

THE PARTICIPATION AND CONTRIBUTION OF LAY MOVEMENTS TO BUILDING UP A SYNODAL CHURCH

Pax Romana ICMICA-IMCS

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Thank you for this invitation. I am really honored to participate in this global conversation with you, Fellows from the International Catholic Movement for Intellectual and Cultural Affairs (ICMICA) and the International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS). It's wonderful to be able to engage with people and communities from around the world. It's a way of experiencing a type of journeying together as a diverse Church which is rooted in the Church's intimate relationship with Christ and so goes forth to preach the Gospel and spread its own joy to all peoples.¹

Before going into my presentation, I want to honor the memory of Father Paul Dabezies, an Uruguayan priest and a long-time advisor to the Latin American Lay movements associated with Pax Romana, who passed away in August 2021. I had the privilege of meeting him a year ago, as part of a webinar on synodality, in which we were co-panelists. I know many of you may have many good things to say about his life and his service, for here, I want to recover Paul's claim during that webinar that synodality was in the DNA of the Pax Romana Lay movements and more specifically in the journey of the Latin American laity since Vatican II. The word synodality might capture a new step in the Church's reception of Vatican II but its spirit is already part of how you as lay professionals, intellectuals, and students belong to the church and respond to God's call to be a community of missionary disciples.

My objective in this presentation will be to reflect on Paul's claim, stressing that the past, present and future experience of the Lay Movements is central to building up a synodal Church. But prior to that I want to establish a common framework to speak about synodality. Therefore, my presentation will be organized in three sections. First, what do we mean by synodality? Second, why does the ongoing synodal process matter? And finally, I will offer some thoughts on how lay movements can contribute to making synodality a reality

¹ Francisco, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 23.

in the life of the Church. What I have to offer is certainly not an exhaustive answer to this question. It should be seen more like a conversation starter, an invitation for you to continue discerning your role to make the Church a more synodal community and the gifts you have to offer to this unfolding project.

Synodality as a way of being Church

I'll start with a little about what we mean when we say synodality. There is a lot that could be said here about its theological foundations. But I will try to keep it simple.

According to Pope Francis, synodality draws from the teaching of Vatican II and expresses a way of being Church and a way of proceeding that has "its point of departure and arrival in the people of God"² and is "the path that God expects from the Church of the third millennium."³ Moreover, it is a constitutive dimension of the life and mission of the Church that fosters a horizontal ecclesial communion fully committed to the mission of evangelization through the participation of all the members of God's people.

Synodality aims to break down a model in which the interpretation of the Gospel, the Church's mission, and the exercise of ecclesial responsibilities are concentrated solely in the clergy. A Synodal Church values the *sensus fidei* (sense of the faith) of the entire People of God and attempts to bring the experience of the faithful to the processes of discernment made by the college of bishops and the Pope. Synodality is a spirit of authentic communion that recognizes the full participation of every baptized in the Church's life and mission.⁴ In this framework, the involvement of the entire people of God is an essential and unavoidable compliment to episcopal collegiality and the authority of the bishops. Synodality is not just about the non-ordained, baptized Christians collaborating in the works and apostolates of ordained ministers. Synodality, instead, situates the cleric as a part of the People of God, not in any way separate and especially not above. In doing this, synodality

² Francisco, *Episcopalis Communio*, par. 7.

³ Francisco, *Discurso en el 50° aniversario de la institución del sínodo de los obispos*, 17 de octubre de 2015.

⁴ Rafael Luciani y Serena Noceti, "Colegialidad episcopal, colegialidad sinodal y eclesialidad sinodal: Un camino para profundizar en la recepción del Vaticano II," *Vida Nueva*, April 2020, 27.

should also empower the full participation of the non-ordained in the Church's mission.

Synodality requires a spirituality in which listening is at the center of the Church's life. Reciprocity is important in listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit because it is a listening that prioritizes relationship and connects us to each other. Listening should bring us closer to interpersonal relationships that are horizontal, rather than hierarchical. Listening demands of us a certain humility in order to put down our own desires and interests in order to listen to God's spirit present to us through the voice of our brothers and sisters.

In the end, the purpose of synodality is to evangelize a dystopic world challenged by climate change, an economy of exclusion, politics divorced from the people, and so many other social threats. As Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas puts it, "it is a practical extension of Francis' plea for the Church to embrace a style of ecclesial life that opts for mission over maintenance and outward extension over inwardly turned complacency".⁵ What is at stake is the Church's responsiveness to Christ's love for us that calls us to become a channel of joy, hope, freedom, peace, and justice for the world. To respond adequately to God's abundant love and the world's needs, we need the full participation and the diverse gifts of all the baptized.

Why does the synod on synodality matter?

This overview of synodality leads us to the current synod on synodality, a 3-year process summoned by the Pope to discern how to become a synodal Church. I want to dedicate a few words to highlighting the synodal process's relevance to the life of the Church, particularly the laity.

The synod's method suggests that the main objective is to engage the faithful in a synodal spirituality, encouraging them to recognize the importance of synodality and put it into practice in their communities. For this reason, listening to the experiences of the people of God is at the center of the proposal. In other words, it is about involving, raising awareness, and empowering the baptized in the commitment to build a synodal church.

⁵ Daniel E. Flores, "Closeness and the Common Journey: Synodality as an expression of the Church's responsiveness to Christ," *Commonweal. Religion, Politics, Culture* 149, n.º 6 (June 2022): 26.

The novelty of the synod lies in its method, which goes beyond the logic of a simple consultation of the people of God. In the past synods during the Francis era, all the faithful were consulted through questionnaires, as in the 2014-2015 synod on the family and the 2018 synod on the youth or territorial assemblies, as in the 2019 Amazon synod. However, in this current Synod, dioceses, parishes, movements, and other communities were invited to carry out “spiritual conversations,” whose purpose is to listen to the experiences of other baptized in the Church, discerning the voice of the Holy Spirit in those testimonies and reflect on how we can walk together in service to God’s mission. This is not merely a consultative action, but it instead creates a dynamic of listening and valuing experiences, so that the faithful might experience synodality and grow in their sense of belonging to the people of God, their corresponsibility in the Church’s mission, and their appreciation of the diversity within the Catholic Church.

This is an ambitious goal, in my reading of it. As the Italian theologian Massimo Faggioli argues, the synodal process is a moment of Kairos for the Church but we should not fall into a naïve optimism.⁶ The synod takes place in a context of unfavorable conditions, and not only because of the pandemic and the crisis of democracy around the world. There are also internal factors that hinder the possibilities of building a synodal church.

Among them, the most serious is that internal division frames the life of the 21st century Church, permeating the construction of ecclesial identities more interested in the culture wars and ideological confrontation than in preaching the Gospel and serving our surrounding world. Aware of this situation, the synod stresses the need to engage in conversation with those distant from our experience or those we consider enemies to see beyond the ecclesial polarization that we live.

Another limitation to the synodal process is that the ecclesial structures as they stand are not always adequate for listening and have difficulty validating experiences. Throughout the process, a constant complaint has been that some bishops and pastors are not interested in giving space to the synodal process in the local diocese or parish. As a result, many lay men and women

⁶ Massimo Faggioli, “The Synodal Church: A Kairos Moment,” *Scottish Laity Network*. August 26, 2021.

have gathered by their own initiative and submitted their contributions to the Vatican through the synod's website. But unfortunately, this does not solve the fact that the Church's organization is still clergy-centered. That a lay group has to do a parallel work to their parish to respond to a Papal call because their pastor is not interested is in fact a perfect image of the problem. Still more complicated, though, is when the hierarchy allows the listening process but then tries to control the outcomes, performing a selective listening that silences what seems most uncomfortable. Structures, therefore, matter.

In conclusion, I believe the fruits of the synod will be not so much in how many specific reforms of Canon Law or of the Roman Curia are carried out, although hopefully some are, but rather the important piece will be in the increased number of members of the people of God who feel the ability to take responsibility for the Church and its mission. The goal of the Synod is to promote the full, conscious and active participation of all in the Christian community, enhancing their gifts and fostering an authentic community that testifies to the world what God dreams for humanity.

What can Lay Movements contribute?

All this leads to the crucial question of what can Lay movements (like the one you all are a part of) contribute to building a synodal Church and the ongoing synodal process. First of all, we need to be present in this significant moment of the Church's history and respond to the Pope's call to listen to the Holy Spirit and learn from our fellow brothers and sisters to acknowledge how we can improve our journey together as Church. The questionnaire in which you have been working is a significant step to show your commitment, and I want to celebrate the effort you have put into it.

As my last point, let me propose four gifts that I see in the life of the Pax Romana movements. They are not the only ones, but take it as a motivation to continue reflecting on what you can contribute to the synodal process.

1. *Your experience with synodality.* As Paul Dabiez argued, the journey of the Pax Romana movements has been motivated by a synodal spirituality, even though you didn't use the word until recently. The see-judge-act method, so fundamental to your experience of a Christian community, has framed your spirituality, reflection, and action in the

world. That way of proceeding has taught you the importance of building bridges between the Christian faith and the diverse dimensions of human life through listening to and reflecting on reality from the perspective of ordinary people and the marginalized. You have learned to recognize the Holy Spirit and articulate significant pastoral responses to concrete needs by embedding yourselves in the here and now, in the lives of those you serve. The synodal process is a time to reflect, articulate, and share that synodal experience to enhance it for the sake of your lay movement and to offer models to all those imagining what a synodal Church looks like.

2. *A community of equals.* Communal life is, of course, important to the Christian life more generally, but I think in a unique way for lay movements like Pax Romana. The communities of Pax Romana embody a spirituality of missionary discipleship of equals in which the experiences of all the baptized matter. Each member has a vocation and gifts to offer to the movement, the Church, and the surrounding world. A Lay movement is often a platform to discover, celebrate and empower in order to build up an evangelizing Church. The hierarchies that usually frame the life of the Church are not so prevalent in movements like yours. Fellow lay men and women enter into a relationship as equals journeying together, and leaders and advisors are seen as peers, not superiors. You witness the horizontal communion that a synodal Church requires. Additionally, your presence in other ecclesial spaces can help foster this model and set boundaries to stop clericalism, populism, and authoritarianism within the Church.
3. *Open dialogue.* Throughout Church's history, the laity has been responsible for pushing the Church to engage with new political or cultural circumstances and respond creatively. Lay movements played their part during the 20th century, especially after Vatican II, to activate difficult but necessary conversations, create new apostolates and be present in new ways, and call the hierarchical Church to expand its views and respond more pastorally. The Lay movements have expertise in offering open dialogue and inviting us to explore unresolved questions that reality raises, a skill that is most needed in the quest to build a

synodal Church. The Church today needs a mature laity to move her forward and engage with the topics that matter most to people.

4. *Be the salt of the Church.* Vatican II's Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, defines the vocation of the laity as follows: we the laity "make the church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them [us] that it [the Church] can become the salt of the earth."⁷ If we as Church should grow in synodality for a fruitful evangelization, the laity's specific vocation to make Christ and the Church present in the secular world is a matter of great importance. Just as Jesus in Matthew's Gospel tells his followers that they should be the salt of the earth, so should the laity act as a sort of salt of the Church. Our experiential and professional knowledge helps the Church better understand our complex world. From that we aid in the articulation of pastoral responses and doctrinal teaching that orient the Church to face the challenges of our times. Lay movements should take up the specific vocation of the laity as salt of the Church and help the voices of all the laity resonate in and cooperate with the Church and beyond.

I hope this presentation leaves you with questions and a desire to engage more in the current synodal wave we are living. In the end, as I have highlighted, synodality is about the involvement of the entire people of God in the Church's mission. Our participation matters and is a reason for hope and communion in a world and Church dominated by despair and division. So let's pray to the Holy Spirit to guide Pax Romana's movements toward becoming a synodal community that journeys with the rest of the Church, witnesses the joy of the Gospel, and works to heal a wounded Church and humanity. Thank you for your attention.

⁷ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, par. 33.