



ALEKSANDER RYSZARD BAŃKA

University of Silesia in Katowice

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1801-4710>

## Synodality and the Subjectivity of the Laity in the Church

**Abstract:** The XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, initiated by Pope Francis on 9—10 October 2021 in Rome, under the watchword: “Towards a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission,” involves lay people on an unprecedented scale in co-creating the synodal process. Why is this voice of lay people so important that it should be heard not only in the synodal process but — more broadly speaking — in the entire synodal style of functioning of the Church? This is connected with the fact that lay people are by no means an inferior part of the Church, what is more — the foundation of their subjectivity in the Church is not first of all the division into clergy and laity, which has a secondary meaning and specifies the nature of the vocation realized in the Church, but the Christian identity received with holy baptism. This article shows how Pope Francis, by developing the concept of synodality, consistently continues the council’s intuition of restoring lay people’s subjectivity in the Church and deepening the understanding of their Christian identity.

**Keywords:** synodality, laity, Church, subjectivity, identity

Evolution or revolution? A question of this kind is often asked by those contemporary theologians, philosophers and researchers of the recent history of the Catholic Church who are closely observing the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, initiated by Pope Francis on October 9—10, 2021 in Rome, on the theme *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission*. It is not only about the very formula of the synod itself, which is different from all previous synods, because it is extended for three years and intended to involve the entire community of the Church — from the bishops and cardinals to the ordinary faithful. The most burning issue is the direction of changes which this synodal

process implies. Some people, as Tomasz Wielebski remarks, believe that the pope wants to implement the plan of liberal modernists striving to introduce changes in the moral teaching of the Magisterium of the Church, who, unable to count on the convening of the Third Vatican Council, want to decree synodality as a way of the Church's existence, so that in the future no councils or synods of bishops are needed anymore.<sup>1</sup> Opinions like these are hardly marginal. The so-called synod on synodality gives rise to many anxieties of this kind, which may be noticed, for example, in the Polish synodal national overview — a document summarizing the first stage of synodal consultations, that had taken place in practically all Polish dioceses. One can read in it that one of the reactions to the Synod initiated by Francis is the attitude of “fear, distance and mistrust of entering the synodal way associated, for instance, with the so-called German way (among other things proposals for doctrinal changes) and the awakening of a demanding attitude towards the Church.”<sup>2</sup> Can these opinions be considered valid?

## The heritage of Vatican II

It seems that the most of the strongly negative and even hostile opinions expressed about the Synod on synodality are largely dictated not so much by factual, substantive reasons, but rather by certain stereotypes, simplifications, and prejudices both against the pope and — more generally — against the entire heritage of the Second Vatican Council. A more adequate approach in assessing the synodal process appears to be the one that sees in it not a striving for revolutionary changes but rather an evolutionary continuation of certain fundamental ideas of Vatican II. Tomasz Wielebski notes that “according to the opinions of some theologians (Hervé Legrand, Giacomo Canobbio, Roberto Repole, Hermann Pottmeyer), Francis, who devotes so much attention to the issue of synodality, wants to implement the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and Paul VI on this important dimension of the realization of the Church, which was to some extent halted during the pontificate of John Paul II. This restraint is expressed in the specific centralism of the Roman Curia and the development of the top-down governance of the Church.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. T. WIELEBSKI: “Droga synodalna wyzwaniem dla Kościoła w Polsce.” *Ateneum Kapłańskie* 676/3 (2021), pp. 534—535.

<sup>2</sup> *Synod 2021—2023. Synteza Krajowa*. Eds. K. KAŻMIERSKA, M. JEWDOKIMOW, W. SADŁOŃ, L. ORGANEK. [no place] 2022, p. 3.

They believe that the pope, emphasizing the need to strengthen synodality, wants to enhance the role of bishops and the local Churches they lead, and that he returns to the authentic thought of the fathers of the Second Vatican Council, making the transition from ‘the universalist ecclesiology to the ecclesiology of the local Church’.”<sup>3</sup> This is also noted by Janusz Bujak, who writes: “French Dominican Hervé Legrand believes that the third chapter of the Constitution *Lumen gentium* — ‘On the Hierarchical Structure of the Church and in Particular on the Episcopate’ — has not been properly implemented, because after the Council it was interpreted in the perspective of the universalist ecclesiology, which made it impossible to reveal what the Constitution says about the Church as *communio Ecclesiarum*. According to Legrand, an example of the remnants of the universalist ecclesiology in the conciliar documents is a sentence from the Article 22 of *Lumen gentium*: ‘One is constituted a member of the Episcopal body in virtue of sacramental consecration and hierarchical communion with the head and members of the body’. This formulation allowed, after the Council, to separate *collegium episcoporum* from *communio Ecclesiarum*, that is, the lack of correlation between the bishops and their Churches, between the college of bishops and the communion of Churches.”<sup>4</sup> What is the conclusion? Above all, if it is really the goal of Pope Francis to shift the emphasis in ecclesiology towards the local Church and in this way bring to the fore the relationships between bishops and their Churches, then synodality, as a way of carrying out this process, must have features that not only make this shift of emphasis possible, but they directly indicate the way to its implementation. The question then arises whether the way in which synodality is presented in the papal teaching supports this kind of conclusion.

The key elements to understand Francis’ vision of synodality are revealed in 2015, in the papal address at the ceremony commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the synod of bishops. It was then that the pope made the famous statement: “The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthens cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”<sup>5</sup> The pope explains in this context

<sup>3</sup> T. WIELEBSKI: “Droga synodalna wyzwaniem dla Kościoła w Polsce...,” p. 535.

<sup>4</sup> J. BUJAK: “Nauczanie papieża Franciszka o synodalności w kontekście współczesnej refleksji teologicznej i ekumenicznej.” *Collectanea Theologica* 91/1 (2021), p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> FRANCIS: *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17.10.2015), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html) [accessed 30.07.2023].

that from the beginning of his activity he wanted to give significance to the synod, which is one of the most valuable legacies of the Second Vatican Council, among other things because it reflects the spirit and method of the ecumenical council<sup>6</sup> — it is therefore, in a special way, its extension and way of implementing it. This was also pointed out by the International Theological Commission in the document published in 2018, entitled *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, emphasizing that “although synodality is not explicitly found as a term or as a concept in the teaching of Vatican II, it is fair to say that synodality is at the heart of the work of renewal the Council was encouraging.”<sup>7</sup> What is more, the Commission notes that it is exactly Pope Francis, following the line drawn by Vatican II and developing the ideas of his predecessors, who invites the Church to cross another threshold in the process of making the Church more synodal,<sup>8</sup> that is, to adopt a more biblical and patristic vision of the ecclesial community, in which local Churches cease to be an insignificant background for the Roman Curia, but — in union with the pope — they begin to play the first fiddle. Francis himself interprets this process as a form of remaining faithful to the discernment of his predecessors, beginning with Paul VI, who “foresaw that the organization of the Synod could ‘be improved upon with the passing of time’”. Twenty years later, Saint John Paul II echoed that thought when he stated that ‘this instrument might be further improved. Perhaps collegial pastoral responsibility could be more fully expressed in the Synod’.”<sup>9</sup> How can it be? The International Theological Commission directs attention above all to the fact that “in this ecclesiological context, synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, 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 evangelizing mission.”<sup>10</sup> This way of understanding synodality — in the spirit of communion of the whole People of God, and not just its selected members — sets the right context for understanding collegiality. According to the document of the International Theological Commission, the theological significance and the form of the exercise of the ministry of bishops in the local Churches entrusted to them and of the communion between local Churches are defined by means of the hierarchical

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION: *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2.03.2018), no. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, nos. 7—9.

<sup>9</sup> FRANCIS: *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17.10.2015).

<sup>10</sup> INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION: *Synodality in the Life...*, no. 6.

communion of the College of Bishops with the Bishop of Rome,<sup>11</sup> and therefore — precisely in the spirit of the fundamental idea of Francis to shift the emphasis towards the local Churches. “Collegiality is thus the specific form in which ecclesial synodality is manifested and made real through the ministry of Bishops on the level of communion of the local Churches in a region, and on the level of communion of all the Churches in the universal Church. An authentic manifestation of synodality naturally entails the exercise of the collegial ministry of the Bishops.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, in order to understand how this dependence works in practice and, at the same time, how synodality enables a shift of emphasis towards the local Church, one needs to have a closer look at its manifestations.

## Journeying together

So what does synodality mean in practice in the ministry of bishops in the local Churches entrusted to them, a ministry that also includes an essential aspect of collegiality? First of all, that this service acquires a new, synodal dimension in its form. “The synodal dimension of the Church — writes Janusz Bujak — expresses the subjective character of all the baptized, and at the same time the specific role of the episcopal ministry in the collegial and hierarchical communion with the Bishop of Rome. This ecclesiological vision invites us to promote the development of the synodal communion between ‘all’, ‘some’ and ‘one’.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, it means that in the synodal understanding of the Church, her essential part is not only the bishops (“some”) maintaining a bond with the pope (“one”), and even not only presbyters and deacons, but also these “all” — the faithful, including, of course, the laity. Moreover, it is synodality which brings to light their subjectivity in the Church. The *Instrumentum laboris* for the first session of the General Assembly of the Synod on Synodality in Rome underlines that the synodal process “enables us to understand the importance of taking the local Church as a privileged point of reference, as the theological place where the Baptised experience in practical terms ‘walking together’.”<sup>14</sup> This “walking together” presupposes that the synodality

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, no. 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> J. BUJAK: “Nauczanie papieża Franciszka o synodalności...,” p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> “*Instrumentum laboris*” for the First Session of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome (10.2023), no. 11, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/>

occurs as an experience involving not only a narrow, selected part of the Church, but all the faithful. This is clearly emphasized in the Preparatory Document of the Synod on Synodality, which underlines: “In the first millennium, ‘journeying together’ — that is, practicing synodality — was the ordinary way in which the Church, understood as ‘People united in the unity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ acted [...] Here are the roots of the broad development of a synodal praxis at all levels of the Church’s life — local, provincial, and universal — that reached its highest manifestation in the Ecumenical Council. Within this ecclesial horizon, inspired by the principle of the participation of all in the life of the Church, St. John Chrysostom was able to say that ‘Church and Synod are synonymous’.”<sup>15</sup> The point is that the very composition of the word *synod*: σύν (with) and ὁδός (path), indicates the path along which the People of God walk together, and that already since the first centuries it has been applied to ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels — diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal or universal — in order to discern in the light of the Word of God doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions by listening to the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, this discernment was connected with a special style of meeting and forming relationships in the ecclesial community, which also concerned the laity, especially it referred to the synods of the local Churches, in which they participated from the very beginning. This style, the way of practicing the synod, and in a broader sense — the functioning of the Christian community, is today referred to as synodality, and although the word itself is a neologism that appeared in the theological, canonical and pastoral literature only in the recent decades, it essentially refers to the most profound tradition, which has always been a constitutive dimension of the Church.<sup>17</sup> “I will not dare — writes Grzegorz Strzelczyk — to give a formal definition of synodality. However, I think that it is reasonable to say that it is a certain sensitivity and style of functioning of people and ecclesial communities. The point is to take into account the opinion of all interested parties in the decisions taken by the Church communities, being convinced that the Holy Spirit can speak through each one of them [...]. Synodality understood in such

---

common/phases/universal-stage/il/PAGINATED\_ENG\_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS-A4.pdf [accessed 30.07.2023].

<sup>15</sup> *Preparatory Document for the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission”*, no. 11, [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-21x21/en\\_prepa\\_book.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-21x21/en_prepa_book.pdf) [accessed 30.07.2023].

<sup>16</sup> INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION: “*Sensus fidei*” in the Life of the Church (2014), nos. 3—4.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, no. 5.30.

a way can and should — because only then it is meaningful — refer to every level of the church organization, from the small community in the parish to its special ‘place’, which is the college of bishops (regardless of whether at particular moment, it acts directly collegially or not).”<sup>18</sup>

If, therefore, in the spirit of collegiality understood as the ministry of bishops for the communion between local Churches and unity with the Bishop of Rome, Francis places such a strong emphasis on the local Church, it means that it is his will that the relations within her — especially the basic relationship between the bishop and faithful — are cultivated in accordance with the idea of synodality. Moreover, it is precisely this perspective which reveals the vital role of the laity in the dynamics of these relations. Describing the way in which the participation and co-responsibility of the faithful in the synodal practice should be properly understood, Tomasz Wielebski emphasizes that “the People of God, by participating in the synodal consultations, respond to the call of the Lord, listening to what the Spirit says to the Church through the Word of God working in them. The pastors, moving on to formulating their own decisions, are to listen carefully to the wishes of the faithful, distinguishing preparing decisions with the participation of the laity from taking them.”<sup>19</sup> Why is the voice of the laity so important that it should be highlighted and listened to both in the synodal process and, in a broader perspective, in the entire synodal style of the Church’s functioning? Because, as it is clearly emphasized by Pope Francis, it is wrong to make “a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and an *Ecclesia discens*, since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church.”<sup>20</sup> This is connected with the fact that the laity are by no means a worse part of the Church, and what is more, the foundation of their subjectivity in the Church is not at first the division into the clergy and the laity, which has a secondary meaning and specifies the nature of the vocation lived in the Church, but the Christian identity received in the baptism. Pope Francis wrote about it in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* in the following way: “In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization [...] In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient

<sup>18</sup> G. STRZELCZYK: “Synodalność: musisz iść przez to, czym nie jesteś.” *Więź* 685/3 (2021), p. 75.

<sup>19</sup> T. WIELEBSKI: “Droga synodalna wyzwaniem dla Kościoła w Polsce...,” p. 539.

<sup>20</sup> FRANCIS: *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17.10.2015).



to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients.”<sup>21</sup> However, it should be mentioned that the words of Francis are in fact no revolution. On the contrary, it is rather a consistent continuation and development of the idea clearly expressed in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, reminding in the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* that “the laity likewise share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world. They exercise the apostolate in fact by their activity directed to the evangelization and sanctification of men and to the penetrating and perfecting of the temporal order through the spirit of the Gospel.”<sup>22</sup> Francis develops this thought, not limiting evangelization only to the way of giving the testimony through work, but directly encouraging to preach the Gospel, what he expects from all the baptized — including the laity — by convincing that whoever has really experienced God, does not need a lot of training to start preaching God and that everyone has to find a way of preaching that is appropriate to their existential situation.<sup>23</sup> It can be said that by developing the concept of synodality and referring to its roots dating back to the first centuries of Christianity, the pope goes a step further in restoring the subjectivity of the laity in the Church and deepening the understanding of their Christian identity. The laity are no longer only called to evangelize by acts, not only encouraged to preach the Gospel by words, but they are also invited to the communal discernment of the future paths that the Church will take. In this context, the International Theological Commission draws attention to the fact that “in this perspective, the participation [in the synodal process — A. R. B.] of the lay faithful becomes essential. They are the immense majority of the People of God and there is much to be learnt from their participation in the various forms of the life and mission of ecclesial communities, from popular piety and generic pastoral care, as well as their specific competency in various sectors of cultural and social life. Consulting them is thus indispensable for initiating processes of discernment in the framework of synodal structures. We must, therefore, overcome the obstacles created [...] by a clerical mind-set which runs the risk of keeping them on the edges of ecclesial life.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> FRANCIS: *Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii gaudium”*, nos. 119—120.

<sup>22</sup> SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity “Apostolicam actuositatem”* (18.11.1965), no. 2.

<sup>23</sup> FRANCIS: *Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii gaudium”*, nos. 119—121.

<sup>24</sup> INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION: *Synodality in the Life...*, no. 73.



## Voice of the People of God

Both the synodality itself and its practical implementation in the life of the Church, and at the same time learning the synodal style — because this is what the synodal process initiated by the pope is all about — focus on a fundamental issue that is the very heart of the synod: discernment. From the very beginning, consistently, the synodal documents present discernment as the essence of the local, continental and in the end the final stage of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, also stating its method, which directly refers to the Ignatian model of communal discernment. Small wonder. The Ignatian model contains basically all the features which the pope associates with the concept of synodality because it is based on mutual listening and sincere, open communication of one's feelings, impressions, opinions and convictions, in the atmosphere of prayer, trust, transparency and acceptance; it does not assume unanimity, but kindness and openness, freedom from prejudice or attachment to classify others by one's own patterns, and from the need to defend one's interests and nurture various concerns.<sup>25</sup> For this reason, the *Instrumentum laboris* for the first session of the General Assembly of the Synod on Synodality in Rome defines the proposed method of discernment as “conversation in the Spirit,” with the reservation that it is not about a simple conversation, but a dynamic in which the spoken and heard word builds familiarity, enabling the participants to be close to one another — a kind of dialogue between brothers and sisters in faith that opens the space for *con-sentire*, that is, a listening together to the voice of the Spirit, who is the true protagonist of the whole process of discernment.<sup>26</sup> This fact explains the following observation expressed in the *Instrumentum laboris*: “In the local Churches, conversation in the Spirit has been accepted and sometimes ‘discovered’ as providing the atmosphere that makes possible the sharing of life experiences and the space for discernment in a synodal Church. In the Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies, it is described as a Pentecostal moment [...]. Bearing in mind the significance of conversation in the Spirit to animate the lived experience of the synodal Church, formation in this method, and in particular of facilitators capable of accompanying communities in practising it,

<sup>25</sup> Cf. J. AUGUSTYN: “Rozeznawanie duchowe.” In: *Rozeznawanie duchów*. Ed. K. OSUCH. Czechowice-Dziedzice 1991, p. 54; B. STECZEK: “Zastosowanie rozeznawania duchów we wspólnotowym rozeznaniu apostołskim.” In: *Rozeznawanie duchów...*, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. “*Instrumentum laboris*” for the First Session of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome (10.2023), nos. 32—33.

is perceived as a priority at all levels of ecclesial life and for all the Baptised, starting with ordained Ministers in a spirit of co-responsibility and openness to different ecclesial vocations. Formation for conversation in the Spirit is formation to be a synodal Church,”<sup>27</sup> since it assumes that the will of God is most fully revealed to the discerning Church when she searches for it as the People of God as a whole and not only as its chosen part. So while until now the voice of the laity has been treated marginally — as a kind of additional guidance more or less useful in the process of discernment, now it appears as its indispensable element, without which understanding what the Holy Spirit says to the Church will not be adequate. This is why “a synodal Church — underlines Francis — is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening ‘is more than simply hearing’. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7).”<sup>28</sup>

So what should this mutual listening lead to? What final effect does the Church expect from the process of discernment in which lay people are involved together with the clergy, both at the level of everyday life of the local Church — to help their bishops make good decisions — and on a macro scale, by participating in the synod on synodality? To put it simply: the unveiling of the sense of the faith which, as the *sensus fidei fidelium* — the sense of the faith of all believers — will reveal the voice of the whole People of God and, at every level of the Church’s life, will shed light on her future paths in varying degrees and intensity. Therefore, as the International Theological Commission stresses that “the entire People of God is challenged by its fundamentally synodal calling. The circularity of the *sensus fidei* with which all the faithful are endowed, the discernment carried out at the various levels on which synodality works and the authority of those who exercise the pastoral ministry of unity and governance shows the dynamic of synodality.”<sup>29</sup> Consequently, the understanding of synodality that Pope Francis proposes is based on the concept of spiritual conversation — the idea of communal discernment in which the entire People of God is involved in various ways. The purpose of this process of discernment is a kind of specific, spiritual knowledge taking the form of an individual awareness of each believer, correlated

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, nos. 34—42.

<sup>28</sup> FRANCIS: *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17.10.2015).

<sup>29</sup> INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION: *Synodality in the Life...*, no. 72.

with the communal awareness of the Church as a whole.<sup>30</sup> This is the sense of the faith. Already in his speech in 2015, Pope Francis emphasized its importance, referring to the statements of the Second Vatican Council. “After stating that the People of God is comprised of all the baptized who are called to ‘be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood’ — the pope reminded — the Second Vatican Council went on to say that ‘the whole body of the faithful, who have an anointing which comes from the holy one (cf. 1 Jn 2:20,27), cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole People of God, when “from the bishops to the last of the faithful” it manifests a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals.’ These are the famous words *infallible ‘in credendo’*.”<sup>31</sup> Of course, this voice varies in its strength. It sounds differently on the level of the local Church, where the bishop meets with his faithful, for example at the local synods, to listen to their advice on important matters for the development of the local community, differently on the episcopal level, when important issues for the Church are discerned together by a group of bishops, and even more differently within the synodal process initiated by Francis, in which the lay people are included in the most extensive, three year-long process of meetings, consultations, dialogue and common prayer. Regardless of this, the International Theological Commission argues that “by means of the *sensus fidei*, the faithful are able not only to recognise what is in accordance with the Gospel and to reject what is contrary to it, but also to sense what Pope Francis has called ‘new ways for the journey’ in faith of the whole pilgrim people. One of the reasons why bishops and priests need to be close to their people on the journey and to walk with them is precisely so as to recognise ‘new ways’ as they are sensed by the people. The discernment of such new ways, opened up and illumined by the Holy Spirit, will be vital for the new evangelization.”<sup>32</sup> It is for this reason that the document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* concludes: “It is possible to go deeper into the theology of synodality on the basis of the doctrine of the *sensus fidei* of the People of God and the sacramental collegiality of the episcopate in hierarchical communion with the Bishop of Rome. The synodal dimension of the Church expresses the subjective and active character of all the baptized [...]. The dynamic of synodality thus joins the communitarian aspect which includes the whole People of God, the collegial dimension that is part of the

<sup>30</sup> Cf. L. SIWECKI: “*Sensus fidei* jako dar Ducha Świętego dla Kościoła.” *Studia Theologica Varsaviensia* 43/1 (2005) no. 1, pp. 80—81.

<sup>31</sup> FRANCIS: *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17.10.2015).

<sup>32</sup> INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION: “*Sensus fidei*”..., no. 127.

exercise of episcopal ministry, and the primatial ministry of the Bishop of Rome.”<sup>33</sup>

## Mutuality

Although the roots of the concept of the *sensus fidei* go back to the very sources of Christianity and it is important for understanding the historical process of shaping dogmas, this concept has been more intensively analysed, primarily in connection with the contemporary development of the theology of the laity. Leon Siwecki remarks that “theologians describe the *sensus fidei* as a supernatural ability to understand the truth contained in the Revelation, even if it has not been expressed explicitly [...]. The sense of faith is perceived as a form of an instinct, a kind of intuitive perception which is deeply rooted in the reality of the Mystical Body of Christ. The *sensus fidei*, guided by the Holy Spirit, on the one hand leads to the rejection of an error, on the other hand, it is able to ‘synthesize’ various aspects of a particular truth of faith. A believer who lives his faith intensely does not really notice a specific, ‘dry’ number of statements or intellectual formulas, but rather encounters living Gospel [...]. Therefore, we must speak of an internal coherence between the sense of the faith and the life of grace. The *sensus fidei*, as a capability to have contact with the revealed things, aims by its nature at the object of the revelation and convinces the faithful of its credibility. However, one has to remember — Siwecki reminds us — that it does not absolutely protect from creating false visions about what constitutes a deposit of faith.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the Magisterium of the Church is obliged to listen to the sense of the faith, especially when it is expressed not only in the individual and personal dimension, as the sense of the faith of individual believers (*sensus fidei fidelis*), but above all as the *sensus fidei fidelium* — the sense of the faith of all believers. The International Theological Commission in the document “*Sensus fidei*” in the Life of the Church underlines that “the magisterium is responsible for nurturing and educating the *sensus fidelium*. Of course, those who exercise the magisterium, namely the pope and the bishops, are themselves, first of all, baptised members of the people of God, who participate by that very fact in the *sensus fidelium*,”<sup>35</sup> but as

<sup>33</sup> INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION: *Synodality in the Life...*, no. 64.

<sup>34</sup> L. SIWECKI: “*Sensus fidei...*,” pp. 85—87.

<sup>35</sup> INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION: “*Sensus fidei*”..., no. 76.

the document further states, “the magisterium also judges with authority whether opinions which are present among the People of God, and which may seem to be the *sensus fidelium*, actually correspond to the truth of the Tradition received from the Apostles [...] Thus, judgement regarding the authenticity of the *sensus fidelium* belongs ultimately not to the faithful themselves nor to theology but to the magisterium.”<sup>36</sup> Reminding this truth has crucial importance for understanding the role of the laity in the synodal process and, more broadly, for understanding the meaning of the synodality itself. Indeed, in the *Instrumentum laboris* for the first session of the General Assembly of the Synod on Synodality in Rome, one can find an explicit reservation that the synodal assembly cannot be understood as representative and legislative, analogous to a parliamentary structure with its dynamics of majority building<sup>37</sup>; so it does not work on the principles of parliamentary democracy or social debate, where the mechanisms of eristic, the art of mutual persuasion and building influence, and often the political game played to gain the advantage necessary to win the vote, turn out to be decisive for the final effect. The synodal assembly does not operate according to such mechanisms, because the very idea of synodality has nothing to do with implementing within the Church ways of functioning characteristic of parliamentary democracy or social and political organizations. Similarly, the synodal and ecclesial involvement of the laity does not come down to any form of direct or indirect exercise of power or putting pressure on the ecclesiastical decision-makers through public or majority opinion. “It is clear — the International Theological Commission emphasizes — that there can be no simple identification between the *sensus fidei* and public or majority opinion. These are by no means the same thing.”<sup>38</sup>

What, then, should be the relationship between the *sensus fidei* of the faithful and the Magisterium of the Church? Its proper model does not apply only to the synod on synodality, but it arises from the essence of synodality as such, and at the same time it depicts the proper attitude of the laity towards the doctrinal and disciplinary authority in the Church. Leon Siwecki writes about it in the following way: “The sense of the faith, as a special capability to understand and define the revealed truth, should be seen as an assistance in recognizing the authentic doctrine, and not as an act that ratifies the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church on the juridical level. The magisterium, by virtue of its office, is the only guide of the sense of the faith in the Church. It is within its competence to

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, no. 77.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. “*Instrumentum laboris*” for the First Session of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome (10.2023), no. 48.

<sup>38</sup> INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION: “*Sensus fidei*”..., no. 118.

defend the authenticity of the revealed doctrine, and in particular those truths which are related to the piety of the faithful [...]. Solely the magisterium has the dignity of an authority which decides about the 'fruits' of the sense of the faith. The authoritative intervention of the magisterium is necessary to determine whether a doctrine considered in the Church belongs to the revealed deposit [of faith]. The lay people, per se, or individuals, have no active doctrinal authority in terms of *de fide et moribus*. They cannot by themselves reach those results to which the development of dogmas moves forward.”<sup>39</sup> This does not mean, obviously, that the place and role of the laity in the Church are insignificant. This kind of thinking, which marginalizes the role of the laity and at the same time absolutizes the power of the clergy, is a false extreme, standing in opposition to another mistake — striving to grant the laity the competence to determine by means of the democratic mechanisms the shape of the doctrinal teaching of the Church. So how to find the right balance between these extremes? By accepting an integral approach to the sense of the faith, “as a supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit given to all the faithful (both the clergy and the laity), revealing itself in the universal agreement on matters of faith and morals, and allowing the People of God, in unity with the magisterium and under its guidance, to stand firm in the faith.”<sup>40</sup> As Antoni Nadbrzeźny highlights, “since the Second Vatican Council, there have been church institutions that give the official hearing for the lay faithful’s opinions and discern to what extent their voice is a manifestation of an authentic sense of the faith. These institutions include: local synods, diocesan synods and pastoral councils on the diocesan and parish level. The condition for a fruitful dialogue is mutual respect, consideration for the received offices and charisms, as well as attentive and humble listening to the content of the spoken testimonies, which express genuine concern for the good of the Church.”<sup>41</sup> The laity’s voice, understood in this way, is more than mere advice; it is an active participation in the process of discernment, in which this voice is a necessary condition, although not sufficient in itself, and therefore, bringing light to the understanding of the reality of the Church, it needs at the same time verification and acceptance of the highest ecclesial authority, which in turn must be correctly embedded in the broadly understood tradition of the Church. Therefore, as Leon Siwecki remarks, “the distinction between ‘infallibility *in credendo*’ or passive infallibility, and ‘infallibility *in docendo*’ or active infallibility, does not mean a separation or division

<sup>39</sup> L. SIWECKI: “*Sensus fidei...*,” p. 94.

<sup>40</sup> A. NADBRZEŹNY: “Zmysł wiary jako zjawisko eklesjalne. Kontekst teologiczno-historyczny.” *Theological Research* 5 (2017), p. 58.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 62.



between the hierarchy and lay Catholics. It is about a common relationship of exchange, a relationship in which a higher order is realized in mutual cooperation. There is an interpenetration between these types of infallibility [...]. Between the *sensus fidei* and the teaching of the magisterium of the Church there are reciprocal relations. The *sensus fidei* needs the magisterium, just as the teaching of the magisterium must take into consideration the fruits of the *sensus fidelium*. So we can speak about the interpenetration of these two realities. ‘The mutuality’ — coordination between the laity and the pastors of the Church should lead to many benefits, including the proclamation of the revealed truth.”<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusions

Good cooperation between clergy and lay people, built on mutual trust and respect, determines the right way of understanding the subjectivity of the laity in the Church. Without losing their own identity and without denying the specificity of their vocation, they become authentic partners of the clergy in the work of evangelization, apostolate and mission, and in discerning the way in which God wants to shape the future of God’s Church. Moreover, one may be tempted to say that in the near future these Church communities will develop and grow, in which the relations between their members will be based on the synodal model of the Church. Synodality is not a threat to the Church, but an opportunity — provided it is properly understood and wisely implemented. Trying to find an adequate answer to the question of how this implementation should be achieved is today one of the most urgent tasks facing the ecclesial community.

## Bibliography

- AUGUSTYN J.: “Rozeznawanie duchowe.” In: *Rozeznawanie duchów*. Ed. K. OSUCH. Czechowice-Dziedzice 1991, pp. 45—59.
- BUJAK J.: “Nauczanie papieża Franciszka o synodalności w kontekście współczesnej refleksji teologicznej i ekumenicznej.” *Collectanea Theologica* 91/1 (2021), pp. 51—76.

---

<sup>42</sup> L. SIWECKI: “*Sensus fidei...*”, pp. 95—96.



- FRANCIS: *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17.10.2015), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html) [accessed 30.07.2023].
- FRANCIS: *Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii gaudium"*, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) [accessed 1.08.2023].
- INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION: *"Sensus fidei" in the Life of the Church* (2014), [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html) [accessed 30.07.2023].
- INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION: *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2.03.2018), [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_synodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html) [accessed 30.07.2023].
- "*Instrumentum laboris*" for the First Session of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome (10.2023), [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/PAGINATED\\_ENG-INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS-A4.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/PAGINATED_ENG-INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS-A4.pdf) [accessed 30.07.2023].
- NADBRZEŻNY A.: "Zmysł wiary jako zjawisko eklezjalne. Kontekst teologiczno-historyczny." *Theological Research* 5 (2017), pp. 55—70.
- Preparatory Document for the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission"*, [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-21x21/en\\_prepa\\_book.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-21x21/en_prepa_book.pdf) [accessed 30.07.2023].
- SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity "Apostolicam actuositatem"* (18.11.1965), [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651118\\_apostolicam-actuositatem\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html) [accessed 1.08.2023].
- SIWECKI L.: "Sensus fidei jako dar Ducha Świętego dla Kościoła." *Studia Theologica Varsaviensia* 43/1 (2005), pp. 79—98.
- STECZEK B.: "Zastosowanie rozeznawania duchów we wspólnotowym rozeznaniu apostołskim." In: *Rozeznawanie duchów*. Ed. K. OSUCH. Czechowice-Dziedzice 1991, pp. 5—12.
- STRZELCZYK G.: "Synodalność: musisz iść przez to, czym nie jesteś." *Więź* 685/3 (2021), pp. 75—84.
- Synod 2021—2023. Synteza Krajowa* Eds. K. KAŻMIERSKA, M. JEWDOKIMOW, W. SADŁOŃ, L. ORGANEK. [no place] 2022.
- WIELEBSKI T.: "Droga synodalna wyzwaniem dla Kościoła w Polsce." *Ateneum Kapłańskie* 676/3 (2021), pp. 533—549.

ALEKSANDER RYSZARD BAŃKA

## La synodalité et la subjectivité des laïcs dans l'Église

### Résumé

La XVI<sup>e</sup> Assemblée générale ordinaire du Synode des évêques, lancée par le pape François les 9 et 10 octobre 2021 à Rome sous le thème : « Pour une Église synodale : communion, participation et mission », engage les laïcs dans la co-construction du processus synodal à une échelle sans précédent. Pourquoi cette voix des laïcs est-elle si importante qu'elle devrait être entendue non seulement dans le cadre du processus synodal, mais, de manière plus large, dans tout le style synodal de fonctionnement de l'Église ? Cela tient au fait que les laïcs ne constituent en aucun cas une « partie inférieure » de l'Église. Leur subjectivité dans l'Église repose avant tout sur leur identité chrétienne reçue lors du baptême, et non sur la distinction entre clercs et laïcs, qui est secondaire et définit la nature de la vocation vécue au sein de l'Église. Cet article met en lumière comment le pape François, en développant la notion de synodalité, poursuit de manière cohérente l'intuition conciliaire de redonner aux laïcs leur pleine subjectivité dans l'Église et approfondit la compréhension de leur identité chrétienne.

**Mots-clés :** synodalité, laïcs, Église, subjectivité, identité

ALEKSANDER RYSZARD BAŃKA

## La sinodalità e la soggettività dei laici nella Chiesa

### Riassunto

La XVI Assemblea Generale Ordinaria del Sinodo dei Vescovi, avviata da Papa Francesco il 9 e 10 ottobre 2021 a Roma con il tema: «Per una Chiesa sinodale: comunione, partecipazione e missione», coinvolge i laici nella co-costruzione del processo sinodale in una misura senza precedenti. Perché questa voce dei laici è così importante che dovrebbe essere ascoltata non solo nel processo sinodale, ma — più ampiamente — in tutto lo stile sinodale di funzionamento della Chiesa? Ciò è legato al fatto che i laici non costituiscono affatto «una parte inferiore» della Chiesa. La base della loro soggettività nella Chiesa non è la distinzione tra clero e laici, che è secondaria e definisce la natura della vocazione vissuta nella Chiesa, ma la loro identità cristiana ricevuta nel battesimo. Questo articolo mostra come Papa Francesco, sviluppando il concetto di sinodalità, porti avanti in modo coerente l'intuizione conciliare di restituire piena soggettività ai laici nella Chiesa e di approfondire la comprensione della loro identità cristiana.

**Parole chiave:** sinodalità, laici, Chiesa, soggettività, identità.