

THE BUSSOLA CONFERENCE

Modernist Synod aims to make Church liberal democracy

ECCLESIA

09_10_2023



**Stefano
Fontana**



*We publish below the full speech (original title: **Il modernismo filosofico della nuova sinodalità**) given on Monday 3 October by Stefano Fontana, at the International Conference "The Synodal Tower of Babel", organised by The Daily Compass in Rome, at the Ghione Theatre.*

In this talk I will attempt to examine the main categories of thought that characterise the new notion of synodality. I will do so using three sources: the documents on the forthcoming Synod, including Francis' 2015 speech on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, synodal praxis in this pontificate, especially the Synod on the Family of 2014-2015, and the main supporting theological literature.¹

As it has been written, "the Synod changes, synodality remains".² it is therefore on the concept of synodality that one must focus, since this Synod and the next synods will depend on it. Indeed, the stabilisation of synodal praxis as a permanent, ongoing process will derive from it. It then becomes important to consider which categories of thought feed this notion. I will deal in particular with three topics: the new synodality as "time", the new synodality as "praxis", the new synodality as "procedure".

1. The new synodality as "time"

Synodality is widely defined as a "process". When the International Theological Commission tried to describe it ³, it used expressions that indicate precisely a process: "style" of life, "way of living and operating", "processes and structures", "events". The theologians do the same: "walking together", "coming together as an assembly", "listening to each other", "dialogue", "community discernment", "consensus building", "decision-making"⁴.

Synodality as a process is also assigned the task of clarifying the very notion of synodality ⁵. Synodality is supposed to be a process that nurtures a progressive awareness in the Church of what synodality is. Philosophically one should say that it is a typically Hegelian historical-dialectical process. Synodality not as something that has a history, but as something that is made in history. It is the history of synodality, or rather, synodality as history, that will tell us what synodality is. What it is will be told by events. This involves talking about synodality as a process. Many are searching in Scripture, in the history of the Church and in that of other Christian denominations, for hints that may constitute "precedents" for a new synodality ⁶, but these are just hints, not

definitions, nor, even less, doctrine. A doctrine on synodality does not exist. Moreover, strictly speaking, the Synod on synodality is not asked to define this doctrine, but to live a process in the events of which synodality will be shown to be something that "is built up along the way, but starting from the base".⁷ Here lies the subversive character of the new synodality, its being "without form".⁸

These initial observations tell us that a first category of thought present in the vision of the new synodality is that of time: historicity. A metaphysical approach to the theme is missing. Synodality is said to be a walking, a setting in motion, a traversing of time, a vitalism... and the events of this walking are both material and of consciousness at the same time, since, modernistically, the novelty of the events is at one with the novelty of the acquisitions of consciousness.⁹ The meaning of walking together is not given from the beginning and is not marked by the end to be achieved, but emerges in time and from time. What synodality is we will never know definitively, because it is constitutively a vital process. Garrigou-Lagrange said in the 1940s that for the *Nouvelle Théologie* a theology that is no longer current is to be considered a false theology. The same can be said for the new synodality: true synodality will be the one that is current in each instance.

2. Synodality as "praxis"

The events of a process over time are praxis. Some key-words of the new synodality, such as listen, integrate, share, do not indicate contents but attitudes, actions, i.e. praxis. In this praxis, the action of the individual persons summoned and the action of the community summoned come together in a dialectical synthesis, the particular and the universal coincide in the global: a hundred persons, supposedly Catholics, will constitute the new synodality. Coming together and common accord are in themselves practices producing meaning. Evident in this range of concepts that revolve around the notion of synodality are the influences of existentialism, Marxism, Hegelianism and, in general, praxist historicism, especially of a hermeneutics separated from metaphysics. This is all the more evident (and worrying) when one considers that in this synthesis of opinions coagulated over time, the voice of the Holy Spirit is confidently indicated, just as in the Hegelian system. Monsignor Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Synod, wrote that the Synod aims "to involve as much as possible all the baptised, so as to listen to their voice and to recognise in it and through it the voice of the Holy Spirit".¹⁰ Since we are talking about praxis, we cannot fail to note the great clash between two claims: that the voice of the Holy Spirit is manifested in praxis and that this praxis has been instrumentally placed in the hands of "a small organising group"¹¹ with homogeneous and pre-established ideas.

That the new synodality is praxis also emerges from two other considerations.

The first concerns the close relationship in the synodal process between method and content. As I have already pointed out above, it has been decided to start walking even though it is not yet clear, on a conceptual and doctrinal level, what synodality is, and therefore where to go. Here, then, method and content coincide. Meeting, talking to each other, deciding together in a kind of elitist brainstorming are already synodality in action. The method is not only applicative, it is constitutive of synodality. Content is immanent to method. This also explains why participation in the synodal process cannot have any limits: everyone must be able to participate, even atheists or enemies of Christ. If method and content coincide, the act of participating already carries with it its content significance. Synodality will no longer be *of the bishops* or other categories within the Church specified from time to time by the ecclesiastical authority, but it will be of those who participate, which already takes place according to a synodal method and therefore according to a synodal content. The new synodality will no longer even be *of Christians*, much less *of Catholics*. They would still claim that the content establishes limits to the method, but philosophical and theological modernism thinks it established long ago and definitively that the opposite is true, namely that the method precedes the content. For

philosophical and theological modernism, it is the method - praxis - that limits the content and not the other way round.

Let us now look at the second consideration on the new synodality as praxis. If we look at the course of recent synods and, above all, the one on the family, we must note that its effects have mainly concerned praxis. Strictly speaking, *Amoris Laetitia* did not establish: it alluded, it did not exclude, but it did not establish. The change of doctrine through the new synodality is not left to doctrine, but to praxis. It is praxis that decides what is done. The bishops of the Buenos Aires region *did*, and this really counted, in the sense of establishing what is to be done. What is done coincides with what must be done, from the point of view of history (and praxis) being and having to be are the same thing. How can one fail to see in all this the influence of the most classic strands of philosophical and theological modernism, which the new notion of synodality transposes with great fidelity? Truly the new synodality "comes from very far away".¹²

3. The new synodality as "procedure"

The categories of "time" and of "praxis" immerse the new synodality in history. It therefore becomes obligatory to assume from history and present time certain forms of worldly praxis. If it is a matter of time and praxis, the Church cannot forget that it lives in a certain time and that it must learn from that time the forms of praxis that are also useful for itself.¹³ Some forms of these practices aimed at decision-making refer back to the democratic method and, more precisely, to procedural liberal democracy. The literature on the new synodality strongly insists that the way of proceeding of synodality cannot be equated with that of a parliamentary assembly.¹⁴ However, some point out that one must take into account "at least some analogies with those taking place in civil society";¹⁵ "to imagine that the verification of the *consensus fidelium* does not open the door to forms of democratisation of the church is to fall into a form of spiritualisation of ecclesial life and thus prevent any reform that promotes co-responsibility".¹⁶ If decisions are to be taken, "procedures borrowed from the experience of democratic societies cannot be set aside".¹⁷

If the decisions were still placed in the hands of the Pope and if he were still the one to decide, then the reformism of the new synodality would be compromised, because that would be putting a stopgap on what time and praxis will have made emerge in the ecclesial conscience.¹⁸ A significant opening in this sense has already been made with regard to the Synod on the family: the final document also included positions rejected by a majority of the synod fathers, and in *Amoris Laetitia* Francis declared that he did not want to say anything different from the Synod's conclusions.¹⁹

It has also been said that, just as in the past the Church had adopted the monarchical political system, nothing would now prohibit it from adopting the democratic system, ²⁰ not taking into account that the adoption of the monarchical scheme was not a mere borrowing from the institutions of the time, but referred to the theological concept of 'kingship'. There is no doubt, therefore, that forms of democratic praxis of a worldly kind will enter into synodal procedures, they will obligatorily enter into them given the dependence of the synodal procedure on the praxis in force at this time. Also in this regard, it is of particular interest to note that the form of democracy that is examined in order to compare it with the decision-making procedures of the new synodality, also in order to highlight their mutual irreducibility, is only and always modern procedural liberal democracy.

The comparison is not made with democracy according to Leo XIII, but with the democracy of Locke and Rousseau. When one argues for the possibility and necessity of adopting democratic procedures, one is undoubtedly referring to procedural democracy, which the Social Doctrine of the Church has always condemned. It is this and not other forms that will permanently enter into the procedures for the formation of an ecclesial public opinion made to coincide with the 'voice' of the Holy Spirit.

Concluding remarks

The new synodality, considered in its own categories of *time*, *praxis*, and *procedure*, is the concluding moment of a long journey that has spanned the whole of modernity. Modernism was an eminently philosophical phenomenon. The idea of transforming the Church not from without but from within also had this meaning: to introduce philosophical categories into theology that would revolutionise it, so that it would be Catholic theology that would deform itself. There is no doubt that this has largely happened and that the notion of the new synodality is a coherent culmination of this attempt. Existentialist and historicist hermeneutics, separated from metaphysics, will dominate: the contents of faith will be what interpretation will have sedimented over time, a succession of shared and sedimented interpretations, the fruit of an ecclesial public opinion born in synodal debate, but still only interpretations.

¹ For complete background information on the new synodality, see: J. Loredó - José Antonio Ureta, *Processo sinodale: un vaso di Pandora - 100 domande e 100 risposte*, preface by Cardinal Raymond Leo Burke, Associazione Tradizione Famiglia Proprietà, Rome 2023.

2 G. Canobbio, *Sulla sinodalità*, "Teologia" 41 (2016) 2, p. 270.

3 Commissione Teologica Internazionale, *La sinodalità nella vita e nella missione della Chiesa*, 2 marzo 2018.

4 R. Repole, *Sinodalità. Il contributo della teologia*, "Teologia", 46 (2021), p. 519.

5 There is a fairly generalised view that the concept of synodality is still undefined and in need of further investigation. This is said both by theological positions that we could call "cautious" [cf. M. de Salis, *La sinodalità della Chiesa. Sensi e contorni di una espressione*, in "Annales Theologici" 36 (2022) 2, pp. 283-316] and that intend to curb excessively progressive drifts, as well as from positions that are instead more in vogue in order to accelerate the process underway.

6 Cfr. G. Canobbio, *Sulla Sinodalità* cit., pp. 249-273; Id., *Tradizione e pratiche sinodali in Occidente*, "Teologia", 48 (2023) 1, pp. 15-62; U. Sartorio, *Sinodalità. Per una chiesa in riforma*, "Studia patavina", 66 (2019) 2, pp. 279-292; A. Barbi, *Discernere e deliberare insieme. Percorsi negli Atti degli Apostoli*, "Studia Patavina", LXVI (2019) 2, pp. 239-250. AA.VV., *Riforma sinodale della Chiesa cattolica e dialogo ecumenico: una possibile e feconda convergenza*, "Studia patavina", 69 (2022) 2, pp. 207-242; AA.VV., *La sinodalità della Chiesa*, "Annales Theologici", 36 (2022) 2.

7 S. M. Lanzetta, *Un Sinodo che viene da molto lontano*, "Fides Catholica", 18 (2022) 1, p. 5.

8 P. De Marco, *La démocratie dans l'Église. Réflexions sur le "chemin synodal" allemand*, "Catholica", n. 149, autunno 2020.

9 – The new vitalistic formulas "must be and remain suitable for the faith as well as for the believer" (S. Pio X, Pascendi Dominici gregis. *Sugli errori del modernismo*, Cantagalli, Siena 2007, p. 58).

10 M. Grech, *Il popolo di Dio soggetto del percorso sinodale*, "Teologia", 48 (2023) 1, p. 4.

11 S. M. Lanzetta, *Un sinodo che viene da molto lontano* cit., p. 6.

12 As the title of the already mentioned work by Serafino M. Lanzetta cit.

13 Cfr. G. Canobbio, *Dal Sinodo alla sinodalità*, "Studia Patavina", LXIX (2022) 2, pp. 243-259, especially pages 256-259.

¹⁴ M. A. Ferrari, *Sinodalità e democrazia: punti di contatto e differenze*, "Annales Theologici", 36 (2022) 2, pp. 475-494.

¹⁵ G. Canobbio, *Dal Sinodo alla sinodalità* cit., p. 255.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 256.

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 257.

¹⁸ "But in the end, if it is still up to him to have the last word, we risk paving the way for new autocratic systems" (*Ibid.*, p. 258).

¹⁹ Cfr. S. Fontana, *Esortazione o rivoluzione? Tutti i problemi di Amoris laetitia*, Fede & Cultura, Verona 2019.

²⁰ "Proposals to assimilate the Church to a democracy are specular to those that described it as a monarchy" (G. Canobbio, *Sulla Sinodalità* cit., p. 258); "In any case, Christians - whether they are aware of it or not - bring the *mens democratica*, of which western society is permeated, inside the Church" (R. Repole, *Sinodalità. Il contributo della teologia* cit., p. 525).