

THEOS AND POLIS

POLITICAL THEOLOGY AS DISCERNMENT

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POLITICAL THEOLOGY AS DISCERNMENT

EDITED BY

STEPHAN VAN ERP – JACQUES HAERS

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THE POLITICAL DISCERNMENT OF THE CHURCH

DEVELOPMENTS TOWARDS A CATHOLIC POLITICAL THEOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

The current crisis in the Roman Catholic Church becomes manifest in its debates on synodality. Central to these debates is the location of authority, and the different positions in the discussion can be placed along the line from a centrifugal to a centripetal ecclesial government. Until now, the conversation that should have led to a reconstitution of ecclesial unity, has instead intensified the already existing polarization between the so-called “traditional” and “liberal” Catholics. A result of the description of this polarization is a binary, and often conflicted view of the dynamics of unity and diversity, a zero-sum balance determined by degree, in which one aspect is inversely proportional to the other. That balance now seems to be a constant battle, subject to disagreement on procedures rather than on principles, and a contested matter of strategy rather than structure. Unity in diversity has become the rare and intermediate result of laborious negotiations instead of being the starting point for reflections on a common ground or goal. In order to counter the potential defeat of the intentions behind synodality, a new understanding of unity in diversity is needed, if it were to avoid ending up as a tool for window dressing a pragmatist dealing with plurality and division.

In this article, we will reconsider the concept of catholicity as a model for political theology. The catholicity of the church has often been described as *unitas in diversitas*. During the last few decades, reflections on the theology of catholicity have shown that the Catholic concept of unity is not one of sheer universality, nor of uniformity¹. Instead, it implies a relationship among things that are diverse, a dynamic that, according to Avery Dulles, “designates a fullness of reality and life, especially divine life, actively communicating itself”². The catholicity of the church is therefore regarded by him as shaped by a diversity of participations in the divine catholicity. So, this theological view of catholicity seems to be a combination of divine self-communication on the one hand and the various participations in that divine communication on the other. In both instances,

1. A. DULLES, *The Catholicity of the Church*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1985.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 167-168.

catholicity is a dynamic performance: of God in particular moments in the history of salvation, and of the church in its variety of forms and engagements.

In what follows, we will first define the concept of catholicity and then explore its potential as a political principle for the church. Next, we will sketch what a political theology might look like by means of a Catholic vision of synodality. This way, we hope to contribute theologically to the debate on unity and plurality in an age of ecclesial conflict and disagreement.

I. CATHOLICITY: UNITY, PLURALITY, SOLIDARITY

The dialectic between unity on the one hand and freedom and democracy on the other has challenged the conversation on synodality in the church. An abstract dialectic between unity and diversity has not proven to be a helpful tool for understanding the motives or goals behind the complexities of ecclesial government. Therefore, we would like to suggest to first reformulate the idea of catholicity, as it suffers from the same tendency to lead either to a static all-embracing universality, or to an abstract, undefined unity that is supposed to be at the centre of an otherwise non-governable diversity.

1. *Catholicity: Defining a Dynamic Unity*

The term “catholic” comes from the Greek roots *kata* and *holos*, together forming *kath’holou*, which means according to, concerning, or through the whole. Ancient Greek writers used the adjective *katholikos*, and the noun *katholikon*, to talk about what is universal or most general. So, there are treatises on the universals, *ta katholikè*, which may be instantiated by particular realities in various ways, depending on one’s philosophy. In *kath’holou* the main sense is downward motion, down in the whole, or immersed in the whole, but it can also mean along, or following, so along or following the whole³. To complicate matters even further, it can also mean both towards and against (as in Irenaeus’ *Adversus Haereses: kata hairesen*). It might prove to be difficult to include all these senses in a particular use of the concept, but it is at least clear that

3. B.M. MEZEL, *Radical Revelation*, London – New York, Bloomsbury, 2019, pp. 299–304. Cf. D.C. SCHINDLER, *The Catholicity of Reason*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2013, p. 9.

the meaning of catholicity is a dynamic combination characterized by movement rather than by a settled, complete idea. It seems to be a quality on the move, a questing, dynamic, active quality which should engage all aspects of life⁴.

Employing the term “catholicity” in an ecclesial context could lead to misunderstandings motivated by matters of identity, and especially by the concern of exclusivism. Such misunderstandings are usually caused by confusing the quantitative and qualitative understandings of the term⁵. The quantitative understanding emphasizes the geographical, temporal and numerical extension of institutional Catholicism. The qualitative understanding focuses on ideas of fullness or holism, whether they be doctrinal, sacramental or eschatological. Understanding the term “catholicity” in the ultimately quantitative sense of universal, which is quite a frequent temptation, can lead to a static, totalizing, and exclusive sense of the term. It is interesting, as the Jesuit Walter Ong noted, that the Western church did not, despite having the perfectly good Latin adjective *universalis* in its lexicon, by and large use the Latinate term in its early documents, preferring instead to transliterate the more unusual Greek term, *katholikos*, into Roman script. As Ong points out, the etymology of *universalis* is also clear, coming from the Latin roots *unum*, or one, and *vertere*, to turn, so to turn into one⁶. There is a clear undercurrent in that term tending towards uniformity. However, it is incontrovertible that if that were the sense of catholic, then the Roman Catholic Church, let alone any other ecclesial body, is not and has never been catholic. Therefore, it seems more fitting that the qualitative path could be explored as a model for political theology, with special attention paid to the sense of dynamism in the act of “turning”, the transformative quality of an event in context.

2. *Unity as Communion: Plurality and Equality within the Church*

The performative dimension of catholicity is perhaps best expressed as “unity as communion”, which is central to it, and could prove to be helpful for envisioning a dynamic model for a political theology. In the 2018 document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, the

4. For a concise introduction into the concept of catholicity and its variety of meanings, see P. McCOSKER, *Catholicity: Its Varieties and Futures*, Lecture for the von Hügel Institute for Critical Inquiry, 1 March 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pf7iDedGWho>.

5. The distinction between quantitative and qualitative understandings of catholicity has been clearly explained by H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Claim to Catholicity*, in Id., *Spirit and Institution: Explorations in Theology IV*, San Francisco, CA, Ignatius, 1995, 65-121.

6. W. YONG, *Yeast*, in *America Magazine*, 7 April 1990, 347-363, p. 347.

International Theological Commission (ITC) has demonstrated the inextricable link between communion and synodality, arguing that synodality should be understood in the context of a communion ecclesiology. “Synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God”, the document affirms, “which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelising mission”⁷. Walter Kasper, in his attempt to explain how synodality is related to the Petrine ministry, has made a similar point. The revival of synodality, in his view, results from the understanding of the church as communion⁸.

So, what does the Catholic idea of “unity as communion” signify, and how could it envision a model of a discerning political theology? Wolfgang Beinert affirmed that communion is a model of social life that manifests the idea of catholicity. The Catholic way of perceiving unity, he argues, does not favour a vertical unity in which “unity is valued above all”, but rather “a multiple figure of unity”, whereby “each organ is called to fulfil its irreducible and original function within the whole”⁹. Beinert seems to suggest that a Catholic model of unity manifests itself when the diversity of the constitutive elements is recognized and accommodated, and when their distinctiveness is faithfully preserved. In this Catholic model of unity, he argues, “the *plurality* of organs maintained intact in the harmony of the organism”¹⁰.

In the literature on the concept of catholicity, a stress on diversity and plurality is often accompanied with a trinitarian foundation. Richard Gaillardetz regards “unity as communion” as an implication of the trinitarian root of the catholicity of the church: “An ecclesiology attuned to ancient trinitarian convictions had to affirm that church unity, if grounded in the triune life of God, could not be based in a stifling uniformity but should rather affirm unity as communion”¹¹. This affirmation informs the model of catholicity as performance. It not only demands a passive confirmation of the distinct persons in the Trinity, but also for the active performance of their interrelatedness. Beinert claims that in the mystery of the

7. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html. Here, we refer to art. 6.

8. W. KASPER, *Petrine Ministry and Synodality*, in *The Jurist* 66 (2006) 298-309, p. 303.

9. W. BEINERT, *Catholicity as a Property of the Church*, in *The Jurist* 52 (1992) 455-493, pp. 470-471.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 471.

11. R.R. GAILLARDEZ, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent*, New York, Orbis, 2008, p. 88.

Trinity, distinction and mutual relationship are well maintained. According to him, the immanent Trinity is perfect communion (*communio*) in perfect communication (*communicatio*)¹². Dulles also writes that the doctrine of the Trinity could clarify that God's unity is not static and monotonous, but consists in a dynamic interaction, and that the practice of catholicity is analogous to this dynamic of a differentiated trinitarian unity¹³. A communion model of unity is therefore not uniform but demands performance, for it depends on the complex interactions of its diverse constitutive elements.

A prime reference for speaking of such dynamic communion as a model of unity, is the Pauline image of the Body of Christ¹⁴. In 1 Cor 12,12-31, Saint Paul writes, "just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ". This image has been used to confirm the vertical structure of the hierarchy of the church, but it has also been employed to stress the equality of all its members. Promoting the vision of active and equal participation of all the constitutive elements, the Catholic view of unity as communion could be used to underline its inclusive character, or as a tool for discerning exclusivity signifying that which is not Catholic. But this discernment – leading either to inclusivity or exclusivity – is never inferred from a single unity that measures everything else, but is based on a participatory performance that constitutes that unity.

To cast some light on the notion of inclusive unity, an idea of Pope Francis is worth noting. During a general audience in 2013 at which he used the image of building a temple, he explained that each member of the church is a living stone. He then added that "we are all necessary for building this Temple! No one is secondary. No one is the most important person in the Church, we are all equal in God's eyes"¹⁵. Put differently, the inclusive character of the Catholic model of unity entails a recognition that all members play an important and decisive role in it, and that therefore no one can be excluded or considered to be less important. So, the

12. BEINERT, *Catholicity as a Property of the Church* (n. 9), p. 467. For Beinert, the fundamental attribute of God as love (1 John 4,8) is of great importance. "Love is the desire for unity of those who are distinct", writes Beinert, "and the realization of communion in a perfect exchange while at the same time maintaining the identity of those who love".

13. DULLES, *The Catholicity of the Church* (n. 1), p. 31. Another term that Dulles uses is "diversified unity", *ibid.*, p. 42. Cf. GAILLARDETZ, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church* (n. 11), pp. 35, 88.

14. BEINERT, *Catholicity as a Property of the Church* (n. 9), p. 471. Here, Beinert speaks about the *communio ecclesiarum*, that is the communion among the local churches that constitute the universal church.

15. Pope FRANCIS, *General Audience*, 26 June 2013, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130626_udienza-generale.html.

Catholic vision of unity seeks to guarantee a form of equality in which every single element assumes equal significance. In his image of the church as the Body of Christ that is made up of a plurality of distinct members, Paul also stresses a certain equality. “There should be no division in the body”, he cautions, “but that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (1 Cor 12,25). In other words, all are included, and more importantly, each distinct contribution is fully recognized. Beinert shares a similar view, though with a slightly different emphasis. For him, the Catholic vision of unity, is best described “in a horizontal sense” that recognizes the multiple relationships among the constitutive elements¹⁶. It is important to note that this unity is not so much constituted by consensus or by sheer equality, but by the active participation in the givenness of that equality, which needs a participative performance to become manifest and to bear fruit.

According to Ormond Rush, a high appreciation of the indispensable contribution of each constitutive element has characterized the ecclesiological vision of Pope Francis. For this reason, Rush argues, Francis’ vision could be viewed as a correction to the monarchical model that maintains a hierarchical inequality in the church¹⁷. For the monarchical model of church governance, Rush takes Pope Pius X’s encyclical letter *Vehementer Nos* (1906) as a case in point. In it, Pius X asserts that “the Church is essentially an unequal society, that is a society comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock”, in which the faithful are left without any role but to follow the direction that is exclusively decided by those in the hierarchy¹⁸. Yves Congar OP has called such an excessively centralized model of church governance as “hierarchology”, in which the church is identified with its hierarchy, namely with the Pope and bishops¹⁹. Contrary to this monarchical model, communion ecclesiology informed by the spirit of catholicity calls for equal participation of all members, and thereby builds on its vision of inclusive community. The spirit of communion ecclesiology therefore, as Beinert succinctly puts it, aims at “promoting all elements” instead of “reinforcing tendencies toward centralization”²⁰.

16. BEINERT, *Catholicity as a Property of the Church* (n. 9), pp. 470-471.

17. O. RUSH, *Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church*, in *Theological Studies* 78 (2017) 299-325, pp. 299-300.

18. Pope PIUS X, *Vehementer Nos*, 11 February 1906, http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_11021906_vehementer-nos.html. Here, we refer to art. 8.

19. Y. CONGAR, *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of Laity*, Westminster, MD, Newman, 1965, p. 45.

20. BEINERT, *Catholicity as a Property of the Church* (n. 9), p. 474.

The awareness that a centralized and monarchical model does not reflect the genuine way of understanding the essence of the church has been a prime concern of Vatican II. The council fathers had attempted to overcome the tendency towards centralization and put tremendous effort into promoting a communion ecclesiology, the result of which is to be found mainly in *Lumen Gentium*, but also in the other documents of the council. With its primary feature of the church as a people of God, as church historian John O'Malley observes, Vatican II insists that "the first reality of the church is horizontal and consists of all the baptized, without distinction of rank. Only then comes the vertical unity, hierarchy"²¹. This yields to the recognition of the equality of all the members of the church. Rush asserts that through *Lumen Gentium*, "the council affirmed the shared dignity and consequent equality of all the baptized in the church, despite differences in charisms and ministries"²².

In *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, this emphasis achieves an even greater recognition. After acknowledging the roots of synodality in the ecclesiology of Vatican II, the authors of the ITC-document state, "the ecclesiology of the People of God stresses the common dignity and mission of all the baptised, in exercising the variety and ordered richness of their charisms, their vocations and their ministries"²³. The feature of the church as a people of God, in which inclusivity and equality among its members finds its warrants, is also central to Pope Francis' ecclesiological vision. In an interview from 2013, the Pope clearly expressed his view of the essence of the church, saying:

The image of the Church I like is that of the holy, faithful people of God. This is the definition I often use, which is the image of *Lumen Gentium*, no. 12. Belonging to a people has a strong theological value ... The people themselves are the subject. And the Church is the people of God on the journey through history, with joys and sorrows. *Sentire cum Ecclesia* [to sense, to feel with the Church], therefore, is my way of being a part of this people²⁴.

21. J.M. O'MALLEY, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 177-178.

22. RUSH, *Inverting the Pyramid* (n. 17), p. 305.

23. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (n. 7), art. 6.

24. Pope FRANCIS, *My Door Is Always Open: A Conversation on Faith, Hope and the Church in a Time of Change*; Pope Francis with Antonio Spadaro, London, Bloomsbury, in association with *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 2014, p. 49; 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. Here, we refer to art. 119.

3. *A Eucharistic Performance: Universal Solidarity beyond the Church*

The idea of unity as communion leads to another key feature of catholicity, in addition to equality and inclusivity, viz. solidarity. Paul's vision of the Church as the Body of Christ, on which Beinert draws when speaking of a horizontal unity, presents solidarity as an inherent part of communion. In the Body of Christ, Paul writes to the Corinthians, "if one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it" (1 Cor 12,26). This is indeed another way of expressing that every individual member plays an important role. When one does not perform its function properly, this will affect the integrity of the whole. Similarly, what happens to one will have a bearing on the others.

This inextricable connection between equality and solidarity is also highlighted in *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*. Commenting on the Pauline image of the Church as the Body of Christ, the document offers a line of thought that demonstrates the inseparable link between equality and solidarity in the context of communion ecclesiology. "All are equally responsible for the life and mission of the community", the document states, "and all are called to work in accordance with the law of mutual solidarity in respect of their specific ministries and charisms, inasmuch as every one of them finds his or her energy in the one Lord (1 Corinthians 15:45)"²⁵. To put it another way, for co-responsibility to happen, in which each contributes out of their specific charisms, a sense of solidarity should be deeply rooted in the life of a community.

Solidarity has the Eucharist at its heart. Rush claims that a eucharistic communion lays the foundation for catholicity and its solidarity. Drawing on the vision of eucharistic communion of *Lumen Gentium* 7, he affirms that the eucharistic synaxis is not only a sacrament of unity with God but also with one another²⁶. An insight of the political theologian William Cavanaugh sheds further light on this matter, as he writes:

The Eucharist aims at the building of the Body of Christ which is not simply centripetal; we are united not just to God as to the centre but to one another. This is no liberal body, in which the centre seeks to maintain the independence of individuals from each other, nor a fascist body, which seeks to bind individuals to each other through a centre. Christ is indeed the Head of the Body, but the members do not relate to one another through the Head alone, for Christ Himself is found not only in the centre but at the margins of the Body, radically identified with the "least of my

25. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (n. 7), art. 22. Italics original.

26. RUSH, *Inverting the Pyramid* (n. 17), p. 319.

brothers and sisters” (Matt. 25. 31-46), with whom all the members suffer and rejoice together (1 Cor. 12.26)²⁷.

The latter point, namely the unity of all humanity enacted by the Eucharist, merits further consideration. It should be noted that such a unity is inclusive for it is not confined to the unity among the fellow participants of the Eucharist alone but rather embraces all humanity. In the words of Cavanaugh, “the Church in its Eucharistic gathering is the sacrament of the gathering of all humanity, but that gathering is not limited to the institutional Church itself”²⁸. The document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* echoes the same thought, albeit with a somewhat different emphasis, as it denotes the universal unity of human beings as the fruit of the Eucharistic communion. The spirituality of communion, the document insists, contains “the awareness of being members of each other as the Body of Christ and of being sent to our brothers and sisters, first and foremost to the poorest and the most excluded”²⁹. In short, those who are united as a Body in Christ in turn are sent to build up unity with all humanity, in which care for the lowest in society is of primary concern.

This line of thought indicates that solidarity is one of the constitutive elements of the Eucharistic communion. The unity of all human beings is celebrated sacramentally in the Eucharist, a sign and instrument of universal solidarity. By exploring the close relationship between the Eucharist and mission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* asserts that “communion made real in the Eucharist spurs us on to mission”, for “whoever partakes of the Body and Blood of Christ is called to share the joyous experience of it with everyone”³⁰. Cavanaugh points out that to be in unity with others means to be willing to be part of their lives. As he writes, “when we consume the Eucharist, we become one with others and share their fate”³¹, which is reminiscent of the words of Saint Paul who cautions the Corinthians that “because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf” (1 Cor 10,17).

27. W.T. CAVANAUGH, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism*, London – New York, Bloomsbury, 2002, p. 49.

28. W.T. CAVANAUGH, *The Church in the Streets: Eucharist and Politics*, in *Modern Theology* 30 (2014) 384-402, p. 397.

29. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (n. 7), art. 108.

30. *Ibid.*, art. 109.

31. W.T. CAVANAUGH, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2008, p. 95.

The Eucharist, in order to manifest this universality, demands a specific discernment of the people who are sharing in it in order to be diverse and inclusive. Because, although it gathers everyone within the boundary of the Eucharist, by virtue of that boundary it could also lead to the exclusion of whoever falls outside the universality of the communion it constitutes. The aim of the eucharistic performance therefore needs to be understood in a Catholic way, because the Catholic quality of “throughout-the-whole” carries no notion of boundary that demarcates those who are “in” and those who are “out”³².

II. A CATHOLIC POLITICAL THEOLOGY

1. *Catholicity at the Heart of Synodality*

The discussion of communion as a Catholic model of unity paves the way to understanding the inextricable connection between synodality and catholicity. This link is also expressed in *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*. Advocating the idea of synodality as inherent in “the dynamic of Catholic communion”, the authors of the document aver that “synodality is a living expression of the Catholicity of the Church as communion”³³. In the first place, such a connection is made on the account of what one may call sacramental dimension of the catholicity of the church. Following its bold statement of synodality as a living expression of catholicity, the document immediately adds, “in the Church, Christ is present as the Head united to His Body (*Ephesians* 1, 22-23) in such a way that she receives from Him the fullness of the means of salvation”³⁴.

Hence, synodality is primarily concerned with the performance of the church as a sacrament of salvation. In this regard, the concept of synodality gains significance on account of its promotion of all members of the church sharing in the fullness of grace, that is salvation, that they receive from God through Christ. The authors of *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* state that for the church, “the synodal path expresses and promotes her Catholicity” in the sense that “it shows the dynamic way in which the fullness of faith is shared by all members of the People

32. D. HORAN, *Catholic Doesn't Mean What You Think It Does*, in *Huffpost*, December 20, 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/catholic-doesnt-mean-what-you-think-it-means_b_1978768.

33. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (n. 7), art. 58.

34. *Ibid.*

of God”³⁵. Amanda Osheim makes this point as she speaks of the baptismal roots of synodality. Reflecting on Pope Francis’ vision of a synodal church, Osheim remarks that “synodality is primarily baptismal rather than hierarchical”, for the final end of synodality is “that all may truly ‘journey together’, led by the spirit in living the church’s faith and mission within history and with eschatological hope”³⁶.

The centrality of synodality in the catholicity of the church pertains to the universal character of God’s salvific work, of which the church is the sacrament. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* clarifies that for the church, the second way in which the synodal path expresses and promotes her catholicity is that such a practice assists in handing it on to all people and all peoples. Prior to this statement, the document makes clear that the catholicity of the church is also related to its mission, for the church “is sent to all, in order to gather the entire human family in the richness of the plurality of cultural forms, under the Lordship of Christ and in the unity of His Spirit”³⁷. In her reflection on the steps toward a synodal church, Osheim writes in much the same terms, arguing that synodality is helpful to “foster an understanding of faith incarnated in the diverse cultural and historical contexts characteristic of the Church’s catholicity”³⁸. The practice of synodality, accordingly, ensures the connections being made in the church beyond the various geographical, cultural, and historical contexts where faith is lived and manifests itself. It follows that in the understanding of synodality, the qualitative understanding of catholicity is prior to the quantitative one.

2. Catholicity instead of Centralization

As a way of governing the church, synodality has been often placed over against primacy and collegiality. Each, of course, has its own emphasis, yet closely related to each other. As clearly stated in *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, “synodality as an essential dimension of the Church is expressed on the level of the universal Church in the

35. *Ibid.*

36. A.C. OSHEIM, *Stepping toward a Synodal Church*, in *Theological Studies* 80 (2019) 370-392, p. 373. Here, Osheim refers to 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.

37. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (n. 7), art. 58. In art. 45 of the document, the authors write, “the Church is Catholic because she preserves the integrity and totality of faith (cf. *Matthew* 16,16) and she has been sent to gather into one holy People the peoples of the earth (cf. *Matthew* 28,19)”.

38. OSHEIM, *Stepping toward a Synodal Church* (n. 36), p. 373.

dynamic circularity of the *consensus fidelium*, episcopal collegiality and the primacy of the Bishop of Rome”³⁹. In this regard, synodality is understood as “the involvement and participation of the whole people of God in the life and mission of the Church”⁴⁰. Such a definition of synodality is easily attributed to Pope Francis who introduced the concept of “entirely synodal Church”. Synodality in this sense, to use Daniel Horan’s terms, insists on a “proper recognition of the place of all the baptized faithful in the prudential discernment about Church decision-making and governance”⁴¹.

Although such a general understanding of synodality reflects how the term is widely held today, it nonetheless captures only a part of the whole idea that has been associated with it in the course of history. In his attempt to expound how the concept of synodality is deeply rooted in the ecclesiological vision of Vatican II, Rush identifies another two ways of understanding synodality. First, synodality in the sense of conciliarity, that is the meeting of all bishops with the Pope as the bishop of Rome in view of exercising the task of governing and teaching the church. Such an understanding of synodality, according to Rush, has appeared thanks to the transliteration of the Greek word *synodos* into *concilium* in Latin. Second, synodality points to episcopal collegiality that takes form in episcopal synods at national, regional, and international level, which also includes synods at lower levels as its extension. This aims at creating a more collaborative way of exercising ecclesiastical power between the bishops and the Pope, and thereby between collegiality and primacy⁴².

With his notion of an entirely synodal church, by which he exceeds the narrower meanings of synodality as merely pointing to conciliarity and collegiality, Pope Francis insists that the concept of a people of God should be the primary feature of the church. In this synodal church, thus the Pope affirms, “as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base”⁴³. According to Rush, with his vision and praxis of a synodal church, 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 ministry is exercised in service to the

39. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (n. 7), art. 94.

40. *Ibid.*, art. 7.

41. D. HORAN, *Synodality Isn’t Just an Option, It’s the Only Way to be Church*, in *National Catholic Reporter*, 13 June 2019.

42. RUSH, *Inverting the Pyramid* (n. 17), p. 303. Cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (n. 7), art. 66.

43. Pope FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, art. 171.

whole”⁴⁴. The underlying principle in this regard is, as Rush writes to summarize the position of Léon-Joseph Card. Suenens when discussing the draft of *Lumen Gentium*, “a whole should precede that on the hierarchy”, for “what is common to all should be treated before what differentiates all”⁴⁵.

Advocating the primacy of baptismal orientation, the vision of a synodal church of Pope Francis, as Massimo Faggioli observes, is utterly opposed to the tendency of excessive centralization in the church⁴⁶. Rush shares a similar view and spells out three tendencies that are contrary to the spirit of synodality, namely triumphalism, juridicism, and clericalism⁴⁷. Being far removed from any kind of tendency of centralization, the vision of a synodal church cherishes the active participation of all its members. As clearly stated in *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, a synodal church is a manifestation of an awareness that “the Church is not identical with her pastors; that the whole Church, by the action of the Holy Spirit, is the subject or “organ” of Tradition; and that lay people have an active role in the transmission of the apostolic faith”⁴⁸.

The example that a synodal church provides as an alternative model for governing political institutions and organizing social life lies in its emphasis on the active participation of all people. A synodal way of governing community life places the active participation of all people as its priority. Social responsibility, therefore, is not to be concentrated to a few elites. In *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, a synodal church is viewed as “a Church of participation and co-responsibility”, for “in exercising synodality she is called to give expression to the participation of all, according to each one’s calling”⁴⁹. Horan therefore observes that with its emphasis on “the participative and collaborative process of the church governance”, synodality calls into question unilateral governance⁵⁰.

44. RUSH, *Inverting the Pyramid* (n. 17), pp. 304-305.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 305. Rush refers to G. PHILIPS, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: History of the Constitution*, in H. VORGRIMLER (ed.), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, London, Burns & Oates, 1967, 105-137, p. 110.

46. M. FAGGIOLI, *From Collegiality to Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis’s ‘Listening Primacy’*, in *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85 (2020) 352-369, p. 354; *Id.*, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis: Moving towards Global Catholicity*, New York, Orbis, 2020, pp. 134-135.

47. RUSH, *Inverting the Pyramid* (n. 17), p. 301.

48. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (n. 7), art. 39.

49. *Ibid.*, art. 67.

50. HORAN, *Synodality Isn’t Just an Option* (n. 41).

The idea of participation of all is not merely a procedural statement, but first and foremost a Catholic one, because it, “offers a way of understanding and experiencing the Church where legitimate differences find room in the logic of a reciprocal exchange of gifts in the light of truth”⁵¹. This, however, raises the question of how to deal with legitimate differences? Should they be reconciled, or just be simply left unresolved? To adequately address this question, it should be noted that when speaking of the discernment as inherent part of a synodal process, it is obvious that listening to the Holy Spirit is not to be seen separately from reading the signs of the times. Discernment of the Spirit in a synodal process is always conducted in the light of one’s present circumstances⁵².

This leads a synodal church to put emphasis on concrete experience as a point of reference in order that its performance can be carried out in an effective way. A synodal church, is a church that is always cognizant of its call to respond properly “to particular circumstances and challenges”, and such a response is made “in fidelity to the *depositum fidei* and in creative openness to the voice of the Spirit”⁵³. Rush makes an insightful point in this regard. Reiterating *Dei Verbum*’s concept of the ongoing revelation and uninterrupted conversation between God and the church, Rush contends that “divine revelation is happening here and now, and the Spirit’s gift enables its faithful interpretation”⁵⁴. Rush is convinced that “in the here and now, God may just be teaching the church new perspective on God’s plan for humanity as history unfolds”⁵⁵.

3. *Polycentrism and the Polyhedron*

Joseph Komonchak has argued that the mission of the church, while “defined by its Christological, pneumatological and eschatological dimensions”, is always “undertaken only within the specific mission of particular churches where the founding event takes place every day”⁵⁶. While Komonchak speaks of the catholicity of the local churches, he

51. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (n. 7), art. 9.

52. OSHEIM, *Stepping Toward a Synodal Church* (n. 36), p. 376.

53. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (n. 7), art. 94.

54. O. RUSH, *A Synodal Church: On Being a Hermeneutical Community*, in A.J. GODZIEBA – B.E. HINZE (eds.), *Beyond Dogmatism and Innocence: Hermeneutics, Critique, and Catholic Theology*, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2017, 160-175, p. 163. Here, Rush reiterates *Dei Verbum*, art. 8.

55. RUSH, *A Synodal Church* (n. 54), p. 164.

56. J.A. KOMONCHAK, *The Local Church and the Church Catholic: The Contemporary Theological Problematic*, in *The Jurist* 52 (1992) 416-447, p. 444.

claims that the diversity resulting from the differing contexts in which the church realizes its mission “is not the denial of catholicity, but its realization”⁵⁷. This Catholic model of mission, as Vittorio Peri observes, has characterized the way the early church lived out their catholicity. In his study of local churches and catholicity in the first millennium, Peri has come up with the concept of “a concrete and historical ideal of catholicity”⁵⁸. By this he means the self-awareness of a local church that, while it is bound to the task of preaching the Gospel to every creature and embrace all aspects of life, and in so doing always in a fraternal love with all other churches, it is also linked to “its particular historical situation and related it to territorial and anthropological milieu in which its evangelizing activity was carried out”⁵⁹.

A collaborative process is central to the concept of synodality that encourages unity while recognizing and building on the contextual differences. This model of unity does not lead to uniformity and centralization, but rather promotes pluriformity and decentralization. In this regard, Bradford Hinze links synodality with the concept of polycentrism, to which decentralization is a key concept. Hinze conceives Pope Francis’ synodal church as “the primary vehicle for his program of promoting a “healthy decentralization” in the church and a polycentric approach to the church’s universality – polyhedron in his own idiom”⁶⁰. These visions of a healthy decentralization and a polycentric approach suggest that the decision-making is made at the local level as much as possible⁶¹, hence the decision on a matter can vary from one context to the others. Nevertheless, this is not to say that a synodal way is just another form of relativism. Rush offers a strong argument on this matter that is worth citing at length here:

57. *Ibid.*, p. 445.

58. V. PERI, *Local Churches and Catholicity in the First Millennium of the Roman Tradition*, in *The Jurist* 52 (1992) 79-108, p. 83.

59. *Ibid.*

60. B. HINZE, *Can We Find a Way Together?*, in *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85 (2020) 215-229, p. 217. Cf. FAGGIOLI, *From Collegiality to Synodality* (n. 46), p. 2. Cf. RUSH, *Inverting the Pyramid* (n. 17), p. 324. According to Pope Francis, the polyhedron model, which he considers most fitting for pastoral and political activities, “reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness”. The polyhedron model, therefore, is opposed to the sphere model, in which “every point is equidistant from the center, and there are no differences between them”. Pope FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, art. 236.

61. This is a revival of an ecclesial custom in the early church. In his elucidation of the relationship of the local churches and universal church in the early Christianity, Gaillardetz states: “The default assumption of early Christianity was that most church issues where to be dealt with at the local level, and only when issues clearly had consequences for the broader community ... were decisions to be made by representative gatherings of religions churches (synods)”. GAILLARDETZ, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church* (n. 11), p. 86.

This is not to be cheaply dismissed as some “situation ethics” or just one more example of the “dictatorship of relativism” but rather a *deep theological affirmation*, grounded in the New Testament and the tradition of the church concerning the activity of the Holy Spirit whose enlightenment brings about understanding, interpretation, and application of the Christian Gospel in the realities of life in sinful, yet grace-filled and often selflessly loving, human lives – down in the valley, in their particular situation⁶².

In addition to the active participation of all by way of consultation, a synodal way of organizing social life allows the application of the principle of subsidiarity. Already in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis highlights such a principle. “It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory”, thus the Pope warns, and then he adds, “in this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound ‘decentralization’”⁶³. Hinze observes that another underlying principle of synodality is the use of local knowledge in solving the problems that occur in certain context⁶⁴, and therefore, the empowerment of local resources is of ultimate importance⁶⁵. In *Laudato Si’*, which has been widely considered not only as a document on human ecology and but also on the ecology of power⁶⁶, Pope Francis also emphasizes the need for empowering local resources for the sake of a more dialogical and transparent way of exercising power in society⁶⁷,

Furthermore, a polycentric approach allows the church to reach those with specific needs, namely those who have been often marginalized. According to Bradford Hinze, it is also an expression of synodal spirit that encourages Pope Francis to reach the people who are marginalized in the church⁶⁸. Faggioli likewise notes that “synodality is the foundation to Francis’ vision of the Church for the poor”⁶⁹. In other words, by virtue of its polycentric approach, a synodal church is able to address the specific needs of those whose interests have been often overlooked and in

62. RUSH, *A Synodal Church* (n. 54), p. 170.

63. Pope FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, art. 16. Cf. ID., *Amoris Laetitia*, 19 March 2016, http://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf. Here, we refer to art. 3.

64. HINZE, *Can We Find a Way Together?* (n. 60), p. 221. Cf. OSHEIM, *Stepping Toward a Synodal Church* (n. 36), p. 378.

65. FAGGIOLI, *From Collegiality to Synodality* (n. 46), p. 357.

66. FAGGIOLI, *The Liminal Papacy* (n. 46), p. 135.

67. Pope FRANCIS, *Laudato Si’*, 24 May 2015, art. 183, http://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf.

68. HINZE, *Can We Find a Way Together?* (n. 60), p. 217.

69. FAGGIOLI, *From Collegiality to Synodality* (n. 46), p. 353.

need of recognition and empowerment. In this way, synodality is not only the way of expressing solidarity, but also a means for realizing the church's contribution in search of a more just society as an integral part of its Catholic performance.

4. *Catholicity and Political Performance*

The concepts of catholicity and synodality have presented us with a complex vision of unity, leaving room for plurality and calling for equality and solidarity. As such, it could be seen as a critical instrument against any form of centralist or uniformist thought in theology, and especially ecclesiology, through an open, universalist interpretation of the Eucharist. At the same time, it has become clear that catholicity has a theological, in particular trinitarian and christological foundation, which manifests its dynamism of revelation and communication. Catholicity calls for divine-human performances – e.g., liturgy, prayer, reconciliation, theology – without which it would not be recognized as signifying the qualitative aspect within a communal plurality, or be the critical instrument it could be as a performance within other performances.

This is the reason why catholicity should form the heart of synodality, while at the same time it presents us with a different image of what synodality can be. Rather than locating a unity in the procedures of listening, dialogue, and openness, or in the outcomes of these procedures, it forms the heart of what these procedures are, as they are generated by it and are aiming at it. This way, catholicity can be viewed as the source and telos of synodality. It forms a critique of every consensus reached by synodal procedures, since these procedures, however motivated by good intentions, can be manipulated, and will also be the result of power structures. Therefore, the synodal way should not be regarded as constituting the church's catholicity, but it is the church's catholicity that constitutes its synodal structures.

Synodality, however, might be subject to the same critique as the dominant liberal paradigms such as those developed by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. These have been critically questioned by the influential political theories of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière and the Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe⁷⁰. A consensual democracy for example, as observed by Rancière, is bound to exclude true otherness, diversity, and dissent, and is therefore blind to the realities of political struggle and conflict. Rancière believes that the present plea for democracy is not

70. J. RANCIÈRE, *La mésentente: politique et philosophie*, Paris, Galilée, 1995.

open to a diversity of opinions, and it finds expression in abstract ideals, such as altruism. It offers no room, he argues, for those who are unable to participate in the dominant discourse⁷¹. Rancière mentions two crucial social developments that have led to this “end of the political”, and he claims that both have to do with a lack of difference between the visible and the invisible: both in the total rule of the opinion polls and in the total rule of the right, every possibility of dissent, and hence of political dispute, disappears. In opinion polls, there is no possibility of disagreement, which makes the *demos* appear as a unity that is completely transparent and present in itself⁷². According to Rancière, this rule of opinion is linked to the logic of modern science, for “opinion research is the science that immediately becomes an opinion”, and any opinion that defies that unity is immediately identified as populist⁷³. A similar “transparency” and also an expression of the abolition of the difference between the visible and the invisible, can be seen in the gradually growing dominance of law over politics. The law itself becomes the instrument of power, governing society with an ever-increasing optimism, thus excluding any political argument or dissent. Again, according to Rancière, the absence of alternatives is the highest commandment given with the need for consensus. In his book *La méésentente*, the clear and permanent visibility and rule of law infiltrates politics and even replaces it⁷⁴.

Mouffe also sees the central principle of modern liberal democracy in the pursuit of consensus and criticizes it for being an element that undermines real political democracy. Inspired by Carl Schmitt, Mouffe distances herself from a Habermassian political model, which determines the rational conditions of social communication. Precisely because conflict is excluded, this model enables the emergence of different forms of populism. Populism, according to Mouffe, is essentially nothing more than opposition to the communicative moral consensus and is produced by liberal democracy itself⁷⁵.

At first glance these critiques of liberal democracy seem to be equally valid for the concept of catholicity. Nevertheless, there is also an important

71. A. HETZEL, *Der Anteil der Anteilslosen: Jacques Rancières Versuch einer Neubestimmung der politischen Philosophie*, in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 52 (2004) 322-326.

72. S. WITTMANN, *Die Entzauberung der Demokratie: Eine Analyse der politiktheoretischen Ansätze von Colin Crouch und Jacques Rancière im Spiegel der Postdemokratie-Debatte*, Diss. Regensburg, 2013, p. 35.

73. J. RANCIÈRE, *La haine de la démocratie*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2005.

74. RANCIÈRE, *La méésentente* (n. 70), pp. 58ff.

75. C. MOUFFE, *On the Political*, Abingdon – New York, Routledge, 2005, pp. 11-14, 50.

similarity between this critique and the Catholic idea of unity, because in both positions it is clear that unity cannot be performed in its fullness. Rancière and Mouffe however clearly indicate that a political unity is beyond the domain of political philosophy and theory. We would like to propose however that catholicity presents us with a performative idea of unity that could be regarded as a political theology. Catholicity is a reality that may be difficult to achieve, but it is also a reality that is everywhere and nowhere and cannot be attached to a particular performance once and for all. It is a reality within the political performances and constellations that are shaped by it, and that can and should be regarded as worthwhile if one is willing to think about the conditions of the performance. Thus, it becomes clear that the criticism of catholicity as a dangerous and therefore failing unifying principle and the description of catholicity as an elusive but real and necessary experience, are two sides of the same coin, and also show two different points of view – the difference between a political-theoretical point of view and a theological point of view, which perceives a political relationship as a *locus theologicus*.

A Catholic performance expresses an elusive dynamic that precedes the opposition between world and actors, and in this respect also overcomes the dualism that underlies the dilemmas with which every theology that wishes to move in the world is confronted. In the network of political relations, a Catholic political theology is concerned with the faith that becomes manifest in the interplay between the political actors and their performances. In this respect, a Catholic political theology seems to escape the dilemma of having to ground political theology either fully in a political diversity or fully in a theological unity.

CONCLUSION

Catholicity could serve as a model to tackle the current crisis in the Roman Catholic Church. In contrast with traditionalist and liberal positions, it offers much more than the pragmatism of procedural solutions. Its contribution would be the analysis of trust as the foundation of all good governance, but also the description of the Catholic integration of the political and the theological. It would be political as it proposes to find, without putting into perspective whether this can be achieved, without subscribing to a set of procedures or to the principles of a common rationality, and without claiming that catholicity can only be achieved by acknowledging that opposite views will always remain opposites. It would

be theological, as it presents a polyhedron space in which the presence and will of the unknown God can become manifest, without denying the radical apophatic nature of understanding the infinite and without projecting or forcing a divine law onto an unreconciled situation.

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