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## Rediscovering Synodal Church for the Third Millennium

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The twentieth century is rightly described as “the century of the Church” (*Das Jahrhundert der Kirche*) by the Protestant theologian Otto Dibelius.<sup>1</sup> From a Catholic perspective, we can say that the twentieth century has been ‘a century of ecclesiologies’, considering the blossoming of ecclesiologies both before and after the Second Vatican Council. Several streams of ecclesiological reflections inspired by the biblical studies and historical consciousness got channeled into the Second Vatican Council through the *periti* and the Council Fathers. Marking a definitive shift from the dominant Neo-Scholastic manualist ecclesiology, the Council embraced the fruits of biblical and patristic studies and allowed the insights from the French and German theologies to freely flow into the Council floor and endeavored to renew the Church top to bottom.

In the Council itself, theology of the Church occupied the central position with two Constitutions *Lumen Gentium* (LG) and *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) fully dedicated to the theology of the Church and most of the other documents dealing with the Church in relation to various fields like liturgy and worship, mission, ecumenism, bishops, priests and laity. The

<sup>1</sup> The Protestant theologian Otto Dibelius, in the title of a well-known book *Das Jahrhundert der Kirche* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Berlin: Furche, 19), referred to the 20th century as “the century of the Church”. See also Avery Dulles, “A Half Century of Ecclesiology”, *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), 419-442.

Second Vatican Council is the most significant landmark in the life of the Church in the second millennium as regards ecclesiology. It forged a new vision of the Church, which steered the vision off the predominant juridical conception of the church as a hierarchical perfect society towards a more biblical and missionary vision of the Church as the pilgrim people of God.

We can find traces of all - ancient, medieval and modern - ecclesiological traditions and thoughts in the documents.<sup>2</sup> The Council documents place on display a collage of ecclesiologies, rather than one ecclesiology, so that the interpretation of the Conciliar ecclesiology vary vastly and many ecclesiologies emerged as claimant to be the ecclesiology of the Council. Two predominant ecclesiologies of the post-Vatican II period are the people of God and communion ecclesiologies. However, these ecclesiologies produced only a shift in emphasis and 'theological' vision and no substantial reform in Church structure or administration happened, that many feel the reform initiated by Vatican II remains an unfinished agenda. And as a result of the controversies over the right interpretation of the Vatican II ecclesiology, the intended reform and renewal of the Church have not happened; and the struggle has spilled over into the third millennium.

Synod of Bishops was established as a remote form of the Council and the desire for more conciliarity is kept alive in the Church. Taking a cue from Orthodox *sobornost* and synods of the Eastern Churches, Synod of bishops has been begging for more teeth and nail beyond a mere consultative exercise. Pope Francis has finally taken a bold initiative to bring the ecclesial reforms forward in the direction of synodality – saying that is the future of the Church in the third millennium. Synodality is nothing new for the Church – it has always been there in some form or other and in varying degrees. The rediscovery of synodality has gathered momentum with convocation of the whole Church on a two-year Synodal (2021-2023) path of reflection and sharing of the whole Church.

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<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the struggles and compromises in LG see A. Acerbi, *Due ecclesiologie: Ecclesiologia giuridica ed ecclesiologia di comunione nella "Lumen gentium,"* Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1975.

This paper is an enquiry into the nature and function of synodality and a quick look at the challenges and prospects of a synodal vision of the Church. We will start by taking a look at the evolution of ecclesiological vision and reforms in the post-Vatican II period and move to a detailed analysis of the Synodal Church proposed by Pope Francis and examine synodality itself and the prospects and challenges of the synodal Church in the third millennium. The synodal Church is a decisive theme for the life and mission of the Church in the third millennium.

## **1. The Ecclesiological Streams that Flowed into Vatican II**

The dominant vision of the Church at the beginning of the twentieth century was the manualistic ecclesiology, which held the Church as the perfect society and a hierarchical institution founded by Christ and governed juridically by the Pope, as the Vicar of Christ. Juridical power was raised above sacramental order and bishops were seen deriving their jurisdiction from the Pope. Roman Catholic Church was identified with the Kingdom of God and as the true and legitimate Church of Jesus Christ, polemically against Protestantism and with consequences in the attitude towards other religions and cultures. However, this ecclesiology could not hold ground against the flow of biblical, patristic and historical research as well as the ecumenical and secular requirements of the day. This led to the search for more dynamic and organic ecclesiologies based on the Scripture, early Church and the historical conditions.

Various theological schools and theologians used different approaches to renew ecclesiology. Theologians in the scholastic tradition, like Journet, harped on to the ontological character of the Church, in the older scholastic tradition of St. Thomas, to construct a descending ecclesiology based on the supernatural character of the Church and its relationship of Christ as instrumental causality. On the contrary, the French theologians like de Lubac, Bouyer and Danielou returned to the patristic sources and revived the Mystical body theology of the Fathers, upholding a physical and organic union between Christ and Church in place of instrumental causality. For both, Church is the mystical body of Christ or the prolongation of Christ

in history. Such reflection on the Church as Mystical Body made it possible for Pius XII to produce his encyclical *Mystici corporis Christi* (1943), the most comprehensive official Catholic pronouncement on the Church prior to Vatican II. Mystical body ecclesiology advanced much beyond juridical ecclesiologies of the manualists, who equated the visible unity of the mystical body to the level of the Church as a hierarchical society, thereby reconciling the mystical body theology with the Neo-Scholastic juridical one. This is reflected in identifying the Roman Catholic Church with the mystical body of Christ and anyone not united to Catholic Church through sacraments and obedience to Pope are considered not in communion with Christ. However, many theologians as well as *Mediator Dei* of Pius XII in 1947 taught that Christians are made members of the mystical body and participants in Christ's priestly office through baptism.

Congar's multi-faceted research in Church unity (1937), on episcopal collegiality (1963), on *ekklesia* or the people of God and on the role of the Holy Spirit, along with similar works by Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, and Ratzinger contributed to the retrieval of the ecclesiological experience of the first millennium with its intense spirituality, prayerful listening to Christ and the Holy Spirit, teaching of the Apostles and Eucharistic communion and missionary fervor. Since the Church in 20th century had ceased to exert any dominant role in society and culture like in the first centuries, the second millennium preoccupation with juridical power and domination as well as hierarchical juridical controls became irrelevant and it became imperative to return to the ancient church model. Historical, biblical and patristic researches highlighted the idea of Church as the people of God, called together through baptism and Eucharist, in order to live in communion with God and one another in imitation of the Trinity. Church is a prolongation of Christ in history and an eschatological pilgrim people of God animated by the Holy Spirit, and as such a sacrament of salvation for everyone. It is a unity in plurality in the fashion of the Trinity and the Pauline metaphor of the body. Church is the eschatological kingdom of God on earth as the pilgrim people of God on the way to the heavenly destination, yet, the kingdom of God is not identical to the Church but refers to God's sovereign lordship bringing Church and all humans and

the whole creation to an eschatological goal. Church as an institution is subordinated to Church as a mystery, sacrament and communion. And we find new ecclesiologies emerging, with old and new elements of mystery, sacrament, community and communion in the post-Vatican II period. Prominent among them are the People of God and Communion ecclesiologies.

## 2. Dominant Ecclesiologies from Vatican II

Although the dominant ecclesiologies within the Council were ‘Church as Mystery’ or the ‘Mystical Body of Christ’, the “People of God” ecclesiology stood out as the most popular vision of the Church in the first two decades after the Council, until the Synod of Bishops in 1985 hailed communion ecclesiology as the authentic ecclesiology of the Council and the Church.

### 2.1. The Church as the New “People of God”

The self-understanding of the Church as the new People of God with a divine origin and a historical mission seemed like the perfect vision of the Church for the twentieth century. In the words of the International Theological Commission (1984) “the expression ‘the New people of God’ has come to stand for the ecclesiology of the Council, because it renders better the divine origin, election and mission of the Church and indicates that the Church is a historic subject and an agent with a mission in the world to bring all human beings into communion with God.”<sup>3</sup> As both “mystery” and “historical subject”, the new people of God “is a community composed of men ... who, united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onward toward the Kingdom of the Father and are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all men.”<sup>4</sup> This new vision of the Church bolstered up by the emerging historical consciousness (*aggiornamento*) in the Church, paved the way for countless, pastoral, liturgical and missionary reforms in the Church in the next decades.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. International Theological Commission (ITC), *Select Themes of Ecclesiology on the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of the Closing of the Second Vatican Council* (1984), II.1. See also LG 9: “Christ instituted this new covenant ..., calling together a people made up of Jew and gentile, making them one, not according to the flesh but in the Spirit. This was to be the new People of God.”

<sup>4</sup> ITC, *Select Themes of Ecclesiology*, IV.1.

The people of God ecclesiology was particularly fruitful in the mission contexts. Called and commissioned by Jesus Christ “to proclaim and communicate [the Good News] in the remembrance and expectation of Jesus Christ”, the mission of the Church among men is to be a pilgrim community that always remains “on the way” and “in commitment to mission.”<sup>5</sup> As a people who have come to know the Good News and to experience the mysteries of salvation through the Word of God and the sacraments, all the baptized are missionaries “chosen from among the whole of humanity to be witnesses and agents of transformation to the Reign of God, their mission being to “lend embodiment to the Kingdom of God” and to “humanize” the world.<sup>6</sup> Through “the witness of their life, resplendent in faith, hope, and charity, they must manifest Christ to others” (LG 31) and “contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties which constitute their very existence” (LG 31).

The People of God ecclesiology gave rise to a regno-centric vision of mission. The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* by Pope Paul VI defines *evangelization* as “bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new” (EN 18; cf. EN 4). EN clarifies further that “it is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind’s criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life” (EN 19; CT 53, LG 13). Christians are called to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and purify and elevate it and build communities of justice and righteousness which Christians refer to as the Kingdom of God. Being quite in tune with the incarnational dynamics of Christianity, the kingdom-centred (*basileological*) vision of the Church and its mission gave a new impulse to all forms of humanitarian work of empowerment of the poor as well as engagement in inculturation and interreligious dialogue. The Liberation

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<sup>5</sup> ITC, *Select Themes of Ecclesiology*, III.3 and 4.

<sup>6</sup> ITC, *Select Themes of Ecclesiology*, III.4.

Theology is the paramount expression of the 'People of God ecclesiology' and kingdom-centred mission theology. However, driven by the impression that the predominantly immanentist interpretation of Church and Kingdom sparked by the People of God ecclesiology is detrimental to the divine aspect of the Church, traditional churches began to distance from the people of God ecclesiology and proposed communion ecclesiology as the alternative.

## 2.2. Communion Ecclesiology Replaces People of God Ecclesiology

The Ratzinger Report delineated the continental debates on the reception of Vatican II in the direction of communion ecclesiology.<sup>7</sup> His view was that Communion ecclesiology understands the Church as the locus of this divine-human communion, willed by the Father, established by Christ and rendered sacramentally available in the Church by the Holy Spirit and, thus, serves as a foundational ecclesiology for the Church's self-understanding and ecumenism among the Churches, as well as dialogue and communion with people of other religions and ideologies. Subsequently, the Synod of Bishops in 1985 sought to promote the ecclesiology of communion as "the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents"<sup>8</sup> distancing itself from the horizontal and anthropological stress of the People of God ecclesiology. This view was supported by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, saying that the communion ecclesiology, with its emphasis on "the *vertical* (communion with God) and the *horizontal* (communion among men)", expresses well the nature of the Church as the Mystery of "the new relationship between man and God that has been established in Christ and is communicated through the sacraments."<sup>9</sup> Thereafter the continental theologies consider communion ecclesiology as the most suitable

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<sup>7</sup> The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), which considerably influenced the Synodal discussions on the Reception of Vatican II; Joseph Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of Vatican II," Conference of Cardinal Ratzinger at the Opening of the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Aversa (Italy) in 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Synod of Bishops, Second Extraordinary Assembly (1985), *Relatio finalis*, Section II: Particular Themes of the Synod, C: The Church as Communion, No. 1. Cardinal Ratzinger was instrumental in this communion ecclesiology.

<sup>9</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church, On Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion* (1992), 1, 3, 4.

ecclesiological expression of the Mystery of the Church, and as the key for the renewal of Catholic ecclesiology.

Nonetheless, in overemphasizing the vertical dimension of the Church in an effort to counter-balance the horizontal leanings of the People of God ecclesiology, Communion ecclesiology inclines towards ecclesio-centrism and to a refurbished version of the Tridentine perfect society, with a hierarchical-sacramental monopoly over salvation.<sup>10</sup> While communion ecclesiology serves well to explain the liturgical, sacramental and hierarchical nature and function of the Church, it fails to take into consideration the Vatican and post Vatican teaching that “the need for all the faithful to share in this responsibility is not merely a matter of making the apostolate more effective, it is a right and duty based on their baptismal dignity, whereby “the faithful participate, for their part, in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King” (LG 17, 33, AG 35-36, 41; *Christifideles Laici*, 14, 35) and that “the mission *ad gentes* is incumbent upon the entire People of God” (AG 2, RM 62; RM 71).

In short, both people of God and communion ecclesiologies, while offering a renewed theological vision of the Church, fail to bring about the ecclesial reform intended by Vatican II, which remains an unfinished agenda.

### 3. The Unfinished Agenda of Ecclesial Reform

Vatican II endeavored to reform and renew the Church in the twentieth century, but the conciliar affirmation of theological principles did not translate into action or social reality, primarily because, as O’Hanlon puts it “while there was significant cultural and theological development at the Second Vatican Council, nonetheless there was insufficient structural, legal and institutional grounding of many of the changes envisaged”, ending up in “an abstract teaching without point of entry into the social reality of the

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<sup>10</sup> This follows closely Chapter IV of *Ad Gentes* (23-27) dedicated to “Workers” of mission. Interpreting AG 1 and LG 23, RM states that “the charge of proclaiming the Gospel throughout the world belongs to the body of shepherds, to all of whom in common Christ gave the command.” In contrast we find EN speaks of a kingdom-centred evangelization as the responsibility of the whole Church with institutional-hierarchical and sacramental links (EN 59-60).



Church.”<sup>11</sup> Majority of bishops favoured reform and they left with a sense that significant change occurred, but the curia people who were to implement reform were from the minority in the Council who opposed radical reform and firmly stood for continuity. Post-conciliar developments under Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI saw a return to the centralized Church firmly rooted on papal primacy and hierarchical authority of the bishops established by Vatican II.

Scholars opine that the text of *Lumen Gentium* and other documents, despite the reformed tone and language, are compromise documents accommodating views of the minority who wanted continuity along with open-ended documents with a parallel presentation of hierarchical and collegial vision of the church.<sup>12</sup> According to Dulles “The ecclesiology of Vatican II ... followed the directions of the *nouvelle théologie* rather than those of neo-scholasticism, but it made no sharp break with the official teaching of the recent past. The shift was one of emphasis more than substance, of rhetoric more than doctrine.”<sup>13</sup> Dulles feels that the church as people of God, which occupies one whole chapter in LG is developed maintaining hierarchical and institutional structures. Hierarchy is described as service to the people of God, conserving the authority as ever. Different reform ideas like the episcopal collegiality, theological and canonical status of episcopal conferences, recognition of the role of laity in the Church remained unproductive theological ideas.<sup>14</sup>

The communion ecclesiology too while being firmly rooted in renewal-reform agenda of the Second Vatican Council and having achieved a lot in the theological, pastoral and missionary reform of the Church, did not lead to profound reforms in the institutional and hierarchical aspects of the Church, except for highlighting the role of the Bishops, along with the Pope.

<sup>11</sup> Gerry O’Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis. A Synodal Catholic Church in Ireland*, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2019, 21, 22. Chapter one traces the background of the reforms of Pope Francis.

<sup>12</sup> O’Malley says “Collegiality was lightening rod” of Council – between ‘hard’ collegiality and ‘soft’ collegiality and the Council leaves statements on collegiality side-by-side with pre-conciliar papal primacy and infallibility without reconciliation. Cf. O’Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis*, 20-21.

<sup>13</sup> Dulles, “A Half Century of Ecclesiology,” 429.

<sup>14</sup> Dulles, “A Half Century of Ecclesiology,” 429-30.

The primary vision of the ecclesiology of communion in which Church is the people of God, coming into communion with the Trinity through baptism, failed to reflect at institutional and hierarchical realms, wherein the pre-conciliar ecclesiology of hierarchical perfect society prevailed. The conciliar “turn to the Laity” did not go to the extent of allowing them to take ownership of their faith and start operating their call. This is because the conciliar ecclesiology of charisms did not receive sufficient attention<sup>15</sup> amidst the hermeneutics of continuity and discontinuity.

The implementation of the Conciliar ecclesiology of communion is still unfolding, even as Church is faced with the rapid globalization and techno-media revolution in the world and the resultant context of cultural, religious pluralism and ecumenical concerns. Pope Francis seems to be determined to complete the unfinished agenda of Vatican II in Church reform, adding his own original style and stamp of synodality to it as Cardinal Wuerl said, in an interview marking the beginning of the fifth year of the pontificate of Pope Francis in 2018: “Now comes Pope Francis who’s saying, “Why don’t we pick up where we left off: collegiality, synodality.” He continued, “the synodality that Paul VI initiated has flowered under Francis.”<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis picks ‘synodality’, a crucial lead from the Council, to return to a more collegial Church.

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Anthony Novak, “We The People: A Vision of the Church Still Unachieved,” H. James Yamauchi Lecture In Religion, Loyola University New Orleans, Wednesday 30 November 2011, <http://cas.loyno.edu/sites/cas.loyno.edu/files/Novak%2011F%20Yamauchi%20Lecture,%20FINAL.pdf>, pp.3-12.

<sup>16</sup> Gerard O’Connell, “Cardinal Wuerl: Pope Francis has Reconnected the Church with Vatican II,” (interview given to the America Magazine on the beginning of the fifth year of the pontificate of Pope Francis in 2017). Cf. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/03/06/cardinal-wuerl-pope-francis-has-reconnected-church-vatican-ii>, (accessed January 21, 2020). In the words of Cardinal Wuerl, “his [Pope Francis’] great contribution to date has been, the reconnecting of the church with the energy of the Second Vatican Council.”

#### 4. Pope Francis - Taking Church Reform Forward

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has signaled a new path for the Church, which can be outlined as the synodal vision of the Church.<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis announced the principle of synodality in the interview that he granted to *Civiltà Cattolica* (published on September 19, 2013): “We must walk together: the people, the bishops and the pope. Synodality should be lived at various levels. Maybe it is time to change the methods of the Synod of Bishops, because it seems to me that the current method is not dynamic.”<sup>18</sup> Synodality, for Pope Francis, consists in all members of the Church, Pope, Bishops and people, *journeying together to evangelize*. Pope believes in involving all the baptized in discerning God’s will by listening to the Holy Spirit to bring about the Kingdom of God. In his own words, “... It is precisely this *path of synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”<sup>19</sup>

His vision is best outlined in his *Address to the bishops on the 50 anniversary of Synod of Bishops* and further clarified on several occasions. In his Address at the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Synod, Pope Francis affirmed “Synodality, as a constitutive element of the Church”, echoing the words of St. John Chrysostom, who stated that “Church and Synod are synonymous.”<sup>20</sup> He also defines more or less what is synod: “What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word “synod” - Journeying together — laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome.” “Church

<sup>17</sup> See J. Palakeel, “Journeying together to Evangelize: A look at the Synodal Church of Pope Francis,” *Asian Horizons*, 14, 1 (March 2020), 119-136.

<sup>18</sup> See Antonio Spadaro, “A Church on a Synodal Journey: Pastoral challenges of the Family,” *America Magazine* (November 07, 2014), <https://www.americamagazine.org/church-synodal-journey>. See also Antonio Spadaro, “Intervista con Papa Francesco,” in *Civiltà cattolica* 2013, III, 449-477, here p. 466. See also Pope Francis, “My Door is Always Open. A Conversation with Antonio Spadaro,” Milan: Rizzoli, 2013, p. 65. In his view, the Synod on Family (2014) is a good example of a courageous “synodal process.” Three things in Synod indicate Francis’ “dynamic of synodality”, namely, (1) an updated methodology of Synod, (2) option to speak with parrhesia and to listen with humility and (3) the understanding ‘united in difference as true Catholic spirit.’

<sup>19</sup> “Address of his Holiness Pope Francis at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the synod of bishops,” Paul VI Audience Hall, Saturday, 17 October 2015. Cf. [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html). (accessed January 21, 2020)

<sup>20</sup> Saint John Chrysostom, *Explicatio* in Ps. 149: PG 55, 493, as quoted in *Address*.

is nothing other than God's Flock "walking together" on the paths of history to meet Christ the Lord."<sup>21</sup> This vision is grounded on the ecclesiology of "the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*)"<sup>22</sup> of the whole people of God" (LG 12), "comprised of all the baptized" (LG 1). Thus "the whole people of God, 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful,' 'whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization" and as such "manifest a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals" (*infallible "in credendo"*) (EG 119-120).

The Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio*<sup>23</sup> – *On the Synod of Bishops* - (2018) turns into norms all the steps on the path of a constitutively synodal Church. Pope expresses the hope that "*the collegial pastoral responsibility can be expressed in the Synod even more fully*"<sup>24</sup> [italics mine] (EC 3-4) as the Canon Law provides that "*the Synod might also enjoy deliberative power, should the Roman Pontiff wish to grant this* (CIC 337, §3; CCEO can. 50, §3) [italics mine].<sup>25</sup> He even goes to the extent of saying "although structurally it is essentially configured as an episcopal body, this does not mean that the Synod exists separately from the rest of the faithful."<sup>26</sup> "Synod of Bishops must increasingly become a privileged instrument "to listen to God and to listen to the people" (EC 6). Thus this document has norms to widen the scope of the synod of bishops in order to make it truly *synodal*, which may be taken up in the forthcoming Synod on Synod of

<sup>21</sup> "Address of Pope Francis at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary".

<sup>22</sup> For study of *sensus fidei* in the context of social media culture see: J. Palakeel, "Crowdsourcing Diving Truth? 'Sensus Fidei' and Theological Authority in the Social Media Culture" in Miriam Diez Bosch and others, ed., *Authority and Leadership: Values, Religion, Media*, Barcelona: Blanquerna Observatory, (2017), 123-140.

<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* - *On the Synod of Bishops*, 2018. [quoted texts are indicated by paragraph numbers within the text]

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, Homily at the Mass for the Closing of the VI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (29 October 1983). Pope Francis, "Address to Members of the XIII Ordinary Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops (13 June 2013).

<sup>25</sup> While "the Eastern Churches have an ancient and very rich synodal tradition", in the West they "would normally exercise a consultative role", although the Code of Canon Law (1983) made the Synod of Bishops part of universal law, (CIC can. 342-348; CCEO can. 46).

<sup>26</sup> EC Article 2#2 indicates that certain others who are not Bishops may be summoned to the Synod Assembly. Article 6#1 makes "consultation of the People of God" by local or particular churches, a part of the preparation for the Synod.

Bishops in 2023.<sup>27</sup> Pope Francis says that “the *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and an *Ecclesia discens*, since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church.”<sup>28</sup> A Bishop is “both teacher and disciple”, a *shepherd* when he acts as “head and shepherd” and a *disciple*, when “he listens to the voice of Christ speaking through the entire People of God.” His ears must be open to the ‘voice of the sheep’ (EC 5). Supernatural sense of faith (*sensus fidei*) entails that “all Bishops are appointed for the service of the holy People of God” (EC 5).<sup>29</sup>

Having analyzed the synodal vision of Pope Francis, we will now move into a systematic exploration of his vision of a synodal church.

## 5. Understanding Synodality

Synodal way of being Church means a paradigm shift which goes beyond any adjustments to the existing model of Church. The presuppositions and processes of a synodal path means more a cultural and spiritual renewal than an institutional reform.<sup>30</sup> Pope told a gathering of 2,200 Italian bishops, priests and lay people in Florence’s Cathedral in 2015: “The constant need for reform in the Church, the *semper reformanda* “does not end in the umpteenth plan to change structures. ... There are ecclesial structures which can hamper efforts at evangelization, yet even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them.” “Without new life and an authentic evangelical spirit, without the Church’s “fidelity to her own calling”, any new structure will soon prove

<sup>27</sup> The theme of Synod of Bishops 2023 is “For a synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission”.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, “Address to the Leadership of the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America during the General Coordination Meeting,” Rio de Janeiro, 28 July 2013, 5, 4; Pope Francis, Address on the occasion of a meeting with Clergy, Consecrated Persons and members of Pastoral Councils, Assisi, 4 October 2013. (as quoted in “Address of Pope Francis at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary”).

<sup>29</sup> So the Bishop is called to lead his flock by “walking in front of them, showing them the way, showing them the path; walking in their midst, to strengthen them in unity; walking behind them, to make sure no one gets left behind but especially, never to lose the scent of the People of God in order to find new roads” (EC 5).

<sup>30</sup> Gerry O’Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis*, 48-49. See also, Massimo Faggioli, *Pope Francis: Tradition in Transition* (Translation ed.), Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015, 32-33.

ineffective.” Hence Pope Francis has “located the issues of renewal and reform within the more basic truth of our encounter with Jesus Christ and the missionary impulse this generates.”<sup>31</sup> By proposing the synodal path, Pope’s intention is to reform and renew the Church for the third millennium along the lines of collegial thrust in ecclesiology.<sup>32</sup> We can call it missionary synodality and/or synodal collegiality

### 5.1. Synodal Church is a Listening Church

Synodality is based on the firm belief that the Church is led by the Holy Spirit and that we must therefore listen to the voice of the Spirit to discern the voice and the call of God. In a hierarchical church Pope and Bishops are privileged listeners to the Holy Spirit and are mandated to teach the people of God, whereas in the Synodal church the magisterium listens to the Holy Spirit speaking to them through the people of God (LG 12) as well. In his general audience on October 23, 2019, in the context of Amazon Synod and its discussion on synodality, Pope Francis said that “the Assembly of Jerusalem offers us an important light on “discernment made in the light of the Spirit.” Commenting on Ephesians 4:15 on seeking “truth in charity” Pope said, “This text helps us to understand synodality. The way they write the Letter is interesting: The Apostles begin by saying: ‘The Holy Spirit and we think that...’ The presence of the Holy Spirit is proper of synodality, otherwise it’s not synodality, it’s a parlor, parliament, something else...”<sup>33</sup> To undertake a synodal journey or to have an attitude of synodality, does not mean “to carry out a survey of opinions, what does this one think, that one, that other one ... and then hold a meeting, and come to an agreement ... No, the Synod isn’t a Parliament!... “You must certainly know what your lay people think, but it’s not a survey; it’s something else. “If the Holy Spirit isn’t there, there is no Synod. If the Holy Spirit isn’t present, there is no Synodality.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> “Address by Pope Francis to Italian bishops in Florence,” 10 November 2015 – see *The Tablet*, 11 November 2015.

<sup>32</sup> In the words of O’Hanlon, Pope Francis “integrates the two conciliar documents on the Church”, combining in a coherent and dynamic way the ad intra dimension (*Lumen Gentium*) and the ad extra dimension (*Gaudium et Spes*) of the Church. He calls it the ‘silent revolution’ of Pope Francis. O’Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis*. 45.

<sup>33</sup> <https://zenit.org/articles/holy-father-continues-catecheses-on-acts-of-the-apostles/>.

<sup>34</sup> Pope Francis Stresses Synodality to Bishops of Synod of Ukrainian Greek-Catholic

The core of synodal process is listening and discernment: “A synodal Church is a Church which listens”, a listening which is “more than simply hearing” (EG 171), a “mutual listening” “at every level of the Church’s life”, in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth” (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he “says to the Churches” (Rev 2:7).<sup>35</sup> The Synodal process begins by “listening to the people of God”, which shares in Christ’s prophetic office (LG 12); it then “continues by listening to the pastors”; and the Synod of Bishops is “the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church’s life.” The Synod Fathers, “having listened to the people of God and the pastors and discerning carefully the changing current of public opinion”, “listen to God ... until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us.” The Synod process culminates in listening to the Bishop of Rome, who is called to speak as “pastor and teacher of all Christians”, and “the guarantor of the obedience and the conformity of the Church to the will of God, to the Gospel of Christ, and to the Tradition of the Church.”<sup>36</sup>

## 5.2. Synodality Demands Effective Communion among the Entire People of God

The Synodal Church redefines the Communion ecclesiology from the perspective of the People of God Ecclesiology. Thus the two predominant ecclesiologies of the post-Vatican II era find a synthesis in the Synodal Church. By emphasizing listening to the Holy Spirit and insisting on listening to the people of God, the vertical dimension stressed by the

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Church”, cf. <https://zenit.org/articles/pope-francis-stresses-synodality-to-bishops-of-synod-of-ukrainian-greek-catholic-church/>. Cf. also <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-09/pope-ukraine-synod-bishops.html>.

<sup>35</sup> “Address of Pope Francis at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary”. Referring to his consultations in the Synod on Family, he says: “such was the conviction underlying my desire that the people of God should be consulted in the preparation of the two phases of the Synod on the family, as is ordinarily done with each *Lineamenta*. Certainly, a consultation of this sort would never be sufficient to perceive the *sensus fidei*. But ... through the answers given ... we had the opportunity at least to hear some of those families speak to issues which closely affect them and about which they have much to say.”

<sup>36</sup> “Address of Pope Francis at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary”.

communion ecclesiology and the horizontal dimension of the Church highlighted by the people of God ecclesiology find their fulfilment in the Synodal Church. Church communion is effected by the spontaneous coming together of believers under the guiding action of the Holy Spirit. This is a perichoretic communion, in which all exist in relation to each other and nobody is independent of any one or above anyone. This communion starts from and is modeled after the Trinity and is sacramentally enacted in the Church. It involves a circularity of movements. It flows from the Father, the source and ground of unity and is revealed by the Son and effected by the Holy Spirit. Humans enter into this communion through baptism and are sustained in communion through common faith and sacraments. Church is thus a communion of the entire people of God.

The synodal church assigns hierarchy and the laity their proper place in the plan of God. The hierarchy is at the service of this communion and not to impose it from top to bottom. Priests and bishops are baptized persons among baptized people with a call to ministering. Pope is a bishop among bishops called to head the hierarchical communion. The same applies to different individual churches or rites as well as local churches. There is a movement from centre to periphery (an outward movement from hierarchy to the faithful) and an inward movement from peripheries to centre (from the faithful in the periphery to the hierarchical centre, represented by the Pope). This move from periphery toward the centre does not replace the centre, but replenish it as a centrifugal force. Synodality as a process of consultation, communal discernment and decision making in the service of the mission of Christ involves a two-way communication and communion of the entire people of God, something missing in the hierarchical Church.

### **5.3. Synodality Redefines Hierarchy and Collegiality**

Synodality offers us “the most appropriate interpretive framework”<sup>37</sup> for understanding the hierarchical ministry and collegiality. In an interview to Belgian Catholic Newspaper *Tertio* in December 2016, Pope Francis stated that “... either there is a pyramidal Church, in which what Peter says is done, or there is a synodal Church, in which Peter is Peter but he

<sup>37</sup> “Address of Pope Francis at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary”.



accompanies the Church, he lets her grow, he listens to her, he learns from this reality and goes about harmonizing it.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, “in this Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base”, an ‘inverted pyramid’, in which people of God are primary and the hierarchy in all its forms are there to serve the people in whom the Holy Spirit is present. Pope Francis says that “hierarchical ministry is one of service in the spirit and manner of Jesus Christ” (Cf. Jn 13:1-15, Mt 20:25-27) and “it is in serving the people of God that each bishop becomes, ... *vicarius Christi*”; and “the successor of Peter is nothing else if not the *servus servorum Dei*.” The bishops are linked to the bishop of Rome by the bond of “*hierarchica communio*” (*cum Petro*) while, at the same time, hierarchically subject to him as head of the college (*sub Petro*) (LG 22, CD 4). For, the Pope is “the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful” (LG 23). “The Synod always acts *cum Petro et sub Petro*” and, thus, synodal church is not doing away with apostolic primacy or hierarchical ministry of the Pope or the Bishops, but reinterprets collegiality in line with the ecclesiology of *sensus fidei* of the whole people of God.

Synodality is, thus, much wider than collegiality spoken of by Vatican II. “The concept of ‘synodality’ refers to the involvement and participation of the whole people of God in the life and mission of the church,” while “collegiality” refers to the College of bishops acting with and under the pope. Synodality “promotes the baptismal dignity and co-responsibility of all, makes the most of the charisms dispensed by the Holy Spirit, recognizes the specific ministry of pastors in collegial and hierarchical communion with the bishop of Rome, and guarantees that synodal processes and events unfold in conformity with the deposit of faith and involve listening to the Holy Spirit for the renewal of the church’s mission.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Interview the Holy Father granted to the Belgian Catholic weekly publication “Tertio”, on the conclusion of the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. See also Massimo Faggioli, “Pope Francis’ Struggle to Bring forth a Synodal Church,” *La Croix International*, published Nov. 5, 2018, <https://international.la-croix.com/news/pope-francis-struggle-to-bring-forth-a-synodal-church/8784#>. <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/12/07/161207a.html> (accessed January 21, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, 2018.

But it doesn't take away the difference of function, ministry and roles. The collegiality which unites the bishops '*cum Petro et sub Petro*' (with and under the Pope) in their concern for the people of God is called to articulate and enrich itself through the practice of synodality at all levels. That calls for "intermediary instances of *collegiality*" and "decentralization" (EG 16). Pope Francis believes that the decentralisation has to be achieved by empowering local, regional and national episcopal bodies into intermediary instances of *collegiality*. "The Second Vatican Council stated that, like the ancient patriarchal Churches, episcopal conferences are in a position 'to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit' (LG 23). Yet this desire has not been fully realized, since a juridical status of episcopal conferences which would see them as subjects of specific attributions, including genuine doctrinal authority, has not yet been sufficiently elaborated. Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach" (EG 32).

The first level of the exercise of *synodality* happens in the particular Churches, in which priests and laity are called to cooperate with the bishop for the good of the whole ecclesial community, (CIC 460-468). The second level is that of Ecclesiastical Provinces and Ecclesiastical Regions, Particular Councils and, in a special way, Conferences of Bishops (CIC 431-459). The last level is that of the universal Church. Here the Synod of Bishops, representing the Catholic episcopate, becomes an expression of *episcopal collegiality* within an entirely synodal Church (CD 5, CIC 342-348), joining the Bishops among themselves and with the Pope in solicitude for the People God. Pope places "episcopal collegiality" (mutual collegiality of bishops, including the Pope) within a 'fully synodal church' (comprising of all baptized). Thus Synodality widens the scope of collegiality.

#### **5.4. Synodality Opens the Church to the Wider World**

Synodal Church widens the scope of communion to the whole humanity. As LG 13 says "All men are called to belong to the new people of God. ... God sent His Son, ... that he might be teacher, king and priest of all, the head of the new and universal people of the sons of God. .... God sent the Spirit of His Son ... who brings together the whole Church." It continues,

“there is but one people of God, scattered though they be throughout the world, are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit.” Synodality in the widest sense means the whole humanity journeying together on a pilgrimage to the heavenly Father. As the whole humanity constitutes the people of God, communion should extend to all.

Synodal Church is an open church, open to one another, and to others and open to the whole world as universal sacrament of communion and salvation. According to Pope Francis, the Church is “not a fortress but a tent capable of enlarging its space (Cf. Is 54:2) giving access to all. The Church is either “going forth” or it’s not Church, it is either a path that is always widening its space so that all can enter, or it’s not Church,’ — “a Church with open doors” (EG 46), always with the doors open.”<sup>40</sup> For Pope Francis, “the commitment to build a synodal -missionary Church ... is fraught with ecumenical implications” and a “careful consideration of how to articulate the principle of collegiality in the Church’s life and the service of the one who presides offer a significant contribution to the advancement of relations between our Churches.”<sup>41</sup> Further, he envisages a synodality that “extends to humanity as well”: “As a Church which ‘walks together’ towards mankind, participating in the travails of history, we cultivate the dream that the rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and of authority’s function of service will also be able to help civil society to grow in justice and brotherhood, bringing to birth a more beautiful world that is worthier of mankind for the generations who will follow us.” “A synodal Church is like a standard lifted up among the nations (cf. Is 11:12)” serves as a new model of authority inspired by Christian vision, “calling for participation, solidarity and transparency in public administration,”<sup>42</sup> which is democracy in its pristine sense.

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<sup>40</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience, October 23, 2019. <https://zenit.org/articles/holy-father-continues-catecheses-on-acts-of-the-apostles/>

<sup>41</sup> “Address of Pope Francis at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary”.

<sup>42</sup> Address of Pope Francis at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary”.

## 5.5. Synodality is about Missionary Transformation of the Church

The Synodal Church is a Church of missionary disciples. In the hierarchical Church the missionary responsibility is vested “primarily with the College of Bishops, headed by the successor of Peter” with the argument that “the Risen Lord gave the universal missionary mandate to the College of the Apostles with Peter as its head” (RM 63; see also RM 61-76; AG 23-27). The ecclesiological defined mission theology thus limits mission to those in the hierarchical-sacramental order leaving behind the vast majority of the faithful who are also “missionaries by baptism” (RM 71; AG 2; RM 62). Despite consistent teachings on the essentially missionary nature of the Church (AG 1; LG 48) and the ‘apostolic’ vocation of all the baptized and making the mission *ad gentes* “incumbent upon the entire People of God” (RM 71), laity are not involved in the missionary activity.<sup>43</sup>

The missionary revamping of the Church that motivated Pope John XXIII to call the Second Vatican Council did not materialize because the post-Vatican debates got embroiled in the hierarchical-sacramental aspects of ecclesiology and fell “prey to a kind of ‘ecclesial introversion.’”<sup>44</sup> We find a welcome change with Pope Francis, who writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “I dream of a ‘missionary option,’ that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation...” (EG 27), so that the Church can be “permanently in state of mission” (EG 25). Pope Francis believes that preaching the Gospel is “the first task of the Church” (RM 34) and “must remain foremost” (RM 86). His call for “the Church’s Missionary Transformation” (EG 19; EG 25, 27-33) is based

<sup>43</sup> Through baptism “the faithful participate, for their part, in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King.” Cf. LG 17, 33; AG 35-36, 41; CL 14, 35.

<sup>44</sup> John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Oceania* (22 November 2001), 19; AAS 94 (2002), 390. Quoted in EG 27 as “all renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion.” Pope Francis states that since the Church is primarily the Community of missionary disciples, all renewal should be “part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented” (EG 27).

on the conviction that “missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity” (EG 15).

The Synodal Church is founded on a missional ecclesiology<sup>45</sup> and traces its origin to a “renewed appreciation of Baptism as the basis of Christian living”<sup>46</sup> and holds that “Baptism constitutes the foundation of communion among all Christians, including those who are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church” (CCC 1271). In the words of Pope Francis, “in all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization” (EG 119) and “all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples” (EG 120, 27). “The mandate given by the Risen Jesus at Easter is inherent in Baptism” and “touches us personally: I am a mission, always; you are a mission, always; every baptized man and woman is a mission.”<sup>47</sup> His words that, “we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries,’ but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples’ (EG 120) stands in sharp contrast to RM’s distinction of ‘leaders and workers’ of mission. Mission is entrusted to each Christian in particular and to the Church in general because the Holy Spirit gives charisms to every believer and every Christian community to share in the Trinitarian life and mission.

## 6. Synodal Church: Prospects and Challenges

The synodal process is initiating a new phase in Church renewal as a community of missionary disciples, at the same time providing an occasion for productive and prophetic engagement with current social, cultural and religious reality. It also creates conditions for reforming structures, ways of life, cultures in the Church and in the civil society. Yet there are several obstacles for making synodality of real-life relevance, because Synodal re-conception of the Church opens up new questions on the role of Pope and

<sup>45</sup> See J. Palakeel, “Missional Ecclesiology: Reflections on Church as the Universal Sacrament of Salvation,” in J. Kudiyiruppil, ed., *Studies in Ecclesiology*, Bangalore: ATC, 2021, 306-33.

<sup>46</sup> John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente. Apostolic Letter on Preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000*, 1994, 41.

<sup>47</sup> Pope Francis, “Baptized and Sent: The Church of Christ on the Mission in the World,” Message for World Mission Day 2019 (in the context of the Extraordinary Missionary month” in commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the promulgation of the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* (*On Mission*)).

papal primacy, the role of the local and regional bishops' conferences, lay participation in doctrinal formulation and ecclesiastical administration, role of women in the church, etc.

The present Church is a hierarchical society profoundly influenced by the legacies of the Roman Empire and the bequests of colonialism. As such, synodality is a concept more or less alien to the western Church, except for the Synod of Bishops, which is currently a purely advisory body for the universal Church, under the direction of the Pope. Although the Oriental Churches have the synodal exercise of collegiality for Church governance, Synod for them is more or less a law-making body of Bishops, with no notable role for the priests or the laity. The synodal path is, hence, a road less travelled and long forgotten by the Catholic Church. Synodality and the present power of episcopal authority cannot coexist. The Catholic tradition of doctrine and law mitigate against the realization of synodality. It may be undermined by clericalism and hierarchicalism of the predominantly patriarchal and clerical model of priesthood and episcopacy. The priests today are trained for a hierarchical clerical Church and not synodality. In such a context the cultivation of the practices and skills involved in synodal practice at various levels of the Church is no easy task.

Synodal Church bases itself on the baptismal communion of believers, which requires greater role to the laity in the Church. Bishops and priests need to be trained in synodal practices of discernment and decision making, synodal style of community formation, deliberation and decision making and even collaboration with laity. A lot of cultural and structural changes required in listening to the laity, exercise of authority, functioning of the councils, forming parish communities, promoting lay mission and leadership as well as seriously involving women and women religious in mission and ministry. Above all, involving laity in theological and doctrinal matters as well as teaching office of the Church is unclear.

Synodal church is neither a new ecclesiology nor a just a tool to reform institutional and hierarchical aspect of the Church, but an integration of different models, "what most effectively enacts and manifests the nature

of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God.”<sup>48</sup> 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 evangelizing mission.”<sup>49</sup> Making synodality to real-life relevance requires redesigning the theology of communion, emphasizing the horizontal communion of all the faithful based primarily on baptism and confirmation and not on holy orders as in the hierarchical-institutional model. Thus we need a *synodal communion ecclesiology*, a radical revision and effective implementation of the communion ecclesiology in view of the mission of the Church in the socio-cultural-religious context of the third millennium.

Despite all the obstacles, Synodal path is worth trying because only “journeying together allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her.” “By journeying together and reflecting together on the journey that has been made, the Church will be able to learn through Her experience which processes can help Her to live communion, to achieve participation, to open Herself to mission.”<sup>50</sup> As the *Preparatory document* no. 4 puts it: “The synodal journey unfolds within a historical context marked by epochal changes in society and by a crucial transition in the life of the Church, which cannot be ignored (GS 4).” In such a context “The ability to imagine a different future for the Church and her institutions, in keeping with the mission she has received, depends largely on the decision to initiate processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every person can participate and contribute.” The decision to “journey together” is a prophetic sign for the human family, which needs a shared project capable of pursuing the good of all.



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<sup>48</sup> Preparatory Document No. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Preparatory Document No. 10; ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2 March 2018), no. 6

<sup>50</sup> Preparatory Document No. 1.

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# MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH

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