SYNODALITY IN THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF THE PHILIPPINES

Roel Joe E. Abonal

Synodality originates from God Himself,[1] a community of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[2] Sacred Scripture is replete with reasons why synodality can be claimed to be already present even in the early Christian community (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). We have been created by a Trinitarian, communitarian God. In Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God claimed for Himself a people and established His covenant with them (Ex 3:6). In the presence of Moses and the community gathered after their liberation from slavery in Egypt, God established His Law that ensures the people's freedom, their communal way of life and His abiding presence in them (Ex 20:1-21). As Jesus gathered the Twelve and preached the Good News to all (Mt 10:1-15), we can see how He re-established God's People and reoriented their laws into a command of loving God and neighbor. When Jesus ascended to heaven (Acts 1:6-11), He sent His Spirit to guide the Church (Acts 2:1-4) and the experiences of the early Christians provide clear manifestations of how synodality was lived out in the first community of disciples.

[1] See International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,* no. 3.

[2] See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 259.

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Recent Developments on Synodality

The Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was convoked at a rather unusual time. There were no heresies that needed to be addressed, no political upheaval affecting the life of the Church that needed to be discussed, and no more kings or queens or emperors who intervened to ensure the unity of the Church. Instead, a rapidly modern world was rising. Church teachings were intact but needed to be examined and proclaimed from a new perspective.

St. John XXIII was relatively old when he was elected to the papacy. Many thought that after the long reign of Pius XII, the cardinals would elect a simple caretaker pope. However, John XXIII did not intend to be a caretaker. From his experiences as Papal Nuncio and Church historian, he realized the need for the Church to be updated, a kind of *aggiornamento* ("bringing up to date") or renewal.

Elected at the age of 77, St. John XXIII knew he would not have a long reign as pope. That was why barely three months after his election, he announced that he would call for an ecumenical council. He immediately took steps to prepare for this occasion by appointing members of preparatory commissions. What was noteworthy about this council was that the Pope wanted it to be truly ecumenical. Thus, observers from other traditions were invited and, unlike other councils, were not persuaded to return to Catholicism in order to join. Another important step the Council took was its pastoral approach instead of the usual doctrinal or dogmatic approaches. Indeed, it was the First Council that issued no anathemas in its pronouncements and focused on its positive messages for all Christians and the world. Furthermore, the active participation of the bishops

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was sought after. They were not to be passive observers but rather true shepherds of their local dioceses and the universal Church as successors to the Apostles.

Attended by more than 2,000 bishops from all over the world, Vatican II produced 16 documents discussing a wide array of topics not only concerning the *ad intra* of the Church but most importantly, its *ad extra*. In the discussion about the Church, the most important documents are *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*.

Some authors argued that while synodality was not particularly mentioned in the proceedings and documents of Vatican II, the radical change in the formulation of *Lumen Gentium* implied a synodal way of looking at the Church. When the debates were taking place, the usual stand was to focus primarily on the hierarchical character of the Church where the pope, the bishops and the clergy would take precedence. However, later, it was proposed and agreed upon by most of the bishops that the common priesthood shared through baptism was the starting point of any discussion on the Church before any talks on hierarchy or charism took place. This paved the way for a new understanding of what membership in the Church should look like.

Lumen Gentium states: "The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light."[3] From the very beginning, God has willed that all people be gathered

[3]Second Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" *(Lumen Gentium), Documents of Vatican Council II,* ed. James Kroeger, MM (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), no. 10.

to Him as witnessed in the life of Israel which now is found in the new covenant in Christ who established the Church. In baptism, the person is incorporated into this new family of God where one is endowed with the gifts of the Spirit and is made child of God.

This proclamation from *Lumen Gentium* fueled a new perspective on the participation of the laity in the Church. Vatican II did not stop with *Lumen Gentium*. Another document of Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* discussed the important role of the laity in the missionary work of the Church. It stressed that by baptism, the laity also bears the three-fold function of Christ as priest, prophet, and king. "The laity likewise share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world."[4]

The laity are called to participate in the Church's activity through their prayer, service, and life of witnessing. *Apostolicam Actuositatem* encouraged the faithful to reach out to the fringes of the world and especially be catalysts in restoring temporal order. "As citizens, they must cooperate with other citizens with their particular skill and on their responsibility. Everywhere and in all things, they must seek the justice of God's kingdom."[5]

The laity's role is indispensable. Since they are primarily immersed in the temporal affairs of the world, they have the power to influence and learn from it. If the Church, the hierarchy in particular, hopes to evangelize the world, the laity's voice must be heard so that the Church as a whole can respond

[4]Second Vatican Council, "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity" *(Apostolicam Actuositatem)*, *Documents of Vatican Council II,* ed. James Kroeger, MM (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), no. 2.

[5]Ibid., no. 7.

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to the challenges of evangelization and avail of the positive advancements the world has achieved. "The Lord renews His invitation to all the laity to come closer to Him every day, recognizing that what is His is also their own (Phil. 2:5), to associate themselves with Him in His saving mission."[6]

By espousing a synodal attitude, the Church can understand a lot from the laity regarding their expertise, reflections, and perspectives. They are the ones who are at the forefront of daily life, raising families and upholding the sanctity of life and marriage. *Apostolicam Actuositatem* has highlighted this: "It has always been the duty of Christian married partners but today it is the greatest part of their apostolate to manifest and prove by their way of life the indissolubility and sacredness of the marriage bond, strenuously to affirm the right and duty of parents and guardians to educate children in a Christian manner, and to defend the dignity and lawful autonomy of the family."[7] Therefore, if the Church teaches that the Universal Church is made up of the communion of local churches and local churches are composed of domestic churches which is the family, the voice of the laity, of parents, and the young are essential to see the different realities besetting the Church. With their voices listened to and their experiences considered, the Church can better understand and hopefully respond to the challenges of everyday human existence.

Moreover, synodality in the documents of Vatican II was not only centered on the laity but also on the hierarchy. It must be noted that the ministerial priesthood is borne out of the common priesthood to serve and guide it. Those who belong to the ministerial priesthood "are endowed with sacred power, serve their brethren, so that all who are of the People of God...

[6]Ibid., no. 33.

[7]Ibid., no. 11.

enjoy a true Christian dignity, working toward a common goal freely and in an orderly way, may arrive at salvation."[8] Here, *Lumen Gentium* had recovered the ancient understanding of the function of the ordained which has been quite lost in the past centuries due to the influence of royal prestige and political entanglements of the hierarchy. "Bishops, therefore, with their helpers, the priests and deacons, have taken up the service of the community, presiding in place of God over the flock, whose shepherds they are, as teachers for doctrine, priests for sacred worship, and ministers for governing."[9]

From this teaching, it can be said that the ministerial priesthood, especially the bishops, is the presider of synodality. They have the responsibility of ensuring that the voices of everyone, particularly in their local Churches are listened to and considered. *Christus Dominus*, another document of Vatican II, established that "since it is the mission of the Church to converse with the human society in which it lives, bishops especially must seek out men and both request and promote dialogue with them. These conversations on salvation ought to be noted for clarity of speech as well as humility and mildness in order that at all times truth may be joined to charity and understanding with love."[10]

Furthermore, *Christus Dominus* encouraged bishops to be present among their flock, listen to their cries and anxieties, and be familiar with their daily lives. "Let them be good shepherds who know their sheep and whose sheep know them. Let them be true fathers who excel in the spirit of love and

[8]Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 18.

[9]Ibid., no. 20.

[10]Second Vatican Council, "Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church" *(Christus Dominus)*, *Documents of Vatican Council II,* ed. James Kroeger, MM (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), no. 13.

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solicitude for all and to whose divinely conferred authority all gratefully submit themselves. Let them so gather and mold the whole family of their flock that everyone, conscious of his own duties, may live and work in the communion of love."[11] Through the bishops, Christ becomes all the more present among the people. On a more practical note, this gesture and attitude of the bishop allows him to be an effective preacher, presider, and pastor for the flock entrusted to him. Synodality becomes possible when the bishop supports, encourages, and practices it.

Moreover, the relationships within the ministerial priesthood also manifest synodality. In each local Church, the diocesan bishop is to have his presbyterium where the priests serve as co-workers of his in the ministry. *Christus Dominus* declared: "All presbyters, both diocesan and religious, participate in and exercise with the bishop the one priesthood of Christ and are thereby constituted prudent cooperators of the episcopal order. In the care of souls, however, the first place is held by diocesan priests who are incardinated or attached to a particular church, for they have fully dedicated themselves in the service of caring for a single portion of the Lord's flock. In consequence, they form one presbytery and one family whose father is the bishop."[12] Together, they form a college, a body whose head is the bishop himself. Collectively, they help the bishop to discharge his pastoral duties as shepherd of the flock in a certain local Church.

As the bishop's representative in a certain portion of the local Church, the pastor or parish priest is essential in helping the bishop determine the pastoral challenges and appropriate responses concerning the parish and the diocese. According

[11]Ibid., no. 16.

[12]Ibid., no. 28.

to *Christus Dominus,* "Pastors, however, are cooperators of the bishop in a very special way, for as pastors in their own name they are entrusted with the care of souls in a certain part of the diocese under the bishop's authority."[13] Therefore, in the exercise of synodality, the pastors also bring to the bishop's attention, usually through presbyteral meetings, the concerns of their parishes. They also listen to and are made aware of other issues of the diocese arising from the reports of other pastors. Here, communion and collaboration with the bishop and the rest of the diocesan clergy are important for synodality to be seen and felt.

Vatican II also mentioned about the collegiality of the bishops. If examined closely, the collegial nature of the bishops' communion manifests a synodal character. The college they compose with the pope as head communicates an image of walking together in the governance of the universal Church. *Lumen Gentium* declared: "The order of bishops, which succeeds to the college of Apostles and gives this apostolic body continued existence, is also the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church, provided we understand this body together with its head the Roman Pontiff and never without this head."[14] If we now understand the college of bishops as succeeding the college of the Apostles, therefore, it can be inferred that they also bear the same character which Jesus Himself has willed that the apostolic college bear. Moreover, this meant togetherness in journeying, praying, governing, and preaching with Peter as the head.

Another breakthrough of the Second Vatican Council was its concern to articulate the *ad extra* of the Church. The Council Fathers deemed it necessary to have a guiding document as

[13]Ibid., no. 30.

[14]Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 22.

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regards the Church's relationship with the world. Notably, *Gaudium et Spes* was not called a "dogmatic" constitution but a "pastoral" one. While the bases of the Council's teaching were dogmas, the Council Fathers were still prophetic enough to foresee that the issues they were discussing would be significant in the future. It must be remembered that Vatican II happened after World War II while nations were slowly piling up their nuclear arsenal. Also, the threats of racism and colonialism continued to prevail, and the economic inequalities only widened steadily. Hence, *Gaudium et Spes* wished to bring everyone back to the reality that humanity is indispensable and human dignity is always intact no matter what. The Constitution states: "For Sacred Scripture teaches that man was created 'to the image of God,' is capable of knowing and loving his Creator, and was appointed by Him as master of all earthly creatures that he might subdue them and use them to God's glory."[15] Moreover, this dignity of man is also rooted not only because of humanity's origin but also because of his destination which is communion with God. The document added: "For man would not exist were he not created by God's love and constantly preserved by it; and he cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to His Creator."[16]

Gaudium et Spes was the Council's invitation for all men of goodwill to dialogue. *Lumen Gentium* can be considered the Church's road map for an internal synodality. *Gaudium et Spes* is the Church's way of assuring the whole world that she is with the entire human race on the way, believers or non-believers

[15]Second Vatican Council, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" *(Gaudium et Spes)*, *Documents of Vatican Council II,* ed. James Kroeger, MM (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), no. 12.

[16]Ibid., no. 19.

alike. The document acknowledged that humanity has become more interdependent with the growing and advancing technology. However, it also noted that such interdependence is not reached fully in technological matters but more so in deeper, interpersonal ones.[17] The social nature of humanity and the growing availability of communicating with each other should foster greater understanding among nations, sadly, this has not been the case. There is always the threat of isolation and selfishness. Failure to dialogue is ironic in a modern world where technology seems to have brought everyone closer. The Council reminded everyone that humanity's "social life is not something added on to man, through his dealings with others, through reciprocal duties, and through fraternal dialogue he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny." To be with others is an essential aspect of being a human person.

In sum, Vatican II did not explicitly mention synodality, but its documents and how it proceeded pointed to synodality. The Council brought everyone back to what is necessary: establishing that relationship with God and others. What fosters, nurtures, and deepens these relationships are the abilities of humanity to listen and walk together despite differences. There is still much more to know about synodality from the context of Vatican II, and what is clear is the fact that it opened and moved the Church closer to this realization.

The ITC Document

On 2 March 2018, the International Theological Commission (ITC), headed by Luis Cardinal Ladaria Ferrer S.J., Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, published *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*. This is perhaps the most deliberate attempt on the part of the Church to look into

[17]Ibid., no. 23.

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and discuss synodality and how it can be helpful in the Church of the Third Millennium.

The document traced back the origins of synodality from both Scripture and Tradition. It also relied on Church magisterium, especially with the Second Vatican Council. It featured ways to live synodality on the local and universal levels by establishing structural reforms. For one, the document proposes forming presbyteral and lay councils in every diocese. Furthermore, it also noted that the present set-up of the Synod of Bishops allows for the participation of bishops from different dioceses. However, the topic of such synods had always been coming from the Vatican. While the goal of the document was to establish the theological foundations of synodality, it also suggested some pastoral orientations which could help make synodality happen at every level of Church life.

In the document, it is said that the theological basis of synodality is the Trinitarian origin and character of the Church. "In this way, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, the Church shares in the life of communion of the Blessed Trinity, which is destined to embrace the whole of humanity."[18] Therefore, it is this communion that is the source and cause for everyone's participation in the Church given their specific gifts and charisms. Such communion and participation are anchored on the fact that everyone in the world is *in via*, on the way to that final destination: God Himself.

This journeying together is guided by no other than the Holy Spirit Himself, whom Christ promised to His Church. If the Spirit is the bond of love in the Trinity, it is also the same

[18]International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (Vatican City: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, March 02, 2018), no. 43.

Spirit who nourishes and guides the Church. "The principle of synodality is the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God."[19] How is the Holy Spirit visible in the Church? The document enumerated that it is manifested "in the equal dignity of the baptized, the universal call to holiness, the participation of all the faithful in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Jesus Christ, the richness of hierarchical and charismatic gifts, and the life and mission of each local Church."[20]

Moreover, the document states that synodality is an expression of the ecclesiology of communion, which *Lumen Gentium* had reoriented through the arrangement of its chapters.[21] It has emphasized that because of baptism, everyone in the Church is "called to play an active role inasmuch as they share in the one priesthood of Christ, and are meant to receive the various charisms given by the Holy Spirit in view of the common good."[22] Everyone needs to contribute and collaborate for the Church is not just about the hierarchy but about everyone—both the lay and the ordained as they compose the one People of God. The gifts and charisms received by each one are meant to build up the Church of Christ.

Having mentioned the need for participation, the document also clarified that participation does not necessarily mean everyone can decide. In a synodal church, each one functions according to his/her gifts and charisms. Therefore, it must be noted that "the authority of Pastors is a specific gift of the Spirit of Christ the Head for the up building of the entire Body, not a delegated and representative function of the people."[23]

[19]Ibid., no. 46.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid., no. 54.

[22]Ibid., no. 55.

[23]Ibid., no. 67.

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Furthermore, in a synodal Church, consultation does not necessarily entail decision-making. Unlike in civil parlance, when there is a consultation, the majority's wish usually is carried over. It is noted, however, that consultation, especially of the faithful, is very important. The ITC declared: "In the synodal Church the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called together to pray, listen, analyze, dialogue, discern and offer advice on taking pastoral decisions which correspond as closely as possible to God's will."[24] However, it is not according to the faithful's gift to decide.[25] That is the gift and function proper to pastors. "A synod, an assembly, a council cannot take decisions without its legitimate Pastors. The synodal process must take place at the heart of a hierarchically structured community."[26] Hence, according to the document, there must be a distinction between decision-making and decision-taking. In decision-making, all the voices in the community are listened to and considered. The pastors should hopefully consider the wishes of the people. In decision-taking, on the other hand, it is the bishop who has the proper authority and competence, for he is the sure and visible sign of apostolicity and catholicity in a given jurisdiction.[27]

In conclusion, there are three things that the document wishes to convey and clarify. First, synodality is a style, a way of life that should be practiced in every level of Church life. It is the Church's specific *modus vivendi et operandi,* which is visible

[24]Ibid., no. 68.

[25]On 26 April 2023, Mario Cardinal Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, and Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ, Archbishop of Luxembourg and General Relator of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, announced to the public Pope Francis's decision to include non-bishops, with a right to vote, to participate in the upcoming Synod.

[26]Ibid., no. 69.

[27]Ibid.

in the celebration of the sacraments and the participation and collaboration of the entire People of God.[28] Second, synodality talks about those specific ecclesial structures that are synodal in character, like the presbyteral councils of the dioceses at a local level and the episcopal conferences of bishops at the regional level.[29] Third, synodality are those events which are called upon by hierarchical authorities that hope to discuss pertinent issues on church life such as ecumenical councils and the synod of bishops.[30]

The ITC document, according to one of the drafters in the sub-committee, Piero Coda said that it was a normal theological development for synodality to find its roots. There was nothing revolutionary in the document, for there were no ruptures with the past.[31] The document gives a better understanding of synodality. However, there needs to be constant updating and reflection on synodality as well as deliberate attempts to make it visible in the life of the Church both at the local and universal levels. Pope Francis, for one, has been promoting and practicing it in his Petrine ministry.

Pope Francis and Synodality

Pope Francis is the Supreme Pontiff who truly lived up to what synodality is all about. From the beginning of his pontificate, he had already shown the world what it was like to have a synodal pope. After all, he is the Pope from the world's farthest

[28]Ibid., 70.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Andrea Gagliarducci, "International Theological Commission document proposes lived synodality," *Catholic News Agency,* 17 May 2018, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/38432/international-theological-commission-document-proposes-lived-synodality.

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ends.[32] When he was shown for the first time on the balcony of St. Peter's, what he did stun everyone. Instead of giving first his blessing as Pope, he asked the people gathered at the *piazza* to bless and pray for him. He said: "And now I would like to give the blessing, but first - first I ask a favor of you: before the Bishop blesses his people, I ask you to pray to the Lord that he will bless me: the prayer of the people asking the blessing for their Bishop."[33] This was the first time in recent memory that a pope did this. Also, in that first greeting from the central loggia of St. Peter's, he reminded everyone that his pontificate would be a journey of togetherness, a journey with the people. He said: "This journey of the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches [is a] journey of fraternity, of love, of trust among us."[34]

His Encyclicals and Exhortations

Pope Francis has been consistent from the very start of his pontificate that we need a Church that listens as it is missioned to the ends of the world. Therefore, there must be some changes in attitude in the Church wherein structures become more inclusive rather than exclusive. He said: "The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship

[32]Pope Francis, First Greeting of the Holy Father Francis, 13 March 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco_20130313_benedizione-urbi-et-orbi.html.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

with himself."[35] In *Evangelii Gaudium,* Pope Francis lays out his vision for the Church, one that is "bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets."[36] If the Church were to be a missionary, it must go forth to where the people are and listen to them. Moreover, his encyclical *Laudato Si* goes beyond listening to people as it encourages everyone to listen to the "cry of the earth."[37] For in listening to the cry of the earth, the cry of the poor who are the most vulnerable in the changing of the climate can be heard. Indeed, Pope Francis has been an advocate of genuine listening, which is an important aspect of synodality.

As a Jesuit, Pope Francis is very familiar with what discernment is - part of it is knowing, understanding, and respecting the contexts of people. In this regard, the Pope has been very clear. Encountering people means meeting them where they are. In his post-synodal exhortation on the youth, he reminded the young that being who they are is more important than any other treasure in the world.[38] By being who we are, we acknowledge how uniquely God has created us. The Pope furthered: "You can become what God your Creator knows you are, if only you realize that you are called to something greater."[39] From

[35]Pope Francis, *On The Proclamation Of The Gospel In Today's World (Evangelii Gaudium)*, 24 November 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

[36]Ibid., no. 49.

[37]Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home (Laudato Si)*, 24 May 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, no.49.

[38]Pope Francis, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and the Entire People of God (Christus Vivit)*, 25 March 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html, no. 107.

[39]Ibid., no. 107.

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this uniqueness, there comes diversity, especially in terms of expressing our relationship with God.

In his encyclical *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis emphasized that there can be different forms and expressions of holiness from different backgrounds. For one, the heroic virtues of the saints and martyrs are great examples. However, the daily, honest, and dignified work of simple people can also be a source of inspiration when it comes to holiness. "Very often it is a holiness found in our next-door neighbors, those who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence."[40] Holiness is not a one-and-done deal but a living, dynamic response to a God who loves us.

Understanding the contexts of others can be vividly seen in how Pope Francis addressed the issues raised in the Synod on the Family. In *Amoris Laetitia*, the Pope reminded "that there is a need 'to avoid judgments which do not take into account the complexity of various situations' and 'to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition.'"[41] Here the Pope was emphasizing a more pastoral response to those divorced and remarried Catholics. They must also be given a chance to participate in ecclesial activities. "No one can be condemned forever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel,"[42] the Pope remarked. However, *Amoris Laetitia*, while welcomed by those estranged from the Church, was heavily criticized by some groups as it seemed to have changed the standing teaching on the reception of communion

[40]Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 7.

[41]Pope Francis, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family (Amoris Laetitia)*, 19 March 2016, https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf, no. 296.

[42]Ibid., no. 297.

by divorced and remarried Catholics. Nevertheless, these are voices that still must be heard and considered.

Furthermore, Pope Francis has been at the forefront when it comes to respecting cultures. In his post-synodal exhortation *Querida Amazonia* he said that "any project for the Amazon region, there is a need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposed an historical process which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people from within their own culture."[43] The Pope asks everyone in the region which is home to many indigenous peoples to respect each other's cultural history and always consider the contexts of each human person.

True to his name, Pope Francis has always left a spot in his heart for those at the margins. He has consistently and deliberately placed the poor at the center of his ministry. He had clearly outlined this in *Evangelii Gaudium* when he said that "if the whole Church takes up this missionary impulse, she has to go forth to everyone without exception. But to whom should she go first? When we read the Gospel we find a clear indication: not so much our friends and wealthy neighbors, but above all the poor and the sick, those who are usually despised and overlooked, "those who cannot repay you" (*Lk* 14:14)."[44] For the Pope, it is important that those who are at the fringes of society are also called upon to participate. Participation is reserved not only for those with power or authority but especially for those who are powerless and seemingly insignificant.

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[43]Pope Francis, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the People of God and to all Persons of Goodwill (Querida Amazonia)*, 2 February 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html.

[44]Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 48.

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Finally, in *Fratelli Tutti*, the Pope devoted a chapter discussing strangers. Reflecting on the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), the Pope highlighted the need to transcend barriers preventing someone from helping another. "Jesus asks us to be present to those in need of help, regardless of whether or not they belong to our social group. In this case, the Samaritan became a neighbor to the wounded Judean. By approaching and making himself present, he crossed all cultural and historical barriers."[45] For the Pope, no one is dispensable. Everyone is necessary. In a synodal church, the voices of everyone, no matter how they vary, are part of the dialogue. Part of the evangelizing mandate of Jesus is also to listen to others, especially to the voiceless. "Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our comfort zone to reach all the "peripheries" in need of the light of the Gospel."[46]

His Papal Ministry

Before Pope Francis mentioned synodality, he had already been practicing it himself. One thing that was clear to him when he was elected pope was the need to ensure that the Vatican Curia was transparent enough, especially when it came to financial resources, and that it could respond well to the needs of the Universal Church. For this, in 2013, he formed a council of cardinals that would help him oversee the administration of the Curia. This Council of Cardinal Advisers comprises eight cardinals from different parts of the world. Their first order

[45]Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship (Fratelli Tutti)*, 3 October 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

[46]Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 20.

of business was to look into the Curia, review it, and reform it.[47] This is one of the many examples of how he considers his Petrine ministry. For him, collaborating with others is an essential part of governing, and listening well to the inputs of others helps him greatly in exercising his responsibility.

For Pope Francis, to be pope means to be of service to all, and because the pope is a servant, he is not above everyone, but instead, below them. Therefore, the image that comes to mind is an inverted pyramid where the apex or the top is found below.[48] Through this, the pope truly becomes the servant of the servants of God (*servus servorum Dei*). "It is in serving the people of God that each bishop becomes, for that portion of the flock entrusted to him, *vicarius Christi*, the vicar of that Jesus who at the Last Supper bent down to wash the feet of the Apostles."[49]

During the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis said that synodality is a "constitutive element" of the Church, and through it, the hierarchical ministry can be better understood. For him, the hierarchy must know how to listen to the lay faithful, which is an essential part of the ministerial function of the clergy as servants. Therefore, he asks: "But how could we speak about the family without engaging families themselves, listening to their joys and their hopes, their

[47]John Hooper, "Pope Francis to revolutionize running of church with new advisory panel," *The Guardian*, 14 April 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/14/pope-francis-church-advisory-panel.

[48]Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, Speeches, 17 October 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

[49]Ibid.

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sorrows, and their anguish?"[50] Listening intently to everyone in the Church makes the Church a truly synodal Church.

The Synod on Synodality

On 21 May 2021, the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops announced that its Sixteenth General Assembly would take on the theme of synodality. However, unlike other celebrations of the Synod of Bishops, it would be a three-year path on which all particular churches will participate through various levels and processes of dialogue.[51] Pope Francis, through this synod, wished to re-capture what synodality is all about in light of the lived experiences of the various local churches in the world. This aligns with what he highlighted in his speech during the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops. He said that it is the synodal path by which the Church of the Third Millennium is called to journey.[52]

In the *Vademecum* prepared for the initial phase of the synodal process, it was mentioned that the objective was to listen together to the Holy Spirit through God's Word and the experiences of each other. This would, in turn, inspire everyone in the Church to continue dreaming and hoping for a better human family journeying together. This would hopefully result in the renewal and reorientation of ecclesial structures wherein everyone can participate and exercise

[50]Ibid.

[51]Salvatore Cernuzio, "Synod of Bishops will begin in the local Churches," *Vatican News*, 21 May 2021, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-05/synod-of-bishops-will-begin-in-the-local-churches.html

[52]Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops" (Paul VI Audience Hall, 17 October 2015).

co-responsibility.[53] Thus, the basic questions were: "How does this "journeying together" take place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allowing the Church to proclaim the Gospel? And what steps is the Spirit inviting us to take to grow as a synodal Church?"[54] From here, the journey toward greater communion, more participation, and a truly mission-oriented Church begins.

With the theme "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission," the synodal process would not like to produce voluminous documents but to have a shared experience of journeying, listening, and discerning together. Communion is always our call as we are created by a Trinitarian God. Together, "we are inspired by listening to the Word of God, through the living Tradition of the Church, and grounded in the *sensus fidei* that we share."[55] Moreover, Participation is based on the giftedness of each other and using such gifts for the good of the Church.[56] Furthermore, the mission is God's collective call to everyone to preach the Good News to the ends of the earth, and that includes the different strata of everyday life.[57]

Pope Francis solemnly opened the synodal journey with a Holy Mass at St. Peter's Basilica on 10 October 2021. In his homily, he highlighted three actions that can guide everyone on this journey: encounter, listen, and discern. For him, to encounter means looking others "in the eye" and allowing oneself to be open to listening to the stories of others. To listen, meanwhile, meant not only using one's ears but, most

[53]Secretary General of Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum*, no. 11.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Ibid., no. 13.

[56]Ibid.

[57]Ibid.

https://publications.lst.edu/

important, one's heart.[58] And finally, to discern is "to look within, in the light of the love that the Lord himself had shown by his gaze."[59] These three verbs could hopefully aid the entire Church in these years of grace-filled encounters with the Lord and His people.

Synodality in the CBCP

When one reviews the history of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), it can be gleaned that the bishops' conference has come a long way. For more than 50 years, together with the changing and developing Philippine society, the CBCP has transformed, renewed, and refashioned itself to become more immersed among the people and adept at how it shepherds.

Taking a cue from the changes ushered in by the Vatican II, the Philippine bishops took seriously the fact that they are part of the People of God and not separate from it. Before becoming ministers, they belong to and share with the common priesthood of all the members of the Church. Therefore, even in their ministry as shepherds of the particular flock entrusted to them, they bear in mind the fundamental dignity that they share with the rest of the faithful.

Towards Deeper Communion

The seeming distance and separation of the bishops from the people were quite noticeable in the nascent years of the CBCP, if their statements and letters would be the basis. Their ecclesiological viewpoint was more of *ad intra*. It was too internal and

[58]Pope Francis, *Homily on the Opening of the Synodal Path*, Homilies, 10 October 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html.

[59]Ibid.

even hierarchical that their letters were mostly concerned with how to defend the faith, explain their authority as leaders, and assert their position, especially on moral questions that affect Church and society. In this case, their statements and letters usually bore an authoritative tone, sometimes to the point of seemingly dictating what the faithful should do.

However, some of the bishops, if not most of them, realized that their voice should be one with the people, especially after Vatican II. They are guides more than guardians, pastors more than political figures, and shepherds more than dictators. After the devastating effects of World War II, it was during the Martial Law years that saw the CBCP become a moral and formidable force the people can depend on. It was also during the Marcos dictatorship that the bishops found themselves closer to the people, deliberately and explicitly advocating for human rights and genuine development. They began talking about human rights, freedom of speech, and genuine human development. The late Bishop Francisco Claver, SJ, the former bishop of Malaybalay in Bukidnon, was one prelate who did not hide his opposition to the dictatorial rule and its apparent alternative, the communist movement. John Carroll, SJ observed: "He took his stand as shepherd of his people, analyzing the local and national situation with his trademark calm but powerful language and even more powerful thought—always with the people, and their genuine development at the center of his concern."[60] Indeed, he always placed the people's welfare before his and that has become his legacy as a bishop.

For Claver, the people themselves needed to find their voice against the oppressing forces that enslave them. This would only happen if "the people themselves participate freely and

[60]John J. Carroll, SJ, "Bishop Claver's Vision of the Church," *Becoming a Church of the Poor,* ed. Eleanor R. Dionisio (Quezon City: John J. Carroll Institute on Church and Social Issues, 2011), 11.

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conscientiously in the process from beginning to end..."[61] The people must constantly be aware of their environment and participate in its uplifting. Perhaps this principle of Bishop Claver was so inspiring and found resonance among the bishops that they asked him to draft the CBCP statement immediately after the snap elections of 1986.

Part of the said statement declared: "We, therefore, ask every loyal member of the Church, every community of the faithful, to form their judgment about the February 7 polls. And if, in faith, they see things as we, the bishops, do, we must come together and discern what appropriate actions to take that will be according to the mind of Christ. In a creative, imaginative way, under the guidance of Christ's Spirit, let us pray together, reason together, decide together, act together, always to the end that the truth prevail, that the will of the people be fully respected."[62]

These words from the bishops, apart from being historic, were groundbreaking. Not only did the bishops call for collective action but they did so by first appealing to the people to listen to their consciences and to discern the best course of action. Only when "they see things" as the bishops did could they unite and stand together to fight for the truth. According to Carroll, the bishops were not giving out directions but discernment; speaking not from the outside of the people but within.[63]

What Carroll noted above beautifully expressed what *Lumen Gentium* taught about the Church. Before any division because

[61]Ibid., 12.

[62] Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "Post-Election Statement," *CBCP Online*, 13 February 1986, https://cbcponline.net/post-election-statement/.

[63]Carroll, "Bishop Claver's Vision of the Church," 14.

of charism or ministry, everyone—the laity, religious, and the clergy—belong to the one People of God. It is a communion of people called by God to be with Him. This communion must be fostered and upheld in all aspects of the Church's life, especially in terms of the relationship between the laity and the hierarchy.

This relationship is deepened and nourished when everyone is considered "companions on the journey."[64] By appreciating each one as brothers and sisters, as members of one family who are on a journey to God, the relationship becomes more meaningful and goes beyond mere superficiality and functionality. The establishment of pastoral councils that include the laity, at both diocesan and parish levels, are concrete manifestations of this relationship and are avenues for the dynamic communion of everyone in the Church. In the end, this relationship must be geared towards a deeper communion in the Church. Hence, it begins with the acknowledgment that everyone has a role to play and a duty to fulfill so that the Church can flourish. It is not only the hierarchy that is bestowed upon with the charism of responsibility for the Church, but also the lay faithful. "They are [also] called to play an active role inasmuch as they share in the one priesthood of Christ."[65]

Like the first community in Jerusalem, the Apostles and the Elders were so close to the community that they knew what their needs were (Acts 4:32-35). In fact, in the Acts of the Apostles, they appointed seven reputable men who would assist them in taking care of the poor and widows (Acts 6:1-15) This kind of closeness is also what should characterize the relationship between the bishop and the people. In and through

[64]International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 55.

[65]Ibid.

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such communion, everyone can know each other and respond to each other's needs. Therefore, communion is essential in a community. Without it, there can only be individualism which will cause harm and discord in the community.

If the bishops become too distant and, worse, indifferent to the plight of the people, they would fail to respond to the needs of the flock entrusted to them. And the CBCP has used its collective voice to stand for the people, especially the poor. This closeness and solidarity were manifested in how the bishops sided with farmers as they fought for genuine land reform. When the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) was on the brink of termination in 2008, eight bishops joined the farmers in a hunger strike asking the legislators to listen to them and heed their plea of extending the said program.[66] Aside from the many statements the CBCP issued on land reform, their gesture of joining the ranks of the farmers in their struggle to have a land of their own and a better life spoke eloquently and forcefully. There they showed their oneness and closeness with the people, especially those vulnerable and voiceless.

The document on synodality produced by the ITC outlined the important role of the bishop in promoting synodality. Since the bishop is the one elected by God to be the shepherd of a particular Church, he also becomes the assurance of its unity. He has the task of ensuring that the local Church's unity and its communion with other local Churches is binding and flourishing. This is manifested as they form a college together with the other bishops with the pope, as the successor of Peter, as the head. Their exercise of collegiality is a form of synodality.

[66]Union of Catholic Asian News, "Bishops, Priest Fast with Farmers for Land Reform," *UCANews*, 16 December 2008, https://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/2008/12/16/bishops-priest-fast-with-farmers-for-land-reform&post_id=49629.

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According to the ITC, "Collegiality in the strict sense denotes the assertion and expression of the communion of the People of God in the ranks of Bishops, in other words in the college of Bishops *cum Petro et sub Petro,* and - through that - communion between all Churches."[67] When they gather together, they each bring the dreams and hopes and concerns of the flock assigned to them. In this way, they manifest their communion with their respective faithful, and this communion is further expressed through the unity and collegiality of bishops from all over the world. Thus, in this way, the particular Churches are listening and are listened to and the universal communion of the Church is vividly manifested.

A Structure of Grace and Synodality

The Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II) mentioned that sinful structures in society are a reality, but at the same time, structures of grace are evident as well. These are "groups and institutions that facilitate the entry of the Good News and of grace into the lives of people and the fabric of society."[68] These structures must be promoted and nurtured, for it is hoped that through these structures, a genuine renewal of Philippine society can be realized.

Without being explicitly mentioned in the Acts of PCP-II, the CBCP could be considered as a structure of grace helping and assisting and sometimes, even initiating, renewal, not only among the believers in the Philippines, but to the Filipino citizenry as a whole. The Philippine Constitution explicitly states

[67]International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 66.

[68]Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees,* no. 657.

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the principle of separation of Church and State. The bishops are fully aware of this fact and their role as shepherds, not as political leaders. Nevertheless, they are also cognizant that they can contribute something to the betterment of this society.[69] They can say something about either political matters without being partisan, or moral issues without being authoritarian. Hence, they have been a moral force advocating for genuine progress and integral development. They have become contemporary prophets not of doom but of God's Good News.

To be a structure of grace means to be an institution that radiates what the Gospel of Christ proclaims. It means to become a beacon of hope amid degrading poverty, of truth a midst the lies and deceit, and of charity in the face of indifference and apathy. However, this requires involvement in the lives of ordinary people. One cannot simply be a structure of grace if one is above and beyond the people. Therefore, the CBCP's transformation from an institution-preserving conference into a people-centered one is a mark of the bishops' awareness and resolve to place the people, especially the poor, at the center. Msgr. Pedro Quitorio III said: "The Conference made the daring leap from being an involved, albeit silent, participant in socio-political issues, to a major and proactive player in the arena of national concerns, undaunted and uncompromising in its fulfillment of the prophetic mission of the Church."[70]

According to the ITC, "synodality denotes those *structures* and *ecclesial processes* in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed at an institutional level, but analogously

[69]Bishop Teodoro Bacani, Jr., "The Ecclesiology of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines," in *Anamnesis,* eds. Francisco Claver, SJ and Pedro Quitorio III (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 1996), 186.

[70]Msgr. Pedro Quitorio III, ed., "Introduction," *On the Threshold of the Next Millennium* (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 1999), v.

on various levels: local, regional and universal."[71] The CBCP as the official, permanent institution of the bishops in the Philippines is a vivid expression of synodality. This gathering of the Philippine bishops, which meets on a bi-annual basis for their plenary assemblies, is a sure sign of the Church in the Philippines' synodal journey represented by their pastors. In these meetings, they update themselves on the realities from the ground, both local and national in scope, and issue guidance through pastoral statements or letters especially when necessary.

One example of this is how the Church advocates for the protection of the environment. Many areas in the Philippines are rich in mineral deposits but these areas are also home to vulnerable sectors of society. Across these dioceses, the Church has continued to consolidate efforts, not only from Church-oriented groups but also from non-government organizations and people's organizations, to protect the rich biodiversity and the source of livelihood of the people living in the affected areas. In 2005, the Philippine-Misereor Partnership Inc. (PMPI) spearheaded a nationwide campaign against large-scale mining. The campaign hoped to gather all organizations and Church groups to rally behind a common advocacy against mining activities in the Philippines. Notably, this campaign was unique because of the "prominent participation of Church leaders and organizations."[72]

Furthermore, the bishops of Eastern Visayas have been outspoken in terms of their opposition to mining activities in the region. In a statement in 2010, they decried the granting

[71]International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 70.

[72]Anna Marie Karaos, "The Church and the Environment," in *Becoming a Church of the Poor,* ed. Eleanor R. Dionisio (Quezon City: John J. Carroll Institute on Church and Social Issues, 2011), 55.

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of permits to explore and of mining production sharing agreements in the islands of Samar, Leyte, and Biliran as well as the small islands of Manicani and Homonhon. They said that the continuing destruction caused by mining activities only had "adverse effects to [the people's] livelihood, to their well-being as persons and as families, to the quality of life in their communities and to their very own dignity as people of God."[73] The bishops were after the preservation of the environment and the welfare of the people, of the flock they have been entrusted to serve.

Certainly, the bishops, in particular of Eastern Visayas, would not simply make those assertions without seeing what is truly happening in those affected areas. In a report by CNN Philippines, Rebeca Destajo, a barangay councilor and anti-mining advocate from Manicani Island, lamented the environmental destruction caused by the open-pit mining of Nickel Asia Philippines on the island. When heavy rains come, siltation and pollution affect their livelihood. Also, aside from environmental destruction, familial conflicts and division in the community happen which show another aspect of the mining's ill effects.[74] Fr. Caesar Garcia, then parish priest of Manicani, noted that "if the ecosystem in Manicani is totally destroyed, there will be no other source of livelihood for the

[73]Archbishop Jose Palma, et.al., "A call to stop mining in Eastern Visayas region," *PhilStar Global*, 1 November 2010, https://www.philstar.com/other-sections/letters-to-the-editor/2010/11/01/625774/call-stop-mining-eastern-visayas-region.

[74]Anna Bueno, "How mining affects the lives of people in Eastern Samar," *CNN Philippines*, 1 December 2017, https://www.cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/politics/2017/12/01/mining-eastern-samar.html.

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people here."[75] This is why Borongan Bishop Crispin Varquez had been consistent in opposing any mining activities in the islands of Manicani and Homonhon, which are under his jurisdiction. In 2012, he said: "People are the ones suffering and these very aggressive mining operations here are dividing our people. It is very painful that communities are divided considering its temporary economic benefits and the irreparable damage mining would create."[76]

These kinds of reports are listened to by the Philippine bishops which prompted them to write pastoral statements such as "What Is Happening To Our Beautiful Land?" in 1988 and "A Statement on Mining Issues and Concerns" in 2006. By becoming aware of what is happening in the daily and ordinary lives of the people, they can bring their concerns to a wider platform and allow those stories to be heard by more people, especially those in power. Therefore, when the bishops immerse and allow themselves to be affected by the plight of their people and bring these to their conference which is the CBCP, individually, they embody what synodality is and collectively, express this synodality. As the ITC remarkably says: "The importance of Episcopal Conferences in promoting the synodal journey of the People of God lies in the fact that 'the individual Bishops represent each his own Church.'"[77]

Challenges to Listening

[75]CBCP News, "Borongan bishop, clergy want mining closed in Manicani," *CBCP News*, accessed 20 December 2022, https://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/borongan-bishop-clergy-want-mining-closed-in-manicani/.

[76]Jerome Aning, "Bishop urges Aquino to stop all mining in Eastern Samar," *Inquirer.net*, 2 February 2012, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/138621/bishop-urges-aquino-to-stop-all-mining-in-eastern-samar.

[77] International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 90.

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Arguably, the statements and letters issued by the CBCP are sought after and sometimes become sensational. Thanks to news media outlets that carry them. However, some statements did become controversial. In 2012, the CBCP made a clear stance against the then Reproductive Health Bill. It was a contentious issue that arrived at a point of extreme polarization between those in favor and those against. The bishops exhausted all means they could to prevent the bill from passing and turning into law but to no avail. In December 2012, the late President Benigno Aquino III signed the measure into law.[78]

During and after this debacle, some commentators observed that perhaps the influence of the Philippine bishops was now wavering. Others said that the bishops used up much political capital and yet were defeated. Fr. Eric Marcelo Genilo, SJ, said: "Some Catholics are now less likely to accept the CBCP's pronouncements at face value and are more ready to disagree with the Church than before."[79] However, regardless of the outcome, there were a lot of things to be learned from that experience. It was a wake-up call for the bishops of the Philippines whenever similar contentious issues arise in society. Should they get themselves involved? Surely, since they have a prophetic role to fulfill. But up to what point? And what can they learn from the RH Bill (or Law) experience?

During the debates on the RH Bill, some groups who professed that they are Catholics and yet supportive of the bill were formed. Some of these groups were Catholics for RH and some professors from the Ateneo de Manila University

[78]Rappler.com, "President Aquino signs RH bill into law," *Rappler*, 28 December 2012, https://www.rappler.com/nation/18728-aquino-signs-rh-bill-into-law/.

[79]Eric Marcelo Genilo, "Epilogue: The Church of PCP-II after the RH Bill Debate," *The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines: Quo Vadis?* Eds. Eric Marcelo Genilo, et al, eds. (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015), 178.

who made a statement days before Congress voted on the measure.[80] What was clear during those times was how divided the Catholics themselves were over the issue. Bishop Vicente Navarra, then bishop of Bacolod, even campaigned against candidates who were supportive of the measure. They placed big-sized tarpaulins at the Bacolod Cathedral's facade bearing the names of those who were for and against RH Bill and tagged them as Team *Buhay* and Team *Patay* respectively.[81]

Indeed, what happened during the RH bill issue divided people. According to Genilo, the virtually endless "debates between Catholic leaders and proponents of the RH Bill have caused fragmentation and animosity within the Church community and a diminishment of the hierarchy's moral authority in society."[82] Some people, especially believers, now think that some of the bishops have expressed too much opposition that they forgot what it meant to be shepherds. For them, they failed to listen to what the people were saying and forgot to uphold the common good. The supporters believed that the RH Bill was compatible with the Church's stand on the principle of the common good and the primacy of conscience.

Nevertheless, this contentious issue was a learning experience for the Philippine Church, especially for the bishops. While artificial contraception is not allowed in Catholic morality, some bishops, if not the CBCP, failed to consider that not all are Catholics in the Philippines despite being the majority. Also, the presence of those Catholics who supported the measure

[80]Shanice Garcia, "160 Ateneo professors push for RH Bill," 15 August 2012, https://theguidon.com/1112/main/2012/08/160-ateneo-professors-push-for-rh-bill/.

[81]Tech Tupas, "SC rules in favor of Bacolod diocese on 'Team Patay,' 'Team Buhay' posters," *Inquirer.net*, 21 January 2015, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/667048/sc-rules-in-favor-of-bacolod-diocese-on-team-patay-team-buhay-posters.

82Genilo, *Epilogue*, 169.

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was an indication of the voices that were not listened to and considered. They were members of the Church who were not ready to accept the stand of the bishops in this regard. When divisive issues such as the RH Bill come to the fore, what should be the primary action of the CBCP?

Perhaps what was lacking in the stand of the bishops was how grounded they were to the realities of people's daily life on this particular issue. Supporters of the bill argued that the lack of access to reproductive health in the countryside often resulted in the deaths of mothers and infants. Teenage pregnancies were rising due to a lack of enough information on reproductive health among the young.[83] Also, the bishops' side was not heard enough because of the too much noise lingering in the public sphere. Criminalizing conscientious objectors was infringing on religious freedom. Appropriating funds for reproductive health might only line the pockets of a few and would only contribute to the worsening corruption situation in the country.[84] These ideas seemed to have fallen on deaf ears as the debate only heated and raged on. What everyone missed out on is what the ITC calls "an effective methodology of participation, with appropriate procedures for consulting the faithful and acceptance of different ecclesial experiences

[83]Individual Faculty of Ateneo De Manila University, "Declaration of Support for House Bill 4244 (The Responsible Parenthood, Reproductive Health and Population and Development Bill) by individual faculty of the Ateneo de Manila University," *Spot.ph*, 13 August 2012, https://www.spot.ph/newsfeatures/51712/160-ateneo-professors-release-statement-expressing-support-for-rh-bill.

[84]Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "Choosing Life, Rejecting The RH Bill," *CBCP Online*, 30 January 2011, https://cbcponline.net/choosing-life-rejecting-the-rh-billa-pastoral-letter-of-the-catholic-bishops-conference-of-the-philippines/.

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in the phase of working out the pastoral orientations that have come from Episcopal Conferences."[85]

Indeed, there seemed to be a failure of peaceful and objective consultation on how the problems the RH Bill was trying to resolve. It only appeared to be a power showdown between the bishops and the politicians, between those for and against. According to the ITC, "the renewal of the Church's synodal life demands that we initiate processes for consulting the entire People of God."[86] Therefore, what is hopefully envisioned is a consultative Church where all voices are listened to even those who oppose or are in doubt about the Church's stand on moral issues. Furthermore, when proper consultation among the laity happens, this helps enhance the episcopal collegiality in their "implementation of synodality."[87]

Listening should always be part of the Church's structure and process. Synodality requires a Church that listens, for it is in listening that we can foster greater and deeper communion. By listening, a person can empathize with others, and understand and learn from them. On the part of the CBCP, listening will be a mark of genuine solidarity even if at times it is inconvenient and time-consuming to do so. According to Eleanor Dionisio, "Solidarity must involve seeing from the perspectives of the people the everyday problems they face which make it difficult for them to fall in line."[88]

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[85]International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,* no. 90.

[86]Ibid., no. 65.

[87]Ibid., no. 90.

[88]Eleanor Dionisio, "Who Speaks for the Church?: Catholic Cacophony in the Reproductive Health Debate," *Becoming a Church of the Poor,* ed. Eleanor R. Dionisio (Quezon City: John J. Carroll Institute on Church and Social Issues, 2011), 33.

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Moving forward, a listening Church and, therefore, a listening hierarchy becomes essential in the building up of God's kingdom for it fosters a spirit of discernment. Discernment requires communion with God and with others. It means becoming aware and sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit in and through the life of each individual and of the community. Thus, discernment is not only the duty of bishops but of all members of the Church.[89] Consequently, listening is the duty of each member of the Church. It must be remembered that through Baptism, one share equally in the common priesthood of all the faithful. With listening, in the spirit of synodality, "the equality of all in the Church, preached so eloquently by Vatican II and PCP-II, would become a reality, and the Church would become truly communion."[90]

[89]Roberto Rivera, SJ, "A Discerning Community: The Philippine Church and Electoral Politics, 1986-2010," *Becoming a Church of the Poor,* ed. Eleanor R. Dionisio (Quezon City: John J. Carroll Institute on Church and Social Issues, 2011), 84.

[90]Dionisio, "Who Speaks for the Church?," 36.

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