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SYNODAL EXERCISES

JESUIT PARISHES, SYNODALITY
AND SYNOD 2021-2024



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Executive summary

This report is based on reflections from a series of studies on synodality at the level of Jesuit parishes in different parts of the world. It is a qualitative study within the framework of the social sciences with a focus on theological themes. Five cities from four different Jesuit provinces were selected: Pescara (Italy), Quilmes (Argentina), London (England), Douala (Cameroon) and Yaoundé (Cameroon). ZOOM interviews were also held with Jesuits from Spain, Slovenia, and Sicily. Online self-administrated questionnaires were also conducted with Jesuits and parishioners in the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States (JCCU).

Some of the key findings were:

- A more synodal Church will take place only if the leaders are willing to foster a profound transformation, leaving behind paternalistic types of leadership. Regarding this, a more synodal church will require some unlearning on the part of clergy (priests and Bishops), including Jesuits.
- A second dimension is also required: the formation of the laity. Lay people must be empowered with new ways of participating in leadership.
- Compared to other parishes, Jesuit parishes were, in many cases, better prepared for this synodal process due to the spirituality of community

discernment practiced in them. This was true not only for the Jesuits but also to parishioners. This synodal process was experienced as being something “natural” to many of them.

- The social frontiers have been spaces for synodal resonances and synodal listening for Jesuit parishes, e.g. charity work, assistance to the homeless. The same applies to activities that are held jointly with the community, the civil society and non-Catholic NGO, such as popular feasts or festivals.
- Many parishioners and Jesuits appreciated the fact that the spirit of unity in this synod is not a spirit of uniformity. There was a recognition that the differences make us richer and that these are not to be dissimulated or hidden.
- There are groups with a wealth of participation in parish life but with very little space for leadership. An example of this is the situation of women in Cameroon. The Synod on Synodality and its process is giving a new platform for a change in this regard.
- There is also the marginality generated by the pandemic that emerged from our field work: people who have drifted away from the parishes, who have become numb in practicing their faith.
- One of the problems that emerged touched on a fear that the community lose its enthusiasm about synodality. Many have participated but wondered if the changes being proposed would be real, profound, and lasting.
- There was evidence that on many occasions young people failed to participate in the synod process. Often this was because the church had failed to integrate them.
- Abuse scandals are a major difficulty that the Church is still facing. Even if our questionnaire did not ask specifically about this (since we wanted to see if it emerged naturally) many people spoke about this as a wound and a shame that must be dealt with.

At the same time, the study itself served as a way to reactivate synodal action and the principles animating Synod 2021-2024. After initial synodal meetings, some parish members and Jesuits tended to go back to routines

and the initial enthusiasm faded to some degree. The interviews, questionnaires and focus groups served to restart dialogues around some themes. This gave the study some participatory-action research frame.

Acknowledgment

This study was carried out in the Secretariat for the Service of Faith of the Society of Jesus, which is under the direction of Fr. James Hanvey SJ.

We would also like to thank Sister Marie Kolbe Zamora, OSF, S.T.D., at the General Secretariat of the Synod, for her suggestions and comments.



Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify ways of living and doing synodality within Jesuit parishes in order to socialize tools of community discernment proper to the Jesuits and to apply them at the parish level.

This, in turn, will promote mechanisms of community discernment in the Universal Church that are fundamental for the Synod 2021-2024 and the time that will follow it.

Hence, the fruit of this work can be of use between the first and the second session of the XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops and, most importantly, after October 2024, when the Church is called to continue to implement her synodal dimension.

Why parishes?

Sometimes there is not a profound discernment regarding the best way for the parish to be transformed. Nevertheless, the matter of parish transformation is fundamental since the parish constitutes the “fundamental unit” within each local Church. It is also important to keep in mind that Jesuit parishes exist within a diocese and therefore live the synodal pro-

cess integrally with, and not isolated from them. This implies that the Jesuits would be meeting regularly with the bishop and the whole presbyterate. In many cases each parish may have appointed one or two contact persons (either Jesuits or collaborators) to act as a filter between the parish and the diocese. Therefore, all the information produced at the parish level ends up at the central level of the diocese.

In this study, there are quotations from interviews and focus groups with Jesuits and people involved in activities and initiatives in Jesuit parishes. But there is also an analysis, an interpretation, and a reflection on the fieldwork carried out. For the interviews and focus groups, a “snowball” method was employed.

The interview guide has kept the following four relevant guidelines:

1. *Personal knowledge regarding the new synodal process recently initiated by Pope Francis*
2. *Synodality and communion*
3. *Synodality and participation*
4. *Synodality and mission*

Once all the material was gathered, the transcriptions were uploaded into the *Atlas.ti* qualitative analysis software for coding it and creating emerging categories. In this study all the participants were the “experts”, both Jesuits and the laypeople. For the interviews and focus groups, participants were met at parish churches or community houses. For the JCCU anonymous input, self-administered questionnaires were provided online. The idea here was to see if “sensitive” themes emerged in this anonymous form of input that respondents, at times, would not have dared to provide face-to-face.



By Vivian Richard SJ

Parishes

About the parishes where face to face interviews and focus groups were conducted

- **Parroquia Nuestra Señora de las Lágrimas** (Our Lady of Tears Parish) is a Roman Catholic church located in the city of Quilmes, province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. It was founded in 1957 and is the main parish of the San Francisco Solano neighbourhood. The church hosts masses, baptisms, confirmations, weddings and other religious events. It also houses a library, a choir and a community centre where a drug recovery program (Hogar de Cristo) and other activities are conducted. The Jesuits arrived at the parish in 2020. Before that it was a diocesan parish.
- **Immaculate Conception**, also known as Farm Street Church, is a Catholic parish church run by the Society of Jesus in Mayfair, Central London, England. The church was designed by Joseph John Scoles in the Gothic Revival style and was completed in 1849. Farm Street Church is a popular destination for both locals and tourists alike. The church is also home to the London Jesuit Centre, a major centre of adult Christian formation. The centre offers a wide range of courses and events on theology, spirituality, and social justice.

- **St Ignatius Church in Stamford Hill, London**, is a large, listed Roman Catholic parish church ministered by the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). It was designed by Benedict Williamson and completed in 1911. It is known for its beautiful architecture, its vibrant liturgical life, and its commitment to social justice. The church is also a major centre for the Jesuits in London. It is home to a number of Jesuit ministries, including a retreat house, a social justice centre, and a publishing house.
- **Parrocchia Cristo Re** (Christ the King Parish) is a Roman Catholic church located in Pescara, Italy. It was built in the late sixties and has been a parish since 1973. The church is run by the Jesuit Fathers. The parish of Cristo Re is an important religious and cultural centre for the Pescara community. The church hosts liturgical celebrations, baptisms, confirmations, weddings and other religious events. The parish also offers a catechesis program for children, young people and adults.
- **The Notre-Dame de l'Annonciation de Bonamoussadi** is a Roman Catholic church situated in the city of Douala, in Cameroon. It is one of the greatest churches of the country and is home to a dynamic Catholic community. The church was founded in 1986 by the Jesuits. Construction was completed in 1987 and the church was named in honour of the Annunciation of Mary. The church is modern in style with refined architecture. It is built of reinforced concrete and has a capacity of 3,000 people. It organizes catechism classes, community development programs and charity activities. It is a gathering place for the country's Catholics and a centre of community and social activities.
- **The Catholic University Centre (CCU)** at the Université de Yaoundé (CAMPUS DE NGOA-EKELLE) is a Catholic spiritual and cultural centre located in the city of Yaoundé, Cameroon. It was founded in 1962 by the Jesuits and is open to all, without distinction of origin, religion or belief. CCU offers a variety of programs and activities that aim to promote the Catholic faith, education and culture. It includes a church, a library, a conference room, a training centre and a cultural centre.



Pope Francis during the Synod, 2024 – by Vivian Richard SJ

Some Key Concepts

When in an interview in March of 2023, Fr. Guillermo Marco¹ asked Pope Francis why synodality is meaningful for him and why he is trying to establish a “style” of synodality, the Pope explained it in simple words:

- Well, this was started by St. Paul VI at the end of the Council, when he somehow said that he understood that the Church in the West had lost the dimension of synodality that the Eastern Church has. So, he created the Secretariat of the Synod for Bishops and that is when the bishops began to meet every four years. I had the opportunity to participate in a synod in 1994, which was very enriching. And Synods were like perfecting themselves (over time). (...) Obviously, the protagonist of a synod is the Holy Spirit. A synod is not a parliament. A synod is not a gathering of opinions to seek the common average and to conform all and none. A synod is a getting into play with the Holy Spirit. That is why three synod fathers speak in the Assembly and then there is the same time in silence. Then another three and a prayerful

¹ Vatican News, *El Papa: A los curas les digo que sean pastores de pueblo y no clérigos de Estado*. 13/03/2023. Available at: <https://www.vaticannews.va/es/papa/news/2023-03/papa-francisco-entrevista-padre-guillermo-marco-infobae-argentin.html> - Last access: 08/12/2023.

silence (and so on). And the Holy Spirit enters. And the experience is that it changes things and refines them.²

A spirituality of synodality can be connected to Pope Francis' theological background. For Scannone³, the theology of the People of God (*Teología del Pueblo*) is in the roots of Pope Francis' theological sense. But the concept of *Pueblo* can be difficult to translate into English and other non-romance languages. It refers to the community as a collective subject. And as José María Francisco SJ and Jayeel Cornelio⁴ observe, not only does the word *people* “promote the emergence of the laity within the church, but also the inclusion of the church in the historical course of peoples inasmuch as they were subjects of history and culture; and thanks to their enculturated faith, they were also both recipients and agents of evangelization”.

Along the same lines, Francisco and Cornelio⁵ observe that Christian identity is not a static characteristic attributed to the church as an organic unit and its individual members, but a dynamic process through which members discover and understand themselves. In fact, a person's identity is not a once-for-all identity given data, but it is built and subject to transformation throughout existence⁶. The church, in its members, shape their Christian identity by converging faith with the richness of everyday life and local cultural traditions. Thus, **Christian identity is neither pure essence nor pure construction**. Some sociologists and theologians refer to this process as **hybridization**, which goes beyond the pejorative term *syn-*

² And in the book *Let us dream. The path to a better future*, Pope Francis expresses more or less the same idea: “La palabra (sínodo) proviene del griego syn-odos, caminar juntos, y ese es su objetivo: no se trata tanto de forjar un acuerdo, sino de reconocer, valorar y reconciliar las diferencias en un plano superior, donde cada una pueda mantener lo mejor de sí misma”. Francisco, *Soñemos juntos. El camino a un futuro mejor. Conversaciones con Austen Ivereigh*. Buenos Aires. Penguin Random House, 2020. P. 84.

³ Juan Carlos Scannone SJ, *La teología del pueblo. Raíces teológicas del papa Francisco, Sal Terrae*. 3^o edición, 2017.

⁴ José María Francisco SJ and Jayeel Cornelio. *People's Christianity: Theological Sense and Sociological Significance*. Paulist Press (2022). Pp. 65.

⁵ *Ibíd*, 2022:81-82

⁶ Maalouf, A. (2006). *Les identités meurtrières*. Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle.

cretism, which implies the juxtaposition of non-integrated disparate elements⁷. Here, the sociological concept of human *agency* plays a significant role, understood as the actions and behaviours that Christians carry out in living their faith.⁸

In this same line of thought, Jesuit anthropologist Ludovic Lado, from Cameroon, argues that “to be a catholic in Africa as anywhere else means different things to different people both in terms of personal trajectories and religious expectations”⁹.

The local Churches, guided by clear pastoral and evangelizing principles, did not hesitate to absorb into the Liturgy certain purified solemn and festive cultic elements deriving from the pagan world. These were regarded as capable of moving the minds and imaginations of the people who felt drawn towards them. Such forms, now placed at the service of the mystery of worship, were seen as neither contrary to the Gospel nor to the purity of true Christian worship. Rather, there was a realization that only in the worship of Christ, true God and true Saviour, could many cultic expressions, previously attributed to false gods and false saviours, become true cultic expressions, even though these had derived from man's deepest religious sense.

For this above mentioned approach, one of the starting points in this study is the idea that human institutionalization (including that within the church) is that process by which practices and norms are established by a double dialectic between the *instituted* and the *instituting*. The *instituting* is the disposition, in a group or community, towards a relative social stability, an adequate organization or a re-negotiation of the relationships within it. Institutionalization is a dynamic reality that unfolds from

⁷ *Ibíd*, 2022:82

⁸ Also, Serena Noceti states that: “la “Iglesia” -en cuanto realidad socialmente contruidas continuamente “remodelada” por sus miembros a través de interacciones simbólicamente mediadas y comunicadas”. Noceti, Serena (2022). *Comunicación generativa. Conversación, consensus, conspiratio*. In: Luciani, R. et al. *Sinodalidad y reforma. Un desafío eclesial*. PPC

⁹ Lado, Ludovic (2020). *Catholicism as a Lived Religion in Africa*, Religion Compass 14, no. 12: 1-10.

the instituted, which is pre-existent¹⁰ and through which the society is an objective reality¹¹.

In the conceptual framework described, this study focuses on a theological dimension, which is synodality, but has a sociological scope.

¹⁰ Borrás, A. (2022). *Comunicación generativa. Conversación, consensus, conspiratio*. In: Luciani, R. et al. *Sinodalidad y reforma. Un desafío eclesial*. PPC

¹¹ Berger P., Luckmann T. (2014). *La Construction sociale de la Réalité*. Paris: Armand Colin.



PARROQUIA
NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LAS LAGRIMAS

By Bruno Pazzi

Communion, Jesuit Parishes And The Synod

In some of the interviews and focus groups it has been noticed that for Jesuits, there is a desire and an ability to listen to people, for which reason this process unfolds more easily in Jesuit parishes than in other parishes. For them, The Synod came as a confirmation of a particular parish lifestyle that was already in place. This gives the Jesuit parish an “advantage”: as if the process is almost “innate” to Jesuits.

| *Let's put it this way. If I want to exaggerate... we lived synodality already before.*

JESUIT, PESCARA¹²

¹² For each verbatim religious status, sex, location, and/or other relevant information will be described if possible. In some special cases, some of these details may be omitted for anonymity purposes. The informal expressions and words of the spoken language will not be modified. Some of the interviews were conducted in English with non-native English speakers.

I have the impression that since always, whatever that means, people here feel entitled to give their opinion, to have their voice heard.

JESUIT, SLOVENIA

For me it (the Synod 2021 2024) is confirmation of what Francis says, of what was already being lived here.

JESUIT, QUILMES

...to tie that to the Synod. I think one of the things that this church does very well is meeting people where they are.

LAY WOMAN, LONDON

So, on the one hand it seems to me that this was a job we did before, but it helped us a lot in the preliminary stage because it got us used to it. I have gotten used to listening to each other. We are used to noticing and underlining what the other says, what the other perceives, it has helped us to be a little less centred. And this then helped me to spread this methodology a little, even to those in the parish who are less intimate, less familiar with Ignatian spirituality. Because in the end this whole method is very much ours, it is very much of the Society of Jesus.

JESUIT, CATANIA, ITALY¹³

And then in our parish picnic we had a hub, we had a Synod hub where we managed to recruit for the prayer group, we got 10 people, five men, five women between 20 to 80. And we've met every month since last September, and the model is silent prayer for about 40 minutes into a different one of us will facilitate it each time we choose a scripture. And then there be a bit of feedback so it's like an Ignatian spirituality group.

LAY WOMAN, LONDON

In Douala, Cameroon, on the other hand, it was noticed that the spirituality of the Society of Jesus, with the establishment of the practice of four

¹³ ZOOM interview.

apostolic preferences¹⁴ at the parish level, represents the cornerstone of the synodal process in this parish. The faithful interviewed knew all four apostolic preferences and refer to them to explain and justify pastoral actions. These allow them to enter the synodal process without difficulty. They even give this impression with a special pride: the impression of having been ahead of the Pope in this matter.

Basically there was a conference that we organized, we summoned all the parishioners to talk about this and how it was structured and what are our expectations and what are we going to do (...) So we had to discuss this and everyone had to submit a report to the priest, before that I must say that it did not surprise us too much, we were already in this movement with Ignatian Christianity and also the four apostolic preferences that the Jesuits live: show the Way to God, walking with the poor, accompanying young people and taking care of the environment which is our common home.

LAY MAN, DOUALA

My disappointment (with the synod) is that it wasn't very deep. On the other hand, we as a Jesuit parish, we had already received the four apostolic preferences, and in it, when I make the connection, we had really lived it (synodality) at the Parish level. Because, when we talk about communicating the word, it is the first preference, and we make sure that the movements, when they share the gospel, it is with the Ignatian method which involved the participation of everyone, which brought everyone to participate.

LAY WOMAN, DOUALA

The youngsters are already very present, because in the Ignatian approach there is a vast project that we have worked on. If a young person finishes their training, we can tell them this is what you can do;

¹⁴ The Society of Jesus has four Universal Apostolic Preferences that were set for the period from 2019 to 2029 and serve as guiding principles for the Jesuits' mission and service to the world. 1) Showing the way to God: Show the way to God through the Spiritual Exercises and discernment; 2) Walking with the Excluded: Walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice; 3) Journeying with Youth: Accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future; and 4) Caring for our Common Home: Collaborate, with Gospel depth, for the protection and renewal of God's Creation.

and this is not limited to the Christians of the parish, if a young person comes to the parish we also help, and this in several areas such as fish farming, agriculture... The project has broad access...

LAY WOMAN, DOUALA

Connected to the question on the spirituality of the Society of Jesus, it has been noted in the interviews that the question of listening, the *theology of listening*¹⁵ and/or Francis' own practice of listening, deeply touched people. It is in listening to one's own interior movements and to others that Jesuits and Jesuit parishes have something special to offer to synodality, as many respondents have stated.

I think it's quite hard for some bishops and priests to genuinely... they listen, but they don't hear... There's two different words. You listen and you hear, so to hear means it gets in. Whereas to listen is just like our mechanical... But to hear it means you hear it in your heart and in your in your spirit.

JESUIT, LONDON

It has reminded me that the concerns and hopes that parishioners share are gifts to be received not problems to be solved. I'm quicker to recognize the Holy Spirit at work in parishioners and the parish as a whole.

LAY WOMAN, USA

The listen with a contemplative heart (...) Oh yeah, because that's absolutely built into our formation. From the beginning, we're already doing quite an intense spiritual education. That we are taught to pray and to listen to our feelings. Compared to reciting lots of songs ... Ignatian Prayer is much more vivid. How am I feeling right now, what is the spirit saying to me right now? As I reflect on this text or even more as I vividly picture or imagine this gospel scene.

JESUIT, LONDON

The transversal idea is that when listening without trying to solve peoples' "problems", people are closer to listening more deeply, since they are not

¹⁵ Scannone, op cit.

listening to themselves as saviours and therefore as the ones to solve everything. The Synodal Process is teaching people to listen to how the Spirit is speaking through the people of God, not simply clerics and hierarchs.

At the same time, some parishes, for instance, would regularly use specific programmes, methods, or exercises for common discernment, such as ESDAC (Spiritual Exercises for Apostolic Discernment in Common)¹⁶, among others.

*Having done a job in the parish the year before with the ESDAC method for community discernment. And we did all the work to understand if an event that was held in past years, a street demonstration, a festivity, still made sense to do it or not and therefore a large part of the Pastoral Council began to work with this method, which then it has become the synodal method (for us). That is, first **listening** to the word, then personal resonance. Then resonance upon resonance...*

JESUIT, CATANIA, ITALY

The matter of the listening emerged as one of the main categories in our questionnaires to JCCU, even if the question does not use the word “listen” or “hear”. In Sociology, when a term or a word shows up often without it having been solicited, one pays attention to it. There was a solid need to be listened to, to be heard, and, most of all, to have one's own voice valued. There is a particular form of listening which is at stake here.

*The Church hierarchy is apparently prepared to **listen** to the grass roots of the Church.*

JESUIT, USA

¹⁶ In some parishes with ESDAC members, these have proposed to the members of the parish to join a gathering to practice spiritual conversation. ESDAC members were encouraged to make themselves available in their local churches to help in this synodal process. Some were well received.

The ESDAC discernment method was also used with good results at the World Assembly of the CVX-CLC in Argentina, in 2018. For further information visit www.esdac.net

Our Synodal **listening** sessions helped to give a clear path forward for our parish - we have sponsored several programs and events based on the listening sessions.

JESUIT, USA

People appreciated the chance to share their thoughts. And they appreciated the opportunity to be **listened to**.

JESUIT, USA

Parishioners have been energized by leading and participating in **listening sessions**. They have an increased sense of their voices being valued. It has led many people to be more significantly engaged in the life of the parish.

LAY WOMAN, USA

On some level, the message that the hierarchical church has some **interest in listening** to the people.

JESUIT, USA

(There has been) **listening to the voices** of a wide spectrum of parishioners.

JESUIT, USA

There has been and involvement of parishioners in parish **listening sessions**.

JESUIT, USA

Also, many of the responses from JCCU were related to communion, in one way or another, especially in reference to the question “What has been happy and/or helpful for you during this Synod 2021 2024?”:

We engaged in wide ranging meetings involving many people. The Pastoral Council has adopted synodality as a working principle.

JESUIT, USA

Seeing so many of our parishioners engaged in the synodal process and deciding we should continue to operate as a synodal parish even after the Synod.

JESUIT, USA

*It was one element in the parish **healing** process, after the change in pastors, due to a conflict situation.*

JESUIT, USA

Parishioners who participated enjoyed the opportunity and experience.

JESUIT, USA

Strong engagement of the 300+ parishioners.

JESUIT, USA

I'm happy with our vitality in our church parish.

LAY MAN, USA

Generally, respondents value more open communication between laity and clergy in the parishes, firm input from and involvement by the laity, and, in other cases, many improvements implemented at parish level. Also, it is clear that there is more awareness of belonging to a global reality as members of the church.

Attentive to the dimension of communion, it was noticed that public activities, to which NGO and other institutions can be invited, have helped Jesuit parishes be attentive to the voices of non-Catholics, non-practitioners or practitioners of other religious beliefs. These are not social or economic margins but many times religious-affiliation ones.

When we organized this square event. Not all were Catholics, not all even believed, but for those who believed in nothing it was a moment to recollect themselves. I said it explicitly, and for the others it was a moment to get in touch with them, with themselves or with the Lord that they feel inside them that they experience. This helped us to ensure that everyone spoke from their centre, to respond a little bit to these situations that were being discussed. And then if you find it

with Buddhism, if you find it with Hinduism or with another practice... It's not a big problem. Because we all tried to share, not starting from the head but starting a little bit from the interiority. And this has also helped us to understand various problems that also exist in Buddhists rather than Muslims

JESUIT, CATANIA, ITALY

At the same time, the particularity of some Jesuit parishes is that of attracting people from different parts of the city; therefore, it is not a closed place where only parishioners meet. It is also, sometimes, in the innovative activities, in the group activities, and not in the sacraments, that some parishes live Synodality the most.

To give you a very banal example, half of the children who attend catechism here are not from this parish. And a large number, a large percentage of the children, of the young people who attend the MEG (Youth Eucharistic Movement) are not from this parish. And there is a virtuous circle. And after the proposals we give, parishioners attract people from the various social centres, above all. Even in service with the poor, perhaps they don't come but we go. So, at least in this parish there is a certain comparison with the suburbs (...) we are trying to find the poor where they are. And since this is a generous parish, it is easier, because the money is there and we can go and bring it where there isn't, so the parish attracts people because there are initiatives.

JESUIT, PESCARA

We already have what we organize here in relation to religions: the ecumenical periods. There are the Catholics, the Protestants, the Presbyterians... here in the parish. They come here or we go to their house during this period.

LAY WOMAN, CAMEROON

It could be stated that for the Jesuits an “advantage” for the synod, and for the synods in general, is the way in which they carry out common discernment.

Some words proper to Ignatian spirituality have been “diocesanized”. They are part of the church’s common patrimony and have become part of the

church's common store of knowledge. The Society of Jesus is one of those that, for example, make strenuous efforts to develop instruments of common discernment. This is what one could call the *metier* of the Jesuit. *Metier* is a French word that has no precise translation in English. *Oficio* would be the translation to Spanish. It is a job, but not any job: a job for which one needs to learn how to use specific tools. A carpenter, a jeweller, a blacksmith are examples of *metier*. These skills and the use of these tools, become part of oneself. They become dispositions, structured and structuring practices, not in the limiting senses of these terms, but in their enabling ones¹⁷.

At the same time, Jesuit parishes have done, and are doing, a considerable amount of work on the formation of conscience and/or discernment. In postmodern life, the demand for accompaniment in spiritual discernment is a crucial factor here. And this not merely in relationship to the community's demands or needs, but also the personal, singular and individual demand or need. In a context in which people are exposed to a polyphonic choir of voices, the desire for healthy discernment is still strong.

In relation to this, it has been noted that there is great demand in the parishes for spiritual exercises and accompaniment. In Jesuit accompaniment, people are trained in listening, in common discernment, and in the rules of discernment; they are helped to appreciate the relative nature of their opinion or point of view, and to open themselves to God and to the views of others. Jesuit parishes usually become a place of formation.

At the same time the synodal process is deeply affecting many Jesuits, leading them to reflect deeply and having an impact on their pastoral labour. A particular synodal activity, such as a workshop, can suggest new ways of developing one's own pastoral life.

The Jesuit parish many times has a formative role. And for this reason, many also ask the Jesuit parish for a hand for the methodologies, above all. Jesuit parishes have helped other parishes to develop this dynamic, even involuntarily, even without ever knowing the Jesuit

¹⁷ Bourdieu, Pierre; Jean-Claude Chamboredon & Jean-Claude Passeron (1968). *Le métier de sociologue*. France: EHESS.

who was the parish priest. In lectio divina or prayer groups, for instance, there is usually not just one sharing turn, but two. Doing a sharing round seems like a key element. Everyone is invited to say something, and to listen. Talking is usually not mandatory. But when instead of a round the word is left free, there is a risk that only the leaders of the group, or those who have more facility with words, speak. Not only what I say, but what you say is important. I go home with the preciousness of what you have understood of that biblical text.

JESUIT, CATANIA, ITALY

My impression is that the Pope wants to put into circulation a different way of proceeding. An ever-increasing lay responsibility and I believe that this stuff is the future, and perhaps even the origin of the Church, but achieving it is not exactly easy. In my small way I deal with kids, young people and I work, even with catechists I try to listen to them, give them the word.

JESUIT, PESCARA

Here, synodality is seen as the future but also as the origin of the Church. Synodality could be the push to change the type of reasoning and feeling, the way of approaching faith in a de-Christianized world, in a secularized world, in a world that is no longer automatically in an area of faith.

Although they're all different parishes, different social groups, different socio-economic levels. Some are very, very wealthy. Some are very, very poor. Drawn together and united as one because we're Jesuit parishes.

JESUIT, LONDON

You know, it's not a, you know, enlarging the tent is kind of the analogy that the parish has used, and you know I am hopeful of that.

LAY WOMAN, LONDON

When I went to the Jesuit parishes conference where a lot of the synodal process was disseminated to people who, you know, who were

either going to lead it or be very involved in their own churches. It was brilliant. People were brilliant. I'm not saying there weren't really any traditional Catholics there, but I'm not a person who doesn't want to speak to traditional Catholics either. I think inclusion needs everybody. That's actually everybody, you know, not just people who think the same as me. So, I won't cancel anyone if they don't cancel me, you know.

LAY WOMAN, LGBTQ+ GROUP, LONDON

Many parishioners and Jesuits valued the fact that the spirit of unity in this synod is not that of uniformity. It is the differences that make the community stronger, and these are not to be dissimulated or hidden. In this same line, in Douala, the parish showed a strong sense of being a “family”, as a parish, and in this image, they sense their spirit of synodality.

Communion in the sense that we accept that we are a “parish family” (paroisse famille). Because when someone stands up and say “parish” ... people respond, “parish family” (paroisse famille). So, people accept that we are family.

LAY WOMAN, DOUALA

We call our parish: “parish family” (paroisse famille). When there is a celebration in the parish the father invites the “nobodies”, who also have a place at the table... for the father when there is a celebration in the parish the doors are open to them.

LAY WOMAN, DOUALA

When someone says Notre Dame parish we answer, “parish family” (paroisse famille) and already all of us know what the definition of a family is. So, we are close; we try to be close.

LAY WOMAN, DOUALA

I want to go to another aspect. I am a married man; I am a father of a family. In families, there is this authoritarianism which can “kill” a family, and so this synodal process, I would say we also win as head of the family. A family is based on what? Married life is based on what? Marriage is based on love, forgiveness and mercy, and a num-



Participation

One of the emerging themes in our interviews is very clear: the question of leading and leadership, beginning with the clergy.

Jesuit Parishes And Leadership

One of the facts that this study has revealed is that a more synodal Church will come about only if leaders are willing to foster broad transformation. To date, everything still depends essentially on leaders. For example, everything depends on the bishop to involve the entire dioceses in an authentic synodal movement. There must be an impulse from the bishop and the leaders so that this can be carried out and so that the Synod is not something on the diocese's "to-do" list that "happens" but rather is a permanent situation revealing a new status and a new (but also originary and primary) way of being church.

Understanding leadership in its most profound meaning is fundamental in this matter. In this case, spiritual, ecclesial, and pastoral leadership is being analyzed. Thereupon another problem emerges: the formation of priests and the formation of future bishops or present bishops. If the church maintains clericalist or paternalistic styles of leadership, this will

impede a more profound synodal movement. A more synodal church would certainly implicate profound *unlearning* on the part of many priests (including Jesuits). This might be an opportunity to resist the temptation to “chase the expert”, typical of the modern culture¹⁸.

But a more synodal church would imply a profound change which has two main dimensions: the formation of the clergy, as mentioned above, and the formation of the laity. A layperson can take on at a deeper level what the baptized layperson is in the Church, with their common priesthood and participation in the Church. Throughout this study it has been evident that there are still many cases in which excessive dependence on clerical leadership is displayed. In addition, even lay people manifest leadership mentalities that are still clericalist, directivist, or paternalist. It is essential to think about how and for what purpose priests of the future are being formed.

It has been stated that “formation for a synodal Church requires to be undertaken in a synodal way: the whole People of God are formed together as they walk together. There is a need to overcome the delegation mentality found in so many areas of pastoral ministry. Formation in a synodal key aims to enable the People of God to live out their baptismal vocation fully, in the family, in the workplace, in the ecclesial, social and intellectual spheres, and to enable each person to participate actively in the Church's mission according to his or her own charisms and vocation”¹⁹. But, at the same time, “unfortunately, clericalism is an attitude that can manifest itself not only in ministers but also in lay people”²⁰.

Some of the reflections of the interviewees bore out the idea that it takes great courage from lay people to engage, but also the ability of the Jesuits

¹⁸ Surowiecki, James (2005). *The Wisdom of Crowds*. Anchor Books: New York.

¹⁹ Secretary for the Synod of Bishops. *Summary Report of the First Session of the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 4-29, 2023)*. BULLETIN NO. 0751 - 10/28/2023. Sala Stampa della Santa Sede.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

to “step aside” when leadership requires it. Lay people can serve, for instance, “in safeguarding and administration”²¹. This synod is allowing some people in the parishes to reflect on that.

How are we leading and what does it mean to be a leader? Because we are not formed to be leaders. And then on the other hand, how to form lay leaders? (...) For example, in Parish council meetings. If I am the one who is doing all the agenda, if I am the one who is leading the meeting, if I am the one who is supposed to take notes... then I am not participating anymore. And I could not; I did not know how to address all this. One day, one of the members of the Parish Council approached me and said: “listen... I can see you are struggling. But in my work, at my job, I do this regularly. I can do it for you: we can prepare the agenda, and I will take care that somebody is taking notes so you can just be here and perhaps participating more in content, not so much in the forms”. And I was like ‘wow! ’

JESUIT, SLOVENIA

I am also a catechist, I realized that for the faithful it is the priest who must do everything. Even a teaching, a simple teaching, a lay person cannot do, we do not listen to him, and that is a problem because there are not enough priests; and the priest, even when he is there, he doesn't have time to be everywhere.

LAY WOMAN, DOUALA

When I heard about this synod, I understood that we were making efforts to involve all Christians in the new formation of lay people. Not only the new formation of the laity but so that they can also participate in the formation of the church. Because when we always hear otherwise, we don't know what it's about... so it also allows us to give our point of view for the growth of the church. So, we lay people are a little happy to also be co-opted as members on a participatory basis .

LAY MAN, DOUALA

I think it's the animal side of the human being, wanting to dominate, wanting to possess, I think it's that side. Wanting to show that it's me

²¹ Ibid.

who's here, what I'm saying here, it's what we have to do that. The animal side of the human being. Perhaps by listening, we are very good at giving advice to people but implementing it ourselves is also very difficult. This is the side that each of us, all of us, must try...

LAY WOMAN, DOUALA

Leadership towards synodality can be a determining factor in initiating long change processes. A church leader who opens his community to a more participatory vision can have a lasting impact on people's social representations. One example is Bishop Jorge Novak SVD (1928-2001) in Quilmes, Argentina²² mentioned by several interviewees as a predecessor of this process of synodal openness, and as fighter for ecumenism. Bishop Novak began with a synod in the diocese 35 years ago.

We were motivated by NOVAK's bottom-up approach

PARISHIONER, QUILMES

He put on his boots to get into the mud. There was also a time when we as catechists put on our boots and went to catechise children who could not come to the neighbourhood. Novak is such an example

PARISHIONER, QUILMES

It does not sound new to us (Synod 2021 2024). It is all confirmation of the review that has been going on because of NOVAK.

PARISHIONER, QUILMES

He started the diocese with a synodal path, of consultation with the people. Francis (Bergoglio) knew him when he was a bishop. And the Spirit continues to be in tune.

PARISHIONER, QUILMES

In other cases, such leadership may not come from a specific person but from a particular way of taking action within a community. Parishes that have been run by Jesuits for a few decades have, in many cases, created

²² Ordained to the priesthood in 1954 in Bahía Blanca.

communities that feel empowered. Parishioners participate and feel engaged with the Parish and understand that they must participate in decision-making and in communal discernment.

The parish was founded in 1961, and since the beginning, it is run by Jesuits. I'm the 8th parish priest. My experience, since the beginning, is that the way this pattern works, it cannot be dissociated from the Ignatian spirituality and the Jesuit approach (...) I have the impression that since always, whatever that means, the people feel entitled to give their opinion, to have their voice heard. Some new things are starting to appear in the parish and in the life of the parishes since last year. But on the other hand, we cannot really say it is a revolution. It is more like an evolution. We are, just perhaps, taking a new step, but always in the same direction.

I can make a parallel with what I was taught at the Faculty of Forestry when I was studying for forestry there was this old professor who was always reminding us that the life cycle of a forest is much longer than the working years of a forestry engineer. And he was always reminding us that when you will cut down trees, you will be making profit, and this is not thanks to you. It is thanks to all the other engineers who cared for the forest before you. And in the same way what you are doing now with the young forest, you will not take credit for that. If you are working well in 50 or 70 years it will be somebody else.

JESUIT, SLOVENIA

This same Jesuit said that this Synodal process has changed his perspective on his vocation. He stated that usually the mental image of the work of a priest, including Jesuits, is that they are on the frontline of Christianity and that they will be engaged in “battles”. But now he views thing in a new way:

I am not in the frontline, you (the laity) are on the frontline, and so my focus must be different. Not on how am I going to fight? My focus should be how am I going to provide more for you. And how am I going to take care of your wounds better, taking care of the wounded, taking care of food and water, the provisions.

JESUIT, SLOVENIA

| *There are those who act like priests but who are not Priests.*

LAY WOMAN, DOUALA

This last quote brings another risk into debate: the clericalization of the laity. However, more and more Jesuits are realising that they are not on the front-line. Rather, lay people are on the front-line and the priest is the backup. As Pope Francis once said, the parish needs to be the field hospital.

Margins In The Parish

This synod seems more about a new way of living, especially in the parish rather than structures. But it is also about structures²³. Regarding what could be called "margins inside the parish", one phenomena that has been detected in that Jesuit parishes is that in some cases they found ways to listen to those who, before this process, were not actively participating or heard in the parish.

| *So, for me the first phase of preparation was interesting, first because of this method, secondly because we also listened to people who, on average, did not speak. Or that it was present, but silent. Those who joined the activities that were already there never expressing a desire or attention to a topic. And for me, that was important.*

JESUIT, CATANIA, ITALY

The process also helped the parish identify which profiles experienced difficulties participating, whether for lack of time or because they were too tired, busy, or concerned with other obligations. Those on the margins are not always the old, the young, or the poor. They can be the middle-class parents with children and busy jobs. It has been noted that synodality "is

²³ As Mons. Luis Marín de San Martín, OSA, stated, "también se trata de revisar las estructuras en las que se concentra la sinodalidad, por ejemplo, las Conferencias Episcopales, los Sínodos diocesanos o nacionales; pero también los Consejos postorales y económicos de las parroquias, los Capítulos de los religiosos. ¿Tienen vida o languidecen? ¿Cómo pueden dinamizarse para cumplir con los objetivos para los que fueron creados? Y un paso más: ¿qué estructuras están ya obsoletas? ¿Podemos crear nuevas estructuras sinodales, nuevos instrumentos de sinodalidad?". Luciani et al (2022). *Sinodalidad y reforma*. PPC.

a term unfamiliar to many members of the People of God, causing some people confusion and concern”²⁴.

Regarding participation and margins inside the parishes, in Cameroon, for instance, women's interventions have one thing in common: They are ready to assume any role in the parish office, but they believe that this totally depends on the priests and the men.

And the preparation for the Synod has helped us to continue, indeed to intensify a journey with families with children, that is, we realized that this is an environment that was left a little on the side-lines, it was families with children, especially small children, because they never had time to stop and reflect, stop and pray. Even mass becomes a problem for them. Because the baby maybe starts crying and is impatient. Instead, we listen mainly to these young families with young children, one year old, two years old, three years old, five years old, eight years old, and this was work that we stepped up to because we realized that basically nobody was doing it. And we have intensified it in two structures, one in our parish and in two other structures, which are a nursery school which is linked to us through the nuns who work there and another institute of nuns which takes care, above all, of welcoming children. And so, we came into contact with their parents, children from a fairly peripheral neighbourhood, even infamous one. And so, this was one of the most beautiful moments in the preparation of the synod. In preparation for the synod, we designed a method for contact with those we had no contact with.

JESUIT, CATANIA, ITALY

We must also recognize that sometimes women also stay behind. They are the most supportive, but we also have ladies who move forward, who exercise responsibilities.

LAY WOMAN, DOUALA

Look, for example, when there is a birthday or an anniversary for priests, parishioners will come with many gifts. But we, nothing. We

²⁴ Secretary for the Synod of Bishops. *Summary Report of the First Session of the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 4-29, 2023)*. BULLETIN NO. 0751-10/28/2023. Sala Stampa della Santa Sede.

are the forgotten ones. Yet they see us working hard day and night for the parish (...) Then finally you understand that priests are the only people who can make this change. Even Women, The CWA – Catholic Women Association – do not have the sensibility of putting religious sisters on a table of meeting for important issues, yet they need them for cooking and other operational things. The power of women in the Church depends on the awareness of priests.

NUN, DOUALA

It is clear that women are everywhere in the parish but do not occupy key positions. Their various functions are limited to situations where it is mainly requested to provide hand labour and material goods. They are absent at the level of decision-making bodies.

Meanwhile, at the Jesuit parish in Douala also in Cameroon, the new synodal process is not known to all as an ecclesial reality of these times. Some heard about it for the first time when answering the questions in the interview.

I admit that I have often heard of synod, but I did not understand, I did not really know what it was about. But there, I understood that it is a moment when the Christian, the faithful, in short, we try to express ourselves, to compensate each other.

I think that yes and at the same time I smile because we already have lay people the Jesuits for example they are training us also they have people that they have trained for some time in my community for example and we have one of our members who was invited by monks to lead a retreat and who is proud of it and expresses this as an honour. We must accelerate the process since it already exists but by encouraging it, we realize that there are fewer and fewer priests who are involved so we must begin to encourage the laity.

LAY WOMAN, DOUALA

Many Christians are ignorant of the synod.

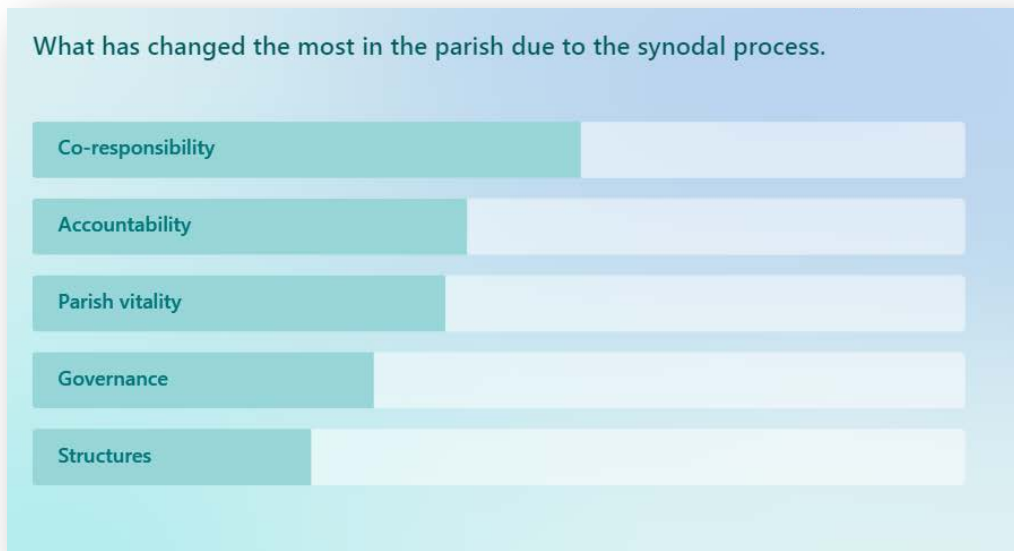
LAY MAN, DOUALA

In these cases, especially in Cameroon, when participants did not fully understand synodality, what a synodal Church consists of in daily practice

was explained to them. The new synodal process is well known by those who have high responsibility in the parish and a specific missionary zeal. These persons try to participate to the maximum in events organized by the parish. For them, their Christian and ecclesial culture is at stake.

As evident in the following graph, for JCCU, many of the changes that have taken place in the parish thanks to the synodal process touch on participation.

Graph 1: Answers the question “What has changed the most in the (your) parish due to the synodal process?” (Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States)



Source: Our own elaboration using Microsoft 365 Forms

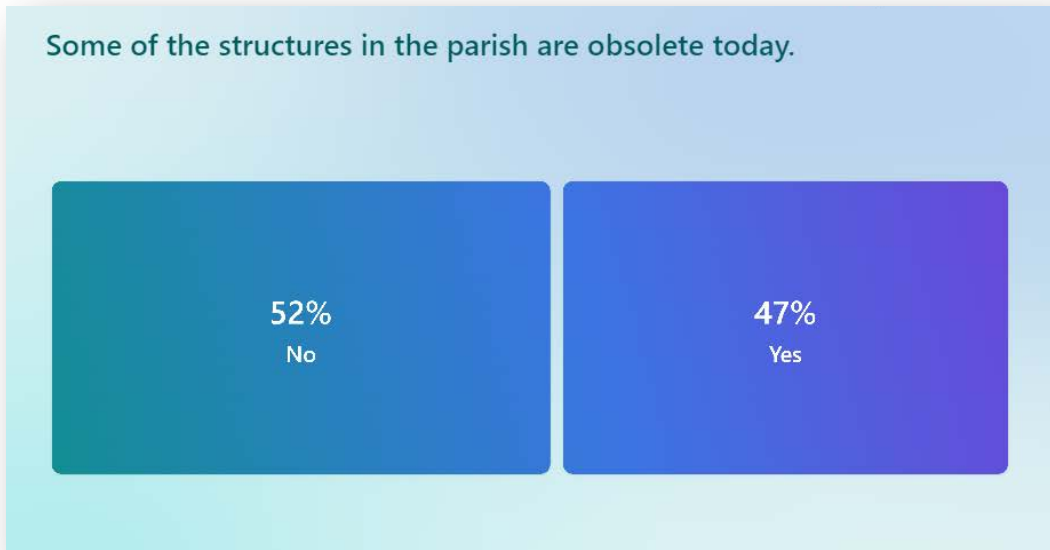
As can be seen here, many people selected “co-responsibility” and “parish vitality” as their first choice. It is also significant to note that parish “structures” have not changed much. As one of the respondents from JCCU put it:

It's more a question of tone than structures. We are already highly consultative, and the green light from Rome has strengthened our commitment to dialogue.

JESUIT, USA

At the same time, 47% of the responders said “yes” when specifically asked if some of the parish structures are obsolete today, as seen in Graph 2.

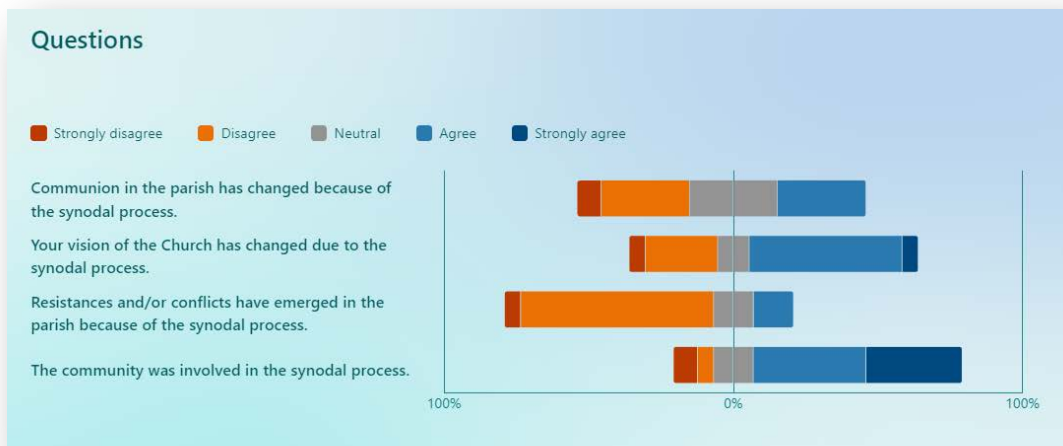
Graph 2: Answers the question “Are some of the structures in the (your) parish obsolete today?” (Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States)



Source: Our own elaboration using Microsoft 365 Forms

Connected to this, it was also asked if some dimensions in the parish have changed because of the synodal process, as shown in Graph 3.

Graph 3: Answers the questions about communion (Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States)



Source: Our own elaboration using Microsoft 365 Forms

The vision of the Church has changed for the respondents from JCCU: 52.8% responded “agree” and 5.6% “strongly agree”. For them, the synod was not for them just another “to do” activity, but a conversion process.

It is evident that in Jesuit parishes in Canada and the USA, the parish community was involved in the synodal process, as Graph 3 shows: 33.3% responded “strongly agree” and 38.9% “agree”, which combined represent 72.2% of respondents.

There is also the marginality generated by the pandemic that emerged from the field work: people who have drifted away from the parishes and who are numb in the practice of their faith. This has happened almost everywhere. It is difficult to think of another similar global process in the church with similar problematic edges. The solutions that were found were missional, but within the neighbourhoods themselves, within the parishes and communities. They had the goal of bringing people back into the warmth of the community²⁵.

For the Argentinians, for example, it was a matter of bringing one's own “body” to charity. Working “body to body” (*cuero a cuerpo*), as Cardinal Bergoglio used to say to them. Hence, not to look for massive answers or mass media, but to work with the person.

²⁵ Also, regarding margins inside the parishes, in England, as in other English-speaking countries, there is a Paulist program called LANDINGS which welcomes returning Catholics. It is a reconciliation process that helps faith communities receive inactive Catholics who want to take another look at the Church. Landings trains compassionate laypeople to reach out to those who have been away from the Church for any reason and offers a safe place to tell one's story, discern a place in the Church, and find a spiritual way home. Some parishioners at the Jesuit parishes in England participate or participated in LANDINGS, and they stated that this synod gave them an excellent opportunity to re-engage with their faith. They even used the preparatory document and *Vademecum* for their meetings. They also conduct a helpline service called “catholic listeners” for those who want to return to the faith and need a safe space to be heard and to reach those who have become isolated after the pandemic and have not made their way back to the church.

I remember a phrase that Pope Francis said at a world youth meeting in Brazil. He said, "make a mess" (hagan lío). I think that in this parish they make a mess. Because, here, the most important one is the one that needs the most. And some people don't like that.

PARISHIONER, QUILMES²⁶

Although none of the respondents promoted exclusion of any kind, some were concerned that the parishes or dioceses may move towards what could be called affirmative action, or *positive discrimination*, which has a negative connotation.

... I'm like so fed up with hearing that word ("LGBTQ+"). Oh my God, the first sentence under someone's mouth. I don't want to know where your sex life is. You know. I'm heterosexual, but I don't go around telling people. Don't tell me what you do for sex. I don't want to know.

LAY WOMAN, LONDON

While these ways of expressing oneself were not very common in any of the parishes, there is a perspective that must be taken into account, even if it might sound politically incorrect. As the VADEMECUM²⁷ asks, "what are some limitations in our ability to listen, especially to those who have different views than our own?". And also "all are invited to speak with courage and parrhesia, that is, in freedom, truth, and charity".

Margins Outside The Parish

All the parishes involved in this study found it difficult to reach those who were not from the parish. Up to a certain point, this could be achieved through the laity, as some respondents have stated. Another creative method for community discernment, in the context of preparing for the

²⁶ MEETING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE FROM ARGENTINA. ADDRESS OF HOLY FATHER FRANCIS. Thursday, 25 July 2013. Available at:

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130725_gmg-argentini-rio.html

²⁷ Synod of bishops (2023). *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*. Available: <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html>

synod, can be a public festival, like the one organized by the Jesuit parish in Catania, Italy.

We asked (the laity): talk about it (the Synod) at work, talk about it in the GYM, talk about it with your classmates, with the parents of your classmates on this issue.

And then with the associations, above all in the third sector and this helped us, precisely a festival (festa) we had in the square, where we talked about taking care: how we took care, in Catania, and within the region, above all in the province, as associations and we said it to each other in the square so that people would know.

JESUIT, CATANIA, ITALY

It is also through charity initiatives, so meaningful in many Jesuit parishes, that listening to the peripheries comes to life. That is significant. The field of proclaiming the Word, is naturally directed to the listening of all Christians, but charity is universal and transversal, just as service is transversal.

At the same time, some parishioners have stated in the interviews that many parishes live synodal reality through Ecclesial Assemblies, especially in Latina America. Therefore, these dimensions are combined even if they have different names. There are parish assemblies and diocesan assemblies, which are usually massive. A convocation is usually a more effective way to incorporate parishioners, the popular sectors, and the peripheries. The idea of synod sounds more formal, more academic, as something for the well-educated members of the parish.

In parishes that are actively committed to charity and to the peripheries, charity is synodality. It was striking that when asked about the synodal process many people, who were members of parishes, responded directly by talking about charitable actions, without feeling that they were changing the subject. For many, charity is not seen as a space where there are two categories or classes of people (those who give and those who receive) but fundamentally as an experience of union, participation, and encounter.

The good thing in this journey, in this church on the way out, let's say, is that they brought this project of the Home of Christ (Hogar de

Cristo): that is the synodality as I see it, let's say, more in the practice of the Home of Christ. We started a year ago, a year and a half ago. We have soup kitchens in the communities where food is prepared for the people, for the neighbours. And then the Hogar de Cristo, where people who are in a situation of drug abuse are received.

PARISHIONER, QUILMES

There have been conversions of people who came from other religious beliefs here. When we receive the sick, we do not distinguish between Catholics and non-Catholics.

LAY WOMAN, DOUALA

Here we have soup kitchens that have been working. We also have school support. It is not only sacramental or catechesis, but there is a great experience of union and participation. Above all, in social work, because we are surrounded by slums. And there is a lot of need. In social work, it is imperative. Even more so in the pandemic.

PARISHIONER, QUILMES

At the parish level, synodality is much more about changing the sense of our relations, than about changing structures, canon law, or institutionalized ways of proceeding. At the same time, some Jesuit parishes perceive changes because of the actual synodal process, as it has been noticed in some of the interviews and focus groups.

Now, when they find themselves having to prepare something in the parish, instead of getting to work as an office manager would do, they'd first take a moment, a few minutes, to listen to the question they asked themselves. Everyone stops for a moment and feels like this somehow touches their heart. Then, from there, once we stopped for a while, we start talking from there. But doing that little exercise, serenely, people realize that to organize something in the parish one must first stop for a moment and go a little to the centre of the heart. Another transformation that has taken place is that people gathered. But not for what they do, nor for what they think, but for what they feel. And so, this has allowed people who perhaps had different apostolates, for instances, those who worked in CARITAS and the ones who instead did the Biblical lectio, found themselves close. So, they

stopped looking at each other as people who, since they have different sensitivities, can't get along. Before this, ones took care of the poor and others, for instance, the Word of God, as if they were two different things. And instead, when they shared feelings, they found each other close because they understood that they both felt the same about the topics in dialogue, although each worked it differently. But the awareness that the feeling was similar was a great preciousness to many. And from there, projects were born that saw greater participation and greater unity. There is greater cohesion because they feel closer each other, hearing about each other, and feeling with the Lord. Then they will do different things, everyone has their own passions. But they said what they feel, and previously they had never gotten to tell each other what they felt.

JESUIT, CATANIA, ITALY

Along the same line of thought, some Jesuits mention that the openness towards the outside of the parish came naturally to the parishes, since this is at the core of the spirit of the Synod 2021 2024.

Word cloud of a focus group in Argentina



Own elaboration using Google DOCS

(Some words are cut into syllables)



Mission

Mission activities are considered to be a significant part of synodality for most respondents. With the mission within the parishes, within the territories of the parishes, the parishes go and meet many people who are far away or have entered other religions.

At the same time, many of the Jesuits and parishioners who were interviewed mentioned that changes occasioned by the synod are not automatic and will not be noticeable soon.

In November, when the (Jesuit) novices went on a mission experience, the whole parish went on mission. In April, the students came and a large group from the parish went on mission. So, there is a lot of participatory activity.

PARISHIONER, QUILMES

When the people that we visited saw the image of Our Lady, they were disarmed and said, "I have distanced myself from my mother". There was a lot of conversion. And there was no fight. With the pandemic there were many people who did not go out, especially the elderly, who were not visited by their families. So, there they received anyone, but the image of the Virgin opens the door .

PARISHIONER, QUILMES

We do see people bringing non-Christian into our church just to come and see. And to talk to them and see what happens, and occasionally, they make a commitment to come more regularly. At Easter Sunday, three people asked me, after church, how do I get baptized? How can I get baptized? Evangelization and exploration. So, we don't restrict ourselves only to Catholics. We let anybody who wants to come in. We don't go out. We don't stand on the street corner. Up at the supermarket with a megaphone. Other people do that, that kind of on street evangelization. Our style here is to open the church for Sunday and let the people come in and see. You know, to experience a beautiful church full of about 500 people all singing. And worshipping God, I mean, that has an effect on people.

JESUIT, LONDON

It's a little premature. Because here, by mentality, all the people who hang out with us are more open to these topics; and outside we know very well that there are certain priests, certain parishes who are just doing it formally, not in a very serious way. Here, however, we also received applause from the bishop because it was one of the very few parishes that does, that has also done work with the outside world, that is, some of our people, the people who frequent us, have met people who are atheists, agnostics, or far from the church, and they spoke precisely about topics that the synod is dealing with.

JESUIT, PESCARA

Also, mission is a sphere where the issue of peripheries in the Church emerges again, as it can be appreciated, for instance, in Cameroon, where a civil war²⁸ had an impact on the parish's life and mission:

²⁸ The Noso War, also known as the Anglophone Crisis, is an ongoing armed conflict in the North and Southwest Regions of Cameroon. The armed conflict began in 2017 just after the government failed to take into consideration the strike of revendications of lawyers and teachers from these two regions (2016). The violent repression of these strike movements by the government radicalized the Anglophone minorities (20% of the Cameroon population) transforming the strike revendications into secession revendications. Finally, on October 1st, 2017, the separatists declared independence of the two regions, which they called Ambazonia. The conflict has caused a humanitarian crisis, with thousands of people killed and hundreds of thousands displaced. On one hand, the government is accused of human rights abuses, including

As far as mission is concerned, one of our tasks is to take care of those Anglophone young girls you have heard about. As internally displaced people they arrived here with many problems. Many of them were traumatized, some dropped out from schools, and many became street girls. The role we are having is the psychosocial support livelihood we should bring to these girls. Forming and training them to help them beginning a new life. The objectives here is to reconcile them with their families and bring them in their homes. The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and the Caritas even help with heavy school fees.

NUN, DOUALA

I am on two fronts because I am at the association of Catholic women. There has already been daring access to the search for common well-being. There was a strengthening of this solidarity, Caritas was even more strengthened. The children from NOSO (war) that we took and to whom we gave a living environment, particularly the girls in the house Saint Martha. The priest wanted the living communities to go in search of the lost sheep.

LAY WOMAN, DOUALA

The first thing the parish did. At the beginning, when the crisis really started, we accepted them here, they even slept here in the rooms, you see the rooms which are there behind us. They were sleeping and now the priest had asked that if someone has a mattress at home or a sheet, if someone even has space at home... that's what we had first done. Before the program we sit down... the council sits down and the clergy, to make the decision to now open the house of Saint Martha.

LAY WOMAN, DOUALA

extrajudicial killings, torture, and arbitrary arrests, on the other hand, the separatists are also accused of terrorism, massacre, kidnappings, child killings, and women raping. The conflict has no easy solution. Though the intensity of the conflict is now very low, the separatists who are more concentrated in the Northwest region and not in the Southwest, are unlikely to give up their demands for independence, and the government is unlikely to give up control of the two regions. The conflict is likely to continue for some time to come.

First of all, during the parish councils, the advice sessions were exclusively oriented towards this problem, so that the parishioners were made aware of the questioning of what can be done to come to the aid of the English-speaking population who are suffering from this war. So, there was first this awareness raising at the parish level with activities mobilized by Caritas so that we could organize the sessions to give food (...) to these people who in fact moved from the South-West region to our space. So, first there was that, then now, there was the strong action which was initiated by the priest and supported by the Christians: it was the creation of a pastoral centre, Saint Martha House. Why this centre? Because we noticed that there were girls coming from the southwest who were in fact on the street and got engaged in prostitution to try to make a living. So, we said to ourselves in our city we cannot afford to live through this without reacting; so, we decided to rent a space for our “daughters” there (...) And then we received strong support from JRS. JRS is a Jesuit mission which takes care of these fragile people.

LAY MAN, DOUALA

The synodal process has become a means for experimentation in many parishes, for creativity and for lay involvement.

Graph 4: Word cloud for the question “Has synodality become a way of mission for the parish? How?” (Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States)



Source: Our own elaboration using Microsoft 365 Forms

Even if Synodality is not supposed to be a solution to the crisis of vocations in the Church, this theme did emerge in a number of interviews and focus groups. There is also a trace of doubt in some lay people who have asked themselves: Is this tendency towards synodality a sort of “patch” given that there are fewer priests and consecrated vocations in the church? Does a desire for synodality appear at a time when the Church finds it most difficult to offer its "religious services"?

So far, the territorial type of Church has been structured around dioceses, parishes and so on. But, at least in the West, but the parishes are emptying out. Only with difficulty can one envision a Church in the future that will consist of parishes as it is the case today. People have enormous mobility, and this mobility is growing progressively. Hence, the territorial type of church is at stake.

A Synodal church, differing also from a “consumerist” type of church, would basically be a community that includes families in the formation of its priests. As some Jesuits have stated, some dioceses are beginning to teach the catechism in a new way: they call on families who feel that they must take responsibility and they entrust their own to these families to teach the catechism at home. This is a spiritual approach that is, first and foremost, widespread. Therefore, this is a new way of empowering the faithful people of God to carry out their responsibility for teaching the catechism until they begin forming their own priests, and their own pastors²⁹.

There is a need to enter more into this mentality: by virtue of baptism, we are all heralds of the Gospel, witnesses of the Gospel. But this mentality is still far away. Lay people see themselves as users of a church that is there, giving the sacraments...

JESUIT, PESCARA

I think the problem is that of the Church rather than the mission (...) with the decrease that there is, at least in the West, of the baptized and of believers, it will also be necessary to think of a different formation, both of priests but also of the laity. The church of the future, I do not know what it will be like, but I certainly think it will be very

²⁹ Secretary for the Synod of Bishops, op cit.

different from what it is now. Even the formation of the seminaries must change. It is not possible that it goes on as if everything were as it was many years ago, in short, or in our formation

JESUIT, PESCARA

In this same way, regarding the catechism, in some Italian dioceses the parish priest calls the families who intend to ask for their children to be prepared for the sacraments. He speaks to them and entrusts the responsibility for catechesis to them. There is no longer a parish catechist. , Some Jesuits have observed that this poses a challenge today since some parents who had a Christian formation and experience have not managed to pass it on to their children.



Difficulties Or Criticisms

The difficulties, challenges, and critiques of the Synod encountered during this study have different, even diverging, roots. Some people noted that the high participation, involvement, and the community enthusiasm is one of the most valuable things in this process. Paradoxically, others stated that they are most struck by the lack of participation and of cooperation.

The only survey conducted in this study, due to its anonymous nature, helped bring even stronger critiques to light, which is why most quotations in these sections are from the JCCU, the only conference in which this technique has been applied.

| *We didn't participate much in the Synod.*

JESUIT, USA

| *We had only a few town hall style meetings with little interest especially with middle or younger people.*

JESUIT, USA

Some people who are from groups that have historically been marginalized do not want to participate because they do not believe they will be listened to.

USA, LAY WOMAN

Only a smaller number of the parish participated; it was difficult to motivate people to participate and especially to do it in an active way.

JESUIT, CANADA

After a while, the faithful see it as a waste. The problems won't be resolved by listening.

JESUIT, USA

This last quote puts another issue on the table: the synod must have a precise closure since people easily tire of ongoing expectation. Another point that many respondents mentioned is the supposed expectation that this synod lead to a new way of life and establish a new way of being church and a new path after October 2024. But as a process it must end at some point, especially for dioceses and parishes. Others appreciated the communities' engagement despite the lack of involvement by other structures of the church, as can be seen in the following quotes.

There was seeming apathy of many other parishes.

JESUIT, USA

We were very much in line with the forward thrust of the Synod already, contrary to the bishop and many parishes in this diocese.

JESUIT, USA

There was lack of enthusiastic support of the chief Shepherd of our Archdiocese

JESUIT, USA

There was lack of interest on the part of local archdiocese.

JESUIT, USA

In many cases, the Jesuits have spontaneously led initiatives of synodality in dioceses without much support from the diocese.

Since I knew a renowned theologian that specializes in Synodality I thought it would be a fantastic opportunity to bring her to the diocese and have a session where she could animate and promote the synod. So, we Jesuits had to organize it. We did it very well because it spread tremendously throughout the diocese. And then we managed to fill the auditorium here, which has about 480 seats. It was fully filled. A call that we had to make from the Society of Jesus, through the Ignatian Groups. But the archbishopric, the synodal team, the synodal referents did not involve. They were on the side-lines. That is, something that they would have had to do, like something for the diocese to really promote this. Well, they did not. We had to do it ourselves (...) and it had a diocesan repercussion.

JESUIT, SPAIN

The limitation with listening sessions is that same small percentage of Catholics are heard or repeated with their same disappointments. These voices are not generalizable. Thus, we are working with skewed findings.

JESUIT, USA

This last quote introduces another question: What happens with the voices of those that were not part of the synod? Why did they not participate? What do they believe and think, and how could their inputs have been of value? Is consensus reached in the same way without them? “*De omnium ore predeamus, quia in omnem fidelem Spiritus Dei spirat*”³⁰.

Another problem to have emerged touches on the fear that the community will lose their enthusiasm. Many of those who have participated legitimately wonder if the proposed changes will be true, profound, or lasting.

³⁰ Noceti (op cit).

Some have wondered if it's possible for real and lasting change to occur.

LAY WOMAN, USA

Perhaps keeping realistic and being patient as the fruits of the synod emerge slowly.

LAY WOMAN, CANADA

When the idea was coming through, that this is what we're going to be doing, there were some people who said "oh, I remember something like this being done a few years ago". And they said and "well, they asked loads of questions, and nothing happened".

PARISHIONER, LONDON

Other respondents do not trust this process at all. Here, in particular, the anonymous self-administrated questionnaires helped their views to emerge:

I think the process was designed as a pretext to abandon the Word of God.

USA, ANONYMOUS

Knowing that the Jesuits are leaving this parish because it is said "Rome" keeps saying we have too many parishes in our province. The parishioners feel betrayed and angry and justifiably so.

JESUIT, USA

Some Catholic people (not so apparent in our parish) consider Pope Francis a heretic, including some bishops.

JESUIT, USA

As it can be seen, some of these are significant critiques that can be taken respectfully into consideration.



Final Reflections

The methods that parishes used for this synodal process were very diverse: from group meetings, invitations to meet the parish priests as a family, as a couple, as a group, as an individual person, face to face, by phone, through questionnaires (paper or online), etcetera.

It has been noticed that young people generally abandon any participation in the synod, or that the church has failed to integrate them. Many youth have their own busy agendas at this stage of life and so they are part of the parish but are not included in the parish system that sets the direction of pastoral action. Even if some pastoral actions are directed toward the benefit of youth, they remain somewhat side-lined in decision-making. Regarding this, in some of its universities, the Society of Jesus has a potential platform for incorporating synodal discernment at the level of university students. At some point, this is in the project of some Jesuits.

Abuse scandals are a serious difficulty that the Church is still facing. Even if our questionnaire did not ask explicitly about this problem (so as to see if it emerged naturally) many people spoke about this as a wound and a shame that must be dealt with.

People value the integration of minorities to the church, such as the LGBTQ+ community, although some say that it is necessary not to go towards “affirmative action” or “positive discrimination”: that is, not to value someone’s point or view more just because he or she belongs to a minority.

It could be considered that diversity and independence are important in a group since the best collective decisions are the product of disagreement and contest. The best way for a group to be smart is for each person in it to think and act as freely as possible. If a diverse group of people who possess varying degrees of knowledge and insight can be assembled in a parish, or in a diocese, sometimes it is better to entrust this group with major decisions rather than leaving these decisions in the hands of one or two people, no matter how intelligent those people might be³¹.

Some parishioners and Jesuits think that it is too early to speak of the future impact that this synod will have since it has not been possible to assimilate and assess the path itself, not even in the local Church. Many parishioners consider that the terminology of synodality is not understood by the majority. Many participated in the first meeting and then did not come back for the subsequent ones.

Those who occupy high parish responsibility are aware of the synodal process. They have an intellectual grasp of it and better understand parish, synodal and ecclesial expectations. Other faithful carry out religious and ecclesial practices based on the instructions received by their parish authorities without being able to name the processes correctly. In Cameroon, for instance, synodality “is a term unfamiliar to many members of the People of God, causing some people confusion and concern”³².

Some faithful regret that not enough is said about the synodal process. Also in Cameroon, for instance, some said it would have been an opportunity to rediscover the Second Vatican Council. Some regretted that many people were not informed about it and that the diocese did not broadcast the synod well.

³¹ Surowiecki, James (2005). *The Wisdom of Crowds*. Anchor Books, New York. Pages XIX-XX.

³² Secretary for the Synod of Bishops, op cit.

Synodality at the parish level is not so much about the universal church, not because they do not feel part of it or because they do not want what is best for it, but because it seems more within reach to change local reality. Somehow, synodality is lived more at the micro-level than at the macro-level. It was noticed during the study that many parishes had a strong sense that synodality was happening in the parishes and at the parish level.

Perhaps it is for this reason that this is one of the Synods that seems to have a deeper impact on the people's *habitus*³³, on their way of life. Hence, it may have a chance to create long term, or relatively long-term, changes. Previous synods were about more concrete themes or topics: family, youth, etcetera. While synodality as a "topic" seems abstract, paradoxically, because it touches on the profound sense of our relations and our lifestyle, it stands to create lasting conversion for parishes and its members if lived meaningfully.

The pandemic was a trauma for the Church, as it was for the rest of humanity. It was also both an isolating (for many) and thus unifying (for others) process in grief. People felt sadness and frustration for not being able to have funerals, and adapted the best they could via ZOOM meetings and online Mass. It is still hard to understand whether the social effects of the pandemic will be lasting and profound. Jeffrey Alexander³⁴ has developed a theory of cultural trauma, which explores how traumatic events shape collective identity and social memory. He based his approach on the idea that societies interpret traumatic events through shared symbolic and cultural frameworks, which are crucial to the construction and maintenance of social solidarity. Alexander argues that social traumas, as historical catastrophes, have a lasting impact on society and can generate processes of reconciliation, collective memory, and political mobilization. He argues that the narration and reinterpretation of trauma are integral to the construction of collective identity and social recovery. In this line of thought, we can ask ourselves if the pandemic process can also be a good starting point for this new synodal path.

³³ Bourdieu et al, op cit.

³⁴ Alexander, J. C. (2012). *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Polity Press.

When in 2013 Pope Francis urged the Argentine pilgrims at the World Youth Days in Rio de Janeiro to “make a mess in the diocese”³⁵ (hagan lío en las diócesis).

"I want to tell you something. What is it that I expect as a consequence of World Youth Day? I want a mess. We knew that in Rio there would be great disorder, but I want trouble in the dioceses!" (...) "I want to see the church get closer to the people. I want to get rid of clericalism, the mundane, this closing ourselves off within ourselves, in our parishes, schools or structures. Because these need to get out!"

This idea, at the origins of his pontificate, seems to be taking shape with the Synod, ten years later. There is “mess” in it, as it has been discovered, with all that implies: there is healing, there is restructuring at parish and diocesan levels, there is resistance, there is dialogue and tension. All of this is not necessarily a problem to be solved but rather a necessary process to be lived.

³⁵ FIRSTPOST. *Make a mess: Pope Francis urges Catholics to shake up dioceses*. Published on: July 26, 2013. Available: <https://www.firstpost.com/world/make-a-mess-pope-francis-urges-catholics-to-shake-up-dioceses-987863.html>

Addenda: Questionnaire

Questionnaire on synodality used for the interviews, focus groups and surveys

INTRODUCTION

The Catholic Church has entered into a process of consultation and openness through a synod: Synod 2021 2024. Synod is a Greek term; which literally means “to walk together” and is often used as a synonym for “assembly”. In short, it is a meeting.

We appreciate your taking the time to answer this short, anonymous, and confidential questionnaire on the Synodal Process at the parish level, which will enable us to develop new tools for synodal discernment.

In order not to lose information, we usually **record** the interviews: is this inconvenient for you?

COMMUNION

1. How was your experience of preparing for this Synod? How was the preparation of your parish?

2. Are there new habits and current practices, in terms of communion, due to the Synodal Process in your parish? In your personal life? For example: did the way of listening change?
3. Has the parish adopted any inward or outward reconciliation processes because of the Synodal Process?

PARTICIPATION

1. Are there new habits and new practices in terms of participation in the parish due to the Synodal Process?
2. Are there new ways of exercising leadership due to the Synodal Process?
3. “The Gospel proclamation is not addressed only to the enlightened or chosen few. Jesus's interlocutor is the people” (*Preparatory Document*, 2021). Has it been a challenge to go to the margins, the peripheries, in this Synodal Process? Was the parish able to do this?
4. Did women's role change due to the Synodal Process?

MISSION

The *VADEMECUM* states that “to participate fully in the act of discernment, it is important for the baptised to listen to the voices of others in their local context, including people who have left the practice of the faith, people of other faith traditions, people of no religious belief, and so forth. For this reason, while all the baptised are specifically called to participate in the Synodal Process, no one - regardless of religious affiliation - should be excluded from the possibility of sharing one's perspective and experiences.”

1. However, for many parishes it has been difficult to open up to these other voices. Was this the case in your parish? How did you face this challenge?
2. Do you consider some structures in the parish or the universal church to be obsolete today?
3. How would you evaluate the parish's reception of the Synod?

CLOSING

1. How did you feel, in general, during the Synodal Process (e.g., during the synodal meetings)? What has been the happiest or the most difficult?
2. Has your vision of the church changed? What will you do with your synodal experience?

BIO

Sex: Male / Female

Age: _____

Country: _____

City: _____

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