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LIVING SYNODALITY IN DIALOGUE WITH THE SYMPHONY OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH. A CASE STUDY FROM THE ARCHDIOCESE OF SANTIAGO, CHILE¹

Vivir la sinodalidad en diálogo con la sinfonía de la Iglesia Universal.

Un estudio de caso de la Arquidiócesis de Santiago de Chile

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1 This article is the result of a workshop held on April 2nd, 2024, in which the author commented, from her experience at the World Synod on Synodality, on the preliminary results of the study carried out by Carolina Bacher-Martínez and Catalina Cerda-Planas (presented in detail in the opening article of this issue of the journal).

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Abstract

The Catholic Church is undergoing a significant transformation through a global synodal process initiated by Pope Francis in 2021. This process seeks to reshape the Church in a synodal, missionary form. The Archdiocese of Santiago de Chile has been actively participating in this transformation, where a recent research project examined the potential of the pastoral council, particularly the participation of women, in reshaping leadership and authority. In this article, this study's findings are discussed in the context of the 16th Ordinary Assembly of the World Synod of Bishops, emphasizing the importance of diversity, co-responsibility, and the integration of women in Church leadership. The paper reflects on the need for a new style of being Church, grounded in theological insights and the principles of Vatican Council II, to foster a more inclusive and mission-oriented Church.

Keywords

Synodality, Catholic Church, Pope Francis, Archdiocese of Santiago de Chile, Women in the Church, Leadership, Pastoral Council, Mission, Vatican Council II, Co-responsibility

Resumen

La Iglesia Católica está experimentando una transformación significativa a través de un proceso sinodal global iniciado por el Papa Francisco en 2021. Este proceso busca reconfigurar la Iglesia en una forma sinodal y misionera. La Arquidiócesis de Santiago de Chile ha participado activamente en esta transformación, allí un reciente proyecto de investigación examinó el potencial del consejo pastoral, en particular la participación de las mujeres, en la reconfiguración del liderazgo y la autoridad. En este artículo se discuten los resultados de dicho estudio en el contexto de la XVI Asamblea Ordinaria del Sínodo de los Obispos, enfatizando en la importancia de la diversidad, la corresponsabilidad y la integración de las mujeres en el liderazgo de la Iglesia. El documento reflexiona sobre la necesidad de un nuevo estilo de ser Iglesia, basado en las ideas teológicas y los principios del Concilio Vaticano II, para fomentar una Iglesia más inclusiva y orientada a la misión.

Palabras clave

Sinodalidad, Iglesia Católica, papa Francisco, Arquidiócesis de Santiago de Chile, mujeres en la Iglesia, liderazgo, consejo pastoral, misión, Concilio Vaticano II, corresponsabilidad

The Catholic Church and its local Churches are right in the middle of it. In 2021, Pope Francis has invited us to a worldwide synodal process, a process that is intended to reconfigure the Catholic Church in a synodal and missionary way (Csiszar, 2024c). The time was ripe, as evidenced by the many fruits of synodality on the ground, the various colloquia, studies, discussions and restructurings inspired by the Pope's invitation to rediscover synodality. A research project dedicated to the topic of synodality, women and leadership was also carried out in the Archdiocese of Santiago de Chile (Bacher & Cerda-Planas, 2025). In this project, an important synodal structural element - namely the pastoral council - was examined in terms of its potential. The question was posed as to what the participation of women in the pastoral council means with regard to the reshaping of leadership and authority; how this participation is to be interpreted theologically in the context of leadership theories and what is needed for the participation of women to be firmly anchored and institutionalized in a synodal Church. In the following, I will reflect on the results of this study in the light of the first session of the 16th Ordinary Assembly of the World Synod of Bishops. In doing so, I will focus on the three axes of the research project: synodality, women and leadership.

Synodality

Since October 2021, the global Church has been in a learning process and is trying to spell out what synodality means in its local churches. The research conducted by Bacher and Cerda-Planas indicates that synodality is also a learning journey in the Archdiocese of Santiago de Chile. Many do not know what it actually means. This was also the case at the assembly in Rome. It was repeatedly pointed out in the speeches that many do not understand what synodality means. Where do you learn synodality? If we summarize its essence, synodality is fundamentally about collaboration and mission. It is not about self-reflection for its own sake, but about being a Church in mission—making God's love tangible, especially amid the existential wounds of humanity. This is where synodality and mission come together. Because when it comes to synodality, it is not about a self-reflection of the Church or a community, a body, but it is always about a Church in mission. How we can make the love of God tangible—especially amid the existential wounds of individual lives and the one humanity. It is therefore much more important to understand the mission of the Church, to spell it out and, together with many, to find ways in which we can demonstrate that, in divine logic, life always has the last word and not death. Easter and not Good Friday (Halík, 2024b). I quote the Synthesis Report (SR):

The purpose of synodality, in the composition and functioning of the bodies in which it takes shape, is mission. Co-responsibility is for mission: this attests that we are truly gathered in the name of Jesus, this frees the bodies of participation from bureaucratic limitations and worldly logics of power, and makes gathering fruitful. (SR 2023, 18/a)

So no one can decide alone how to do this. What is needed is togetherness in genuine Catholic diversity. How do I understand this? The Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* speaks of the power of catholicity, which manifests itself in diversity. This diversity is not only represented by the local churches but should be visible at all levels of Church life (LG 13). The Synthesis Report clearly states what is needed in the future to ensure this diversity in ecclesial bodies and synodal structures:

The composition of the various councils for the discernment and decision-making of a synodal missionary community must provide for the presence of men and women who have an apostolic disposition, distinguished not by their frequent presence in Church, but by a genuine evangelical witness in ordinary life. The People of God are all the more missionary when they can make the voices of those already living the mission by inhabiting the world and its peripheries resonate within themselves, including in participatory bodies. (SR 18/d)

How the synodal bodies – including a pastoral council – can show a diversity of the people of God is also important for the composition of the body/pastoral council. And here the Synthesis Report goes far beyond the role of women in Church bodies and pleads for bodies in which lay associations, Church movements, women and men have representation. Furthermore, the Synod advocates the representation of migrants (SR 5/d), the representation of people who do not live in regular partnerships (SR 18/f) and the representation of people with disabilities (SR 8/k). We are convinced that only this diversity allows us to always keep the reality of many people's lives in mind in our deliberations and decisions, to keep the joy and hope, the sadness and fear of the people – of whom the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), speaks – before our eyes (GS 1).

Women

This remains a complex and often contested area. While women's presence on pastoral councils is a given in many regions, from Romania to Germany, challenges persist in fully integrating them into leadership structures. This was no longer an issue in the synod either. But where we always stop, and this was also your question, is how we reconfigure leadership and authority in the Church, namely in such a way that this (synodal) reconfiguration does not exclude women but integrates them fully. Do we need ordination or not? If we consider the current developments in canon law – in particular the apostolic constitution on the reform of the Curia, *Praedicate Evangelium* (Francis, 2022)–, we can see that ordination will be less and less necessary for leadership in the Church, but that commissioning will be much more so (Francis, 2022, Halík, 2024b). What this means in terms of ecclesiology and theology of ministry must be clarified by dogmatists. From the perspective of the

World Synod of Bishops, it is clear that women are not an issue or a problem, “Instead, we desire to promote a Church in which men and women dialogue together, in order to understand more deeply the horizon of God’s project, that sees them together as protagonists, without subordination, exclusion and competition” (SR 9/h). Similar to Bacher & Cerda-Planas’ findings, the Assembly of the World Synod also notes: “Women make up most of those in our pews and are often the first missionaries of the faith in the family” (SR 9/d). There is a long way to go before we can speak of the full integration of women in the Church. In many places, such as Santiago de Chile, there is a conscious effort to ensure that this happens, but in many places, such as in Romania or Hungary, the role of women in the Church has not even been discussed (Csiszar, 2024c).

Synodal Leadership

The Synthesis Report uses the term leadership only three times. Two of these are in Chapter 12 on the bishop in the ecclesial community. Right at the beginning of the chapter it is stated:

As the visible principle of unity, he [the bishop] has, in particular, the task of discerning and coordinating the different charisms and ministries sent forth by the Spirit for the proclamation of the Gospel and the common good of the community. This ministry is realized in a synodal manner when governance is accompanied by co-responsibility, preaching by listening to the faithful People of God, and sanctification and celebration of the liturgy by humility and conversion. (SR 12/b)

In other words: leadership in co-responsibility. Then, if we read on in the chapter, it says:

The bishop has an indispensable role in vivifying and animating the synodal process in the local Church, promoting the mutuality between “all, some and one”. The “one” Episcopal ministry values the participation of “all” the faithful, through the contribution of “some” who are more directly involved in discernment and decision-making processes. (SR 12/c)

So: participation and leadership. We notice which tasks of a bishop are made clear here: firstly, to discern and coordinate the various ministries and charisms, namely in such a way that synodal leadership takes place in co-responsibility. Here the bishop is assisted by the committees (the committees we have already seen how they should/could be composed), which are involved in the discernment and decision-making processes. The Synod in Rome revealed that leadership and authority in a synodal Church must be reimagined, with committees –composed in a ‘good Catholic’ way, that is, with genuine diversity– playing a central role. This became clear not least where there was repeated talk of Church leadership and its accountability. In the Synthesis Report, the issue of leadership and accountability was included as follows:

Participatory bodies represent the first instance in which to experience the accountability of those who exercise responsibility. While we warmly welcome and support their commitment, in turn, they are invited to practice the culture of accountability to the community of which they are an expression. (SR 18/i)

Two aspects will become important in the future in the context of leadership in a synodal Church, which also appeared us such in the research done by Bacher & Cerda-Planas on one of the Pastoral Councils of the archdiocese of Santiago de Chile: firstly, the participation and co-responsibility of the committees in discernment and decision-making processes, and the role of the committees in establishing a culture of accountability and transparency. It is important to note that women will also be involved in these bodies.

Learning a New Style of Being Church

The research results presented by Bacher & Cerda-Planas clearly show that it is often not enough to make a proposal or even issue a regulation that pastoral councils be set up and it will happen. It will not happen everywhere, and it is important and necessary to scientifically accompany new pastoral development processes. When we talk about synodality, we are not only talking about the necessary reciprocity of universal, regional and local, or the reciprocity of some, many and all, but we must also always bear in mind the reciprocity of theology, law, practice and even other disciplines. Theology did not have the status it should have in the Synod. It was noticeable that conciliar theology did not shape all the arguments and statements.

Going forward, theology must be better integrated into Church development processes. In the coming months, we will be looking at how we can be a Church in mission in the global Church and we also hope for good and practicable guidance. Bacher and Cerda-Planas' research also aims to formulate proposals on how the participation of women can be promoted in pastoral committees in the future and how synodal decision-making can take place with the participation of women. If we think about other areas of life, none of them can do without its scientific community and its latest research findings. I hope that our local Churches, but also the global Church, will incorporate theological know-how into Church development accordingly.

A key question for theologians is whether it is possible to rethink the role of theology in a synodal Church almost 60 years after the Council, so that theology and its reflections and insights are not missing from any process of Church development. This is particularly important, as synodality encapsulates the essence of conciliar theology. You cannot understand this synodal process with all the committees and participation of women, with all the questions and necessary reciprocities that have already been discussed (Csiszar, 2024b). In the synthesis it becomes clear

that a re-reading of Vatican Council II is currently on the round table of the universal Church. The question is how theological work can be made attractive worldwide in such a way that it gives courage and hope, motivates and supports.

The four weeks of world Church experience have shown that this will only be possible through an attitude that is inviting, asks good questions, listens and is able to accompany processes and not just criticize them. It may be difficult in some parts of this world Church that the theology of the Council and its consequences are not self-evident everywhere, but it will be necessary to repeat it, quite explicitly in the great themes of the Council, such as the reciprocity between tradition, Scripture, the Magisterium and the signs of the times, the critical self-reflection of the Church, the Church in the world of today, the Council's understanding of mission and pastoral care, the theology of the people of God, communion theology, the synodal principle in the Church, the local congregation as Church, the hierarchy of the truths of faith, the universal priesthood, the personal freedom of faith, the importance of a historical-critical theology, the significance of the liturgy of the word – to name just a few of the issues that determine the hermeneutics of being Church today. This re-reading will help to think through to the end the answers to much unease regarding synodality, women and leadership in the spirit of the Council.

In learning the new synodal style, you have to start at the bottom, and this also applies to the dioceses, to all synodal bodies in a diocese. Synodality is always also a process of missionary heart formation because a missionary heart never closes itself off:

It never closes itself off, never retreats into its own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness. It realizes that it has to grow in its own understanding of the Gospel and in discerning the paths of the Spirit, and so it always does what good it can, even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street. (Francis, 2013, n. 45)

If the Church accepts the logic of the Incarnation in this synodal process, it will have to confront itself with the “polyphony of the Logos”, with the diversity, with the beauty of Catholicism. However, this confrontation must then in turn draw on the Church's inherent “competence of polyphony”. From this power of catholicity, the reforms that are long overdue can then take place. We will increasingly become a Church of possibilities, where many things will be possible and where important decisions will be made by the bishops' conferences and dioceses for their structures, services and ministries. We are therefore well advised to train ourselves to make good decisions synodally, either in Austria, in Romania, or in Santiago de Chile; so that our coexistence within the Church and with everyone outside, day by day, even if only fragmentary, becomes a lived Gospel.

Karl Rahner gave a speech in Munich in December 1965 after his return from the Council and predicted that it would take a long time for us to move from a Church that had a Council to a Church of the Council, and he added: *Ecclesia semper reformanda in capite et in membris* (Rahner, 1965). We are on the way!

Conclusion

The Catholic Church is in the midst of a profound transformation through the synodal process initiated by Pope Francis in 2021. This process aims to reshape the Church into a more synodal and missionary entity. The Archdiocese of Santiago de Chile has also been involved in this transformation, supporting a research project that examined the role of the pastoral council and the participation of women in Church leadership.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of diversity, co-responsibility, and the integration of women in leadership roles within the Church. The research underscores the need for a new style of being Church, one that is inclusive and mission-oriented, grounded in the theological insights and principles of Vatican Council II.

The synodal process is a learning journey for the global Church, emphasizing good cooperation and mission. It calls for a Church that is not self-reflective but outward-looking, aiming to make God's love tangible in the world. The participation of women and the reconfiguration of leadership and authority are crucial aspects of this transformation.

The study also points to the necessity of scientific accompaniment in pastoral development processes and the integration of theological insights into Church development. The re-reading of Vatican Council II's themes is essential for understanding and implementing synodality, women's participation, and leadership in the Church.

In conclusion, the synodal process represents a significant step towards a more inclusive and mission-driven Church, where diversity and co-responsibility are key. The active participation of women and the reconfiguration of leadership structures are vital for the Church's future, ensuring that it remains relevant and responsive to the needs of its members and the broader world.

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