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SYNODALITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR SEMINARY AND RELIGIOUS FORMATION

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Abstract

A synodal church is the new revolution that is possibly happening in the church in this millennium. Seminary and religious formation have a pivotal role in shaping the future church in a synodal way. Acknowledging the significance of formation in this process, this paper addresses the implications of Synodality in both Seminary and Religious formation. Hence, this paper details different ways as approaches for the integration of formation in a synodal way. It creates a textual space for the discourse of reformations to take place in the formation process. It invites paradigm shifts in the bottom-to-top pedagogy in priestly formation and challenges the integration of spiritual and intellectual formation.

Keywords: Clericalism; Integrity; Religious Formation; Seminary Formation

Introduction

The call for a synodal church is the new way of expressing and living the spirit of Pentecost in the Catholic Church in our times. We are almost in a hyper-secularized time and a non-religious era of civilization to think about the possible new ways to present God to humanity. At this juncture, the Catholic Church is to be asked: *Quo Vadis?* As the fire in the ashes, the divine voice through Pope Francis calls upon 'Synodality' in all areas of the Church. This paper will focus on the implications of synodality for seminary and religious

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formation in our times. This paper also intends to look at the vital concept of synodality, concerning how the church was in the past, and is at present, and as we look for a way to a better future.

1. Synodality: An Essential Dimension of the Church

Synodality is not new to ecclesial circles. In some cases, it is a synonym for the ecclesial community since the Church is all about walking together. The Bishops' Synod of 2023 is no longer just one synod of Bishops but a two-year synodal process for all the baptized People of God. The idea of a Synodal Church is a call to renew our way of being and working together and moving forward. It is a visible form of the communion of all the baptized. It is centred more on the people of God. A synodal church calls more to listening than preaching. It is, therefore, a promise for the believer. In the synodal approach, the goal is not efficiency but rather effectiveness and engagement—a way of enabling the members of the Body of Christ to influence how the Body will proceed.¹ It is a Spirit-led, formational process that shapes the People of God. Synodality is an invitation to foster conversion processes as we listen to one another and the larger society while reading the signs of the times together. It will be a journey of sharing, reflecting, and listening at all levels across the church.

2. Your Vocation Finds You

Formation for religious or priestly life must begin by evaluating the promotion of vocations. A vocation is a supernatural mystery that emerges from a sustained encounter with Christ.² Before entering consecrated/priestly life, the candidate must be assisted in developing the vocational courage to be clear about their call: what, how, and why. It means before and during initial formation periods, true vocational discernment must occur. As the author Parker Palmer puts it, "vocation is not a goal to be achieved; it is a gift to be received."³ According to Pope Francis, a vocation flows from the heart of God.

¹ Joe Paprocki and D. Min, "The Synodal Process: The Church's Way of Proceeding," <https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/scripture-and-tradition/church-leadership/the-synodal-process/>. Accessed on 15.09.2022.

² Sherry A. Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples*, Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012, 89.

³ Nicholas Pearce, "Why Purpose-Not Passion-should Guide Young Professionals," <https://hbr.org/2019/10/why-purpose-not-passion-should-guide-young-professionals>. Accessed on 15.09.2022.

We live in a culture where vocation to the priesthood and religious life is looked upon scrupulously, and it is a matter of discourse in the social media today. The cyber world of the 21st century is saturated with the ideologies of the power structure and *carpe diem* motives. It is interesting to pay attention to the fact that many candidates, even after their higher studies, are still ready to join us to live priestly and religious lives. However, vocation promoters and Congregations have to have a third eye to discern rightly in recruiting the right vocations.

Formation towards the synodal Church must be very realistic in the human mind. To reach out to humanity, they should be aware of their being as humans; not angels who come from above and land on earth. Sometimes it is a serious issue on the part of the authorities and the formators to spiritualize things, and candidates forget entirely about the world they came from. Therefore, the whole programme for formation assists them to be more synodal, fraternal, missionary, welcoming, and inclusive of the Church against the backdrop of an extraordinary denunciation of clericalism. Consecrated life is born in the church; it grows and can bear evangelical fruits only in the Church, in the living communion of the faithful people of God.⁴

3. Forming Formators in Synodality

Formation of formators for “forming new priests and religious in Synodality” is an essential need of the Church, because they prepare them for the unique role in the Catholic Church. To accomplish the formation task effectively, the formator needs a vast array of skills that will enable him or her to listen to, understand, challenge, and adequately assess the formee openly and honestly. The challenge faced by formators today is to help candidates realize that priesthood and religious life are about service and leading people to God, not material comfort. Synodality entails receptivity to change, formation, and ongoing learning. In his address to the formators, Pope Francis said:

[T]he seminarians may learn more from their formators’ lives than from their words, as happened in the house of Nazareth, where Jesus was formed in the school of Joseph’s ‘creative courage.’ May they learn docility from your obedience; industriousness from your dedication;

⁴Pope Francis, “Pope to Seminarians: Be Available for Others,” Pope Francis addresses Italian Seminarians and their Formators, 10th June 2021, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-06/pope-audience-seminarians-italy-marche-region.html>, Vatican News. Accessed on 30.09.2022.

generosity towards the poor from the witness of your sobriety and availability; fatherhood from your living and chaste affection.⁵

So, formators must be role models for the candidates to live their life in the church, with the church, and for the church (the people of God). Formators must also be persons of docility so that they will be able to promote a one-to-one relationship with the candidate and also to seek the will of God for the entrusted soul. The safe, comfortable, well-set-up formation settings need to be changed so that their formation is contextualized and conscientious in response to the needs of the people at the periphery to journey together.

A synodal form of the participatory model should be actualized in formation so that the candidate also takes responsibility for their formation. Also, promote more consensus-based decisions instead of the 'command and control' style. We feel that authority figures like bishops and major superiors are attentive to forming mature synodal formators, and enough scrutiny is needed as they are entrusted with moulding future priests and religious. We should not just appoint so-called good priests/sisters as formators without proper training, but we need authentic, transparent and capable disciples of Christ.

4. Seminary Formation: A Synodal Approach

Formation of priests in the Catholic Church is vital. Before getting into priestly formation, we must see how Catholics view a priest. How are we taught to view a priest? The Church teaches that a priest is a living icon, a re-presentation of the eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.⁶ "Priests are made, not born. Although his discipleship must deepen during his ministry, a man must be a converted Christian disciple before becoming a priest."⁷ Discipleship is the prerequisite for the priesthood. Therefore, formation for the priesthood must be deeply concerned with the essential nature of the church, which is synodal. Formation to the priesthood must be based on the premise that a Catholic priest is, first and foremost, a human person. "One simply cannot be an integrated priest without attending to one's human, physical, emotional and spiritual needs."⁸ The

⁵Pope Francis, "Pope to Seminarians: Be Available for Others."

⁶George Weigel, "The Importance of the Priest in Sanctifying the Church," <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/importance-of-the-priest-in-sanctifying-the-church-2942>. Accessed on 9.09.2022.

⁷George Weigel, "The Importance of the Priest in Sanctifying the Church."

⁸Michael Galea, "Healing the Healers: A Profile of Strengths and Weaknesses of Catholic Priests in Gozo, Malta," *Pastoral Psychol* 60 (2011) 860.

seminarian's human formation will help him to think and feel with the people of God. In what follows, we discuss a stumbling block to this formation towards a synodal church.

4.1. Power/Clericalism vs Synodality

Saint Pope John Paul II insisted throughout his pontificate that the priesthood is about service, not power. Again, the ministerial priesthood promotes the participation and collaboration of all the members of Christ's mystical body in the life and work of the Church.⁹ On the contrary, today we face clericalism and careerism—two incurable diseases among the clergy. They are stumbling blocks to actualizing synodality. According to Thomas Richard, the deadening effects on the Body of Christ, His Church, which is planned and meant for holiness, fervour, fruitfulness, and a beautiful life, are the most deadly results of clericalism. Once more, it is in direct conflict with Scripture and the clerical culture itself. The dominant leadership style of clericalism makes such priests uninterested in fostering collaboration and mission. Most priests leave the seminary as tyrannical, narcissistic people. They remain silent, show no remorse for their errors, and constantly despise clergymen and lay people. The points in some of the diocesan conversations on the synodal Church and the current circumstances are reflected in the following comments:

- The Church has become too institutional and has lost the intimacy and compassion for people on their spiritual/faith journey.
- The pastor is always on a "day off," and he forgets to show up for service.
- Priests are more concerned with donations and less with the fellowship in the community.
- We, as a Church, are inconsistent in our approach to controversial topics.
- Priests belittle and humiliate people, have anti-women or anti-laity attitudes, they are prone to shaming and intimidation, pass imprudent comments, and some have even shared frightening experiences of confession.
- At a funeral for a Catholic suicide victim who suffered from depression, he (the priest) told the deceased's four and five-year-old children that their father had gone straight to hell because of how he died.

⁹George Weigel, "The Importance of the Priest in Sanctifying the Church."

Synodality is countercultural to all the issues mentioned above. The synodal vision of the church challenges us to transform clericalist practices in which an individual or a group in the church makes decisions without listening and consulting, as if existing beyond the people of God.¹⁰ Synodality demands that we listen and engage in dialogue to establish binding relationships that build the church. So, a synodal perspective challenges the culture of clericalism and proposes a culture of dialogue and consensus.¹¹ Synodality calls for a revival of existing seminary formational pedagogy.

4.2. Reformation of Seminary Pedagogy

Those in formation must become wise through all aspects of their seminary formation, including their spiritual, psychological, intellectual, and disciplinary instruction that bears wisdom received as a gift from the Lord, anchored in awe of the Lord. According to Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, Prefect of the Congregation for Evangelization, Propaganda Fide, the fear of the Lord is inspired by love, humility, and the recognition of one's smallness and the greatness of the Lord.¹² A fuller understanding of Jesus' character may be attained by years of seminary training, especially theological study; otherwise, theology fails. They must be trained and guided to have a personal encounter with Jesus, who is present in all the arguments they study. As a result, theological pedagogy should not be incompatible with spirituality, missionary work, or pastoral care.¹³ Then only will synodality be a living expression of communion, participation, and mission for the future priests.

Vimal Tirimanna, with his long experience in seminary training, noted that the academic curriculum of most of the seminaries still follows the long-outdated Tridentine model of theological formation instead of following the indications given by Vatican II.¹⁴ Clericalism has also been aided by emphasizing the priest as being holier than the laity by adapting to the post-Tridentine style of seminary formation. Most intellectual formation in seminary seems more like

¹⁰Hosffman Ospino, "Synod on Synodality," <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/closer-look-synodality-and-its-promise-more-inclusive-church>. Accessed on 29.09.2022.

¹¹Ospino, "Synod on Synodality."

¹²Luis Antonio Tagle, "Homily on the occasion of graduating students of the faculty of theology," Rome. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=td_b1f4dPI. Accessed on 29.09.2022.

¹³Tagle, "Homily on the occasion of graduating students of the faculty of theology," Rome.

¹⁴Vimal Tirimanna, "The Challenges of Liberating Legitimate Authority from Clericalism," *Asian Horizons* 15/1 (March 2021) 87.

head service than equipped to serve God's people. Without any discussion, we are all aware of the need to revise theological pedagogy to form future priests.

4.2.1. Conversion from Top to Bottom

Synodality means that the whole Church is a subject, and everyone in the Church is a subject.¹⁵ Pope Francis describes a synodal Church as 'an inverted pyramid', adopting the ecclesiological viewpoint of Vatican II. The top is located below the base.¹⁶ As a result, those who exercise authority are referred to as 'ministers' because, in the original meaning of the word, they are the least among all. This pyramid effectively divided the church—not only notionally but also frequently in practice—into the teaching church and the learning church. By inverting the pyramid, Francis's analogy recasts authority as being dependent upon reception—listening to, and learning from others, within the church.¹⁷ Again, as seen in the Synod on Synodality logo, priests, bishops, and religious are called to walk together, one among them at their service. We have received special training modelled after the Saviour who suffered and was crucified.

Additionally, Tirimanna claims that our staff members who have ascended the organizational ladder by being "politically right" with the authority office serve as role models for the young seminarians. The young seminarians are consciously or unconsciously given the message to follow the intricacies of clericalism by being politically correct in the seminary and later in the priesthood, as against being prophetic as Jesus of Nazareth was.¹⁸ Pope Francis called it a disease of idolizing superiors, and they are victims of careerism and opportunism; they serve thinking only of what they can get, not what they should give.¹⁹ It would be quite truthful to say that several young men (and women) join seminary or the convent to acquire some kind of social status in life, among other motives. We need a one-to-one formation so they will have a lived experience of the Church, and Church personnel who are real models. Authority

¹⁵International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 55.

¹⁶International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 57.

¹⁷Amanda C. Osheim, "Stepping Toward a Synodal Church," *Theological Studies* 80/2 (2019) 370-392, 371.

¹⁸ Tirimanna, "The Challenges of Liberating Legitimate Authority from Clericalism," 88.

¹⁹The Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Roman Curia, 22nd Dec. 2014, no. 10.

(episcopates, major superiors, theologians, seminary teachers, or parish priests) should exercise their responsibility with a renewed attitude, devoid of power, but with humility. They have to exercise legitimate power for the glory of God in response to the needs of the people of God truthfully. The authority, or the one privileged to guide and educate the future priests, has to have the heart of the synodal experience: listening to one another, inspired by the Word of God.

4.2.2. Integration of Intellectual and Spiritual Formation

Synodality demands that we listen, and engage in a dialogue, to establish binding relationships that build the church. In an interview with seminarians, Bishop Robert Barron said that intellectual formation in the seminary must be equipped to make them holders of the mystery of God.²⁰ In this hyper-secularized world, they must be enabled to guide people into the mystery of God. It is pastorally indispensable. As a result, in seminary formation, theological training must coexist with pastoral work. In addition, from their doctrinal classes, they need to walk to the chapel to pray, and back to the theology classroom with deepened interest and focus. In his address to Italian seminarians, Pope Francis said that “the seminary should bring you closer to God” and that “within the walls of the seminary, expand the boundaries of your heart and extend them to the whole world.”²¹ Their prayers are naturally drawn into the parish to the people of God. Therefore, each Catholic seminary must be a hub for spiritual and intellectual formation, training seminarians to proclaim Christ in the culture in which they find themselves. Thus, each priestly candidate will be a builder of a synodal church.

4.2.3. Integration of Theological and Human Formation

To understand synodality, we must return to the text and to the spirit of Vatican II. The Council’s decree, *Optatam Totius* (OT), was clear that all the forms of training are to be ordered with intensive effort towards the one single pastoral end of forming true shepherds. It is observed that in many seminaries and faculties of theology, the documents of the Council receive little attention. So how can pastoral leaders and theologians comprehend synodality? The fundamental aspect of human person is described by John Paul II in *Pastores dabo*

²⁰Bishop Robert Barron, “On the Intellectual Formation of Seminarians, Q&A,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxNX-4BC6ng>. Assessed on 17.07.2022.

²¹Pope Francis, “Be Available for Others,” Pope Francis Addresses a group of Italian Seminarians, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-06/pope-audience-seminarians-italy-marche-region.html>. Assessed on 19.08.2022.

vobis (PDV), no. 43, as follows: “The human personality of the priest is to be a bridge and not a hindrance for others in their contact with Jesus Christ the Redeemer of the human race.” In their studies, prayers, and liturgical celebrations, they “totally walk together.” Their shared life and mission in our community are inspired and guided by the “walk together” they experience in their studies, prayer, and liturgical celebrations. Each seminarian/religious should develop his or her moral character, sense of integrity, and other qualities that will help him or her in the future ministry.

According to Pope Francis,

The fundamental idea is that seminaries should form missionary disciples who are ‘in love with the Master,’ shepherds ‘with the smell of the sheep,’ who live in their midst to bring the mercy of God to them. To listen and to be listened to, they must be taught a Listening Theology. May the Seminary be for seminarians like the house in Nazareth where the Son of God learned from his parents about humanity and closeness.²²

Priests should be trained to be more humble, welcoming, positive and understanding. A seminarian needs to be prepared with perseverance, patience and understanding to promote collaboration with neighbouring dioceses, religious communities in the area, lay associations and movements.

5. Religious Formation and Synodality

Synodal conversion at all levels of religious formation is necessary. Ideally speaking, religious communities have synodal patrimony. As we are at the phase of ‘synodalization’ of all ecclesial realities in preparation for the Synod on Synodality, we, consecrated persons, must examine our conscience.²³ This is because consecrated communities are becoming less of a visible expression of a communion of love, and instead of being a reflection of participation, it is becoming more individualistic. It requires a real change of mentality and new ways of living out the life and mission in the Church as brothers and sisters in Christ, clothed in equal dignity.²⁴ In an interview, Sr Cynthia Nwadike of Botswana explains, “The Synodal process is fundamental to religious

²²Pope Francis, “Be Available for Others.”

²³Address by Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, General Rapporteur of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Sala, Stampa Vaticana, 26 August 2022. Accessed on 18.09.2022.

²⁴Nathalie Becquart, XMCI, Under-Secretary of the General Secretariat of the Synod.

formation...If we use the Synodal process approach, we will boost vocations to Religious Life, and more people will join us.”²⁵ Even if religious communities have synodality in their DNA or have already had a long experience of synodal dynamics, in practice, the fundamentals of synodalization are forgotten in formation and in communal lives today.

5.1. Formation for Religious towards a Synodal Church

Synodality involves a readiness to change, formation, and ongoing learning.²⁶ Formation comes by way of action. The formation programmes must facilitate formees to be more capable of “walking together,” listening to one another, participating in the mission, and engaging in dialogue. It comes by way of prayer and preparation. Moreover, formation occurs in the context of community; yet, the Holy Spirit and we are the principal agents of our formation. Synodality is a way – particular style of being the Church as the people of God. With this background of treasured understanding of the Church, we need a shift in religious formation as all are called to become partners in the mission of the Church. The authority of formation must come down to journey together to listen to the new generation; it is a reciprocal listening in which everybody can learn something. Formators must plan formation for future religious in such a way that they will be able to contribute to the Church’s mission. Just like in the synodal Church, in order to achieve integrality, a candidate’s entire life must be taken into consideration throughout the period of formation.

5.2. Challenges in Religious Life and Formation

When we analyze the challenges for the consecrated people, I feel some areas of the thrust are very significant. Primarily, what is asked of consecrated people is discernment so that priority can be given to one rather than another.²⁷ This comes first because most religious are broken with the burden of an overload of responsibilities and then missing what is vital. In this context of the inner dilemma of being shattered in goals, we have to listen to the Holy Father’s call to

²⁵Sheila Pires, “Synodal Process in Formation will boost vocations to Religious Life,” <https://news/5931/synodal-process-in-formation-will-boost-vocations-to-religious-life-nun-in-botswana>. Accessed on 9.07.2022.

²⁶*Vademecum for the Synod of 2023*, 5.3.10.

²⁷ Jose Rodriguez Carballo, “Challenges to Consecrated People,” <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/challenges-to-consecrated-life-14250>. Accessed on 02.10.2022.

consecrated life to return to what is essential, the need to return to the Gospel. To some extent, the formators are not focused enough; the ones coming after them will experience chaos without the right direction. Secondly, we need to retrace the collaborative relationship among religious. There is a striking decrease in respect for the other/elders and a decrease in the sense of understanding. Generally speaking, the new generation of formees come from homes where there is no sense of formation and disciplinary correction in the family. One of the common tendencies observed in formation is that formees use the phrase, 'I don't know' if they did not prepare for something.

Formation in religious congregations seems less participatory. I feel that at times, both formators and candidates are not very clear about the purpose of formation or the desired outcome in the future religious. So, it is urgent to identify the goals to be pursued, the way to reach them, and the steps to achieve the end. Affirming a synodal culture, the formation pattern must be more participatory and co-responsible of both the formator and formees. In the synodal model, "participation means taking responsibility," so one cannot be inattentive or act autonomously in formation. It is the participation of a cluster of people like the one in authority, formator, formee, candidate's family, religious community and people around. The participation style thus becomes that of co-responsibility: proper to the nature of the church, communion with people, and appropriate to one's fundamental option.

Sr Inigo highlights that the spirit of synodality must permeate in and through religious formation and mission.²⁸ We should not limit candidates' intellectual formation to the congregational charism and vision of the founders of their Congregations, but the formation curriculum should be more ecclesiastical. In addition to that, they must be introduced to the documents of Vatican II for their study, reflection and meditation, and to make the candidates aware of their vocation and its significance in the church, right from the early stages of formation.

A bottom to top approach will create an atmosphere of respect and freedom of expression. Therefore, formators must take care that we need a procedural change in the formation; we are not imposing

²⁸Sr Inigo SSA, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church and its Implications for Consecrated Life," Consecrated Life Lecture Series - 7 organized by Sanyasa. Accessed on 17th September 2022.

formation on the candidate; it is walking together, listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit in communion, and working together to be formed unto the likeness of Christ.

5.3. Theological Formation is to ‘Say God’

Theological formation for candidates for religious life is spread over five plus nine years. All theological, psychological, spiritual, pastoral, and intellectual formation follows the guidelines or syllabus of each stage. Theology is not a word about Jesus, but it is “saying, God.”²⁹ The testimony of great saints teaches us that in every moment of our life, we need to “say God” with our person, relationship, values, decisions, and actions. There are various ways to “say God.” Jesus said God with tears; Jesus said God by touching and healing when it was forbidden due to the person’s leprosy, etc. There are many ways to “say God,” such as through our smile, love, and kind words.

5.4. Pastoral Conversion

Pope Francis speaks of “pastoral conversion” as a missionary path for the entire Church, which means that the changes must come from the grassroots and local churches.³⁰ It invites us to more collaborative and inclusive ways of pastoral praxis. Intellectual formation in some seminary catalogues highlights priestly identity, priestly/religious ministry and priestly/religious spirituality in contrast to presenting the broader ecclesiological context that includes all the faithful. In moral theology, more emphasis is placed on sexual morality, and biomedical ethics dealing with reproductive technology, rather than on broader social teachings of the church or the dignity of the human person (men/women; rich/poor, educated and uneducated etc.).³¹

Pastoral formation in seminary/religious houses should not be limited to some pastoral programmes. Each consecrated person offers his/her life as a gift to God and His people, and it is always complimentary, like two sides of the same coin. This commitment needs responsible cooperation with God and fellow beings. Henceforth, we need a participatory aspect to listen to the people of

²⁹ Tagle, Homily on the occasion of graduating students of the faculty of theology.

³⁰ Pope Francis “Pastoral Conversion,” In the General Conference of the Latin American episcopate in Santo Domingo Brazil, 2007.

³¹ Tirimanna, “The Challenges of Liberating Legitimate Authority from Clericalism,” 87.

God with humility and openness while proclaiming that we are for the people of God, and it should come not out of generosity but as responsibility.

Conclusion

In the millennium of the post-truth era, the church has to be more relatable to the needs of the time. To establish the encompassing motto of the Second Vatican Council, the Church as the People of God, synodality is the most effective approach and radical way of living. As we revisit the synodal church, we have to chart out new methodologies for the formation of future church leaders in terms of categorizing religious and priestly vocations. It is challenging and mandatory for the church, which will be free of relations of power and structures. Still, it will resemble the true compassionate face of Jesus, who challenged all existing systems for quality. The future priest and religious should be the living gospel of inclusiveness, and the church should be the continuum of the inclusive approach of Jesus, who trod the path to walk with everyone. Implications of synodality can be adopted as a most effective way to approach formation from its grass root level. In religious and seminary formation, we need to debunk the structural locus of power and renew our approach with a synodal mind, inclusive of all voices. Thus, the pattern of “walking together” will create a sense of communion, and participation for the mission will also be a more promising one for the church of the future.