, Pope) to make decisions for the common good. The goal of such gathering is *to strengthen communion*.⁷ Example of synodal moments are: religious chapter, parish pastoral council, diocesan synod, synod of bishops, ecumenical council etc. And if we take seriously our notion of the family as *ecclesia domestica*, then family meetings and gatherings are rudimentary “*synodal moments*” as well.

Ecclesial Discernment and Decision

*We have decided, the Holy Spirit and us...*⁸ (Acts 15:28). This is a remarkable, moment in the history of the Church. Faced with division, the Church takes a decision in an unprecedented way. James, leader of the Jerusalem community, pronounced this bold judgment, the first outcome of an arduous communal discernment of a nascent church, together with the apostles Peter and Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Prior to this pivotal moment, the apostles, under the leadership of Peter, cast lots to determine who will take the place of Judas Iscariot. They had clear criteria who to choose: *“it is necessary that one who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day on which he was taken up from us, become with us a witness to his resurrection”* (Acts 1:21-22). They prayed for guidance but when the time came to choose between Joseph and Matthias, they resorted to lots. Thus, the decision taken was not a result of an internal process of communal discernment but an impersonal and external act of divination of God’s will that is similar to the one used in the Old Testament: *“and [Aaron] will cast lots to see which of the two must be of the Lord and which of Azazel”* (Lev 16:8).⁹ God remains transcendent and invisible, whose will is made known through an inanimate object, insulated, as it were, from the possibility of human manipulation and error in judgment.

As Master of the Order of Preachers (also known as Dominicans) how I wish to be spared from making difficult decisions; if only our constitution allows for *“drawing of lots”* as a legitimate way for making decisions! But the choice of Matthias is the last drawing of lots that we see in the New Testament. After Pentecost, decision-making radically changed due to the immanent presence of the Holy Spirit who takes an *“active role”* in the life of church. For this reason, the Acts of the Apostles is called by many biblical scholars as *“Acts of the Holy Spirit”*. In the so-called Council of Jerusalem, James, head of the Jerusalem community, pronounced his judgment: *“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials”* (Acts 15:28). An important decision is no longer made by an external divination of God’s will but by a communal process of intense dialogue and patient discernment under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to determine what is truly good for the community. For the *“Spirit of truth who guides into all truth”* (John 16:13) now *“dwells in them”* (1 Cor. 3:16). *After Pentecost, the “apostolic manner” for making decisions, “in the presence of the Lord”, is communal discernment.* Communicating the decision to the communities through a letter, then choosing and sending delegates to accompany the letter’s reception by the communities are

integral to the entire process of making and implementing a communal decision (Acts 15:22-32).

Allow me to mention here that Pope Francis, in *Praedicator Gratiae* (24 May 2021), his gracious letter to the Order of Preachers affirmed that “*the ‘synodal’ process enabled the Order to adapt its life and mission to changing historical contexts while maintaining fraternal communion*”. This synodal structure is concretized in its “*inclusive form of governance, in which all shared in the process of discernment and decision making, in accordance with their respective roles and authority, through the system of chapters at all levels*”.

Eucharistic Spirituality and Synodality

The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus presents elements that can help us grow in the synodal life in the Church. The two were walking together (*synodoi*), just as Jesus told those whom he sent to preach the Kingdom. However, they were walking away from Jerusalem, the community of the apostles, because they had lost hope: “*we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel*”. Then Jesus walked with them, explained the Scriptures and broke bread. Listening to the Word opened their minds, the breaking of the bread restored their hope!

The Church, the communion of the baptized, makes real and present its synodal nature in the celebration of the Eucharist, a celebration of its communion with God and with one another. The Eucharist is truly food *via te cum*, nourishment for the pilgrim people of God, the Eucharistic assembly that seeks to grow in deeper understanding of the faith and greater love of the Lord: “*Whenever the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the faithful can in some way relive the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: “their eyes were opened and they recognized him”* (Lk 24:31).¹⁰ Thus, we can say that the *synodal* nature of the Church is *ordinarily* realized and expressed in the Eucharist, “*the source and summit of Christian life*”.¹¹

The Eucharistic assembly (synaxis) is the most basic, hence the most universal expression and actualization of the synodal life. In it we find

elements that foster *affectus synodalis*. Thus, salient aspects of *Eucharistic spirituality* must permeate the various expressions of synodal life.

Gathered in the name of the Trinity. The Eucharist begins with the sign of the cross and the invocation of the Trinity. A gathering that is convoked in the name of God, signifies that its acts are done *in His Name*. In a profound sense, the Church becomes a sacrament of Christ for it becomes a bearer of his Presence: “*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*” (Matt 18:20). Thus, when divisions arise or lines of fracture become manifest in a community on account of differences in conviction or persuasion, then it is time to pause and conscientiously consider whether adherence to such divisive convictions is truly done *in God’s name* and reveals Christ’s presence in their midst.

Reconciliation. A gathering convoked in the name of the Trinity fosters communion by an act of reconciliation with God (vertical reconciliation) and with one another (horizontal reconciliation). The *confessio peccati* celebrates God’s merciful love and expresses a desire not to allow the divisive tendency of sin get in the way of unity: “*Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift*” (Matt 5:23-24). In his homily at the opening of the Synod of Bishops in 2012, Pope Benedict indicated that the *best path to the new evangelization is through reconciliation*.¹² The best way to heal fractured relationships and broken hearts is through reconciliation. Jesus tells us, *if you offer your gift to the altar and realized that you have something against your brother or sister, leave your gift, be reconciled first, then come back to offer your gift* (Matt 5:23-24). The Eucharist is the sacrament of communion and unity. It is no wonder that we begin its celebration with the penitential rite, by asking pardon and reconciliation. And just before we receive Holy Communion, we give each other the sign of Christ’s peace. The, *res tantum*, the full grace of the Eucharist is impeded if we are not fully reconciled.

“*Horizontal reconciliation*” happens when both persons involved in a conflict humble themselves and decide to tread the path of a healed future, empowered by a healed memory. Jim Campbell OP was an

American who served in the US Air Force during World War II and took part in the bombing of Japan. Even after he joined the Order, he was tormented by what he did as a soldier. When he met a Japanese Dominican, Fr. Oshida, he approached him and apologized: “*Fr. Oshida, I bombed your people during the war; I have come to apologize.*” Fr. Oshida replied: “*I was part of the Japanese anti-aircraft unit; we were trying to shoot you down, and I am also sorry, we missed!*” Realizing that Fr. Oshida was making up his story, Fr. Campbell laughed; and they hugged each other!¹³ It was liberating for Fr. Campbell, who was tormented by his conscience, to realize that, in *any conflict*, everyone involved takes part in the same evil, thus we cannot blame it *solely* either on ourselves or on others.

However, if reconciliation is not possible because the other party is gone or dead or simply refuses to be reconciled, one take the path of *forgiveness*. A saint once said: “*Forgiveness transforms circumstances of sin into occasions of grace.*”¹⁴ We need to realize that to forgive is to take control of our peace of mind and happiness. We don’t wait for the offender to apologize, otherwise we put our peace of mind in the hands of the one who has done us wrong. What if the offender is already dead? Would that mean we could no longer forgive because no apology will ever be offered? Someone wisely said: “*To forgive is to set a prisoner free, and to realize that that prisoner is you!*”

Attentive Listening to God and One Another. Within the Eucharistic celebration, we listen to the proclamation of the Word of God, and to its elucidation in the homily. Essentially, preaching God’s word is *dialogic*: for the preaching to truly convey God’s message, the preacher and his hearers must contemplate God’s word; for preaching to touch the hearts of the people, the preacher must listen attentively to the life-situations of his people. This dialogic structure in the liturgy is a paradigm for dialogue in communal discernment: before we listen to one another, we must first listen, in prayerful contemplation, to God’s word, that we may truly discern His will for our community.

One of the fascinating miracles Jesus did was the healing of a man who cannot speak: first he “*put his finger into the man’s ear; then touched his tongue and told him Ephphatha!, be opened!*” (Mk 7:32-35). Clearly, *we cannot speak unless we have heard*. In fact, most mute people

cannot speak not because something is wrong with their tongues but because they are deaf. One cannot produce a sound without hearing any. A few years ago, in the university of Santo Tomas in Manila, more than two thousand deaf patients were given free hearing aid by a foundation. I personally witnessed how the innocent faces of deaf children lighted up in amazement as they entered the world of sound! It seems as though they felt tickled by hearing something for the first time! Then they are taught to produce their first syllables: “Ma-ma, Pa-pa” Their capacity to speak words depends largely on their capacity to listen to words. They could not speak unless they have heard.

All the baptized are called to be preachers of God’s word,¹⁵ to speak, even on behalf of the Church. But one could only speak in the name of the Church if one first *listens* in attentive obedience to God’s Word and what the Church teaches. For how could one speak rightly if one has not heard correctly? How could one speak *about* God if one does not speak *with* God or listen to Him in prayer and contemplation?

Communion. The grace (*res tantum*) of the Eucharist is communion with God and with one another.¹⁶ “*The Eucharist creates communion and fosters communion.*”¹⁷ The birth of the Church at Pentecost is an event where people coming, literally, from different roads converged. The graced capacity of this *ekklesia* to embrace diversity, to be truly *katholikos* has brought many peoples from “*different roads and walks of life*” to a singular direction, as men and women who are first known as belonging to *The Way, hodos* (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).¹⁸

Mission. *Ite, missa est*. Communion is ordered towards being sent, towards mission. One who receives holy communion is impelled to share, to bring Jesus to others. In like manner, synodal communion is always oriented beyond itself, towards mission, to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), for how could it be truly synodal when it ceases to be “*on the way*”.

The unanimity of heart and mind of the first community of believers (Acts 4:32) is an ideal for the entire Church. St. Augustine further specifies such unanimity, “*to be of one heart and mind on the way to God*”.¹⁹ For Augustine, oneness of mind and heart i.e., communion remains static, without an explicit *telos*. Thus he adds: *on the way to God*. Synodality, being on the way together, imbues the notion of communion

with movement and dynamism. Every synodal moment, from a small community chapter to an Ecumenical Council, presents a graced opportunity for growth and development. As synod members gather to discern answers to questions facing the church, they listen and learn from each other until a consensus is attained. Each conclusion of a synod is another communal step forward for the ecclesial community concerned.

Notes

1. FRANCIS, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015, *AAS* 107 (2015) 1139.
2. PAUL VI, *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, II.
3. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 73, a. 4, resp.
4. *Lumen Gentium*, 12.
5. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018) no. 6. See also no. 3: “‘Synod’ is an ancient and venerable word in the Tradition of the Church, whose meaning draws on the deepest themes of Revelation. Composed of a preposition *συν* (with) and the noun *ὁδός* (path), it indicates the path along which the People of God walk together. Equally, it refers to the Lord Jesus, who presents Himself as “the way, the truth and the life” (*Jn* 14,6), and to the fact that Christians, His followers, were originally called “followers of the Way” (*cf. Acts* 9,2; 19,9,23; 22,4; 24,14,22).
6. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Ad Ephesios* IX, 2; Franz Xaver Funk (ed.), *Patres apostolici* I, Tubingen: H. Laupp, 1901, p. 220.
7. PAUL VI, *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, II, 1.b. While the document pertains specifically to the Synod of Bishops, the goal of a synodal gathering remains the same on all levels of a synodal assembly.
8. Though a more literal translation is “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials”, the Greek text conveys a Spirit-led discernment and decision by the apostles, which is rendered a bit loosely yet clearly as “we have decided, the Holy Spirit and us...”
9. This Jewish practice of casting of lots is made “in the presence of the Lord”; for instance, Joshua cast lots when he allotted the lands to the Israelites (*Joshua* 18:6,8,10). True, it is the Lord, not blind chance, who decides: “into the bag the lot is cast, but from the Lord comes every decision” (*Proverbs* 16:33).
10. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 6
11. *Lumen Gentium*, 12.
12. Benedict XVI, Homily, Opening Liturgy, Synod of Bishops 2012.
13. TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE, *Take the Plunge: Living Baptism and Confirmation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012) p. 129.

14. St. Julian Eymard, Rule of Life, 9.
15. BENEDICT XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 94.
16. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 73, a. 4, resp.
17. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 40.
18. *hē hodos* is a uniquely Lucan name for the early Christians as a group. See Joseph Fitzmyer, SJ, ‘The Designation of Early Christians in Acts and their Significance’ in *To Advance the Gospel*, 2nd edition, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998, pp. 320-321.
19. In some versions of the Rule of St. Augustine we read: *et sit vobis anima una et cor unum* (Act 4, 32) *in Deo*. In this version, “in Deo” (ablative) indicates position which is static. However, the *Regula ad servos Dei* (PL 32) uses “in Deum” (accusative) which conveys movement, i.e., “towards God or Godward”. Here, I proffer for reflection, the version with a “dynamic” sense i.e., “in Deum”, which St. Augustine used in explaining what “living in unity” means: *Et quid est, in unum? Et erat illis, inquit, anima una et cor unum in Deum*. (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 132,2, PL 36) and in his letter to nuns written around 434, where he used the same expression: *Primum propter quod estis in unum congregatae, ut unanimes habitetis in domo, et sit vobis cor unum et anima una in Deum* (Epistola 211, 5, PL 33; all Latin texts are from the Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana edition). For this reason, Van Bavel avers that: “È caratteristico di Agostino aggiungere quasi sempre all’idea di “un cuor solo e un’anima sola, tratta degli Atti degli apostoli, la frase: “in cammino verso Dio” (It is typical of Augustine to add almost always to the idea of “one heart and one soul,” from the Acts of the Apostles, the phrase: “on the way to God”. Cf. Tarsicius Van Bavel OSA, *La Regola di Agostino d’Ippona*, Palermo: Edizioni Augustinus, 1986, p. 48.