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Steep Path Toward a Synodal Church

An Indonesian Case

Wilibaldus Gaut

Research Group of Fundamental Theology and Political Theology,
Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium
Institute of Philosophy and Creative Technology of Ledalero (IFTK
Ledalero), Maumere, Flores, Indonesia
wilibaldus.gaut@kuleuven.be

Abstract

Analyzing a recent case of the church's involvement in a geothermal project in Wae Sano, Flores, Indonesia, from an ecclesiological point of view, this article aims to demonstrate one formidable obstacle to the realization of the vision of a synodal church. While many theological reflections following Pope Francis's pronouncement of the notion of 'an entirely synodal Church' have led to the conclusion that synodality is the *modus vivendi et operandi* of the church that best represents the ecclesiological vision of Vatican II, the practice in the field can show otherwise. In the case under discussion, the failure to practice synodality is caused by the ecclesial hierarchy's preference to listen more to the civil authority and other involved institutions at the cost of neglecting the voices of the grassroots community. From the perspective of synodality, it is the voices of ordinary people and their actual experiences that should take precedence.

Keywords

synodality – the church's hierarchy – the faithful – government – geothermal project

Introduction

As a religious institution and an ecclesiastical community, Ruteng Diocese in Flores, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia, has been widely renowned for

its strong commitment to JPIC (justice, peace, and the integrity of creation) ministry. Manifold efforts have been made in this regard. However, a decision of its leader, Bishop Siprianus Hormat, in terms of the geothermal project in Wae Sano, West Manggarai Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, in 2021 has surprised many. Contrary to the diocese's initial stance in which the project was barred because of its potential ecological devastation and harmful impact on the well-being of the local people, the new decision lent support to proceed with the project. The initial stance was expressed in the bishop's letter to the president of Indonesia, Mr Joko Widodo, insisting the president should stop the project. However, the new decision was manifest in a letter of recommendation to the President of Indonesia for the project to continue. This letter of recommendation has evoked protest from the local people of Wae Sano. They feel denied their right to determine the decision on something that directly affects their lives. Thus, they consider the bishop's recommendation as failing to reflect their concerns and aspirations.

In this article, I would like to theologically analyze this case from the point of view of synodality as the *modus vivendi et operandi* of the church. I would argue that the decision of the church's hierarchy that ignored the voices of the local people is against the spirit of synodality in the life and mission of the church. To advance this argument, this article will proceed in three steps. The first part describes how the decision of the church's hierarchy of Ruteng Diocese pertaining to the geothermal project has given rise to the protest of the natives of Wae Sano. The second part examines the vision of a synodal church as a hermeneutical lens to theologically analyze the case in question. Finally, the third part presents the analysis of the case in the light of the vision of a synodal church. The aim is not only to show how the bishop's recommendation is at odds with the spirit of synodality but also to map out the ways to go forward in order for the local church to truthfully live out synodality as its *modus vivendi et operandi*.

The Diocese's Decision and the Protests of the Local People

Before elaborating in greater detail on the involvement of the local Church of Ruteng Diocese in the geothermal project in Wae Sano and the responses of the local people thereof, it might prove helpful to offer a caveat on a long-standing socio-political commitment that has been integral to the apostolate of this diocese. Right from the outset, the local church of Ruteng Diocese has been concerned not only about its internal ecclesiastical life but also the well-being of the local people and the betterment of manifold aspects of their lives

in general.¹ By taking seriously the social, economic, political, and cultural issues that surround and shape the lives of the local people into its missionary activities, Ruteng Diocese, whose pastoral territory currently includes three regencies, namely Manggarai Regency, East Manggarai Regency, and West Manggarai Regency, has played a significant role in the social transformation of the broader society at local, regional, and national level.²

In undertaking such a socio-political involvement, the local church of Ruteng Diocese might have seemed to function as a partner for civil government in the practice of development. However, even if this is the case, it should be noted that the church's socio-political involvement is never to be reduced to simply serving as an instrument of the politics of the state. The church, thus, cannot just help accelerate the implementation of the political programs of the government. While, at times, the church could turn out as a good partner that supports the government in the practice of development, it should never lose its role as an institution of social criticism, especially when the development programs and practices of the government are at odds with the fundamental values of humanity, and therefore run contrary to the ideal of integral and sustainable development.³

Such a fundamental conviction seems to be the underlying principle for the critical stance that Ruteng Diocese has consistently taken in terms of mining projects in some locations in its ministerial territory in the last few decades. Through its JPIC ministry, Ruteng Diocese has been at the front line of social movements in resisting mining activities in western Flores. The destructive impacts of mining activities on the social and ecological well-being of the local people lie at the heart of this resistance.⁴ Such a socio-political involvement

1 A thorough historical description and analysis of the church's missionary activities in Manggarai region from its first coming in the early 20th century to the last decade could be found in Fransiska Widyawati, *Catholicism in Manggarai, Flores, Eastern Indonesia* (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2018).

2 Ibid, pp. 134–135.

3 In the discourse of political theology, considering the church's role in public life as an institution of social criticism is central to the so-called 'dominant model' of political theology. See Daniel M. Bell Jr., 'Postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy', in Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 110–132 at 115.

4 See Max Regus, 'Church-based Resistance to Mining in Manggarai', *Inside Indonesia* 130 (October–December 2013) < <https://www.insideindonesia.org/church-based-resistance-to-mining-in-manggarai> > [accessed 04 May 2022]. Cf. Benny Denar, *Mengapa Gereja (Harus!) Tolak Tambang? Sebuah Tinjauan Etis, Filosofis dan Teologis atas Korporasi Tambang [Why should the Church Resist Mining? An Ethical, Philosophical and Theological Consideration on Mining Corporation]* (Mauere: Ledalero, 2015).

clearly shows how the church sides with the local people and voices their concerns, and thus protects them from being marginalized in the development programs and practices.

This long-standing socio-political commitment undoubtedly provides a backdrop against which the initial stance that Ruteng Diocese took with regard to the geothermal project in Wae Sano could be understood, as one can easily notice in a letter of Bishop Siprianus Hormat, to the President of Indonesia, Mr Joko Widodo, dated on 09 June 2020. Being an integral part of the people of Wae Sano, the bishop expressed in the letter his repudiation of the geothermal project that has been set up to operate in that area.⁵ The project, the bishop asserted, should not proceed. According to him, after considerable thought, the project will bring about more disasters than advantages, most notably in terms of its impact on the rights of the local people and their safety. Furthermore, it spoke of the ecological devastation the project is likely to cause, the destruction of the local communities and their religious activities as well as their cultural-ancestral heritages. In addition, the project does not reflect the vision of an integral and holistic approach to development.⁶ Prior to this evaluation, in this letter the bishop also spelt out the reasons for this rejection, ranging from the project's negative impact on the well-being of the local people, its devastating ecological impact, the rejection of the local people to lease their land and to be relocated, to the horizontal conflict among the local people that occurs between the pros and cons of the project.⁷

In response to that letter, the Indonesian government sent its representative to meet Bishop Siprianus, the result of which was the signing of an MoU (memorandum of understanding) on 02 October 2020 between Bishop Siprianus as the representative of Ruteng Diocese and F.X. Sutijastoto as that of the General Director of the Renewed New Energy and Energy Conservation. The General Director of the New Renewed Energy and Energy Conservation served as the

5 Bishop Siprianus Hormat, *Rekomendasi Gereja Katolik Keuskupan Ruteng tentang Penghentian Eksplorasi dan Eksploitasi Proyek Panas Bumi di Desa Wae Sano – Kecamatan Sano Nggoang – Kabupaten Manggarai Barat – NTT*, 09 June 2020. ['The Recommendation of the Catholic Church of Ruteng Diocese to Stop the Exploration and Exploitation of the Geothermal Project in Wae Sano Village, Sano Nggoang Sub-district, West Manggarai Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province', 09 June 2020]. This recommendation was also forwarded to the Minister of Finance of Indonesia, the Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources for Investment and Production of Indonesia, the Governor of East Nusa Tenggara Province, and the Regent of West Manggarai Regency.

6 See five points of consideration laid out in Hormat, *Rekomendasi Gereja Katolik Keuskupan Ruteng*.

7 See four points of facts about the current problems related to the geothermal project in Wae Sano in Hormat, *Rekomendasi Gereja Katolik Keuskupan Ruteng*.

first vice-chairman of the Joint Committee for the Realization of the Activities of Supplying Data and Information on Geothermal.⁸ This MoU aims to accelerate the process of solving, in a comprehensive way, any social problem stemming from the activity of supplying data and information of geothermal in Wae Sano village.⁹

According to this MoU, the government is committed to maintaining the well-being of the local society and environment during the whole process of exploration. This is explained into greater detail in the list of activities that the government should undertake, which generally includes conducting research and then preparing as well as socializing all the data and the information on and related to the geothermal project through a dialogical and participative communication with the local people, based on the values of truth, transparency, and honesty.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the church assumes the role of a shepherd that embraces all parties in order to find out a comprehensive solution to the issues related to the geothermal project in Wae Sano. Furthermore, the church stands for the principles and values of an integral and holistic development that put the priority on human dignity and the common good based on local wisdom and eco-friendly approaches.¹¹

A dramatic change, however, took place later. On 29 May 2021, Bishop Siprianus wrote another letter to the President of Indonesia. Unlike the previous one, in this letter, the bishop recommended the geothermal project to go on.¹² This letter was written on hearing and accepting the explanation given by

8 Bishop Siprianus Hormat and the Joint Committee for the Supply of Data and Information of Geothermal, '*Nota Kesepahaman antara Komite Bersama Penyediaan Data dan Informasi Panas Bumi dan Keuskupan Ruteng tentang Kerjasama Penyelesaian Permasalahan Sosial pada Kegiatan Penyediaan Data dan Informasi Panas Bumi di Area Panas Bumi Wae Sano Desa Wae Sano, Kecamatan Sano Nggoang, Kabupaten Manggarai Barat, Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur*,' 02 Oktober 2020 ['Memorandum of Understanding between the Joint Committee for the Supply of Data and Information of Geothermal and Ruteng Diocese on the Collaboration in Solving the Social Problem on the Activities of Supplying the Data and Information of Geothermal in the Area of Wae Sano Geothermal in Wae Sano Village, Sano Nggoang Sub-district, West Manggarai Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province', 02 October 2020].

9 See Hormat and the Joint Committee, '*Nota Kesepahaman*,' *pasal 1* [Chapter 1].

10 Ibid, *pasal 3* [Chapter 3].

11 Ibid.

12 Bishop Siprianus Hormat, '*Kelanjutan Proyek Panas Bumi (Geothermal) Wae Sano, Kabupaten Manggarai Barat, NTT*,' 29 Mei 2021 ['The Continuation of the Geothermal Project in Wae Sano, West Manggarai Regency, NTT', 29 May 2021]. This letter of recommendation was forwarded to the regent of the West Manggarai Regency, the governor of the East Nusa Tenggara Province, the Minister of Finance of Indonesia, the

Tim Bersama Pengelola Sosial Proyek Panas Bumi Wae Sano (The Joint Team of Social Organizer of the Geothermal Project of Wae Sano) on the issues concerning the project as well as the mechanism provided by the government which assumes the responsibility for the attendant impacts of the project on manifold aspects of the well-being of the local people. While in the initial rejection letter the bishop seemed to recognize only the project's negative impacts, he became more positive in this letter of recommendation. The bishop concluded that the continuation of the project is recommended, given the benefit it offers for the eco-friendly supply of renewed electricity energy and the well-being of the local people, their surrounding ecosystem, and their cultural heritages.¹³

At this point, what is surprising is that while the bishop claimed that his recommendation for the geothermal project to proceed was made after a thorough investigation as well as an intensive and transparent dialogue with the local people of Wae Sano,¹⁴ a wave of protest broke out. The people of Wae Sano sent an open letter to express their standpoint.¹⁵ Although this open letter was addressed to three parties, namely the entire people of Wae Sano, the Bishop of Ruteng Diocese, and the President of Indonesia, its starting and central point nonetheless was to call into question the recommendation of Bishop Siprianus for the continuation of the geothermal project. Hence, it turned out as demonstrating the critical stance of the local people to the latter position that the bishop took.

This open letter clearly states that the letter of recommendation of Bishop Siprianus is problematic for three reasons. First, while the diocese gave a positive signal for the geothermal project to proceed, the local people of Wae Sano

Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources for Investment and Production of Indonesia, the Minister of Environment of Indonesia, and the World Bank.

13 Ibid.

14 See the second point in Hormat, '*Kelanjutan Proyek Panas Bumi (Geothermal) Wae Sano*'.

15 Herman Hemat, cs, 'Surat Terbuka Masyarakat Wae Sano, Kec. Sano Nggoang, Kab. Manggarai Barat, Nusa Tenggara Timur', 15 June 2021 [Open Letter of the People of Wae Sano, Sano Nggoang Sub-district, West Manggarai Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Timur, 15 June 2021]. This open letter was forwarded to 18 institutions, including the Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources of Indonesia, the Executive Office of the President of Indonesia, the Finance Minister of Indonesia, the People's Assembly Council of Indonesia, the Governor of East Nusa Tenggara Province, East Nusa Tenggara People's Assembly Council, the Regent of West Manggarai, West Manggarai People's Assembly Council, PT. Sarana Multi Infrastructure in Labuan Bajo, PT. Sarana Multi Infrastructure, the World Bank in Indonesia, the World Bank in Washington, Asian Development Bank, International Finance Corporation, PT. Geo Dipa Energy, Agent of International Renewed Energy in Abu Dhabi, the Chairman of the Indonesian Bishop's Conference, and the Vatican Ambassador for Indonesia.

remain in their position to reject it on account of its enormous potential risk to their well-being and that of the surrounding environment. Therefore, the local people never agree to allow the project to proceed. Secondly, in the entire process of searching for a comprehensive solution to the problems related to the geothermal project, the local people have been treated as objects instead of subjects, thanks to the top-down approach employed. Thirdly, by recommending the project to proceed, the bishop seemed to have disregarded the life and well-being of the local people of Wae Sano.¹⁶

In the concluding part of the open letter, the position of the local people is restated even more strongly, emphasizing that they reject the project entirely.¹⁷ On this wave of protest, a report of *Floresa*, an online media based in Labuan Bajo, the capital of West Manggarai Regency, claimed that it occurred due to the failure of the bishop's recommendation to include the rejection and protest of the local people of the project. However, according to Stef Abur and Yosef Erwin, both are natives of Wae Sano, the claim that the local people have agreed on the continuation of the project was not true.¹⁸ Edu Watumedang, another native of Wae Sano, similarly admitted that he did not understand how the bishop's recommendation for the project to go on was made.¹⁹ Another local person of Wae Sano, Valentinus Emang, was even more to the point. For him, the claim that the local people enthusiastically accepted the project could be considered a lie since it was not based on what was really happening in the field.²⁰ Yosef Erwin further commented that content-wise, the bishop's letter of recommendation was not comprehensive since it did not accurately represent the fact that the local people have not been entirely of the same mind on the project.²¹ All this has led the natives of Wae Sano to

¹⁶ Ibid, especially part I.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See the news in *Floresa* entitled 'Surat Uskup Ruteng terkait Geothermal Picu Protes Warga' ['The Letter of the Bishop of Ruteng Diocese on Geothermal Evoked the Protest of the Local People'] <<https://www.floresa.co/2021/06/09/surat-uskup-ruteng-terkait-geothermal-picu-protas-warga-wae-sano/>> [accessed 12 December 2021].

¹⁹ Sunspirit for Justice and Peace, 'Wae Sano Ruang Hidup dan Masa Depan Kami – Hentikan Rekayasa atas Sikap Penolakan Warga' ['Wae Sano as Our Living Space and Future – Stop Manipulating the Rejection of the Local People']. This media discussion was organized by Sunspirit for Justice and Peace. Based in Labuan Bajo, West Manggarai Regency, Sunspirit is a civil society organization working in the area of social justice and peace in Indonesia. <Wae Sano Ruang Hidup & Masa Depan Kami! – Hentikan Rekayasa atas Sikap Penolakan Warga – YouTube> [accessed 02 December 2021].

²⁰ *Floresa*, 'Surat Uskup Ruteng terkait Geothermal Picu Protes Warga'.

²¹ JATAM, cs, 'Wae Sano Ruang Hidup Kami! Kepentingan Apa dan Siapa di balik Upaya Paksa atas Keberlanjutan Proyek Geotermal Wae Sano oleh Pemerintah, Perusahaan

conclude that their refusal has been neglected or even manipulated through a top-down approach that abandoned the active participation of the local people in the entire process.²²

What is particularly notable in this regard is that even the local people were not sent the letter of recommendation of the bishop. Instead, the letter was forwarded only to some institutions but not to the local people.²³ Yosef Erwin pointed out that the bishop's failure to accommodate the people's aspirations is only a sign that the local church's hierarchy sides with the corporation and the government to neglect the local people's voices. Erwin felt abandoned by the church's hierarchy, which in his view, should have instead sided with the local people.²⁴ Indeed, such a polemic has been a big challenge for the life and mission of the church, in this respect, the local church of Ruteng Diocese. In the following, I will further reflect on this challenge through the lens of the vision of a synodal church that has taken on a new significance in the pontificate of Pope Francis. Before making such an analysis, however, it is necessary to sketch out the key elements of the understanding of synodality and a call to be a synodal church, to which I now turn.

Understanding the Vision of a Synodal Church

In the 2018 document entitled *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, the International Theological Commission (hereafter ITC) defines synodality as 'the involvement and participation of the whole people of God in the life and mission of the Church'.²⁵ Such a definition of synodality as a way of

dan Keuskupan Ruteng?" [Wae Sano as Our Living Space! What and Whose Interest is behind the Forced Attempt on the Pursuit of the Geothermal Project in Wae Sano by the Government, Corporation and Ruteng Diocese?]. This media discussion was held on the occasion of the launching of the open letter of the local people of Wae Sano and organized jointly by JATAM (Jaringan Advokasi Tambang [Mining Advocacy Network]), JPIC OFM (Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation of the *Ordo Fratrum Minorum*), Sunspirit for Justice and Peace (a civil society organization working in the area of social justice and peace in Indonesia), WALHI NTT (Wahana Lingkungan Hidup NTT [The Indonesian Forum of Environment of East Nusa Tenggara Province], and KruHA (Koalisi Rakyat untuk Hak atas Air [The People's Coalition for The Rights to Water]). < [Diskusi Media] Wae Sano Ruang Hidup Kami! – YouTube> [accessed 02 December 2021].

22 Hemat, cs., 'Surat Terbuka Masyarakat Wae Sano', especially point b of part I.

23 This has been one of the points in the open letter of the local people of Wae Sano. See Hemat, cs., 'Surat Terbuka Masyarakat Wae Sano', especially part II.

24 See Flores, 'Surat Uskup Ruteng terkait Geothermal Picu Protes Warga'.

25 International Theological Commission (hereafter ITC), *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018, <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/

governing the church readily calls to mind Pope Francis, who introduced the notion of ‘an entirely synodal Church’.²⁶ According to Daniel Horan, through this notion of an entirely synodal church, Pope Francis insists on ‘a proper recognition of the place of all the baptized faithful in the prudential discernment about Church decision-making and governance’.²⁷ By the notion of an entirely synodal church, which exceeds the narrower meaning of synodality as merely pointing to conciliarity and collegiality, Pope Francis suggests that the concept of a people of God should be the primary feature of the church. The Pope, therefore, likens the synodal church to an inverted pyramid, in which ‘the top is located beneath the base’.²⁸

In so doing, as Ormond Rush rightly observes, Pope Francis is making manifest Vatican II’s vision of a participative and dialogic church, namely ‘the Church that is primarily baptismal in its orientation and in which ministries is exercised in service to the whole’.²⁹ According to Massimo Faggioli, by promoting the primacy of the baptismal orientation, the vision of a synodal church of Pope Francis is utterly opposed to the tendency of excessive centralization in the church.³⁰ The vision of a synodal church cherishes the active participation of all its members instead. Once this conviction is granted, it follows that ‘the whole Church, by the action of the Holy Spirit, is the subject’.³¹ The consequence of this conviction is noteworthy. In a synodal church, the active participation of the whole members of the church is indispensable. Therefore, a synodal church could be viewed as giving expression to the awareness that ‘the

cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html> [accessed 5 November 2021]. Here, I refer to article 7.

26 Pope Francis, ‘Address of His Holiness Pope Francis at the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops,’ 17 October 2015 <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html> [accessed 5 March 2021].

27 Daniel P. Horan, ‘Synodality Isn’t Just an Option,’ *National Catholic Reporter* (December 27–January 9, 2020), 16.

28 Pope Francis, ‘Address of His Holiness’; Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), <http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html> [accessed 5 November 2021]. Here, I refer to article 171.

29 Ormond Rush, ‘Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church,’ *Theological Studies* 78:2 (2017), 299–325 at 304–305.

30 Massimo Faggioli, ‘From Collegiality to Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis’s “Listening Primacy”,’ *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85:4 (2020), 1–18 at 3; Massimo Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis: Moving towards Global Catholicity* (New York: Orbis Books, 2020), pp. 134–135.

31 ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, art. 39

Church is not identical with her pastors,' because 'lay people have an active role in the transmission of the apostolic faith'.³²

Having said that, a question arises as to how such a synodal church would operate. To address this question, an insight from the ITC's document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* is helpful. In this document, a synodal church is fully aware that 'she is called to set in motion a process of listening to all the subjects who together form the People of God in order to agree in discerning the truth and on the missionary path to take'.³³ A synodal church, put simply, faithfully safeguards the rights of each member to participate in determining the life and mission of the church. Horan puts this matter well as he stresses the pivotal role of consulting all the faithful in the church governance if it is to be faithful to its identity as the people of God, as clearly stated in *Lumen Gentium*.³⁴ In the following, I will further elaborate on this point by examining three key elements in the praxis of synodality.

Mutual Listening and Learning

The line of argument outlined above already signifies the first fundamental element of synodality: mutual listening and learning. To shed further light on this first principle, an insight of Pope Francis is worth recalling. For him,

a synodal Church is a Church that listens and realizes that listening 'is more than simply hearing'. It is a mutual listening 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', in order to know what [the Spirit] 'says to the Churches'.³⁵

In a synodal church, all members listen to each other. However, as the passage of Pope Francis cited above makes it clear, listening to each other at once means listening to the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the underlying theological presupposition of this mutual listening is that the Holy Spirit is at work in all the baptized owing to their baptism. As Pope Francis expounds, 'in all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization', and so, 'the people of God are holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*'.³⁶ It is precisely for this reason that the

32 Ibid, art. 39.

33 Ibid, art. 94.

34 Horan OFM, 'Synodality Isn't Just an Option'.

35 Francis, 'Address of His Holiness'.

36 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, art. 119. Italic original. The Pope is reiterating *Lumen Gentium* 12, where he finds his favourite image of the church. In this article, among other

concept of *sensus fidei* is so central to Pope Francis's vision of a synodal church. As he maintains, 'God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what truly of God'.³⁷ Faggioli regards this as a dynamic use of *sensus fidei*. Unlike the static understanding of *sensus fidei* that accentuates the 'unanimity within a given expression of faith', Faggioli contends, a dynamic one views *sensus fidei* as manifested in the process of dialogue.³⁸

Given such theological ground for the practice of mutual listening, Rush is right to conclude that with his vision of a synodal church, Pope Francis is reaffirming the pneumatological dimension of the church's existence. Rush notes that for Pope Francis, 'the *sensus fidelium*, and listening to the *sensus fidelium*, is fundamental for a church that is genuinely synodal', and at the same time essential for the church to be 'more pneumatologically balanced in its self-understanding'.³⁹ Faggioli likewise holds that Pope Francis's vision of a synodal church marks out a shift in the structure of a missionary church, from an institutional church to a more charismatic and pneumatological church. While the former favors the dominant role of the hierarchy, Faggioli writes, the latter upholds the active participation of all the faithful.⁴⁰ This discussion of the vision of a pneumatological Church brings me to the second element of synodality, namely discernment of the Spirit.

Discernment of the Spirit

As the second element of synodality, discernment of the Spirit is a corollary of the conviction that mutual listening also means listening to the Holy Spirit at work in all the faithful regardless of the differences in charisms and functions. As stated in *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 'fidelity to

things, the Council Fathers state: 'The universal body of the faithful who have received the anointing of the holy one, cannot be mistaken in belief. It displays this particular quality through a supernatural sense of faith in the whole people when 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful laity', it expresses the consent of all in matters of faith and morals. Through this sense of faith which is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of Truth, the People of God, under the guidance of the sacred magisterium to which it is faithfully obedient, receives no longer the words of human beings but truly the word of God'.

37 Ibid, art. 119.

38 Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy*, p. 133.

39 Rush, 'Inverting the Pyramid', p. 303.

40 Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy*, p. 136; In addition, a synodal church is grounded in the awareness that 'participation is based on the fact that all the faithful are qualified and called to serve each other through the gifts they have all received from the Holy Spirit'. ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, art. 67.

depositum fidei’ and ‘creative openness to the voice of the Spirit’ are two fundamental principles towards the realization of the vision of a synodal church.⁴¹ Amanda Osheim reiterates the same idea. A synodal church, she argues, is the one that ‘listens to the one Spirit who moves within all the faithful, guiding person and communities to be faithful to God so that their shared stories may become part of the salvation history’.⁴² In the document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, this discernment of the spirit is regarded as shaping the unique characteristic and giving theological weight to the process of mutual listening in a synodal church. The document states:

The consultation that takes place in synodal assemblies is actually different, because the members of the People of God who take part in them are responding to the summons of the Lord, listening as a community to what the Spirit is saying to the church through the Word of God which resonates in their situation and interpreting the signs of the times with the eyes of faith.⁴³

To consider discernment essential for a synodal church is to acknowledge that being a synodal church means going through a lengthy or even complex process. As Osheim points out, this is related primarily to the fact that discernment of the Spirit takes place both at the personal and communal levels.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the process of discernment comprises some steps that make a whole. While respecting the freedom and recognizing the rich diversity of its members, in a synodal church, the whole community ‘is called together to pray, listen, analyze, dialogue, discern and offer advice on taking pastoral decisions which correspond as closely as possible to God’s will’.⁴⁵ Osheim attempts to summarize this process, stating that as a habit of a synodal church, discernment should ‘include prayer, dialogue, and self-reflection’.⁴⁶ What is particularly notable in this regard is that this entire process is taken in view of fulfilling God’s mission through the church.

41 ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, art. 94.

42 Amanda C. Osheim, ‘Stepping toward a Synodal Church’, *Theological Studies* 80:2 (2019), 370–392 at 374.

43 ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, art. 68.

44 Osheim, ‘Stepping toward a Synodal Church’, 374–375.

45 ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, art. 68.

46 Osheim, ‘Stepping toward a Synodal Church’, 374.

Collaborative Process and Participatory Leadership

Finally, the practice of synodality is a collaborative work as it is implicitly signified by the first two elements discussed above. In a synodal church, all members of the church as a people of God should actively involve themselves in church life. Synodality, as Bradford Hinze affirms, ‘would offer a distinctive affirmation of the need for mutual listening and collective discernment and decision-making of participating bishops, theologians, and lay people.’⁴⁷ Such a collaborative process is well described by the authors of the document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*. In a synodal church, they insist, the principle outlining that nothing is done without the authorization of the hierarchy is equally true with that insisting that nothing is done without the consensus of all the faithful.⁴⁸

For synodality to happen, as Hinze suggests, there must be a willingness ‘to create dialogical processes that promote open, courageous honesty at all levels of the church.’⁴⁹ This implies that there is no special requirement to be involved in the synodal process, for this will be against the principle of the active participation of all the faithful. As Hinze maintains, all the baptized are openly welcomed, regardless of ‘however shaken and unsure they are in their faith.’⁵⁰ According to Rush, it is here that lies the responsibility of the hierarchy. In a synodal church, the role of the hierarchy is ‘to facilitate the full participation by the whole body of the faithful in prophetic, sanctifying and governing offices of Christ in the Church.’⁵¹ An insight of Richard Gaillardetz is worth recalling in this regard. The authority assumed by the church’s hierarchy, he rightly argues, should be viewed as working through empowerment and coordination. Building on Victor Austin, he remarks that ‘distinctive authority exercised by the Church’s pastors must be directed toward recognizing, empowering, and ordering the gifts of all God’s people.’⁵²

47 Bradford Hinze, ‘Can We Find a Way Together?’, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85:3 (2020), 215–229 at 221.

48 ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, art. 25.

49 Hinze, ‘Can We Find a Way Together?’, 215.

50 Hinze, ‘Can We Find a Way Together?’, 216.

51 Rush, ‘Inverting the Pyramid’, 320.

52 Richard R. Gaillardetz, ‘Power and Authority in the Church’, in Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hannenberg, eds, *A Church with Open Doors* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), pp. 87–110 at 105. Austin’s concept, to which Gaillardetz specifically refers, is known as nonsubstitutionary form of authority that views the function of authority as coordinating individual activities for the sake of corporate action in a given community. The authority’s task is to provide individuals or groups with conditions to best contribute to the common good out of their gifts or resources.

As such, in a synodal church, emphasizing communion on the ground of the understanding of the church as a people of God does not necessarily mean to underrate the hierarchy. The two should be taken together and go hand in hand instead. In a synodal church, 'a hierarchical structure' is combined with 'a concrete regime of association and agreement'.⁵³ In short, being a synodal church, as Horan warns,

is not a call to do away with hierarchical leadership. No, the church is not a democracy. But neither is the church a monarchy wherein local bishops' conference or even the pope rules by fiat. The church is a 'hierarchical communion', as *Lumen Gentium* explains, but one whose ministers arise from and are oriented to the service of all the baptized.⁵⁴

There is nonetheless a further point worth considering in this respect. The collaborative process and participatory leadership required by a synodal church aim to acknowledge and promote different roles or functions in the church thanks to various charisms and gifts of the Spirit. In this respect, a line of thought once expressed by the authors of *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* is of great importance. They insightfully caution:

An ecclesial mentality shaped by synodal thinking joyfully welcomes and promotes the grace in virtue of which all the baptized are qualified and called to be missionary disciples. The great challenge for pastoral conversion that follows from this for the life of the church is to intensify *the mutual collaboration of all* in evangelizing witness based on everyone's gifts and roles, *without clericalizing lay people and without turning the clergy into lay people*, and in any case avoiding the temptation of 'an excessive clericalism which keeps them [lay people] away from decision-making'.⁵⁵

53 ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, art. 65; In article 105, the same document states: 'Pastoral conversion for the implementation of synodality means that some paradigms often still present in ecclesiastical culture need to be quashed, because they express an understanding of the church that has not been renewed by the ecclesiology of communion. These include: the concentration of responsibility for mission in the ministry of Pastors; insufficient appreciation of the consecrated life and charismatic gifts; rarely making use of the specific and qualified contribution of the lay faithful, including women, in their areas of expertise'.

54 Horan OFM, 'Synodality Isn't Just an Option'.

55 ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, art. 104. Italics mine.

Current Challenges and the Ways Forward

Inverted Pyramidal Structure: Co-responsibility

A synodal way of governing community life places the active participation of all people as its priority. The social responsibility, therefore, is not to be concentrated to a few elites. The authors of *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* examine this matter as they concisely summarize the essence of a synodal church as ‘a Church of participation and co-responsibility’.⁵⁶ This means that the exercise of synodality gives expression to the way of organizing socio-communal life that prioritizes ‘the participation of all, according to each one’s calling’.⁵⁷ In this regard, Horan rightly observes that by underscoring the active participation, dialogue and collaborative process concerning the church governance, synodality calls into question any tendency towards unilateral governance.⁵⁸

The idea of a participatory and co-responsible model of organizing social life can be easily understood when one recalls how Pope Francis harnesses the inverted pyramid as the primary image in promoting his vision of a synodal church, as mentioned previously. Accordingly, more space for active participation is created, and the vision of sharing responsibility is strongly encouraged. The active participation of all takes precedence over the role of a few entrusted with the task of governing the whole community. A closer examination of this idea has led some to argue that in using the image of an inverted pyramid for a synodal church, the Pope draws inspiration from Vatican II’s ecclesiological perspective.⁵⁹ Indeed, the image of an inverted pyramid best describes the church’s true self-understanding, for instead of the hierarchy, it is the people of God that the idea of the church primarily represents. In other words, the people of God come first, then followed by the hierarchy whose task is to minister to the people of God.⁶⁰

Furthermore, this inverted pyramid metaphor reveals another essential insight, that is, a synodal way of exercising power and authority. In the church’s internal affairs, this has something to do with the role of the hierarchy. In his vision of a synodal church, Pope Francis warns that ‘those who exercise authority are called ‘ministers’, because, in the original meaning of

⁵⁶ Ibid, art. 67.

⁵⁷ Ibid, art. 67.

⁵⁸ Horan OFM, ‘Synodality Isn’t Just an Option’.

⁵⁹ ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, 57.

⁶⁰ Ibid, art. 57. A synodal church, as stated in this document, ‘comprises the People of God and the College of Bishops, one of whose members, the Successor of Peter, has a specific ministry of unity’

the word, they are the least of all'.⁶¹ This very last point, as Gaillardetz rightly observes, allows the ecclesial authority to be exercised in a more faithful way to the manner Jesus has exemplified. In this respect, power is regarded as a means of humble and liberating service, and not an instrument of control and domination.⁶² However, it should be noted that while the active participation of all the faithful is fundamental to a synodal church, the role of the hierarchy remains important. Yet such a role, as discussed earlier, should be viewed as a call to be facilitators or coordinators.⁶³

Seen from this perspective, the latter decision taken by Ruteng Diocese does not entirely represent the vision of a synodal church. Unlike the initial rejection letter, the MoU and the recommendation of the bishop for the geothermal project to proceed were made without a proper consultation with the local people. Therefore, it gives expression more to the unilateral governance than a synodal one. Within the framework of an inverted pyramid as the image of a synodal church, by which it makes manifest the Vatican II's understanding of the church as the people of God, one may argue that if the church's hierarchy is to raise its voice as that of the church, it is the aspiration of the local people that it should have represented.⁶⁴ In line with this argument, if a synodal church envisions the role of the leaders as facilitators, it is the protest of the local people that the bishop should facilitate and make heard to the government. The vision of active participation and co-responsibility should take the form of involving the grassroots people and accommodating their concerns in the decision-making process. In this regard, the initial recommendation made by the diocese has been the best decision to make, for it well reflected the aspiration of the grassroots people. However, with the letter of recommendation for the project to continue, as Frans Napa, one of the local people of Wae Sano, rightly said, 'the bishop seems to let his sheep enter into the mouth of a lion'.⁶⁵

While this can be claimed as a failure in the church's internal affairs, namely in the matter of communication and collaboration between the church's hierarchy and the faithful, it nonetheless can be seen as showing a bad example to the organizing social life in the broader context too. Indeed, Pope Francis's

61 Francis, 'Address of His Holiness'.

62 Gaillardetz, 'Power and Authority in the Church', p. 90.

63 Cf. ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, art. 55; Osheim, 'Stepping toward a Synodal Church', 377.

64 In a media discussion, this point was raised by Yosef Erwin, one of the local people's representatives. For him, if the Bishop wants to speak on behalf of the church, he should have voiced the aspiration of the people, since they are the essence of the church. See JATAM, cs, 'Wae Sano Ruang Hidup Kami!'.

65 See Sunspirit for Justice and Peace, 'Wae Sano Ruang Hidup dan Masa Depan Kami'.

vision of a synodal church not only brings about renewal in the self-understanding and mission of the church but also sheds light on how to organize social life in broader society. The Pope himself recognizes this as he clearly states:

Our gaze also extends to humanity as a whole. A synodal Church is like a standard lifted up among the nations (cf. *Is* 11:12) in a world which – while calling for participation, solidarity and transparency in public administration – often consigns the fate of entire peoples to the grasp of small but powerful groups. As a Church which ‘journeys together’ with men and women, sharing the travails of history, let us cherish the dream that a rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and of the function of authority as service will also be able to help civil society to be built up in justice and fraternity, and thus bring about a more beautiful and humane world for coming generations.⁶⁶

Synodality and Decision-Making as a Participative Process

Advocating the active participation of all, a synodal way of organizing social life is at odds with any tendency toward centralization. As Hinze succinctly summarizes it, ‘synodality is not just a group of people trying to take a walk together to a common destination, but rather it is a community trying to find a way together through collective discernment’.⁶⁷ This is made even more visible in the synodal way of decision-making. Contrary to a centralized system that allows decision-making to be rendered by a few elites, a synodal way requires the participation of all through consultation. As the authors of *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* note, this process of consulting the entire people is central to a synodal model of organizing social life.⁶⁸

From this standpoint, apart from the first recommendation to stop the geothermal project, the whole process that has boiled down to the bishop’s recommendation for the continuation of the geothermal project runs contrary to the vision of synodality. Instead, it exemplifies how a centralized system operates, to which a synodal way is the opposite. In this case, the insistence on the active and dialogical participation of the grassroots community in the decision-making process was not properly taken, for the final decision was made only at the level of the church’s hierarchy in collaboration with the representative of

66 Cited in Faggioli, ‘From Collegiality to Synodality’, 358–359; Cf. Massimo Faggioli, *Catholicism and Citizenship: Political Cultures of the Church in the Twenty-First Century* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017), pp. 65–66.

67 Hinze, ‘Can We Find a Way Together?’, 215.

68 ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, 65.

the government. From the perspective of synodality, the decision should have resulted from a comprehensive, free, participative, and transparent dialogue between those in authority, both ecclesial and civil, and the local people. The final decision should be taken after carefully listening to every consideration these stakeholders pose. In the case of the geothermal project in Wae Sano, the consultation with the people is of particular significance, not only concerning their status as the landlords but also as the ones who will be immediately affected by the operation of the project, as two local people, Eduardus Watumedang and Evaristus Batara, rightly stated.⁶⁹

According to the document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, the practice of synodality is based on a principle used in the Roman law stipulating that ‘*Quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet* (what affects everyone should be discussed and approved by all)’.⁷⁰ Synodality stands for the conviction that every community member has equal dignity, thereby considered a subject. In other words, the exercise of synodality is based on the conviction ‘that the whole Church is a subject and that everyone in the Church is a subject,’ and so the faithful are to be seen as ‘companions on the journey’.⁷¹ Being considered a subject, each member retains the right to determine the communal life, which is put into practice through their participation in the decision-making on things that pertain to the life of all. In the open letter of the people of Wae Sano, this point was clearly made. When the final decision was taken without a proper participation of the local people, they considered themselves to have been treated as objects instead of subjects in the whole process of solving the issues related to the geothermal project.⁷²

As mentioned previously, the primary means of such participatory decision-making is consultation. When speaking of the synod of family, for instance, Pope Francis called for the participation of the families themselves. He, therefore, posed a rhetoric question, asking ‘how could we speak about the family without engaging families themselves, listening to their joys and their hopes, their sorrows and their anguish?’.⁷³ In the case of the geothermal project in Wae Sano, what is missing is the right of the local people directly affected by the project to be properly heard. Even if such a project is for the

69 See Sunspirit for Justice and Peace, ‘Wae Sano Ruang Hidup dan Masa Depan Kami’. They are concerned about the geothermal project not simply because they own a piece of land in the would-be area of the project but more fundamentally due to the possible adverse effect of the project on the well-being of the local people in general.

70 ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, 65.

71 Ibid, art. 55.

72 See Hemat, cs, ‘Surat Terbuka Masyarakat Wae Sano’, especially point b of part I.

73 Francis, ‘Address of His Holiness’.

betterment of the well-being of the local people of Wae Sano, they should be treated as subjects with the right to voice their aspirations and be heard by those in authority. In a media discussion, Yosef Erwin pointed out that on the recommendation for the project to proceed, the local people only heard the news, for they were not adequately involved in the process that resulted in the letter of recommendation of the bishop for the project to proceed. He then rightly insists that as the geothermal project in Wae Sano is their problem, the local people should have been properly involved in the entire process.⁷⁴

Concrete Experience as the Point of Reference

Discernment of the Spirit as the second fundamental element of synodality should not be seen separately from reading the signs of the times, for it is always conducted in the light of one's present circumstances. Accordingly, listening to the Spirit and reading the signs of the times should go hand in hand.⁷⁵ This line of argument finds its ground in the awareness that a synodal church is a missionary church, and thus a synodal model in governing the church life is always in view of the realization of God's mission entrusted to the church through Jesus Christ.⁷⁶ Faggioli captures this matter well as he observes that Pope Francis's vision of a synodal church is based on the idea of a missionary church. Faggioli avers that 'the rediscovery of a more participative ecclesiological model,' which is the essence of a synodal church, aims to reaffirm what he calls 'a missionary ecclesiology'.⁷⁷ Carrying out the task of realizing the vision of a missionary church in effective ways, a synodal church considers concrete experience as a point of reference.

This line of thinking is central to Pope Francis. He recognizes the effort to take people's daily life seriously as the starting point of a synodal church. Hence people's real experiences matter a great deal. As he points out, a synodal church begins to take shape only when it is persistently 'connected to the 'base' and start from people and their daily problems'.⁷⁸ In the case of the geothermal project in Wae Sano and the involvement of the church in it, all sorts of anxieties and hopes of the local people should be the point of reference. The whole process, however, has overlooked this significant point. Instead of listening to the voices of the local people, the church's hierarchy was more concerned

74 See JATAM, cs, 'Wae Sano Ruang Hidup Kami!'

75 Osheim, 'Stepping toward A Synodal Church', 376; *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, art. 113 & 114.

76 Faggioli, 'From Collegiality to Synodality', 5; ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission*, art. 75–76.

77 Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy*, p. 134; Cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, art. 3 & 27.

78 Francis, 'Address of His Holiness.

about the government's development programs. As a result, the local people find themselves left behind, both by the government and by the church. When the civil authority abandoned the local people, it is the task of the church to accommodate them and to listen to their anxieties and hopes. In this respect, the initial position taken by the local church's hierarchy would have been the best option. It was the preference to be with the local people and to share their fate that has motivated and shaped the concern of Bishop Siprianus as he wrote the rejection letter to the Indonesian President.⁷⁹

To take people's actual experiences as the starting point means to acknowledge the variety of perspectives and the distinctive aspects that shape their lives due to differing contexts and circumstances. The far-reaching consequence of this principle is noteworthy. It can happen that the voices of the local people, based on their daily struggles, do not fit the opinion of the mainstream or the plan set up by those in authority. A synodal process, as Osheim rightly warns, is 'a collaborative process inclusive of divergent voices'.⁸⁰ This point is worth highlighting in terms of the case of the geothermal project in Wae Sano. The local people protesting the project or being against those in authority concerning the decision related to the project could not be considered as not supporting the practice of development. Nor could they be regarded as not respecting the unity of the church simply by being against the decision taken by the local church's hierarchy. It is so striking that the local people of Wae Sano are aware of this. In a media discussion, for instance, they clearly said that despite their critical stance toward the decision taken by the church's hierarchy concerning the geothermal project, they never consider themselves as the enemy of the church.⁸¹

Conclusion

In *Laudato Si*, which has been widely considered not only as a document on human ecology but also on the ecology of power, Pope Francis has underscored the need for empowering local resources for the sake of a more dialogical and

79 Hormat, 'Rekomendasi Gereja Katolik Keuskupan Ruteng'. Here, Bishop Siprianus cited *Gaudium et Spes*, 1. This point was also raised by Frans Napa, one of the local people of Wae Sano. See Sunspirit for Justice and Peace, 'Wae Sano Ruang Hidup dan Masa Depan Kami'.

80 Osheim, 'Stepping toward A Synodal Church', 379–380.

81 See JATAM, cs., 'Wae Sano Ruang Hidup Kami!'.

transparent way of exercising power in society.⁸² This line of thinking has also been one of the underlying principles of synodality. Synodality prompts the use of local knowledge in solving the problems that occur in specific contexts.⁸³ Following this line of argument, one may say that in order to acquire the local knowledge and resources in the decision-making process concerning the geothermal project, listening to the voices of the local people, being attentive to their concerns, accommodating their aspirations and adopting their perspectives seem to be indispensable requirements. While scientific, economic, and development analyses are undoubtedly of great significance for the final decision, the real experiences of the local people remain another critical point that merits careful consideration. I would argue that the role of the church in the whole process of the geothermal project should have been directed more to this side. According to Hinze, it is also a synodal spirit that encourages Pope Francis to reach the marginalized people in the church.⁸⁴ Faggioli likewise notes that ‘synodality is the foundation to Francis’s vision of the Church for the poor’.⁸⁵ In other words, a synodal church can address the specific needs of those whose interests have often been neglected and in need of recognition and empowerment. When the local people are often denied the right to actively participate in the development strategy and plan set up by those in civil authority through a top-down approach, and hence their voices are often made unheard, the church should be present as their last recourse. It is for these people that the church of Christ is present in the world.

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83 Hinze, ‘Can We Find a Way Together?’, 221; Osheim, ‘Stepping toward A Synodal Church’, 378; Faggioli, ‘From Collegiality to Synodality’, 357. Here, Faggioli argues that the empowerment of local resources is of utmost importance for the exercise of synodality.

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