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WHAT STANDS IN THE WAY OF A SYNODAL CHURCH?

It's not just clericalism

By Louis J. Cameli

Members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops gather for morning prayer on Oct. 27, 2023, in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican.

In a rare intervention in the synodal process on Oct. 25, 2023, Pope Francis seemed to suggest that clericalism is at the root of resistance to synodality. “Clericalism is a whip, it is a scourge, it is a form of worldliness that defiles and damages the face of the Lord’s bride [the church],” he said. “It enslaves God’s holy and faithful people.”

These are strong words. They point to a significant issue in the life of the church, but I am unconvinced that clericalism is *the* problem that blocks synodality from entering the life of the church. Rather, the mindset of many of us regarding our role and participation in the church may be an even bigger problem.

Let us begin by trying to identify what exactly clericalism is. It can mean different things because it is rooted differently in the clerics who manifest it. For example, what could be tagged as clericalism may simply be evidence of a general sense of entitlement. Sadly, that is a negative and potent feature of some personalities,

ordained and not ordained. Entitlement can shape behavior ranging from the plainly rude to the horrifically criminal, as well as its haughty ecclesiastical form that gets the name *clericalism*.

The same word, *clericalism*, can also express a controlling personality at work in a church setting: a personality that must, at all costs, be in charge to the detriment of others. In a less toxic but also clearly eccentric way, clericalism can stand for a kind of antiquarianism and aestheticism that revels in the past at the cost of genuine engagement with the present. This last form seems to be what the pope decries when he speaks of young priests shopping and “trying on cassocks and hats or albs with lace.”

Is clericalism in these different forms a problem that sets up resistance to synodality? Yes, of course it is. At the same time it is not *the* root problem. The fundamental resistance to synodality belongs to a much wider swath of church membership than its ordained segment.



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Co-responsibility for Mission: The Heart of Synodality

In various places, the synthesis report of the first session of the Synod on Synodality speaks of what is at the heart of synodality. A section at the beginning of part two of the document is especially clear and deserves close attention:

The sacraments of Christian initiation confer on all the disciples of Jesus the responsibility for the mission of the Church. Laymen and laywomen, those in consecrated life, and ordained ministers have equal dignity. They have received different charisms and vocations and exercise different roles and functions, but all are called and nourished by the Holy Spirit to form one body in Christ (1 Cor. 4-31). They are all disciples, all missionaries, in the reciprocal vitality of local communities who experience the delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing. The exercise of co-responsibility is essential for synodality and is necessary at all levels of the Church. Each Christian is a mission on this earth.

Co-responsibility for the mission means coming together in communion to participate in moving the mission of the church forward. It is at the heart of synodality. Furthermore, this shared responsibility for the mission shapes every level of church life. It means listening to each other, working together, challenging one another and encouraging each other.

The mission at the heart of synodality also needs to be clear. We do not construct the mission; we receive the mission. It is given to us by Jesus Christ as the continuation of his mission in the world. And that mission brings good news to the world by proclaiming that all things are reconciled and recapitulated in Christ. Entrusted to the entire church, the mission shapes her fundamental identity—in the words of the Second Vatican Council, “the church is

in Christ like a sacrament or...sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (“Lumen Gentium,” No. 1). In other words, the mission ultimately serves communion, with God and with one another, the twofold dimension of horizontal and vertical communion that form a unity and flow into each other in Christ.

If co-responsibility for the mission is at the heart of synodality, and if that mission is ultimately a movement to communion, then what is the pathway to implement the mission? At this point, we can turn to the third term of the triad that has been a part of this synodal process from the beginning: participation.

Participation: Today’s Key Challenge

What is participation in the church sense? Full engagement marked by dialogue, listening and frank proclamation. Together, as Pope Francis has explained, communion, participation and mission describe synodality in its full reality. All three dimensions are essential. Participation, however, presents the key challenge and resistance to synodality in the context of the church today.

If it is true that co-responsibility for the mission leads to communion—which becomes real through the active participation of all the baptized—then we face a fundamental problem. A passive consumer mindset is currently pervasive in the U.S. church, and this mindset probably exists elsewhere as well. That mindset militates against participation.

Of course, not everyone in the church is passive or oriented toward obtaining something from the church rather than participating co-responsibly in her mission of communion. A large swath of Catholics, however, veer in that direction. And that fact is hugely consequential for the development of a synodal church.

Language betrays this passive consumer mindset. For example, Catholics reflexively speak about “getting” sacraments: get the baby baptized, get confirmed, get first Communion, get absolved, get married, get anointed and even get ordained. The implied sense of obtaining something in getting the sacraments reveals something. For so many Catholics, this kind of sacramental contact is their essential connection with the church, and this can be true for people who are sincere and devout. In the context of synodality, however, it is a very diminished way to be in the church. This is obviously not active co-responsibility for the mission.

In another context, I have written about my experience of collating the synod consultations in my diocese. One important feature that I detected was how people di-

rected their responses. Generally, they spoke *to* the church, not *from* the church, as if the church were an entity outside of themselves. This outsider form of reference does not match co-responsibility for the mission.

Add to all of this clericalism, especially in its forms of entitlement and control. Although it may not be the root challenge to synodality, it surely is complicit in hindering the movement to a synodal church. In fact, clericalism supports the passive, consumer-oriented, outsider mindset among Catholics that subverts synodality.

What Is the Next Step?

The core challenge to synodality can be expressed in many ways: passivity, a consumer-driven mentality, a sense of looking at things from the outside with a consequent lack of ownership, and a generalized disengagement. Laid out in this way, the challenge is indeed formidable. It is not, however, impossible to address.

The key is to call all people, ordained and non-ordained, to conversion. Pope Francis has frequently said that a synodal church requires conversion—but that summons to conversion also needs specification. Whatever can be done to change the way that people see themselves in the church will be the key to embracing our synodal future. The call to conversion must first explain co-responsibility for the mission by way of participation. The communication must be clear that conversion entails a new way of living in the church.

Traditionally, this communication would be some form of instruction or catechesis. Although this is a necessary step, if it is the only measure taken, it is inadequate because the communication must involve much more than an intellectual conviction. A spiritual-formational component that touches the heart must also be a part of the call to conversion. But how can that happen? Four actions come to mind: dialogue, witness, worship and a retrieval of history.

The synodal process has already emphasized *dialogue* within the church as an essential element of our life together. Then, as we speak of our experience and listen deeply to each other, we can trust the Spirit to prompt us to a deeper awareness of who we are as responsible people and collaborators in mission. Linked to dialogue is mutual *witness*, a process of offering and receiving testimony from those who have already grasped the sense of co-responsibility for the mission.

Our liturgical *worship* also offers us a template of co-responsibility for the mission when we engage in the act of worship with full, conscious and active participation. We are not passive spectators or consumers. Rather, we are people who actively lift up their worship of God in com-

munion with one another and intend to engage the world beyond the walls of the church.

Finally, a *retrieval of history* of co-responsibility in mission lived out in the past can be very helpful for today's formation. Co-responsibility is not an entirely new reality in the life of the church. Before Vatican II and, in some sense, feeding into its dynamism, there were movements that captured and lived out a shared responsibility for the mission, especially for laity.

The experience of these movements in my own local church, the Archdiocese of Chicago, during the 1940s and 1950s can be instructive. Groups like the Young Christian Workers and Young Catholic Students, originally founded by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn in Belgium, fostered a sense of mission and purpose for students and workers in the context of school and workplace. This further developed into various forms of Catholic Action in our local church. The Christian Family Movement, developed by Pat and Patty Crowley, helped married people and their families to live out the Gospel mission in their lives. In its own way, the Cursillo movement in Chicago and elsewhere prepared its participants to evangelize. The retrieval of this history can form and inspire people today on the synodal path.

If we deliberately and intentionally call people to a synodal conversion by summoning them to it and drawing them into dialogue, witness, worship and the retrieval of past experiences of co-responsibility, then by God's grace, people will begin to claim their responsibility to carry the mission forward. Eventually, a critical mass of convinced believers will emerge: people who take ownership and responsibility for the mission. As that happens, a larger collective conversion will begin to take hold in the community of believers.

At that point, to be a Catholic simply will mean to be in communion with each other and to be co-responsible for the mission by way of participation. In that moment, the synodal church will have emerged.

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