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The Place of the Laity in the Synodal Vision of the Church

Abstract: The article examines the place and role of the laity within the synodal vision of the Church developed in the teaching of Pope Francis. It traces and discusses the historical evolution of the relationship between clergy and laity, from the early Christian concept of *laos Theou* to the modern understanding of the People of God. Although the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici* affirmed the dignity and mission of the laity, their participation in the Church's governance and decision-making remains limited. Synodality – understood as the common journey of the People of God – emerges as a response to this tension. Pope Francis presents it as a new stage in ecclesiological development, in which the laity's shared responsibility for the Church's mission constitutes not a supplement but the very essence of its life and activity.

Keywords: synodality, laity, co-responsibility, evangelization, Church

If one were to ask today what in the pontificate of Pope Francis has proved most significant for the future of the Church and, in turn, will most decisively shape the direction of its further development, the answer would undoubtedly include the concept of *synodality*. This refers not merely to the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* – commonly called the “Synod on Synodality” – which lasted three years and concluded on October 27, 2023, in Rome. More important is what this synodality brings to the Church: the new perspective it opens before the ecclesial community at various levels of its life and functioning. Still relevant in this context is the observation once made by the International Theological Commission,

which, in its document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, points to the fact that although the noun “synodality” appeared relatively recently in theological, canonical, and pastoral literature – as a neologism derived from the adjective “synodal” and ultimately from the term “synod” – “people speak of synodality as a ‘constitutive dimension’ of the Church or *tout court* of the ‘synodal Church’. This linguistic novelty, which needs careful theological clarification, is a sign of something new that has been maturing in the ecclesial consciousness starting from the Magisterium of Vatican II, and from the lived experience of local Churches and the universal Church since the last Council until today.”¹ What, then, does this achievement consist of – one that may be situated at the very centre of the renewal undertaken by the Second Vatican Council and that, in the Synod on Synodality, finds its theological and pastoral grounding and development?

The troublesome word *laos*

Even before the inauguration of the Synod on Synodality, the International Theological Commission connected this achievement with the theological idea of the Church as the People of God, emphasizing the following point: “The ecclesiology of the People of God stresses the common dignity and mission of all the baptized, in exercising the variety and ordered richness of their charisms, their vocations and their ministries. 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.”² What is thus meant is the engagement and participation of the entire People of God in the life and mission of the Church – not merely of a certain selected or privileged portion of it, determined by the fact of ordination. In this sense, synodality is inseparably linked to the question of the place

¹ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION: *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2.03.2018), no. 5. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html [accessed 5.11.2025].

² *Ibidem*, no. 6.

and role in the Church of those who, in fact, constitute its great majority: the laity. This raises a key question: Does the synodal vision of the Church imply merely a return to a certain understanding of the involvement of the laity in the life of the ecclesial community, characteristic of the first centuries of its existence, or does the said vision, in fact, point to a new direction? And if so, what is that direction?

There is no doubt that the concept of the People of God has, from the very beginning, retained a clearly defined meaning and rests on the conviction that all the baptized – including the laity – constitute its integral part. Yet, as Jacques Fontaine rightly notes, it also raises the question, “what relation is there in fact between the people of God in Scripture, the *laos Theou*, and that which we call in the twentieth century the laity? [...]. A traditional sociology – adds Fontaine – and one could say clerical sociology, of this people of the church has for a long time defined the laity by a sort of ‘method of the remainder’. From the time of the most ancient Christian communities, the development of individual charisms and of the hierarchy has ‘set apart’ those who have chosen the better part (*klēros*) [...]. There remain then by simple subtraction the ordinary baptized persons, the laity.”³ This condescending and negative view of the laity is ancient. It originates in an elitism, that is to say a dualism that is not the best legacy to Christianity of an aristocratic and Platonizing antiquity, relayed thereafter through the oligarchical and monarchical structures of Germanic societies but also through an encratism just as ancient as Judeo-Christians – that of the second-century sermon on ‘one hundred, sixty, and thirty for one’ (an allusion to the parable in Mark 4:20), which reserved the better spiritual ‘return’ to the martyrs and to continent ascetics (one hundred for one, and sixty for one!). The simple ‘just ones’ of the Christian people were not allocated more than thirty for one.”⁴

It would be a mistake, however, to think that such a depreciating view of the position of the laity in the Church was universally accepted in the first centuries of Christianity. On the contrary, there is clear evidence that the theology taking shape at that time did not seek to diminish the role of the laity on account of their lack of ordination. An example can be found in the words of Saint Augustine, who in *The City of God*,

³ J. FONTAINE: “The Practice of Christian Life: The Birth of the Laity.” In: *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*. Eds. B. MCGINN, J. MEYENDORFF, J. LECLERCQ. New York 1985, p. 453.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 454.

commenting on the words of the Book of Revelation (20:6), writes: “Now St John having said, ‘On such the second death shall have no power’, proceeds thus: ‘But they shall be the priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years’. Now this is not meant only of those whom the Church peculiarly calls bishops and priests, but as we are all called Christians, because of our mystical chrism, ‘our unction’, so are we all priests in being the members of one Priest. Whereupon St Peter calls us, ‘A royal priesthood, an holy nation’ (1 Pet 2:9).”⁵ Marie-Françoise Baslez further reminds that the emergence within the Church of the distinction between clergy and laity – appearing from the turn of the second and third centuries and based on the ecclesial model presented in the writings of Saint Ignatius of Antioch – was originally grounded in the definition of a ministerial hierarchy consisting of three levels: the bishop, the presbyter (or elder, who would later become the priest), and the deacon.⁶ Consequently, “clericalization went hand in hand with professionalization, especially in the Churches of Africa. These were the ones that revived, in order to enhance the privileges of the bishop, the Latin word *sacerdos*, which designated one who performed sacred rites, by virtue of his special calling to celebrate the sacrifice. Tertullian distinguished between ‘sacerdotal functions’ and the ‘functions of the laity’. This term, derived from the Greek *laos*, was used by Cyprian to denote the ‘people established in the Church’. As such, they were occasionally consulted by the bishop on matters of discipline and clerical promotion.”⁷ Does this mean, then, that theologically speaking, the lack of ordination – and therefore the inability to exercise the functions derived from it – made the laity a lower category of members within the People of God? Jacques Fontaine recalls that already at the beginning of the 3rd century, Tertullian “reflected the lack of precision at Carthage regarding the distribution of ‘ministerial’ tasks between laity and clergy [...]. Tertullian based on Rev 1:6 the question he posed in chapter 7 of his Exhortation to Chastity: ‘Is it not true that we also, the laity, are priests? [...]. That which constitutes the difference between the order of priests and the people is the authority in the church [...]’. The function of exercising authority – with all the social, judiciary, and, in the large sense,

⁵ SAINT AUGUSTINE: *The City of God*. Trans. J. HEALEY. Vol. 2. Edinburgh 1909, pp. 261–262, [Book XX, Chapter X].

⁶ Cf. M.-F. BASLEZ: “Kościoły w Kościele, stopniowa strukturyzacja.” In: *Po Jezusie. Pierwsze wieki chrześcijaństwa*. Eds. R. DUPONT-ROC, A. GUGGENHEIM. Lutyńia 2022, pp. 449, 453 [trans. R. ZAJĄCZKOWSKI, no official English translation available].

⁷ Ibidem, p. 453.

political nuances of the Old Latin word *auctoritas* – is translated visibly by the privileged place that the members of the clergy of the church occupy materially in what will be called the presbyterium, that is, the semicircular bench that surrounds, along the wall of the apse, the ‘cathedra’ of the bishop, in opposition to the *quadratum populi*. Tertullian insisted on the fact that in case of necessity a layperson may just as well baptize as preside over the Eucharist: ‘There where the members of the ecclesiastical order do not sit together, you are alone to make the offering, to baptize, to be priest on your own account, because there where the three are reunited the church is found – even though these are the laity’.”⁸

The Synod and “the lay spirituality”

The tension that had already manifested itself in the first centuries of the Church’s existence, connected with grounding the theology of the People of God in the term *laos* – used to designate the entirety of the faithful – may be summarized as follows: on the one hand, the emerging ecclesiology clearly recognized the equal dignity of all the baptized and presented them as a community of companions on the journey, united by baptism and personal friendship with Christ.⁹ On the other hand, the distinction between laity and clergy – initially introduced to differentiate sacerdotal functions, which conferred the right to celebrate the liturgy, and later, beginning with the time of Emperor Constantine, associated with the gradual granting of specific privileges to the clergy¹⁰ – led to a slow depreciation of the position of the laity in the Church. What was the way out of this situation? It seems that already in the early centuries of the Church, amid the emerging division, an effort was made to discover an authentically ecclesial identity proper to the laity – one that would strengthen their place and role within the community of the People of God. Perhaps for this reason, as Jacques Fontaine finds “interesting to see Clement of Rome, who wrote in

⁸ J. FONTAINE: “The Practice of Christian Life: The Birth of the Laity...,” pp. 455–456.

⁹ Cf. A. PRONIEWSKI, M. ANIKIEJ: “Synodalność Kościoła – czy na dzisiejsze czasy?” *Society: Studies, Research, and Documents in the Field of the Church’s Social Teaching* 157/1 (2022), pp. 44–45.

¹⁰ Cf. B. KUMOR: *History of the Church. Vol. 1: Christian Antiquity*. Lublin 2023, pp. 122–123.

Greek from the city of Rome, employing for the first time the word layman (*laikos*) in a sense that does not differ very much from our own [...]. Clement was drawn to use the word and to define it. If the function of ‘a particular service has fallen upon the high priest’, Levites (the context suggests that he sees in them the ‘figures of bishops, priests, and Christian deacons’), ‘those of the laity are bound by precepts proper to laity’ [...]. Clement’s phrase proposes in the church of Christ a positive specificity for the lay tradition. It postulates the existence of rules of life distinct from those of the future *ordo sacerdotalis* and particular to the lay tradition.”¹¹ What did this mean in practice? Questions such as the celibacy of bishops, priestly continence, the duties of presbyters, and the delineation of typically lay spheres of engagement in the world were only beginning to take shape. Yet there was an awareness that one essential aspect of the role of the laity in the early Church was to support and legitimize the bishop’s authority. “From the beginnings of the organization of the African church – writes Fontaine – the bishop had to be assisted by a council of *seniores laici* elected by the Christian people, a council whose origin may go back to the Jewish community. This council assured, with the bishop, an administrative and governmental function and also jurisdiction and teaching. The correspondence of Cyprian contains the same message. If the bishop of Carthage was convinced that his authority was delegated to him by God, he knew that concretely he held it just as much from the Christian people as from his clergy.”¹² This undoubtedly reflects the same spirit that animated the first synodal gatherings, though it is difficult to identify within it the foundations of a specifically lay spirituality or way of life.

“There remained, then, great permeability between the Christian people and a clergy – notes Jacques Fontaine – that was far from constituting a clerical class. In large part, it was still recruited directly from among the best of the laity.”¹³ This distinction, however, becomes evident in the functioning of the synods that were so crucial to the development of the early Church. “As far as we know – writes Józef Grzywaczewski – synodal sessions lasted only a few days. They were attended principally by bishops, who could be accompanied by priests and deacons as travel assistants, secretaries, or theological advisers. Lower clergy, even if present in the assembly hall, did not have voting rights. Antoni Żurek writes that ‘some assemblies of

¹¹ J. FONTAINE: “The Practice of Christian Life: The Birth of the Laity...,” p. 455.

¹² Ibidem, p. 456.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 460.

bishops were held in churches, and in those cases the faithful could be present' to listen to the proceedings and support the participants with their prayer."¹⁴ Bolesław Kumor makes a similar observation: synods did not gather the general body of the faithful, but bishops. When all the bishops of the East or the West participated, they were called general synods; when they gathered the bishops of a given patriarchate under the leadership of the patriarch, they were patriarchal synods; and when they assembled bishops from a given country, metropolis, or diocese, they were respectively national, provincial, or diocesan synods. Of special significance were the synods of Constantinople, which brought together under the patriarch's leadership the bishops of nearby episcopal sees and those residing in the imperial capital, and likewise the papal synods of Rome, held under the authority of the Bishop of Rome.¹⁵ In the following centuries of the Church's first millennium, the form of the synods changed somewhat, but this did not result in greater participation of the laity. "Catholic diocesan synods were convened for various purposes – primarily to preserve the purity of faith, ecclesiastical discipline, and order. At these gatherings, the clergy were informed of the decrees of the Apostolic See and the resolutions of provincial synods. During the synods, changes to liturgical rubrics were made, and the bishops' own instructions were promulgated. By right, the cathedral chapter, the clergy of the diocesan seat, and representatives of the priests from the territory were to participate. Only the bishop, however, possessed legislative authority. All others had merely a consultative voice."¹⁶ It seems, therefore, that although the synods of that period constituted a very important element of the Church's identity and served as a source of many doctrinal, pastoral, and liturgical developments, they were not, as such, accompanied by any significant increase in lay participation. Synodality, as a valuable and desirable "way of being" of the Church – its *modus vivendi et operandi* – was, in that era, still limited to a chosen and rather elite "segment" of the ecclesial community. Despite this, Jacques Fontaine maintains that even at that time the foundations of a specific spirituality proper to the laity – a distinct "lay spirituality" – were beginning to take shape. "The Constantinian turning point in the first third of the fourth century – argues Fontaine – followed by the official suppression of ancient

¹⁴ J. GRZYWACZEWSKI: "Tradycja synodalna w pierwszych wiekach." In: *Synodalność wyzwaniem dla Kościoła w Polsce...*, p. 73.

¹⁵ Cf. B. KUMOR: *Historia Kościoła...*, p. 139.

¹⁶ A. PRONIEWSKI, M. ANIKIEJ: "Synodalność Kościoła – czy na dzisiejsze czasy?...", p. 47.

paganism in the age of Theodosius (from 379 to 395), started a new course open to the penetration of Christianity in all of Roman society. The laity began to bring to bear all their weight, both for better and for worse. By the beginning of the sixth century, the fall of Rome, which had politically disappeared in 476, handed over medieval society in the West to the spiritual authority and often, involuntarily, to the temporal authority of the clergy, at first of the bishops, but also of the abbots. But the Carolingian 'reform' of the eighth and ninth centuries gave new attention to the laity and to reflection on their way of life. These three great phases are the starting points for [...] the difficult birth of a 'spirituality of the laity' in the life of the Christian people."¹⁷

A specific vocation

Efforts to strengthen the position of the laity in the Church by seeking a spirituality or a particular vocation distinctive to them began to gain momentum during the period of the Counter-Reformation. This process, however, is not always evaluated positively, especially since it ultimately led to a reinforcement of the division between clergy and laity – a division that gradually, more than baptism, became the fundamental point of reference for Catholic identity. "The Spanish theologian José R. Villar notes – observes Janusz Bujak – that the Catholic theology and practice in recent centuries emphasized the distinction between clerics and the faithful, as a reaction to Protestant thought and its assertion of the equality of all the baptized. This explains the weak theological and magisterial references to the idea of a common Christian vocation before the Second Vatican Council. The sharpening of differences between clergy and laity inevitably led to the creation of an image of the Church as a pyramidal institution, divided into two sectors: *ecclesia docens*, the depository of function and authority, and *ecclesiaicens*, composed of the baptized who were subject to the clergy, on whom the primary responsibility for mission rested, while the baptized were to 'help' them, yet without bearing personal responsibility."¹⁸

¹⁷ J. FONTAINE: "The Practice of Christian Life: The Birth of the Laity...", pp. 454–455.

¹⁸ J. BUJAK: "Teologiczne podstawy synodalności." In: *Synodalność wyzwaniem dla Kościoła w Polsce...*, p. 55.

Janusz Bujak adds that, according to Villar, the Second Vatican Council overcame this image of the Church as a *societas inaequalium*, by emphasizing that all the baptized hold equal rights and a common dignity by virtue of their participation in the one priesthood of Christ, which is realized in the Church as the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood.¹⁹ Yet one might ask whether Villar's thesis regarding this overcoming is not somewhat overly optimistic. Indeed, the Council's *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* clearly emphasizes that "[a]s sharers in the role of Christ as priest, prophet, and king, the laity have their work cut out for them in the life and activity of the Church. Their activity is so necessary within the Church communities that without it the apostolate of the pastors is often unable to achieve its full effectiveness."²⁰ Similarly, the apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici* of John Paul II – on the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and in the world – explicitly reiterates the truth that, by the power of baptism, lay persons receive in their own proper dimension a share in the threefold office of Jesus Christ: priestly, prophetic, and kingly.²¹ The fundamental difficulty, however, lies in the interpretation of what exactly this proper dimension of participation entails. The exhortation *Christifideles laici*, referring to the words of the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, explains that "[t]he secular character is properly and particularly that of the lay faithful [...]. The 'world' thus becomes the place and the means for the lay faithful to fulfill their Christian vocation. [...] 'The secular character of the lay faithful is not therefore to be defined only in a sociological sense, but most especially in a theological sense. The term secular must be understood in light of the act of God the creator and redeemer, who has handed over the world to women and men, so that they may participate in the work of creation, free creation from the influence of sin and sanctify themselves in marriage or the celibate life, in

¹⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 55–56.

²⁰ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* "*Apostolicam actuositatem*" (18.11.1965), no. 10. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html [accessed 1.08.2023].

²¹ Cf.: JOHN PAUL II: *Apostolic Exhortation "Christifideles laici"*, no. 14. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html? [accessed 29.10.2025]; SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church "Lumen gentium"*, [nos. 10–12]. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html [accessed 29.10.2025].

a family, in a profession and in the various activities of society’.”²² In practice, this means that everything which for the clergy may constitute an additional or exceptional task becomes, for the laity, their proper mission: to seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs such as economics, science, politics, culture, or various forms of social involvement.

Defining the place and role of the laity in the Church through the lens of their specific vocation – as articulated by the Second Vatican Council and further developed in *Christifideles laici* – undoubtedly deepens the understanding of the ecclesial identity proper to the laity. Yet, in a certain sense, it still halts the development of this understanding halfway. For by delimiting a sphere of temporal affairs as specific to the laity – matters which for the clergy may be secondary or exceptional – the remaining domain of “spiritual affairs” in the broad sense becomes effectively reserved for the clergy. This involves not only the governing authority in the Church, sacramental administration, or liturgical preaching, but also many other spiritual activities – pastoral, evangelizing, formative, and devotional. This “half-step” situation means that, apart from defining a specific and distinctive vocation for the laity (concern with worldly affairs) and allowing a relatively narrow range of other forms of engagement (involvement of the laity in liturgy, catechesis, or certain missionary activities), a significant area of participation in the life and mission of the Church still remains inaccessible to them (or accessible only to a limited extent). The fact that, in light of *Christifideles laici*, this area appears as proper to the clergy does not, however, arise necessarily from the nature of their vocation. Rather, it could – and indeed should – constitute a common sphere of mission shared by both clergy and laity, and a space of close collaboration between them. This is particularly true with regard to evangelization, common discernment, and shared participation in the process of decision-making at various levels of ecclesial life. It is precisely this perspective that characterizes the vision of the Church which Pope Francis closely associates with the idea of synodality.

²² JOHN PAUL II: *Apostolic Exhortation “Christifideles laici”*..., no. 15; cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church “Lumen gentium”*..., no. 31.

A co-shared mission

Already in the first year of his pontificate, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis set the direction for further reflection on the place and role of the laity in the Church. “In virtue of their baptism – writes the Pope – 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 to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love.”²³ These words of Pope Francis are crucial because they identify evangelization as the vocation that naturally flows from baptism and belongs to all believers – not only to the clergy. Moreover, Pope does not limit the evangelizing activity of the laity merely to the witness of a Christian life; he calls for the courageous proclamation of Christ through word and explicit testimony, in ways adapted to the concrete situations in which believers find themselves.²⁴ Equally significant is the fact that Francis sees the necessity of lay activity not only in the sphere of worldly affairs, but also in the evangelizing and pastoral dimension of the Church’s life, because, as he writes, “in all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization. The People of God is holy because of this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*. This means that it does not err in belief, even though it may not find words to express its faith. The Spirit guides it in truth and leads it to salvation. As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God.”²⁵ In this way, Pope Francis unites the universal baptismal call to evangelization with the reality of the *sensus fidei*, which makes the laity natural

²³ FRANCIS: *Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii gaudium”*, no. 120. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html [accessed 29.10.2025].

²⁴ Cf. *ibidem*, no. 121.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, no. 119.

partners of the clergy in the processes of discernment and decision-making within the Church. It is precisely this participatory process, grounded in the *sensus fidei* and aimed at building the unity and mission of the Church, that constitutes the essence of synodality.

One may therefore conclude that Francis's vision of shared responsibility between clergy and laity for the Church's mission – centred on the proclamation of the Gospel – finds its deepening and development precisely in the idea of synodality. This means understanding the Church as the pilgrim People of God, in which all the baptized, in addition to their particular vocations according to their state of life, share in a synodal way the responsibility for the essential dimension of the Church's mission. *The Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* expresses this clearly: "Synod of Bishops in its two sessions has permitted us today to present to the Holy Father and to all the Churches this witness to what we have experienced and the fruit of our discernment for a renewed missionary impulse. During each stage, the journey was characterised by the wisdom of the 'sense of faith' (*sensus fidei*) of the People of God. Step by step, we came to understand that at the heart of the *Synod 2021–2024. For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* there is a call to joy and to the renewal of the Church in following the Lord, in committing to service of His mission, and in searching for ways to be faithful. This call is based upon a shared baptismal identity [...]. It challenges all the Baptised, without exception: 'The whole People of God is an agent of the proclamation of the Gospel. Every baptised person is called to be a protagonist of mission since we are all missionary disciples'."²⁶ This is what Jacek Kiciński fittingly calls a co-shared mission,²⁷ whose synodal

²⁶ *Final Document of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission"*, [nos. 3–4]. Available online: <https://www.synod.va/en/news/final-document-of-the-xvi-assembly.html> [accessed 29.10.2025].

²⁷ "Kiciński – writes Ireneusz Werbiński – confronts his reflection here with the contemporary signs of the times in which the Church fulfills its mission [...]. The response to the emerging signs of the times is above all the communion of mission [...]. The author points to the presence of a co-shared mission. Today, the ability to participate and cooperate skillfully in the ministry of evangelization becomes extremely important. Hence the emphasis on the necessity of the ongoing evangelization of culture and the inculturation of the Gospel. This should take place within the space of dialogue with all people. In this way, actions in favour of peace and justice can be undertaken. All of this calls for a holistic vision of the Church community." I. WERBIŃSKI: "Jacek Kiciński CMF: Duchowość misji współdzielonej. Studium w świetle współczesnego Magisterium Kościoła." *Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny* 16 (2023), p. 241.

understanding opens the way to completing the step initiated by the Second Vatican Council toward a deeper interpretation of the place and role of the laity in the Church. What does this synodal understanding consist of? Above all, it is not about defining distinctive features that constitute the identity of the laity, but about indicating the manner in which cooperation between clergy and laity should be expressed – precisely in those areas of the Church’s life that they are called to shape together. The point of reference for such an understanding is the historical tradition of the early synods and the synodal heritage of the Church; yet this is not a simple return to the Christian past. Through the unprecedented inclusion of lay people in the entirety of the synodal process – on a scale never before seen in the Church – Pope Francis has demonstrated that his intention is also to advance the very concept of the synod in a way that shapes the Church’s future. This development is both anticipated and reflected in the very idea of synodality itself. In this context, the idea of synodality contributes not only to indicating future directions for the Church’s growth but also opens up new perspectives on looking at the laity

Przemysław Sawa is right to emphasize that the experience of synodality motivates the discovery of the co-responsibility of all the baptized – clergy, consecrated persons, and laity – for the Church, its functioning, and its mission. “This flows directly from the communal nature of the believing community. The first pillar of this understanding is the recognition of the personal subjectivity of the baptized. A proper vision of the Church does not deny this subjectivity to any of its members, and the acceptance of a hierarchical structure can in no way, by its very nature, serve as justification for introducing divisions within the community.”²⁸ This follows directly from the very essence of synodality, which is defined in *The Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* as follows: “This *modus vivendi et operandi* works through the community listening to the Word and celebrating the Eucharist, the brotherhood of communion and the coresponsibility and participation of the whole People of God in its life and mission, on all levels and distinguishing between various ministries and roles.”²⁹ It should be emphasized that this co-responsibility, in the case of the laity, embraces a broader field of activity than that

²⁸ P. SAWA: “Synodalność w Kościele katolickim i innych wspólnotach chrześcijańskich. Możliwości i granice inspiracji dla odnowy Kościoła.” In: *Synodalność wyzwaniem dla Kościoła w Polsce...*, p. 247.

²⁹ *Final Document of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission”..., no. 30.

indicated by the Second Vatican Council and post-conciliar documents as characteristic of their “secular character.” In this respect, the idea of synodality not only justifies the participation of the laity in forms of ecclesial activity that have traditionally been attributed to the clergy, but also develops the original idea of the synod by pointing to the need to expand the circle of its full and legitimate participants to include lay persons. For this reason, as Przemysław Sawa observes, “the co-responsibility of the laity cannot be limited merely to the practical or organizational sphere. What is crucial is the participation of the laity in discernment and governance in unity with the bishops and the presbyters sent by them. The challenge remains to maintain a balance between lay involvement and hierarchical ministry. [...] However, there are no theological objections to lay participation in the governance of various ecclesial bodies at the universal, diocesan (e.g. consecrated and lay persons at the head of curial offices), or parish levels. [...] Furthermore, it also seems worthwhile to ask about the participation of the faithful in the selection of candidates for important ecclesial offices – especially that of the diocesan bishop and parish priest – as well as about the right to present such candidates to the appropriate ecclesiastical authority.”³⁰

Conclusions

There is no doubt that synodality, as understood by Pope Francis, and the synodal vision of the Church associated with it, represent a step forward in the understanding of the place and role of the laity within the ecclesial community. At the same time, they signify not only a return to the early Christian idea of the synod but also its genuine development. In this way, the programme announced in the *Preparatory Document* for the Synod on Synodality is brought to realization: “Within this context, synodality represents the main road for the Church, called to renew herself under the action of the Spirit and by listening to the Word. The ability to imagine a different future for the Church and her institutions, in keeping with the mission she has received, depends largely on the decision to

³⁰ P. SAWA: “Synodalność w Kościele katolickim i innych wspólnotach chrześcijańskich...,” p. 249.

initiate processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every person can participate and contribute. At the same time, the decision to ‘journey together’ is a prophetic sign for the human family, which needs a shared project capable of pursuing the good of all.”³¹ Of course, synodality cannot violate the sacramental and hierarchical structure of the Church and must respect the distinction between the ministry that arises from episcopal and priestly ordination and the service proper to all the baptized. The co-sharing of mission between laity and clergy should never diminish or replace the specific tasks proper to bishops and priests.³² Rather, what is needed is a model of cooperation and co-responsibility for the Church in which the ministries of clergy and laity do not stand in opposition but complement one another – each preserving its proper prerogatives while taking into account individual gifts and charisms. Such a model undoubtedly requires great mutual openness, maturity, trust, and the cultivation of a genuinely synodal culture. Yet if, as Pope Francis has stressed, “[i]t is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium,”³³ then it is the duty of all the faithful to embrace this challenge.

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³¹ *Preparatory Document for the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission”*, no. 9. Available online: https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-21x21/en_prepa_book.pdf [accessed 5.11.2025].

³² Cf. P. SAWA: “Synodalność w Kościele katolickim i innych wspólnotach chrześcijańskich...,” p. 251.

³³ FRANCIS: *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17.10.2015). Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anni-versario-sinodo.html [accessed 5.11.2025].

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