

The Path of Synodality: Walking and Talking Together as the Mystical Body of Christ

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Abstract

The Church is by nature synodal and “the entire People of God is challenged by its fundamentally synodal calling.”² Synodality is established to energize the life and evangelising mission of the Church in union with Christ.³ The fact that in practice she might be lacking in synodality sometimes or in some places, does not invalidate this attribute. According to Pope Francis, “it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”⁴ Thus, “while synodal procedure and events have a beginning, a process and a conclusion, synodality offers a specific description of the historical development of the Church as such, breathes life into her structures and directs her mission.”⁵ Hence, the purpose of this essay is to throw more light on this sublime feature of the Church (the path of synodality) and to bring out into fuller light the important functions of the members (the Hierarchy and the Laity) who are walking and talking together with Christ, their Head, and with one another as “the Mystical Body of Christ.”

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²International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 72.

³International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 103.

⁴Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015.

⁵International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 48

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Introduction

The Mystical Body of Christ is one of the biblical images of the Church. In her age long history, a host of interrelated images have been used to speak of and describe the inexhaustible mystery of the Church. Among these designations, the biblical images have preference. In the Scriptures, the images taken from the Old Testament and the New Testament are many. All of the images find a new center in the imagery of “the Mystical Body of Christ,” taken as the most fitting image that best describes the Church. The comparison of the Church with a body casts light on the intimate union between Christ and his Church and among the members of the Church. Not only is the Church gathered around Christ, but she is also united in and with him. Thus, the Church is described as a Body: Christ is the head of the body, which is His body, and the people of God are the members of this Body.

However, to make distinction between the Church as “the Body of Christ” and other usages of “Body of Christ” in the Scriptures, the term “Mystical” was added to designate the Catholic Church. Thus, the Catholic Church is the “Mystical Body of Christ.” In the Encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, Pope Pius XII clearly states that “the Mystical Body of Christ is the Catholic Church.”⁶ Leo XIII, in his Encyclical *Satis Cognitum* argues that “the Church is visible because she is a body. But a body calls also for a multiplicity of members, which are linked together in such a way as to help one another. . . . So, in the Church the individual members do not live for themselves alone, but in mutual collaboration for the common comfort and for the perfect building up of the whole Body.”⁷ Therefore, there is need to always toe the path of synodality in the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ.

⁶Pius XII, [Encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi*](#) , the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), n. 1.

⁷Pius XII, [Encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi*](#) , the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), nn. 14 & 15.

Christ recognized the importance of the path of synodality in the Church; that is why prayed three times, as his parting wish: “that they may be one” (John 17). For instance, any performing choir that is not united in its diversity ends up producing cacophony instead of melody. The Scriptures underscore the path of synodality among first community of believers. Thus, “as a result, all the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had ... that there were no needy persons among them” (Acts 4:32-34).

The time to reroute towards the path of synodality in the Church is long overdue. Little wonder the Church is preparing to embark on a special synod which is expected to focus on the theme of 'Synodality' in the life and mission of the Church. Already inaugurated in September 2021, it is designed to sample the contributions of the Laity, the Religious, the Clergy, National Bishops' Conferences and Curial Officials. This explains the essence of two years long wide consultations and profound discernment that will climax in October 2023 assembly proper. At present the Church is in prayers for this auspicious event; a synod of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church that is centered on the well-timed theme: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.

Providentially, the 80th anniversary of *Mystici Corporis Christi*, issued by Pope Pius XII on 29 June 1943, during World War II, will be celebrated next year - 2023. This encyclical “teaches that both lay people and the leadership have a role to play in the Church. Lay people are at the forefront of the Church, and have to be aware of 'being the Church', not just 'belonging to the Church'. At the same time, the Pope and bishop are responsible for providing leadership for all the faithful. Together, they are the Church and work for the good of the Church.”⁸

⁸ Pius XII, Discourse, February 20, 1946:AAS 38 (1946) 149; quoted by John Paul II, CL 9.

The Path of Synodality: Walking and Talking Together as the Mystical Body of Christ

Likewise, next year, the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of Synod of Bishops, known as 'Synod on Synodality,' will focus on how the Church can chart anew 'the path of synodality' in her life and mission. The latter informed choice of the theme: *The Path of Synodality: Walking and Talking together a Mystical Body of Christ*.

The Path of Synodality

At the first glance, the phrase “synod on synodality” sounds tautologous. Many people seem to be familiar with the word 'synod' but not 'synodality.' According to Catholic News Service, “Synodality,” which literally means “walking together,” has become a key topic of Pope Francis' pontificate, but one which has raised questions and even confusion.”⁹ Surprisingly too, although the practice of synodality is as old as the Church, the term “synodality” is missing from the whole documents of Vatican Council II. The reason is that the term “synodality” is a neologism, a fruit of subsequent theological reflection. Yet, it authentically translates and summarizes the ecclesiology spirit of communion expressed by Vatican Council II and practiced in the early Church.¹⁰

On March 2, 2018, the International Theological Commission, endorsed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, published a document titled: “*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*.” According to this document, “in the theological, canonical and pastoral literature of recent decades, a neologism has appeared, the noun “synodality,” a correlate of the adjective “synodal,” with both of these deriving from the word “synod.” Thus, people speak of synodality as a “constitutive dimension” of the Church or *tout court* of the “synodal

⁹ National Catholic Reporter: Internet source (<https://www.ncronline.org/news/quick-reads/pope-chooses-synodality-theme-2022-synod>), Assessed on 25th July, 2022.

¹⁰ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 6.

Church”¹¹ synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelising mission.¹² Thus, while 'synod' is only a part, 'synodality' is the whole.

“Collaboration” as Walking Together

When it comes to walking together, which this segment tries to x-ray, “the great challenge for pastoral conversion that follows from this for the life of the Church is to intensify the mutual collaboration of all in evangelising witness based on everyone's gifts and roles, without clericalising lay people and without turning the clergy into lay people, and in any case avoiding the temptation of "an excessive clericalism which keeps them [lay people] away from decision-making”¹³ This is what the above document on “Synodality” means when it uses concepts like: participation and co-essentiality.

Accordingly, “in this perspective, the participation of the lay faithful becomes essential. They are the immense majority of the People of God and there is much to be learnt from their participation in the various forms of the life and mission of ecclesial communities, from popular piety and generic pastoral care, as well as their specific competency in various sectors of cultural and social life.”¹⁴ Among the laity, there is another special group whose life closely resembles the

¹¹ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 5.

¹² International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, nn. 6, & 7

¹³ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Joy of the Gospel, (Nov 24, 2013), n. 102.

¹⁴ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Joy of the Gospel, (Nov 24, 2013), n. 126.

clergy, the Religious. Hence “there also needs to be a decisive promotion of the principle of co-essentiality between hierarchical gifts and charismatic gifts in the Church on the basis of the teaching of Vatican. This entails involving communities of consecrated women or men, the movements and new ecclesial communities.”¹⁵

“Dialogue” As Talking Together

The other branch-off on the path of synodality is dialogue, which implies talking and listening. Dialogue offers the opportunity to acquire new perspectives and points of view to shed light on the solution of the matter in question. Hence, “the criterion according to which “unity prevails over conflict” is of particular value in conducting a dialogue, managing different opinions and experiences... making it possible to “build communion amid disagreement.”¹⁶ Synodal dialogue depends on courage both in speaking and in listening. It is not about engaging in a debate where one speaker tries to get the better of the others or counters their positions with brusque arguments, but about expressing whatever seems to have been suggested by the Holy Spirit as useful for communal discernment, at the same time being open to accepting whatever has been suggested by the same Spirit in other people's positions, “for the general good” (1 Corinthians 12, 7).¹⁷ This is true since “communication needs to become explicit through the community listening to the Word of God in order to know “what the Spirit is saying to the Churches” (Apocalypse 2, 29).”¹⁸

¹⁵ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 4; cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, 10.

¹⁶ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Joy of the Gospel, (Nov 24, 2013), n. 228.

¹⁷ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 111.

¹⁸ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 111.

Finally, an essential attitude in synodal dialogue is humility, which inclines each one to be obedient to God's will and obedient to each other in Christ.¹⁹ Thus, "a synodal Church is a Church which listens... The faithful People, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other; and all listening to the Holy Spirit."²⁰ Because truth – as Benedict XVI emphasized - "is *lógos* which creates *diá-logos* and hence communication and communion."²¹ Most importantly, for the Blessed Paul VI, true dialogue is spiritual communication, which requires specific attitudes: love, respect, trust, and prudence. "Dialogue thrives on friendship and most especially on service".²²

The Mystical Body of Christ

The image of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ is a sound theology. Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, through which He communicated and communicates truth and grace to all. The Church is a Causal Conjunction of two principles, the one spiritual and supernatural, and the other material and sensibly perceptible. It is this amalgam of the latter two elements that makes her the Mystical Body of Christ: duality in unity or unity in duality.

Thus, "the Mystical Body of Christ" is not a *metaphor* for the Christian community of believers or *mysticism* for the hypostatic union of Christ and the Church. When Paul refers to the Church as "Mystical Body of Christ," he means it is a *mysterious reality* – "this is a *profound*

¹⁹ Benedict of Norcia, *Rule 72*, 6.

²⁰ Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015.

²¹ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Caritas in Veritate*, 29 June 2009, 4, *AAS* 101 (2009) 643.

²² Blessed Paul VI, Encyclical Letter, *Ecclesiam*, 6 August 1964, 83 -87, *AAS* 56 (1964) 644.

mystery; but I am speaking of *Christ and the Church*” (Ephesians 5:32; 22-32). As a *mystery*, closely tied to the central Christian Mystery of the Incarnation, we should not expect to fully comprehend it, but God does expect us to believe everything He has revealed about it in His Written Word, the Bible.

To this end, if we would fittingly define or describe this true Church, the Body of Christ - which is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic - we shall find nothing more noble, more sublime, or more divine than the expression "the Mystical Body of Christ:" an expression which springs from and is, as it were, the fair flowering of the repeated teaching of the Sacred Scriptures and the Holy Fathers.²³ The question is: why is “the Mystical Body of Christ” the most sublime biblical image in discussion about the Church? To answer this question, what follows shall dissect the concept of “the Mystical Body of Christ” into its three constitutive components: “the Body,” “of Christ” and “the Mystical.”

The Church as “the Body”

The concept and composition of “a body” describe very fittingly the unique nature of the new people of God - the Church. Thus, “that the Church is a body is frequently asserted in the Sacred Scriptures: “Christ,” says the Apostle “is the Head of the Body, the Church.” The Church is described as a body because there is unbroken unity in it. Paul says: “Though many we are one body in Christ” (Romans 12:5). However, it is not enough that the Body of the Church should be an unbroken unity and intimate bond; it must also be something definite and perceptible to the senses like the body is.²⁴

²³ Pius XII, [Encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi*](#) , the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), n. 13

²⁴ Pius XII, [Encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi*](#) , the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), n. 14.

To this end, “the comparison of the Church with the body casts light on the intimate bond between Christ and his Church. Not only is she gathered around him; she is united in him, in his body. Three aspects of the Church as the Body of Christ are to be more specifically noted: the unity of all her members with each other as a result of their union with Christ; Christ as head of the Body; and the Church as bride of Christ.”²⁵ To this extent, “as in nature a body is not formed by any haphazard grouping of members but must be constituted of organs, that is of members, that have not the same function and are arranged in due order; so for this reason above all the Church is called a body, that it is constituted by the coalescence of structurally untied parts, and that it has a variety of members reciprocally dependent. It is thus the Apostle describes the Church when he writes: “As in one body we have many members, but all the members have not the same office: so, we being many are one body in Christ and everyone members one of another.”²⁶ This highlights unity in diversity.

A common aphorism has it that “united we stand and divided we fall.” The latter truism on the beauty of unity in diversity within the Mystical Body of Christ, reminds me of an Aesop's Fable, titled – “The Belly and the Members:” One day it occurred to other Parts of the body that they were doing all the work while the Belly had all the food. So, they held a meeting and decided to stop giving the Belly food. For a day or two, the Hands refused to take the food, the Mouth refused to receive it, and the Teeth had no work to do. After a day or two, all the Parts of the body became weak and in poor condition: the Hands could hardly move, the Mouth was parched and the Legs unable to support the rest of the Body. At this time, it became clear that the Belly was doing a work too in keeping the body going. Hence, all Parts are equally important. What Paul said of the physical body can be applied to the Mystical Body: “The head cannot say to the feet: I have no need of you” (1 Cor. 12: 21).

²⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, par. 789.

²⁶ Pius XII, [Encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi*](#), the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), n. 16.

The Body “as Christ's”?

According to Pius XII, in his encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, the body is qualified as Christ's because Christ is the Founder, the Head, the Support; and the Savior of this Body.²⁷

Christ as the Founder: For the Divine Redeemer began the building of the mystical temple of the Church when by His preaching He made known His Precepts; He completed it when he hung glorified on the Cross; and He manifested and proclaimed it when He sent the Holy Ghost as Paraclete in visible form on His disciples- appointed their Chief and His Vicar on earth (Acts 20:28).²⁸

Christ as the Head: That this Mystical Body which is the Church should be called Christ's is proved in the second place from the fact that He must be universally acknowledged as its actual Head. "He," as St. Paul says, "is the Head of the Body, the Church." He is the Head from whom the whole body perfectly organized, "groweth and maketh increase unto the edifying of itself."

Christ as the Support: After Christ's glorification on the Cross, His Spirit is communicated to the Church in abundance through which all the parts of the Body are joined one with the others and with their exalted Head. To the members He is present and assists them in their various duties and offices, and the greater or less degree of spiritual health which they enjoy. It is He who, through His heavenly grace, is the principle of every supernatural act in all parts of the Body (cf. Jn. 15:5).

Christ as the Savior: The final reason why the Body of the Church is given the name of Christ is because Christ is the Divine Savior of this

²⁷ Pius XII, [Encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi*](#) , the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), n. 25.

²⁸ Pius XII, [Encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi*](#) , the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), n. 34.

Body (Eph 5: 23), even though we must add with Paul: "especially of the faithful" (1 Tm 4:10), since, before all others, He has purchased with His Blood His members who constitute the Church (Acts 20:28).

The Body of Christ as "Mystical"

The expression "Body of Christ" is used by Paul to refer to three ideas in the Sacred Scriptures, namely: the natural body of Christ (*Corpus Christi Naturale*), the Sacramental Body of Christ (*Corpus Christi Sacramentale*) and the Mystical Body of Christ (*Corpus Christi Mysticum*). Hence, the reasons why the adjective "mystical" is used in describing the body of Christ, which is the Church, are namely: to make clear distinctions among the latter three usages of "the body of Christ" and to distinguish it from any other body, that of the Church is qualified with the adjective "Mystical."

The Mystical Body of Christ is a Society whose Head and Ruler is Christ, the physical body of Christ is the one born of the Virgin Mother of God and now sits at the right hand of the Father and the Sacramental Body of Christ, is the one born of the Virgin Mother of God and now is hidden under the Eucharistic veils. The word "Mystical," makes it clear that the Church, a perfect society of its kind, is not made up of merely moral and juridical elements and principles. Her juridical bonds in themselves far surpass those of any other human society, however exalted; they are far superior to all other human societies as grace surpasses nature, as things immortal are above all those that perish.

To this end, Pope Francis has inaugurated the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of Synod of Bishops with the central theme: *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission*. This synod promises to reroute the Church towards the path of synodality in her life and mission. What follows shall attempt to dissect the latter synodal theme and establish its connection with the theme: "The Spirit of Synodality: Walking and Talking together a Mystical Body of Christ."

For a Synodal Church

The word "Church" is derived from Latin word "*ecclesia*" meaning to "call out of." It implies an assembly of people for a religious purpose. In the Greek Old Testament, it stands for assembly of the Chosen People before God; in which case God is present among them. By calling itself "Church" in the New Testament, the first community of believers recognized itself as heir to that assembly of the Chosen people in which God is invisibly present in their midst. The Scriptures say: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who CALLED YOU OUT OF" darkness into His wonderful light (1 Pt. 2:9).

The equivalent Greek term for Church "*Kyriake*," means "what belongs to the Lord." Hence, in the Church, Christ "calls together" his people; those who belong to God, from all the ends of the earth. In Ecclesiastical usage, the word "Church" is used to designate, namely: the liturgical assembly or the local churches or the whole universal Church. These three meanings are inseparable because Christ says: "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mtt. 18:20).

In Scriptures, there are many images and figures through which the inexhaustible mystery of the Church has been described. The images taken from the Old Testament are variations on a profound theme 'the People of God;' since "at all times and in every race, anyone who fears God and does what is right has been acceptable to him. He has, however, willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people."²⁹

²⁹ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (21 Nov. 1964), pars. 7 & 3

According to Pope Francis, “if we understand as St. John Chrysostom did, that “church and synod are synonymous,” since the Church means nothing other than the common journey of the Flock of God along the paths of history towards the encounter of Christ Lord, then we understand that within the Church, no one can be raised up higher than the others. On the contrary, in the Church, it is necessary that each person be “lowered” in order to serve his or her brothers and sisters along the way.”³⁰ In other words, while the concept of synodality refers to the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church, "Being truly 'synodal', therefore, means moving forward in harmony, spurred on by the Holy Spirit."³¹ This entails communal participation in mission.

Communion

Communion is at the center of synodality. Hence, “pastoral conversion for the implementation of synodality means that some paradigms often still present in ecclesiastical culture need to be quashed, because they express an understanding of the Church that has not been renewed by the ecclesiology of communion. These include: the concentration of responsibility for mission in the ministry of Pastors; insufficient appreciation of the consecrated life and charismatic gifts; rarely making use of the specific and qualified contribution of the lay faithful, including women, in their areas of expertise.”³²

The path of synodality manifests the 'pilgrim' character of the Church. The image of the People of God, gathered from among the nations

³⁰ Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015.

³¹ J. Ratzinger, “Le funzioni sinodali della Chiesa: l'importanza della comunione tra i Vescovi”, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 24 January 1996, 4.

³² International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 105.

(Acts 2, 1-9; 15, 14), expresses its social, historical and missionary character, which corresponds to the condition and vocation of each human person as *homo viator*.³³ Three aspects of this relationship and their significance are noted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, as follows: Unity with Christ and among members (can be categorized into external and internal dimensions); Christ as head of the Body and the Church as bride of Christ.³⁴

The Internal Dimension (Unity among all the Members)

By partaking of the body of Christ in the breaking of the bread they are taken up into communion with Him and with one another. The unity of the Mystical Body produces and stimulates charity among the faithful. From this it follows that if one member suffers anything, all the members suffer with him, and if one member is honored, all the members together rejoice (cf. 1 Cor. 12:26). The unity of the Mystical Body of Christ triumphs over all human divisions: “for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3: 27-28). This unity does not do away with the diversity of its members. Thus, “in the building up of Christ's Body there is engaged a diversity of members and functions. There is only one Spirit who, according to his own richness and the needs of the ministries, gives his different gifts for the welfare of the Church.”³⁵

³³ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 49.

³⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 789.

³⁵ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (21 Nov. 1964), pars. 7 & 3.

The External Dimension (Unity of the Members with Christ)

In the mystical Body, Christ unites with believers through the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. They are united in a hidden and real way to his paschal mystery in baptism. By partaking of the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, they are taken up into communion with Him and with one another. In this communion of Christ with believers in the Church (the Mystical Body), Christ is the head of the Mystical Body, and the Church is the Bride of Christ.

Christ as the Head of the Church

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Christ "is the head of the body, means that:³⁶

1. He is the principle of creation and redemption. Raised to the Father's glory, "in everything he is preeminent", especially in the Church, through whom he extends his reign over all things.
2. Christ unites us with his Passover: all his members must strive to resemble him, "For this reason are taken up into the mysteries of his life that with him we may be glorified."
3. Christ provides for our growth: to make us grow toward him, he provides in his Body, the Church, the gifts, and assistance by which we help one another along the way of salvation.

The Church as the Bride of Christ

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Church is the Bride of Christ means that:³⁷

1. Christ referred to himself as the "bridegroom." Using the model of a man loving his wife, "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her."

³⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 792 – 794.

³⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 796.

2. Using the metaphor of the bride and the Bridegroom, Christ has joined her bride with himself in an everlasting covenant and never stops caring for her as for his own body.
3. The Church, in her turn, is subject to her head. The bride respects and loves back the groom. The Church is subject to Christ as the Bride is subject to the bridegroom.

Participation

A synodal Church is a Church of participation and co-responsibility of all the members in the one mission of Christ. In exercising synodality she is called to give expression to the participation of all, according to each one's calling, with the authority conferred by Christ on the College of Bishops headed by the Pope. Participation is based on the fact that all the faithful are qualified and called to serve each other through the gifts they have all received from the Holy Spirit.³⁸ According to Robert Bellarmine, the Church is most beautifully organized thus: Christ as the Head, the Holy Spirit as the heart, Mary as the neck, the baptized as the parts of the body and the hierarchy as the shoulder.³⁹

1. Christ as the Head

What is the function of the Head in the body? It is the principle and governing force of the Body. The head gives sense and movement to the other members. So, Christ is the Head of the body, the Church, because He freely gives life and movement to the faithful members who compose His Body.

³⁸ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 67.

³⁹ John A. Hardon, *Communion of Saints: St. Bellarmine on the Mystical Body of Christ*, (cf. Catholicculture.org)

2. Holy Spirit as the Heart

The heart is the source of life's vitality. Leo XIII says: "Let it suffice to say that, as Christ is the Head of the Church, so is the Holy Spirit her soul."⁴⁰ He works in many ways, to build up the Church using many graces ("charisms"), by which he makes the faithful fit and ready to undertake various tasks.

3. Virgin Mary is the Neck

What is the function of the neck in the body? The neck connects the Head to the Body. Mary connects the Church to Christ because she has merited God's favour, who decreed that "all the graces which proceed from Christ (the Head) should pass through her to the rest of the Body (the Church).

4. The Hierarchy as the Shoulder

What is the function of the shoulders in the body? We are accustomed to placing burdens on our shoulders. Christ also placed the burden of the Church's governance on the shoulders of the Apostles and by extension on the Church's hierarchy: the Pope, Bishops, Priests, and Deacons.

5. The Laity as the Other Parts

The laity and the hierarchy form the Body of Christ. They become, in the words of Christ, branches of the Vine which He is. For St. Paul, they are the eyes, hands and feet of the Body and Christ is the Head. In building up the Body, the Spirit gives various gifts to these diverse parts of the body.

⁴⁰ Pius XII, [Encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi*](#) , the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), n. 34.

Mission

Synodality is lived out in the Church in the service of mission. The Church exists in order to evangelize.⁴¹ The whole People of God is an agent of the proclamation of the Gospel.⁴² Every baptized person is called to be a protagonist of mission since we are all missionary disciples. The Church is called, in synodal synergy, to activate the ministries and charisms present in her life.⁴³ Thus, “all the faithful are called by virtue of their baptism to witness to and proclaim the Word of truth and life, in that they are members of the prophetic, priestly and royal People of God.... The anointing of the Holy Spirit is manifested in the *sensus fidei* of the faithful. "In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelisation.”⁴⁴

Taking up the ecclesiological perspective of Vatican II, Pope Francis, sketches the image of a synodal Church as "an inverted pyramid" which comprises the People of God and the College of Bishops, one of whose members, the Successor of Peter, has a specific ministry of unity. Here the summit is below the base.⁴⁵ "Synodality, as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the most appropriate interpretative framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself.... But in this Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located below the base. Consequently, those who exercise authority are called 'ministers', because, in the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all."⁴⁶ Christ is the one whom the Father anointed with the Holy Spirit and established as priest, prophet, and king. In union with the

⁴¹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Evangelisation in the Modern World, (8 December, 1975), n.14.

⁴² Vatican II, Decree *Ad Gentes*, n. 35.

⁴³ International Theological Commission, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, n. 53.

⁴⁴ International Theological Commission, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, n. 56.

⁴⁵ International Theological Commission, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, n. 57.

⁴⁶ International Theological Commission, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, n. 57.

head, all the members of the mystical body of Christ participate in these three offices of Christ, bearing the responsibilities of mission and service that flow from them.⁴⁷

Evaluation and Conclusion

From the foregoing, synodality is like a triangle with three dimensions. At the top of this triangle is Communion, which stands on two legs of Participation and Mission, as the triangular base. The latter features support the designation of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, where different parts Commune with one another and Participate according to their various states in the same Mission. The latter is the sense of an internal corporation. On the external level, synodality includes the ecumenical efforts of the Catholic Church with other Christian denominations towards Christian unity and solidarity. Thus “synodality is at the heart of the ecumenical commitment of Christians: because it represents an invitation to walk together on the path towards full communion and because - when it is understood correctly - it offers a way of understanding and experiencing the Church where legitimate differences find room in the logic of a reciprocal exchange of gifts in the light of truth.”⁴⁸

Above and beyond the immediate goal of Christian unity, “the People of God is journeying towards the end of time (*Matthew* 28, 20) and towards the ends of the earth (*Acts* 1, 8). The Church lives through space in the various local Churches and travels through the time of Christ's Passover until His *parousia*. She is a single historical subject; already present and working in her are the eschatological destiny of definitive union with God and the unity of the human family in

⁴⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 783.

⁴⁸ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n.9

Christ.”⁴⁹ Thus, synodality captures the entire mission of the Church, on earth, which is always in line with the mind of “God who desires that all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4).

Accordingly, the Church is by nature synodal. Pope Francis teaches that “to walk together is *the constitutive way* of the Church; *the figure* that enables us to interpret reality with the eyes and heart of God; *the condition* for following the Lord Jesus and being servants of life in this wounded time. The breath and pace of the Synod show what we are, and the dynamism of communion that animates our decisions; only in this way can we truly renew our pastoral ministry and adapt it to the mission of the Church in today's world; only in this way can we address the complexity of this time....”⁵⁰

Hence, “the renewal of the Church's synodal life demands that we initiate processes for consulting the entire People of God... This axiom should not be understood in the sense of conciliarism on the ecclesiological level or of parliamentarianism on a political level. It is more helpful to think in terms of exercising synodality at the heart of ecclesial communion.”⁵¹ Synodality is established to energize the life and evangelising mission of the Church in union with and under the guidance of the Lord Jesus ... The synodal renewal of the Church happens through the re-vitalization of synodal structures...: formation for the spirituality of communion and the practices of listening, dialogue and communal discernment; ... in building a social ethos based on fraternity, solidarity and inclusion.⁵²

⁴⁹ Cf. International Theological Commission, *Select Themes of Ecclesiology* (1984),

Francis, Address at the Opening of the 70th General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference, 22 May 2017.

⁵¹ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 65.

⁵² International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 103

Finally, in his address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis called on Catholics for prayers in these words: "First of all, let us ask the Holy Spirit for the gift of listening for the Synod Fathers, so that with the Spirit, we might be able to hear the cry of the people and listen to the people until we breathe the will to which God calls us."⁵³ Likewise, as the Church prays and prepares for the forthcoming 16th Ordinary General Assembly of Synod of Bishops ("Synod on Synodality") in October 2023, to reflect on the Path of Synodality in the life and mission of the Church, we equally fly to the patronage of Mary, the Mother of God and Mother of the Church, who accompanied the early Church in her 'first synod of synodality' at the Upper Room after Christ's Ascension and seek her intercession as the Church strives to reroute towards the Path of Synodality: Walking and Talking together as the Mystical Body of Christ.

⁵³ Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015.