

## **Vademecum on Synodality: How Can We Journey Together?**

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### **Abstract**

*The synodality of Pope Francis comes with lots of excitement, misgivings and misconceptions. Some have asked whether it is a product of coercion or freedom. Some have wondered whether it is a true renewal or a disguised trap. Some have questioned the intention of this synod. It is factual that every synod is shrouded in mystery and the Holy Spirit is the principle of communion and mission in the Church, the principle of synodality. The fears, anxiety, tensions, joys and excitement this synod has generated seems unprecedented in the recent history of the Church. The processes of this synodality will determine the 'shape of the future of the Church. We shall therefore examine in this paper the virtues and vices that can make or mar the processes.*

**Keywords:** Church, Journey, Synod, Synodality.

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Synodality is the invitation of Pope Francis for the universal Church to gather together and discuss how we are to stay together today in the world in the light of the Gospel. This is not the meeting of the collegial government or episcopal collegiality but the ecclesial communion, the entire people of God. It is the gathering of the people of God who constitute the Church of Christ: the clerics and laity. The greatest aim of the synod is to listen and discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church, how we can live together today. It is to listen and discern the image of the Church envisaged by Christ. The way of the synod is the way of collective discernment, collaboration, sharing, participation and communion. The idea of synodality has increased mixed feelings of fears, suspicions, hopes, excitement and more in the universal Church.

However, no matter what one thinks about the synod and the outcome of the synodal process, the potential dangers and abuses, the enormous promises of the synod cannot be ignored. Therefore, Catholics, both great and small, rich and poor, saints and sinners are encouraged to give in their best of bests and engage actively, passionately, prayerfully, wisely, and honestly on the synod and the synodal process. This will bring about a purified, balanced and enriched outcome for the Church. What is important is to religiously follow the virtues of the Church in a journey together and overcome the tendencies to slack towards the vices.

### **Virtues of the Church in a Journey together**

These are the virtues of the Church in a journey together that makes the journey the symbol and characteristic of a pilgrim Church. The Vademecum for the synod on synodality views it as the principles and attitudes of synodality.

### *Listening and Dialogue*

This is the key to the synodal journey. We must listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit if this synod is going to be truly the Church in a journey. The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria affirms this in a recent document, “This Synod is a dynamic process of convergence that call for listening and dialogue, leading to greater collaboration, a more profound sense of communion and participation in Church life at various levels.”<sup>4</sup>

Pope Francis on his address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops on 7 October 2015 says that “dialogue involves coming together across diverse opinions. Indeed, God often speaks through the voices of those that we can easily exclude, cast aside, or discount. We must make a special effort to listen to those we may be tempted to see as unimportant and those who force us to consider new points of view that may change our way of thinking.” The question is: Is the Church ready to listen? Is the Church interested in dialogue? Maybe! Let us see an example. On the 10th of January, 2022, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) posted a question to help the discussion on the synodal journey in her twitter handle and requested for comments from the public. This is it: “Here are seven attitudes we can all adopt as we continue our synodal journey together. Which one inspires you the most? Let us know in the comments below.” The seven attitudes listed graphically in a vertical descending order are:

- Innovative Outlook
- Inclusivity
- Open-Mindedness
- Listening

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<sup>2</sup> Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN). Human Fraternity: Path to Building Sustainable Peace in Nigeria. The First Plenary Meeting Communique, Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria Resource Centre, Durumi, Abuja, 5 -11 March 2022.

- Accompaniment
- Co-Responsibility
- Dialogue

In splits of moments, comments flashed instantaneously but colossally against the so called inspirational words. The negative reactions were unbelievable. Even though some of these comments were beautiful Christian alternate proposals, at one point, the USCCB Twitter handler turned off the comment button. Listening and dialogue? Commenting on the entire saga, Stephen White, “as a whole, they only serve to convince Catholics (and plenty of non-Catholics looking on, by the way) that the whole Synod process is precisely the sort of bureaucratic, political enterprise the Holy Father keeps insisting it must not be”.<sup>3</sup>

One would have expected the USCCB twitter handler to lead by example. One would expect the USCCB to keep to the rules of engagement: listening and dialogue, but the reverse was the case. Turning off the comment session was resisting the core values of the synodal journey. It was opposition to listening and dialogue. If this happened in a country, the most acclaimed democratic nation on earth where freedom of expression is uppermost regardless of religion, imagine what could happen in countries in Africa, Asia, South America and so on, where the order of the day is suppression and domination. One may ask, “is the fruit (final document) of this synod on synodality going to be hijacked or staged managed by the hierarchy and wrapped with the paper of the laity to give it imprimatur and coloration of the people of God, the case of Esau's hand and Jacob's voice?”

If this synod is going to be the Church in movement, in a journey together, then the entire Church must move together. Nobody should

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen P. White, “What's at Stake with the Synod?” in *Ethics and Public Policy Centre*. (January 13, 2022). Retrieved from <https://eppc.org/publication/whats-at-stake-with-the-synod/>

be left out; otherwise, it becomes a mere movement or journey in the Church by a few, an attitude that runs contrary to the intention of the Pope for this synod. In this context, the part cannot truly represent the whole. Beyond this, the Church in a journey together must be ready to listen to the excluded, the victims of war, of poverty, of abuse, the physically challenged, the oppressed, the divorced, the remarried, the marginalized and women. It is obvious that “listening to those who have the same views as we do bears no fruit. Dialogue involves coming together across diverse opinions. Indeed, God often speaks through the voices of those that we can easily exclude, cast aside, or discount”.<sup>4</sup> In this synod, everyone in the Church has right to speak and to be listened to. God speaks through each of us.

### *Openness*<sup>5</sup>

Openness is a function of truth and transparency. It is a value against rigidity. It is one of the greatest virtues of the Church in a journey together. One who engages in dialogue must be open to change. The people of God who are actively involved in the synod on synodality must be willing to accept the better and new ways of living out the Gospel in our time. Openness improves transparency and makes truth attractive. Without openness, listening becomes superficial, dialogue becomes fruitless and discernment becomes impossible. We must be willing to embrace newness of insights, ideas, methods and things. We must be open to accept new ways of doing things and new ways of staying together. According to *Vademecum*,

Dialogue leads us to newness: We must be willing to change our opinions based on what we have heard from others. Openness to conversion and change: We can often be resistant to what the Holy

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<sup>4</sup> *Vademecum*, 2. See also, Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. O. Rush, 'Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church'. *Theological Studies* 78 (2017), pp. 299–325, at p. 311.

Spirit is trying to inspire us to undertake. We are called to abandon attitudes of complacency and comfort that lead us to make decisions purely on the basis of how things have been done in the past. Synods are an ecclesial exercise in discernment: Discernment is based on the conviction that God is at work in the world and we are called to listen to what the Spirit suggests to us. We are signs of a Church that listens and journeys: By listening, the Church follows the example of God himself, who listens to the cry of his people. The Synodal Process provides us with the opportunity to open ourselves to listen in an authentic way, without resorting to ready-made answers or pre-formulated judgments.

#### *Inclusiveness and Sharing*

The Church in a journey together is a process of inclusiveness. Inclusiveness is a beautiful way of giving voices to those whose voices are hardly heard in the Church. This process of this synod must be willing to give opportunity for the people of God to get adequately involved in the administration and governance of the Church. The synod will be able to suggest how far the laity can go in this direction today in the light of the Gospel. It will consider opening more spaces for women and physically challenged.

No matter the state of the people in the Church, the Spirit of God is present in all. The Pope maintains that “all the members of the Church are active subjects of evangelisation and 'missionary disciples'”(EG §120). Therefore, the process of the synod must find ways of overcoming the excuses that prevent the lay people from sharing the charisms in the service of the Church and stop the adverse effects of clerical complex or “an excessive clericalism which keeps them [the lay people] away from decision-making” in the Church (EG §102). The synod must empower the lay people with those roles that do reflect “a greater penetration of Christian values in the social, political, and economic sectors”, tasks with “a real commitment to applying the Gospel to the transformation of society” (EG §102).

Again, efforts should be made to re-examine the role of women today in the light of the Gospel. This synod must make legitimate spaces for women in the heart of the Church. We must find ways of overcoming the tendency to exclude women in some cultures, in the decision making and administration of the Church. Pope Francis acknowledges “that many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests, helping to guide people, families and groups and offering new contributions to theological reflection.” He adds that, “we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because “the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace” and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures”.<sup>6</sup> The *Vademecum* for the synod captures it well: “Being synodal requires time for sharing: We are invited to speak with authentic courage and honesty (*parrhesia*) in order to integrate freedom, truth, and charity. Everyone can grow in understanding through dialogue”<sup>7</sup> and “it is vain to try to impose one's ideas on the whole Body through pressure or to discredit those who feel differently”.<sup>8</sup>

### *Respect*

The aim of the synod is to find the truth of the Gospel so as to apply it appropriately in our time. This cannot be done in disorder and violence. The Church in a journey together must make the journey together in peace, love and fairness. This is to say that the process of the synod must be protected with the virtue of respect. Rights and dignity of people must be respected. We must respect one another as we journey together. We must speak our mind in love and listen what others have to say. Everyone has something to say.

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<sup>6</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, Nos. 103.

<sup>7</sup> *Vademecum*, 2.3.

<sup>8</sup> *Vademecum*, 2.4.

In this journey together, disagreement and argument are bound to occur from time to time. We must not allow our anger rise to high as to speak without respect. We must not attack anyone with different opinion as we walk along. Dialogue is defeated if we all have the same opinion. It is through dialogue that we can discern who we are, what we ought to do and where we need to stand in the changing world of our time. It is through dialogue done in love and respect that we can discern where we have deviated from the Gospel. The *Vademecum* says, “We must make a special effort to listen to those we may be tempted to see as unimportant and those who force us to consider new points of view that may change our way of thinking”.<sup>9</sup> Nobody should be disrespected or discountenanced. Everyone is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

### *Discernment*

Discernment is another important virtue of the Church in a journey together. The processes of the synod on synodality must be coated with the fruits of discernment. One can describe the disciples' journey together on the Road to Emmaus as a classical example of synodality. It was a journey of doubts, tensions, and questions. They did not know what was going to be the outcome. But they were ready for surprises. It was a process of discernment. The revelation, insight, awakening and awareness came at the moment of prayer. At the celebration of the Eucharist, the process of discernment yielded result. Let us say that the two disciples withdraw for a retreat. To think about what was happening and see if they could understand it. Surprisingly, during prayer, the revelation came. The process of this synod must not take prayer for granted. There is no revelation, no discernment without prayer. Church communities must organize sessions for prayer, reflections or practice of silence. If possible people should go on retreat or have a quiet time. It is then that one can recognize the Spirit when it

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<sup>9</sup> *Vademecum*, 2. 2 See also, Pope Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015).



speaks. It is then that one can effectively listen to God and understand what others are saying. According to *Vademecum*:

The Synodal Process is first and foremost a spiritual process. It is not a mechanical data gathering exercise or a series of meetings and debates. Synodal listening is oriented towards discernment. It requires us to learn and exercise the art of personal and communal discernment. We listen to each other, to our faith tradition, and to the signs of the times in order to discern what God is saying to all of us. Pope Francis characterizes the two interrelated goals of this process of listening: “to listen to God, so that with him we may hear the cry of his people; to listen to his people until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Freedom*

One of the fundamental virtues of the synod is freedom. The freedom of the people of God in Christ must be requirement for every contribution in this synod. There must be no coercion. None should be forced to speak. None should be made to say anything under duress. This is how the Brazilian Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, puts it “Pray, reflect, discuss and share your experiences, insights and desires. Do it with the freedom of those who place their trust in God and are thus able to overcome timidity, a sense of inferiority or worse still, reproaches and complaints”.<sup>11</sup> Discussions and sharing of experiences, desires, and proposals should be made in freedom.

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<sup>10</sup> *Vademecum*, 2.2

<sup>11</sup> Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, “To dream together, to pray together and to work together.” Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1l6b-nFftfRNstClTqGuL5xYH0yLGG2AS/view>

### *Humility/Simplicity*

Cardinal João Braz de Aviz encourages that the synod discussions and sharing be done in simplicity, without arrogance: “Let it be done in all simplicity, moved by the Holy Spirit, avoiding arrogance, without presumption but always having a sense of co-responsibility”.<sup>12</sup> As has been expressed so far that listening is the method and format is dialogue through participation. Listening, dialogue and participation cannot bear fruit without humility.

An important virtue that helps us to journey together is humility. People of God must be humble and simple. These are good attitudes for the synod. Only a humble person can listen to others and listen with sincerity. Only a humble person knows that others may have better opinions. Only a humble person can respect the views of others. Only a simple person is able to honestly engage others in dialogue. The *Vademecum* puts it this way:

Humility in listening must correspond to courage in speaking: Everyone has the right to be heard, just as everyone has the right to speak. Synodal dialogue depends on courage both in speaking and in listening. It is not about engaging in a debate to convince others. Rather, it is welcoming what others say as a way by which the Holy Spirit can speak for the good of all (1 Corinthians 12:7).<sup>13</sup>

### **Vices of a Journey in the Church**

The vices of a journey together in the Church can be seen as various stumbling blocks to our achieving the goodly desires of the synod on

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<sup>12</sup>Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, “To dream together, to pray together and to work together.” Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/116b-nFftfRNstClqGuL5xYH0yLGG2AS/view>

<sup>13</sup>*Vademecum*, 2.3.

synodality. The Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality captures these vices as temptations or pitfalls that we must do well not to fall into during the process of this synod.

### *Clericalism and Bureaucracy*

One of the dangers or stumbling block that the synod on synodality will face is the tendency to undermine the laity. The aim of the synod will be defeated if the laity is not fully carried along. It is when all the sons and daughters participate in the process of the synod that the fruits of the walking together will be fully realized. This is no time for excessive bureaucracy or hierarchical clericalism. We cannot say that the synod is the Church in a journey but a journey in the Church if it is hijacked by the hierarchy and clerics. The synod should neither be dominated by the clerics nor by the laity. The Vademecum pleads:

Overcome the scourge of clericalism: The Church is the Body of Christ filled with different charisms in which each member has a unique role to play. We are all interdependent on one another and we all share an equal dignity amidst the holy People of God. In the image of Christ, true power is service. Synodality calls upon pastors to listen attentively to the flock entrusted to their care, just as it calls the laity to freely and honestly express their views. Everyone listens to one other out of love, in a spirit of communion and our common mission. Thus the power of the Holy Spirit is manifested in manifold ways in and through the entire People of God.<sup>14</sup>

### *Labelling and Stereotyping*

Another vice that the participants of the synod on synodality must overcome is the tendency to label and stereotype people and places. The Church in a journey together walks in unity and not in disorder.

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<sup>14</sup>*Vademecum*, 2.3.

Labelling and stereotyping puts people or places in categories and creates divisions. The synod is to enhance peace and not to create crises. No one should be condemned or perceived as irredeemable. The *Vademecum* for the synod on synodality warns: “Leave behind prejudices and stereotypes: We can be weighed down by our weaknesses and sinfulness. The first step towards listening is freeing our minds and hearts from prejudices and stereotypes that lead us on the wrong path, towards ignorance and division”.<sup>15</sup>

### *Secular Humanism*

One of the vices that may rise up during this synod is the tendency to give opportunity to secular humanism while every attention will be on the human person and thereby overlooking the work of the Holy Spirit. Synodality is actually the revelation of the Holy Spirit. It is centred on listening to the Spirit. There may be temptation to shift the attention to ourselves and try to direct ourselves. Such temptations must be avoided. Otherwise, the synod may just end up as a mere journey together in the Church and not the Church in a journey. The *Vademecum* admonishes on what to avoid:

The temptation of wanting to lead ourselves instead of being led by God. Synodality is not a corporate strategic exercise. Rather it is a spiritual process that is led by the Holy Spirit. We can be tempted to forget that we are pilgrims and servants on the path marked out for us by God. Our humble efforts of organization and coordination are at the service of God who guides us on our way. We are clay in the hands of the divine Potter (Isaiah 64:8).<sup>16</sup>

### *Myopism*

Another vice of a journey in the Church is what the author calls the vice of myopism. A journey in the Church usually focuses on matters of

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<sup>15</sup>*Vademecum*, 2.3.

<sup>16</sup>*Vademecum*, 2.4.

immediate concerns. The synod on synodality is like to fall into the temptation of defective narrow minded vision. The synod is not just about matters of few weeks to come. It is a journey of foresight. It is the journey of the future, the journey of eternity. It must not be reduced to matters of immediate concerns. The emphasis of the synod must be to discern the 'shape' of the future Church and not just the Church of few hours. This synod must have foresight and think long-term concerns. The Vademecum has something to say:

The Synodal Process is an opportunity to open up, to look around us, to see things from other points of view, and to move out in missionary outreach to the peripheries. This requires us to think long-term. This also means broadening our perspectives to the dimensions of the entire Church and asking questions, such as: What is God's plan for the Church here and now? How can we implement God's dream for the Church on the local level?<sup>17</sup>

### *Reductionism*

Reductionism is a vice of a journey in the church that entails reducing the intention of the synodal journey to something else. It could be in form of reducing the synod into mere problems fixing project or structural re-organization project or undermining the objective altogether. The Church in a journey together does not focus on fixing problems or building structures or forget that its aim is to discern what the Spirit is saying to the Church. It does not overlook problems or structure, its aim is essentially to lead to a renewal or conversion experience in the lives of the people of God that will reset the image of the Church the way it was originally designed by Jesus. The Vademecum admits:

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<sup>17</sup>*Vademecum*, 2.4.

The challenges, difficulties, and hardships facing our world and our Church are many. Nevertheless, fixating on the problems will only lead us to be overwhelmed, discouraged, and cynical. We can miss the light if we focus only on the darkness. Instead of focusing only on what is not going well, let us appreciate where the Holy Spirit is generating life and see how we can let God work more fully. ...The Synodal Process will naturally call for a renewal of structures at various levels of the Church, in order to foster deeper communion, fuller participation, and more fruitful mission. At the same time, the experience of synodality should not focus first and foremost on structures, but on the experience of journeying together to discerning the path forward, inspired by the Holy Spirit. The conversion and renewal of structures will come about only through the ongoing conversion and renewal of all the members of the Body of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

### *Exclusion*

Exclusion is one of the vices of a journey in the Church whereby a cross-section of the Church is entirely overlooked in collective discernment and decision-taking. This is what the synod on synodality must avoid. It must overcome the tendency to listen to some persons, people and group and overlook others. There must be wider consultations. This is the intention of the pope.<sup>19</sup> It must overcome the temptation to forget the contribution of those who are less active in the Church. It must avoid the tendency to exclude non-Catholic who have invaluable contributions to make on the basis of their expertise and

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<sup>18</sup> *Vademecum*, 2.4.

<sup>19</sup> See Pope Francis, *Apostolic Constitution. Episcopalis communio* (15 September 2018), no. 7. Cf. Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 07.09.2021. For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission, no. 31. This consultation is with “the Priests, Deacons and lay Faithful of their Churches, both individually and in associations, without overlooking the valuable contribution that consecrated men and women can offer”

knowledge. Even the *Vademecum* speaks against such tendency that may harm the process of the synod on synodality. It says: “Synods are a time to dream and “spend time with the future”: We are encouraged to create a local process that inspires people, with no one excluded to create a vision of the future filled with the joy of the Gospel”<sup>20</sup> and again, “a Synodal Process is a time to dialogue with people from the worlds of economics and science, politics and culture, arts and sport, the media and social initiatives. It will be a time to reflect on ecology and peace, life issues and migration. We must keep the bigger picture in view to fulfil our mission in the world. It is also an opportunity to deepen the ecumenical journey with other Christian denominations and to deepen our understanding with other faith traditions”.<sup>21</sup> The synod must overcome the vice of exclusion.

### *Politicization*

This vice of a journey in the Church is the temptation of viewing every discussion and processes of the synod from political point of view. We must avoid the tendency to turn the synod into political in character. The tendency to categorize the participants as winners or losers, create factions and divide the people of God. In the words of the *Vademecum*, we must not “treat the synod as a kind of parliament. This confuses synodality with a 'political battle' in which in order to govern one side must defeat the other. It is contrary to the spirit of synodality to antagonize others or to encourage divisive conflicts that threaten the unity and communion of the Church”.<sup>22</sup> The synod should be a time to build bridges beyond the walls that divide us.

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<sup>20</sup> *Vademecum*, 2.3.

<sup>21</sup> *Vademecum*, 2.4.

<sup>22</sup> *Vademecum*, 2.4.

## **Conclusion**

By and large, if this journeying together in synodality is going to be a lasting work of the Holy Spirit, we must try to discern and practice together the virtues of the Church in a journey and prevent the vices of a journey in the Church. In any case, our faith and assurance is that divine providence will not allow the fruits of our synodal aircraft to be hijacked by unscrupulous elements within and outside the Church to a scandalous demonically arranged airport. Afterall, the Holy Spirit is in each of us and this Spirit is the principle of communion and mission. This is the faith of the Church. This we must confess with confidence and great expectation.