

Celebrating Synodality: Synodality as a Fundamental Aspect of Christian Liturgy

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Abstract

A synodal church makes assumptions about our basic ecclesial experience which takes place when we assemble liturgically, especially when we act eucharistically. The basic assumption is that we are a genuine human community knowing and relating to one another as brothers and sisters in baptism. Only real communities can authentically image the church's nature. This is a 'bottom – up' activity. If we wish this, then we must rediscover our liturgy and celebrate it in a new way as flowing out from a community and helping it to discover its own nature. This, in turn, makes demands on our understanding of ministry and its structures. While many Catholics endorse synodality, their willingness to change the shape of the presbyterate is uncertain.

Keywords

Synodality, Church, Liturgy, Assembly, Memory, Celebration, Eucharist, Priestly People

'Synodality', 'collegiality', 'subsidiarity', and '*koinonia*' are all key buzz-words in Catholic ecclesiology since the Second Vatican Council. But if these words are to have any meaning other than as terms within a theoretical theological discourse, then they must *describe the experience* of the People of God as they live their lives of discipleship, as they relate to one another as sisters and brothers of the Christ, and in the style of living they convey within the world. Conversely, if these are not words that can be used to describe what a group of Christians understand and experience about their life as Catholics, how they relate to one another, how they belong, and how they imagine their discipleship as witnessing to the gospel, then these are mere sounds: empty concepts.

But if synodality – itself a word that originates from the deep academic recesses of where canon law meets ecclesiology – is or should

be part of the make-up of the People of God, then where should we look to find it? And, when we seek it out, what would it appear to be like? For many it is a name for a set of relationships between bishops or between groups of bishops and the pope; for others it is a way of relating the work of parishes within a diocese; and for most it, along with subsidiarity and collegiality, is a vague term relating to administrative style – most often mentioned when its absence is regretted or as a longed-for corporate goal.¹ If that is all that it involves, then it will never have any traction outside a small group (bishops, presbyters, deacons, and a few lay people) who concern themselves with the running of the church. Likewise, if it is just a concern of this group it is a waste of energy to see synodality as worth developing more widely as beneficial to lives of Christians and our common mission. Put another way, if theologians see this as worth pursuing as an ecclesial ideal, then our sisters or brothers have to experience a difference in their lives as disciples (and we might have to consider our theological debates as belonging solely within the academy). However, it is my belief that synodality is a concept that is important to the life of the Church and that it is an element in the on-going reform of the Roman Catholic Church that was initiated by the Second Vatican Council. From that standpoint I am going to examine here what it might look like – for it is a concept that becomes manifest in many forms – in the area of our public common work of worship (*leitourgia*).

Many theologians eager for a renewal of the Catholic Church dismiss the liturgical renewal of our practice as something incidental to their concerns or as almost an irrelevant issue – a ‘fiddling with rubrics’ – that can be left to one side. Rather than take issue with this stand, to those who would see the issue of uncovering the theme of a synodal church within our liturgy as unimportant, I would point out this statement by Hans Küng which shows how he imaged the link between liturgical renewal and the renewal of the church more generally:

¹ There is, at the basis of this notion, the manner in which bishops came together in the early centuries to agree common strategies and rules. While some synods involved only the bishops from a particular area, some had a much wider representation, and some synods had far more influence than others – and it was from this synodal activity that the notion of a ‘ecumenical’ council evolved. However, this rich history is of limited use to us today in our discussions because (1) this synodal activity was primarily legal in emphasis aimed at providing a shared set of practices expressed in decrees; (2) this legal function passed over to the canonists with the rise of systematic canon law; and (3) the aim of current discussions on synodality – as this term is used by Pope Francis – seem to have little to do with legislative purposes for which synods, at any level, were called. So while the language of ‘synodality’ has a history; that history does not illuminate the current discussions be held in dioceses across the world.

The liturgy is and remains the centre of the life of the church. If this can be successfully renewed, won't that also have effects on all the areas of church activity?²

However, any statement about the renewal of our worship proceeds from certain key assumptions about human nature and the nature of the Christian endeavour, and in this case all that I shall say in this paper follows on three suppositions. The first is about the size of human communities. While Catholics are aware that they belong to a global community that includes millions of people, we can easily overlook a human fact that the actual affective communities which impinge on us, in which we live out our lives, and within which we work, are far smaller. Social psychologists point out that the largest size of any real community in which we act is determined by our biology and the neural networks by which we understand and engage with the world – it is a datum of our humanity as much as our need for sustenance and hydration. That community maximum size is estimated to be around 150 people and is often much smaller. This is the largest community in which I, as an individual, can have stable social relationships where I know the others in the group, they can know me, and we can interact in some way together.³ This insight is less startling as an assumption if we recall that Aristotle believed that the *demoi* within a city should be such that all can know one another by name,⁴ and it was the proverbial Greek wisdom that the assembly should be small enough for someone to make themselves heard without ‘having the lungs of Stentor’, and the fact that most worship has taken place not in great cathedrals but in small village churches which are not that much larger than the ancient village synagogues archaeologists uncover in Palestine, while our early Christian sources assume gatherings of a domestic scale. So, any engagement with collegiality or synodality must take its starting point in such small communities that have human actuality.

² *My Struggle for Freedom: Memoirs* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2002), 285.

³ The number is not chosen here at random but is derived from the research of Prof. Robin Dunbar (hence 150 is often called ‘Dunbar’s Number’). Dunbar has studied how there is a fixed relationship between the brain size of primates and their average group size; and, in turn, this group size can be used finding the optimum arrangements in human organizations: this is an ‘optimum human group size’ and one cannot just keep increasing the size of any group – a classical *sortes* – with transforming the relationships of the individuals within the group to the group. See his *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (Cambridge, MA, 1998) for an introduction to a vast literature. For an indication of the kind of research that underlies, and is the rationale for, a community of no more than c.150, see L.C. Aiello and R.I.M. Dunbar, ‘Neocortex Size, Group Size, and the Evolution of Language’, *Current Anthropology* 34,2 (1993): 184-93. It has been popularised as the expression that ‘humans are only capable of 150 social connections’; for an example of such popularization, see M. Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York, NY, 2000).

⁴ *Politics* 1326b.

Equally, the tendency visible across the church of ever larger notional communities – combining parishes to accord with the numbers of available presbyters or assigning pastoral territories along such lines – must not be judged on abstract theological grounds but simply dismissed as anthropologically devoid of meaning. Human community – and so all ecclesial realities – is not fractal or scalable: we have to think in terms of communities such as we humans can actually live and flourish within as a starting point.

The second assumption follows from thinking in terms of communities of around, or fewer than, 150 people. While Catholics have often challenged theoretically the basis of individualism and endorsed the notion of the common good within our social teaching since the time of Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum*, we have been far less concerned about a sacramental individualism within the actual working out of our lives as Christians. Long before individualism was recognised as a style of human living,⁵ we, Catholics, had normalised the 'Private Mass', made participation in the Eucharist by laypeople a matter of private devotion and spiritual accounting, individualised sin such that our corporate failings became invisible to us, and imagined faith as individual survival in which a personal account of worth and blame could be balanced by such devices as indulgences. While we formally confess ourselves to be the body of the Christ, we have to confront the legacy of this sacral individualism is still powerfully active within our imaginations, our behaviour within the church, and within our theology. Only by acknowledging this problematic inheritance can we set out on a pattern of behaviour that seeks to value individuals in relation to one another as communities, and communities not as agglomerations but as networks of relationships between individuals. This perspective is both the basis of a synodal vision of the church and also for a imaginative understanding of how liturgy performs and enacts our vision of new life with one another and with God.⁶ It is this togetherness, *communitas*, of our

⁵ 'Individualism' was a notion first mentioned by Alexis de Tocqueville in his reflections on American society (*Democracy in America* (New York, NY, 1945), 318) and he described it thus: 'Each person, withdrawn into himself, behaves as though he were a stranger to the destiny of all the others. His children and his good friends constitute for him the whole of the human species. As for his transactions with his fellow citizens, he may mix among them but he sees them not; he touches them, but he does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone. And if on these terms there remains in his mind a sense of family, there no longer remains a sense of society'. This famous quotation can be used liturgically: does it describe your experience when gathered for the Eucharist? If so, it is the strongest argument in favour of a synodal liturgy.

⁶ While we use of understanding primarily as a means of analysis of what is before us, we are also capable of understanding in a way that shows us what *can* be – while such creative understanding is often seen as lying solely within the sphere of the creative arts, it is at least arguable that the theologian is equally called to imagine 'what could be' alongside a 'realistic' understanding of what is present now – not least because ritual activity is such an important art form.

humanity and our acting that makes our Christian liturgy so humanly important, and, in turn, which makes our liturgy a real component in our journey as the pilgrim People of God.⁷

My third assumption is that such real communities are formed by memory, remembering, and re-enactment. As Jan Assmann put it: ‘It is not “blood” or “descent” as such that keeps a group [as a family, tribe, clan] together but the shared *consciousness* of it, the idea of common descent’.⁸ These communities are formed by what they remember and, therefore, they must perform and enact the vision of what they want to become. We can only become the people of God, aware of the dignity of each, when we live in ‘affective communities’ where each of us can enact our vision of the gospel. It will be objected that this ignores the reality that we become part of the community of the Church through water in baptism – but this is to conceive our discipleship only in terms of our theological vision. If our ontological status arising from baptism is to become a life of discipleship within an actual community of faith, it must find support through some common endeavour within that community.⁹ This means that identity formation for the Christian, the community that is the church, and the notion of being ‘wholly celebrant’ (*participatio actuosa*) are so interconnected in practice as to be incapable of separation. While many Catholics fear this vision of liturgy that involves every member of the assembly as an actor, and there have been many learned attempts since the Second Vatican Council to so spiritualize its meaning as to make it meaningless, this paper will assume that any group which does not facilitate each of its members to affectively connect with it is failing in its proclamation of the gospel.¹⁰ Consequently, liturgy must not only form and re-form the memory of the community, but must do so in a way that we cannot but be aware

⁷ The notion is taken from anthropologist *cum* liturgist Victor Turner; for a new expression of this ritual need for community, see R. Sennett, *Together: The Ritual, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (London 2012).

⁸ Jan Assmann, ‘Form as a Mnemonic Device’ in R.A. Horsley, J.A Draper, and J.M. Foley eds, *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory and Mark* (Minneapolis, Mn, 2006) 67–83 at 67.

⁹ For this distinction between our baptismal status and our lives as disciples we can appeal to the classical theology of baptism as imparting a ‘character’; St Thomas sees the ‘character’ of baptism in terms of it being a passive potency to receive the grace to grow in the Christian life (*Summa Theologiae* 3a, 63, 4c) whereby that which is given as a capability becomes actual in the context of the life among other disciples. To re-use Thomas’s image (3a, 63, 3c), if baptism is like a coin impressed so that it can be used, it must be used to become fully a coin which, in turn, supposes a context of commerce. It is significant to note that throughout his treatment of the on-going effect of baptism, Thomas sees it as ordered towards the liturgy (‘... *aliquam ... potestatem respect ... quae pertinent ad divinum cultum*’ (3a, 63, 5c – and he makes the point in every article of this question).

¹⁰ For an exploration of the debates over this phrase of Vatican II, see T. Elich, ‘Full, Conscious and Active Participation’ in C. Pilcher, D. Orr, and E. Harrington eds, *Vatican Council II: Reforming Liturgy* (Adelaide, 21013), 25–7.

that we are the baptised, and I am one of these, which establishes us as sisters or brothers within a family of equals,¹¹ a celebrant of the Church's great hymn of praise, a participant in the work of my actual community, and also a disciple who has *chosen* the Way of Jesus the Anointed One.¹²

So, if synodality is to start from the ground, what would such a synodal local church look like? How would it express itself to itself? What follows is a series of pen pictures of a synodical church. As pen pictures they are utopian in the strict sense: they do not exist in any one place, but they are also, in the other sense of utopian: a vision of what could come about with changes in the way individual communities act and in the way the Catholic Church, as a network of real communities, could re-imagine itself in its laws.¹³

Solidarity in the Body of the Christ: Becoming the *Circumstantes*

Few Catholics have ever had the sense perception of being gathered at the eucharistic table or of belonging, physically, to a synodal church.¹⁴ The very notion that they would have such an experience usually frightens conservatives as a dangerous novelty. When such experience is given – in 'experimental communities' or university chaplaincies or the houses of some religious orders, it is often then represented as the ephemeral affectivity of an effete western liberal elite symptomatic of a decay following from the Second Vatican Council. But such 'restorationists' should contemplate, in Latin, these words:

¹¹ See T. O'Loughlin, 'Equality as a Theological Principle within Roman Catholic Ecclesiology', *Ecclesiology* 18(2022)35-56.

¹² This element of choice – I have chosen to follow / religion is for me a decision – is the great cultural gulf between our time and earlier societies: in a secular age, religion is optional. This theme is explored by Charles Taylor in his *A Secular Age* (Harvard, CT, 2007).

¹³ On this imagining itself in its laws, see my 'Sacramental Languages and Intercommunion: identifying a source of tension between the Catholic and the Reformed churches', *Studia Liturgica* 47 (2017):138-150.

¹⁴ It might be objected that this statement does not take account of communities of religious, monasteries, mendicant communities, campus ministry Masses, or those who have gone to places such as Taizè. However, if one could quantify the number those Catholics with that experience and compare that with the number who go to their local parish on a Sunday, it is suspected that it would be a very low percentage. Moreover, while in some places – e.g. Catholic run universities – there may be such events as celebrations for students; this would not be usual in institutions, more generally, where such chaplaincy services are limited. Likewise, when visiting a monastic community recently I saw that while the whole monastic community (including non-priest monks and sisters of that order) assembled around the table in a sanctuary area, all those who we understood to be visitors to the abbey knelt in pews in the nave of the building: so even those with extra-parochial experience may not have had the experience of being around the table. See Richard Giles, 'The Simple Room in Carlow' in T.O'Loughlin ed., *Shaping the Assembly: How our building form us in worship* (forthcoming).

*Memento, Domine,
famulorum famularumque tuarum
et omnium circumstantium
quorum tibi fides cognita est et nota devotio ...*

This ancient prayer, long embedded in what we now refer to as Eucharistic Prayer I, has such a vision of the assembled body of Christians taking part in the celebration that no modern translation has dared to render it literally.¹⁵ It reads thus:

O Lord, keep in mind your male servants (*famuli*) as well as (the enclitic *-que*) your female servants (*famulae*), indeed (*et*) all who are standing around (*circumstantes*), because their faith in you is known as their dedication obvious ...

That this – ‘the memento of the living’ – originally referred to the actual women and men standing around the table with the presider is made clear from the corresponding ‘memento of the dead’ where there is no mention of *circumstantes*: the dead await resurrection in their graves rather than standing with the living at the liturgy.¹⁶

The venerable Roman Canon assumes that those present stand around the table alongside the bishop or presbyter as he gives voice to their common praise and petition. They stand there because this is their table, their offering of praise to the Father in, through, and with the Christ – and by standing with one another they affirm both their priestly dignity as the baptised (the action of standing), and their social dignity as human equals (by standing alongside one another) before God. Already in the church in Corinth in the mid-first century there was the problem of human social stratification contradicting the community vision that should characterise the disciples of Jesus. Later, we find the same quest of human distinction coupled with the desire for clerical distinctiveness affecting the Eucharist.¹⁷ Eventually, we arrived at the

¹⁵ The origins and Latinity of this petition is examined in my ‘The *Commemoratio pro vivis* of the Roman Canon: a Textual Witness to the Evolution of Western Eucharistic Theologies?’ in J. Day and M. Vinzent eds, *Studia Patristica: Early Roman Liturgy to 600* 71(2014) 69-91.

¹⁶ This notion seems strange to modern ears, but when the memento of the dead is read within the culture that produces it we become aware of how corporeal was their understanding of this prayer. See the survey of the place of the dead in Christian consciousness in Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago, 1984), 88-127; and see T. O’Loughlin, ‘Treating the “Private Mass” as Normal: Some Unnoticed Evidence from Adomnán’s *De locis sanctis*’, *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 51 (2009): 334-44; and idem, ‘Death, burial, community and anamnesis in a medieval parish: the interplay of place, liturgy, and story in thirteenth-century Chaldon, England’, *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* (forthcoming).

¹⁷ Cf. C. Leonhard, ‘Morning salutations and the Decline of Sympotic Eucharists in the Third Century’, *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 18 (2014): 420-42.

situation of a holy of holies of a priesthood¹⁸ (a *sacerdotium*) distinct from the People of God: expressed and experienced in the architecture of a sanctuary railed off from the nave. This divided church experience (a segregated assembly of clergy and laity mirrored in a divided ritual space) is still what is experienced in most celebrations. Until this is changed, and a new experience made commonplace, talk of synodality is merely sounds.

The solution lies in creating within a building – or any room capable of holding about 75 people¹⁹ – a level space free of pews / benches. If we are to know and experience a familiarity as sisters and brothers this, though very small by modern standards of church buildings, is the sort of size of community we should be aiming at,²⁰ and it is such affective communities that we should be thinking about when we discuss the number of presbyters needed within a diocese.²¹ Place a table in the middle and locate a few chairs – for those who are unable to stand – around it.²² The experience will not only be one of a more involved liturgy, but a new sense of all present being equal as sisters and brothers of one another and of the Lord Jesus.²³

¹⁸ Note the imagery of the prayer when the priest approached the table in the un-reformed rite: *Aufer a nobis ... iniquitates nostras: ut ad Sancta sanctorum puris mereamur mentibus introire ...*

¹⁹ If we allow that Dunbar's Number indicates that a group of 150 people is the upper limit on the number of social connections humans can maintain, then an *ecclesia* has to be less than that to allow for its own growth, to be able to welcome visitors, and so as to be as intimate as possible while not being a little clique. This number – 75 – seems to fulfil this requirement and, interestingly, roughly corresponds with the numbers suggested by various kinds of evidence for eucharistic communities in the early middle ages (see T. O'Loughlin, 'The Praxis and Explanations of Eucharistic Fraction in the Ninth Century: the Insular Evidence', *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 45 [2003]: 1-20). Some see the notion of such small communities as 'fatuous' or even 'silly' because it is so far from our Catholic experience in the last two centuries and large buildings – sometimes capable of holding thousands – have been the norm. But it should be borne in mind that any trip through Europe visiting rural parish churches (or the many chapels to be found in historic centres of cities) will show how many of these buildings would be filled with a congregation of 100 people.

²⁰ This was first examined by J. P. Audet, *Structures of Christian Priesthood* (London, 1967), 167-70; and see Anscar J. Chupungco, *Liturgies of the Future: The Process and Methods of Inculturation* (Mahwah, NJ, 1989), 71-101.

²¹ See T. O'Loughlin, 'How many priests do we need?' *New Blackfriars* 86 (2005): 642-57; and idem, more recently, 'Theology and Christian Discipleship II: Are We Short of Priests?' *Doctrine and Life* 67/10 (2017): 16-9.

²² On the connection between theology and the experienced space, see R.S. Vosko, *Art and Architecture for Congregational Worship: The Search for a Common Ground* (Collegeville, MN, 2019); and R. Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent: Re-ordering the church building for worship and mission in the new millennium* (Norwich, 1996).

²³ Cf. R. Hurley, 'The Eucharist Room at Carlow Liturgy Centre: The Search for Meaning', *Worship* 70,3 (1996): 238-52.

Presbyters: Status or Ministry

One major experiential difference between Roman Catholic presbyters and those of eastern churches and those who hold leadership roles – however they might describe themselves – in the churches of the sixteenth-century reformation is how they view ordination. On the whole, for Catholics, ordination is the moment of special election, the moment of consecration to a specific status within the church, and the moment of the conferment of sacral powers unique to the presbyterate. Many Catholics are happy to speak of this priesthood in terms of its ‘ontological distinction’ from that of the rest of the *Christifideles*, and so ordination is a special personal moment to the one ordained. It is thus celebrated as if it were parallel with a wedding and is recalled as a personal anniversary:

*Pater sancte, qui me
ad communionem cum aeterno Christi tui sacerdotio et
ad Ecclesiae tuae ministerium nullis meis meritis elegisti ...*²⁴

The presbyter is chosen to be communion with the priesthood of the Christ and, then, for the ministry to the Church. This sets up such a division at the base of a presbyter’s vision that all talk of synodality is always chasing to catch up with an experience of the specialness of this priesthood.

By contrast, for most other churches *ordination is a means to ministry*. Why are you being ordained? In order that you can perform a ministry needed by the people who make up the church. So, it is ordination *so that* one can minister, whereas among Catholics it is ordination as a personal fact *and then* one can minister. This sacerdotalist perception has deep roots in the hierarchical vision that had been dominant in Catholicism for centuries and it is deeply embedded in

²⁴ *Missale Romanum*, 1969 et seq., Collect from ‘the Mass on the anniversary of the priest’s own ordination’. While this might seem an exception within the missal in its use of the singular with self-reference to the speaker (as distinct from the more usual ‘we’-form of liturgical prayer as in ‘*oremus*’) we should note that it accords with very individual-centred view of the priest’s liturgical ministry within vision of seminary formation fostered by ‘the French School’ of spirituality (see C. McGrath-Merkel, *Bérulle’s Spiritual Theology of Priesthood: A Study in Speculative Mysticism and Applied Metaphysics* [Münster 2018] who has examined its underpinnings in seminary formation in detail). We should also note how it manifested itself in prayers that became part of the daily prayer of many priests as in the Thanksgiving after Mass that was to be found in the 1570 Missal and on the wall, over a *prie Dieu*, in many sacristies: ‘*Gratias tibi ago, Domine ... qui me peccatorem, indignus famulum tuum, nullis meis meritis, sed sola dignatione misericordiae tuae satiare dignatus es pretioso corpore et sanguine Filii tuae ...*’ which was used at time when at most Masses when all the celebrant received communion. This prayer, attributed to St Thomas Aquinas, can still be found in an appendix to the official translation of the Liturgy of the Hours (The Divine Office (London, 1974), 1, 653*; 2, 682*; and 3,845*). So while there have been criticisms of this prayer within the missal, we should note that it does reflect the lived spirituality of many priests.

our practical theology through our laws relating to presbyters and our spirituality of the priesthood as a recent study of the 1992 papal document, *Pastores dabo vobis*, has shown.²⁵ This will not change quickly or soon, and consequently the challenge is to create structures that help all Catholics, whether or not they have presbyteral ordination, to re-imagine ordination in terms of a specific service within a community.

One starting point, available already within the possibilities of Canon Law, would be for every community to take Pope Francis's decree in January 2021, *Spiritus Domini*, to heart.²⁶ Let every diocese sponsor the training of lectors and acolytes seriously, and so equip women and men to be formally appointed as ministers to act in the liturgy. It would no longer be a community and a minister, but a community with a variety of interacting, officially designated, ministers. Many will say that this is such a minor step that it makes no difference, yet until every community has a team of designated ministers we cannot say we have started on the road to a synodal church.

So what would this involve? It would mean that in every community – probably a group fewer than 100 people – there would have to be a discernment process as to who are the members best suited to proclaiming the Word in the assembly and who are best suited to helping the assembly in its gathering around the table. This would require a commitment to ministry – and to taking the steps towards ministry such as training – by both the individuals concerned, the group, and the network of churches that form the diocese. When it can be seen, and the effects experienced every Sunday, that there are many ministers in this gathering all working together for the common good and *servicing among* the community, as distinct from a single expert who may see himself as being of service to the community (he being ontologically distinct from the other members), then we shall have a church that is synodal in its perception of ministry. Moreover, if in such a real community there were between 10 and 20 members who were formally commissioned as lectors or acolytes, synodality would be part of the normal thinking of the community, there would be widespread 'buy in' to the vision of a synodal church, rather than the idea being the preserve of the few.

Before dismissing this as a first step to church reform, one should consider the level of challenge this move posed to the older understanding of church. So,

²⁵ McGrath-Merkel, 2018.

²⁶ This Apostolic Letter was issued 'motu proprio' on 15 January 2021 to modify Canon 230,1 (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html); it has now been given effect by a letter from the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments dated 3 December 2021 (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html).

- (1) Will communities shift their perception of those who perform the readings from being simply those ‘helping out the priest’ to those who are taking up part of the baptismal call to witness in word before the assembly to the Good News preached by the Christ?
- (2) Will these women and men see this as a ministry, and part of conforming their lives to the work of Jesus?
- (3) Will presbyters take this vision to heart when they seek out readers and encourage them to see this as a real ministry?
- (4) Will presbyters take to heart that this changes their own relationship with the assembly and that this shift is part of the death of clericalism?
- (5) Will those who help in the Ministry of the Table see this as part of their baptismal calling and not just a ‘job’ to ‘help out Father?’ Acolytes are not just ‘jumped up altar boys’ but part of the community’s celebration of its identity.
- (6) Will presbyters see that this shift in the law is a reminder of a deeper shift in the Church’s understanding that has been going on since the 1950s, but which has often barely affected the Church’s practice?
- (7) Will bishops / episcopal conferences take Pope Francis’s letter to heart and actually institute these ministries of lector and acolyte? Bishops can hardly say that it will need a lot of time to think about – the actual structures of these ministries was established thirty-nine years ago in 1972 by *Ministeria quaedam* (as Pope Francis reminds us now), and they already have the necessary liturgical texts with them in the Pontifical.²⁷

Deacons: A Way of Relating

There has been, and continues to be, much discussion about whether or not it is possible for the Church to ordain women as deacons: the results of these historical investigations are destined to be inconclusive because while there can be no doubt there were women deacons in the

²⁷ The more recent letter mentioned in the note gives some indications on how this is being viewed from the Roman perspective; it remains to be seen how particular regions and diocese will respond to this development.

history of the Church and who were seen as real ministers,²⁸ they disappeared before the notion of ordination – as now used in relation to ‘ordained ministry’ by Catholics – had emerged. The questions now being examined by a Roman commission are an exercise in anachronism akin to checking if horse-drawn carriages two hundred years ago kept to the speed limits. So rather than waste time in trying ‘to discover’ an historical warrant for women as deacons – a notion that assumes the Catholic theology is *semper eadem* or some sort of inevitable historical process of development – it might be better to ask how a vision of the diaconate should be part of the life of every community.²⁹

The question of the slayer of his brother in the Genesis story is posed to every human being: ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ (Gen 4:9) – and the answer must be a resounding: yes – I have responsibilities of care for all my sisters and brothers. While it might be sufficient at a political level to acknowledge our universal fraternity / sorority as human beings with shared responsibilities for the planet, for Christians who claim Jesus as their brother this relationship of brother / sister is far deeper and is part of our very identity. This is a claim re-made every time we, as Christians, gather in the Christ to thank the Father, respond to the call: *orate, fratres*.³⁰ This universal fraternity can only become actualized, and experienced, when it becomes the driving force of a human-sized community. The slogan of the environmental movement, ‘think global, act local’, should thus also be an organising principle of both Catholic liturgy and a synodal church.

In a community which takes this theme of service, *diakonia*, as basic to its manner of relating to one another there are a number of links

²⁸ See P. Pylvänäinen, *Agents in Liturgy, Charity and Communication: The Tasks of Female Deacons in the Apostolic Constitutions* (Turnhout, 2020).

²⁹ In the last decade there has appeared a great many books and articles on the diaconate – often connected with the issue of whether or not women can be ordained deacons (e.g. Phyllis Zagano ed., *Women Deacons?: Essays with Answers* (Collegeville, MN, 2016) – and it would simply be an exercise in bibliography to try to summarise these studies here. However, one should note that there has been paradigm shift in studies of the diaconate in recent decades that can be traced to the approach of John N. Collins in *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford 1990).

³⁰ See J.A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Missarum Sollemnia* (New York, NY, 1955), 2, 82-90. It is sometimes asserted by those who favour a priest-centred interpretation of eucharistic sacrifice that this prayer was originally addressed to the ministers surrounding the bishop in the sanctuary. However, while this interpretation of the phrase is supported by one of the oldest manuscripts containing the text, the text is itself older and in the sweep of its distribution make its clear – and this is Jungmann’s position – that it was originally addressed to the entire congregation. Jungmann sees the confirmation of this – that the prayer is addressed to the whole congregation – not only in medieval commentaries (e.g. Amalar of Metz, *De ecclesiasticis officiis* 3,19 [see now E. Knibbs, *Amalar of Metz: On the Liturgy* (London, 2014), 2, 132]) but in some extant medieval prayers which include ‘*et sorores*’, and in the fact that the priest turns towards the people and the response was / is expected to come from them (i.e. in the mouth of the server). Moreover, this is certainly how it is to be understood in the present missal where the rubric states: ‘*versus ad populum ... dicit*’.

that must be re-established. While the historical warrants for ordaining women are elusive, those for a direct connection between gathering for the Eucharist and collecting money for the poor, and for a link between the community assembled and a concern for the sick and housebound, are explicit and clear.³¹ The liturgy supposes a network of care: those we pray for in the Prayer of the Faithful – the poor, the sick, the excluded, we imagine as being welcomed at our table in that it anticipates the heavenly banquet, and we serve in the local food bank and through practical action. Mt 25:34-40 can serve as a check-list for the authenticity of any eucharistic assembly: ‘as you did it to the least of those who are members of my family, you did it to me’.

But such actualised, practical concern requires skills and administration or it will amount to no more than pious words, and such skills will only be found among specific members of any community. Such people must be sought out, helped to recognise that those skills have an ecclesial as well as a social and economic dimension, and then commissioned to express this part of that church’s mission. Those so commissioned we should designate ‘deacons’. This is not a case of outsourcing this care to deputies, but having those within the community who hold us to account and facilitate the actions of the group. As Christians in the world we acclaim human solidarity and fraternity, while in our community we acknowledge that we serve and care for one another.³²

Celebrating Synodality: The Example of Jesus

The notion of *diakonia* is not to be confused with merely a religious variant of social concern, nor dismissed, as so often happens, as a confusion of Christian love with social work. *Diakonia* is an expression of Christian identity made manifest in accordance with the incarnational principle: in serving the sisters and brothers beside and visible to us, we are serving the God who is invisible to us (1 Jn 4:7-21). But how could we perform and remember and enact this again in our communities?

In the Johannine Last Supper we are given a demonstration of the relationships that should characterise every community: we should be prepared to abase ourselves and, after the manner of the lowliest female household slaves, wash each other’s feet (Jn 13:4-20).³³ This is

³¹ See my ‘Reading, and re-reading Justin’s account of “the Eucharist”’, *Anaphora* 12 (2018/9): 67-110.

³² Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n.93 which presents the work of the Church as one of service, what we might call *diakonia*, to all people.

³³ That this is the lowliest of tasks can be seen in, *inter alia*, two texts roughly contemporary with the gospels. The first is the retelling of the Septuagintal text of Gen 18:1-3 as found in the *Testament of Abraham* (Text A 6,6 and Text B 3,9 as found in E.P. Sanders ed., ‘The Testament of Abraham’ in J.H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* [London, 1983], I, 871-902); and, secondly, in the tale of *Joseph and Aseneth* (13,15 and 20,1-5 as found in C. Burchard ed., ‘Joseph and Aseneth’ in J.H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament*

already part of our liturgy during the Paschal triduum, but it has become a matter of spectacle, a mime of a text, or simply an expression of the liturgical leader's – always a presbyter – relationship to those in his care.³⁴ While this is a useful liturgy, it often simply cloaks a hierarchical relationship that while power remains power, it should be exercised with humility. A more careful reading of the gospel text reveals that the command of Jesus is to all the disciples: they must wash one another's feet. They are not asked to mime Jesus's activity, but to take his relationship of service among them to be the paradigm of their relationship to one another. It is this set of relationships within a church which is expressed in the Synoptics in their dispute about greatness during the supper,³⁵ and which is summed up in Luke's statement: 'But I am among you as one who is like a servant / a deacon (*hós ho diakonón*)'.

In the monastic tradition this communal vision of this shocking ritual of Jesus has been preserved in that it is an activity that represents the relationship of the individual monks to one another within the community's regime of service.³⁶ As such it is an expression of a community where service is at the heart of their gathering and also where the relationship that must underpin a synodal vision of a church / the Church. So perhaps we need to reach into the depths of our tradition and re-discover this action of Jesus. This could become the expression of who we are in a community – not once a year on Holy Thursday when it is apt to be confused with a mime or a specious display of humility by authority,³⁷ but whenever the community comes together to make decisions or to ratify, condone or appoint those who will have special responsibilities – be they lectors or acolytes or deacons or whatever – in the community. Here is not sufficient to ask it that has been done or is done, but the need to develop on the basis of our memory

Pseudepigrapha [London, 1985], 2, 177-247). This is further confirmed by the presupposition of the status of the un-named, but ever to be remembered, woman in Lk 7:36-50 (with Mk 14:3-6). On this combined reading of these texts, see my 'Harmonizing the Anointings of the Christ: Eusebius and the Four-Gospel Problem', *Milltown Studies* 73 (2014): 1-17. The possible roles of foot washing within liturgy are explored in my *Washing Feet: Imitating the Example of Jesus in the Liturgy Today* (Collegeville, MN 2015), especially, 31-7. While on later interpretations of footwashing within the tradition, see T. O'Loughlin, 'Foot Washing in the Church of Hippo: Augustine as an interpreter of a liturgical practice', *Augustinianum* (forthcoming).

³⁴ See my 'From a Damp Floor to a New Vision of Church: Footwashing as a Challenge to Liturgy and Discipleship', *Worship* 88 (2014): 137-50.

³⁵ Mk 10:42-5; Mt 20:25-8; and Lk 22:24-24-7.

³⁶ The various monastic rules imagine this as reinforcing an ethos of mutual service and mutual humility, not simply the humanity of a ruler to the ruled, and of it being a gesture of inclusive welcome (modelled on a particular reading of Gen 18:1); see my *Washing Feet*, 17-20

³⁷ Thus, the current liturgy is modelled on a rite in the former papal liturgy that fell into desuetude in the nineteenth century and whose ritual dynamic was parallel to that in imperial / royal foot washings (which also have disappeared from use). The ritual did not embody mutual service, but acted to glove the fist of authority.

of Jn 13 a new ritual that will express our synodal ecclesiology. But even more, it could happen periodically to remind us all how we must model a very different set of relationships – a covenant of care for one another – within the Church to that which creates divisions and abuses of power in human societies. If the Church is to witness to the kingdom and speak truth to power in our world, then each church must be clear in its own understanding of how the Christian vision of community / power / authority is radically different. This vision is what we theologians strive after when we speak of a synodical vision of authority in the Church.

The vision of a Church which takes *diakonia* seriously and celebrates it to inscribe it in its identity is one that is in radical opposition to the prevalent liberal capitalist notion of individualism as one's anthropology coupled with functional transactionalism as one's view of relationship. *Diakonia* is founded on the reality of I – Thou: you are for me a 'thou' because I am willing to be your servant.³⁸ This is a hard vision in any society or community, and when can it be better experienced as our ecclesial anthropology than when I am kneeling on the floor and willing to wash your feet, and, in turn, willing to become 'thou' to you in that I let you wash my feet – in the Church we learn from our remembering of both Jesus and Peter!

The Dark Side of Belonging: Shared Guilt

Still within the living memory of many Catholics today is the notion of their church as the *societas perfecta*, a two-tier organisation of leaders (*ecclesia docens*) and led (*ecclesia discens*) that could pompously hold itself up to other churches, other religions, and all humanity as a model. Even those who never accepted the departure from this ecclesiology through an inner acceptance of Vatican II, have now had to avoid it in the light of the on-going uncovering of abuse – sexual, financial, and of authority – at every level of the hierarchical church. Indeed, it is the discovery of the hollowness of such claims that has been a major factor in the calls for a synodal church. But the sinfulness of the Church is larger as a phenomenon than the circle of clerics and religious who have betrayed and caused suffering to their fellow Christians: all of us are involved in one way or other. Even if we leave

³⁸ It will immediately be objected that *diakonia* exists because 'we' are in this together in the Church. However, if there is no allowance made for an I-Thou relationship then the Church is more akin to a loose secular organisation than one which imagines itself as a fictive family. The degree of service that many are called to give within the Church towards others supposes a commitment that can only come about with the existential commitment presumed in the I-Thou relationship. Moreover, in a Church characterised by synodality there must be real, human relationships or else this shift to synodality is merely a re-organisation rather than a vision of transformed individuals.

aside egregious failings on the part of Christians as in their acquiescence, to put it mildly, in the Holocaust,³⁹ none of our hands are clean. We have been willing to engage in various forms of Anti-Semitism for centuries; we have been defenders of slavery until the nineteenth century⁴⁰ and it seems clear that many Catholics are still supportive of racial supremacy movements;⁴¹ and we have our share of the blame for colonialism and the reckless exploitation of the planet. Truly we pray: *peccatores te rogamus, audi nos*.

It is worth noting that the liturgy of the Second Temple, and also the community in Qumran, those two great sources of our liturgy, both envisage a common acknowledgement of our sinfulness, a collective guilt, and the prayerful hope of a collective redemption. We see this in Ps 51 (the *Miserere*) where the singular is not that of an individual's prayer but the liturgical expression by the singer of the group's iniquity.⁴² It is this prayer which is then taken up by all in prayer, fasting, and works of loving kindness. This communal perspective, acknowledging that we sin as a social group and can only tackle the effects of sin by acting collectively, must become the dominant theme with regard to sinfulness in a synodal church. It is through our various belongings that we cause harm to others and the creation – often with a minimal sense of responsibility for the harm done or our own culpability – and so it is at the community level we need to make decisions for amending *our* life, seek divine aid, and acknowledge our need for divine mercy. Yet our liturgical expression of our guilt is still, almost exclusively, focussed on an individualist model of human existence: indeed, the anthropology underlying our Canon Law and practice with regard to the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the direct antithesis of our understanding of the common good and the social nature of humanity that underpins Catholic Social Teaching.⁴³

If we are to have a truly synodal Church, then every church has to take its common guilt for its crimes and omissions as seriously as we urge each individual to acknowledge their sins. This means that rite of community reconciliation – Rite III in the current Ordo – must not be seen as exceptional and for use only in emergencies due to a lack of the necessary ordained manpower to celebrate Rites I or II, but seen as reflecting a deeper awareness of our collective human situation. Its

³⁹ See J. Sachslehner, *Hitlers Mann im Vatikan: Bischof Alois Hudal* (Graz 2019).

⁴⁰ Cf. for example, this mid-nineteenth century defence of slavery in the United States by Archbishop Francis Patrick Kenrick: *Theologia Moralis* (Philadelphia 1841 / Mechelen 1860), Tract 5, Ch. 6 (*De servitute*), nn. 35-41 [vol 1, pp. 164-8].

⁴¹ See L. Dodd, 'The Tablet Interview: Jim Wallis', *The Tablet* (27 February 2021), pp. 8-9.

⁴² See S. Miller, 'the Role of Performance and the Performance of Role: Cultural Memory in the Hodayot', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137 (2018): 359-82 at 371 and 374.

⁴³ By this I mean that body of magisterium stretching from *Rerum novarum* (Leo XIII in 1891) to *Fratelli tutti* (Francis in 2020).

celebration must be equivalent to a collective plea for mercy that we find in the liturgy for the Day of Atonement, an acceptance of how we have all contributed in our shared endeavours as a community to the damaging of the creation, and that we as a people, a real human community, of the covenant have failed and therefore as a community we need to return to the covenant, seek to address the damage, and have a new sense of our common discipleship. Echoing the vision of the dying Moses pointing out that the People of God could choose collective action that leads to life and that which leads to death (Dt 30:19), the early guide to Christian discipleship, the *Didache* imagines a small community which has to choose between these two ways. We have lost our sense of the need *to choose together the way of life* because we have seen sins as individual actions to the extent that we even fail to see our great corporate crimes in terms of sin. A realistic assessment of our situation must be a priority within a synodal church – and the liturgy for it already exists if we are prepared to learn to use it.

Imagining Synodality: We Are One Loaf

Go into any Catholic Church on a Sunday and observe what happens when it is time to eat of the eucharistic loaf and how what happens invites itself to be perceived experientially. People – perhaps the majority of those present – go to the front of the assembly and are given a small, pre-cut, wafer in such a way that the whole affair is not delayed. It is functionally, fast food using all the devices – pre-preparation, standard sizing, vessels adapted to a mass situation, swift delivery procedures, each outlet identical to all others – that in recent decades we have learned to associate with drive-thru hamburger restaurants. It is a religious analogue of industrialised mass production which creates alienation within society while reducing humans to the status of consumer units. I see this similarity of our Communion Rite with a drive-thru fast-food outlet as a parable of our situation in the Catholic Church today: centralised, formalistic, and devoid of interactive human engagement and scale. Rather than seeking to analyse this problem in the manner of a sociologist, the theologian should hold up against it a poetic vision.⁴⁴

The starting point for this vision is a gathering of sisters and brothers around a table. Into their midst and placed in the centre of the table is brought warm, rich smelling loaf of bread. It is large enough for

⁴⁴ On the significance of ‘a loaf’ – a human object - as distinct from a generic name for a foodstuff (‘bread’), see my ‘Translating *Panis* in a Eucharistic Context: A Problem of Language and Theology’, *Worship* 78 (2004): 226-35; and on the way this was an object of theological reflection in the earliest communities such as those who used the *Didache* and to whom Paul wrote, see my *The Eucharist: Origins and Contemporary Understandings* (London, 2015), 159-66.

all who are assembled. The assembly itself has a real human unity in that it is not so large that one cannot find a loaf large enough to give each a share. Each person takes a piece of the loaf and begins to eat it and at the same time they hear a voice – they recognise it as Paul’s – and it repeats slowly these words: ‘the loaf that we break is it not a participation in the body of the Christ? Because there is one loaf, we though many are one body, because we all share in the one loaf’ (1 Cor 10:16-7). The community continues to eat and recalls that the memories and hopes that have brought them together and bind them to one another in shared desires. Then they hear another ancient voice, this time in prayer, with which they join: ‘We give thanks to you, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you have made known to us. Through Jesus, your servant, to you be glory forever. For as the broken loaf was once scattered over the mountains and then was gathered in and became one, so may your church be gathered together into your kingdom from the very ends of the earth. Yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever’ (*Didache* 9:3-4).

At the end of this paper we are still left with the question about what we mean by a ‘synodal church’? This is, at this time, an unknown: we are seeking our way towards it in discussions that are taking place across the world and what will eventually emerge – if we continue along this path opened by Pope Francis - will surprise us. My own suspicion is that it has to be something like this vision if it is to be more than a topic in a class in ecclesiology among theologians or an abstract principle among canonists. A synodal church will not come about in an instant – though many of the obstacles to its coming could be cleared relatively quickly by action at each level whether that is the level of the Roman curia, the episcopal conference, the individual diocese, or the local community. A synodal church will be, as is the way with the pilgrim People of God, a work in progress. It is like a great epic poem. Each real community must see itself as being a poem in the process of being made, it is a poem of praise, of concern, a group whose interaction is not only life giving to those involved but a witness to the living God among us.⁴⁵

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⁴⁵ I would like to acknowledge the benefit I received from the insightful comments of the two anonymous readers in the course of preparing this article for publication.