

The Synod on Synodality in Light of Pope Francis's Theology of Mission

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The Church's Synod on Synodality is a troubling prospect for many because the concept of "synodality" at its basis seems characterized by protean vagueness. The synod appears to be easy interpretive prey for those who wish to transform Christian life and practice in accordance with the norms of contemporary society and the ethos of modern democracy rather than in deepening conformity to the sacramental and Trinitarian basis of the Church. The promulgators of the German "synodal way" and of similar paths suggested by like-minded cardinals, bishops, and theologians throughout the world are currently making good use of the synodal "process" for their pet causes on social media, in the press, and at academic conferences worldwide, including in Rome. These episcopal leaders and theologians often claim to speak for the mind of Pope Francis, but it is contestable whether this claim is completely true, especially given that he has himself placed the emphasis of the synod on mission and evangelization rather than on *ad intra* ecclesial reorganization in the manner of the secularizing camp. Against some of his critics *and* supporters, I shall spell out in the present essay key aspects of the missionary focus in Pope Francis's concept of synodality and suggest its metaphysical basis. Instead of arguing, as is sometimes done, that mission is for the sake of synodality, I shall demonstrate that Pope Francis keeps the reverse in view: that synodality is for the sake of mission.¹ Synodality has to do for Pope

¹ See Welder Lancieri Marchini, "Mission and Synodality," *Saveriane*, February 27, 2021,

Francis first and foremost with evangelization, with enabling the Church to communicate more effectively and pervasively the Word of God to people who have either fallen away from the Church or not yet received the liberating message of the Gospel. At the same time, I shall urge, his understanding of mission is rooted in a well-considered Trinitarian ontology in line with Tradition that renders his overarching vision an uneasy fit, ultimately, with the historicizing or democratizing reductionisms so prevalent today.²

I shall base my case in this essay on exploration of some of the fundamental keys of Pope Francis's thought that come from his theological background, and that he articulates especially in his papal exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. I shall proceed in three sections: in the first, exploring, with reference to polarization in the Church, the theology of mission in *Evangelii Gaudium*, which illuminates Pope Francis's understanding of synodality; in the second, suggesting that this theology of mission is reflected in the fuller, more explicit theological treatment of synodality presented in the International Theological Commission (ITC) document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*; in the third, suggesting that Pope Francis's papal magisterium and synodal vision is a continuator of sometimes-neglected aspects of the theology of the Second Vatican Council, which bear profound congruence with nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments in Trinitarian ontology that are manipulable by questionable interpretations but are also quite defensible, and may even be essential to grasp the meaning of the Council and its papal interpretation for the good of the future of the Church and the world.

A Theology of Mission in *Evangelii Gaudium* and the Theology of the People

One of the most interesting and important contributions to the current discussion on synodality is Michael Hanby's recent article "Synodality,

saveriane.it/en/news/notizie/2533-mission-and-synodality. Marchini says that "mission has synodality as its horizon." Mission, in his understanding, is about establishing autonomous churches. His focus is ultimately on the independent power relations of churches in their *ad intra* functioning. My argument in this essay is that, for Pope Francis, synodality has mission as its horizon: local churches exist to go always outward in spreading the Gospel and enabling its inculturation.

² I have already made forays in this direction of interpretation of Pope Francis. See Keith Lemna, "Three Pathways into the Theological Mind of Pope Francis," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 12, no. 1 (2014): 25–56; "Pope Francis's Strong Thought: A Literature Review," *Theological Librarianship* 7, no. 2 (2014): 45–53.

Sociologism, and the Judgment of History,” because, in it, Hanby gets at the root of the division in the Church that sets the context for possible meanings of the very concept of synodality.³ Hanby discusses in this piece what he calls “The Unresolved Crisis of Catholic Modernisms,”⁴ drawing heavily on the work of the Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce.⁵ The crisis indicated has to do with the relationship between metaphysics and history. Hanby urges that the internal conflict that the Church has faced between opposed poles of Catholic thought, left and right, is not—as it has often been urged—a methodological division between those who give priority to metaphysics and those who base their approach, in supposedly a-metaphysical manner, on historical considerations, because, quite simply, “there *is*,” as he puts it, “no ‘outside’ of metaphysics and theology.”⁶ The modernists and their successors who loudly prioritize history and historicity are, in fact, according to Hanby, consecrating metaphysical historicisms.

Following Del Noce’s genealogy of modernisms, Hanby explains that post-World War II “neo-Modernism”⁷ combined historicism with a Marxian political reduction, according to which true philosophy “surpasses itself into political realization and finds there its verification.”⁸ But Marxism itself degenerated, as it was fated to do, into “sociologism,” with its rank tendency to consecrate technocracy and the bourgeois vision of life so antithetical to genuine Christian religiosity.⁹ According to this Del Nocian genealogy, the neo-modernistic trend embraces in full modernity’s ontological and epistemological break from the Augustinian-Thomist Christian Platonism of the Tradition, with its Christology of the eternal Logos incarnate and its rich Trinitarian ontology of creation and redemption. This tradition affirmed “the primacy of contemplation, the primacy of the immutable, and the reality of the eternal order . . . which coincide with taking intellectual intuition as the definitive model of knowledge.”¹⁰ In its place, neo-modernism puts an emphasis on power relations in the realm of politics as the locus of interpretive meaning when setting the foundational warrant for its positions.

³ Michael Hanby, “Synodality, Sociologism, and the Judgment of History,” *Communio* 48, no. 4 (2021): 686–726.

⁴ Hanby, “Synodality,” 686. This expression is the title of his first section heading in the article.

⁵ Augusto Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, trans. Carlo Lancellotti (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2017). This is Hanby’s main source on Del Noce.

⁶ Hanby, “Synodality,” 688.

⁷ Hanby, “Synodality,” 688.

⁸ Hanby, “Synodality,” 689; quoting Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 236.

⁹ Hanby, “Synodality,” 689.

¹⁰ Hanby, “Synodality,” 693; quoting Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 241.

Hanby spells out the division between preconiliar “extrinsicism” and modernism, and he does not give any facile justifications for falling back into the former, extrinsicist position, which, he realizes, needed to be surpassed in its a-historical approach to theology, valorizing, as it did, “eternity at the expense of time and history.”¹¹ One consequence of extrinsicism is that it blinded theologians to the depth of meaning of those historical, civilizational developments which inevitably confront Catholic theology with new questions that must be faced. Captured by extrinsicism, the Church could achieve “no real *penetration* of history, . . . nor any real engagement with the challenge of history or the modern world.”¹² Hanby does not promote a return to some presumed golden age of preconiliar Catholic vigor, but the bulk of his article focuses on the negative consequences of modernist historicism in its various phases, such as in the bourgeois sociologism of some contemporary advocates of synodality in the media, especially the multimedia project of Massimo Faggioli.¹³ Faggioli joins the long brigade of thinkers opposed to orthodox Christian Tradition who have ended up turning history itself into what Maurice Blondel called a “total metaphysics.”¹⁴

Hanby warns that interpretations of the synod risk being dominated by the sociology-driven historicists, but it seems to me that the problem runs deeper for him, that it goes beyond the usual agitations provided by the typical ecclesial journalistic and lobbyist classes, and that it has its roots in the vagaries of Pope Francis’s own thought and agenda. Hanby does not himself explicitly raise the question, but one is justifiably led to wonder, from what he does say, whether the historicists are indeed the authentic champions of the papal magisterium of Pope Francis, in letter or in spirit, or whether Pope Francis himself remains true to the Logos theology of Tradition that issues directly from the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. It is my contention that, in fact, the historicist interpretive angle—which sees the endpoint of mission as the democratization of Church structures—grossly misrepresents Pope Francis’s mind and the purpose of the Synod on Synodality. It underestimates the theological depth of the Pope’s own thinking and of the theological sources from which it was developed, as well as its fundamental orientation toward the awakening of a fully missionary Church. Pope Francis is historically minded, friendly

¹¹ Hanby, “Synodality,” 690.

¹² Hanby, “Synodality,” 691.

¹³ See Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Hanby, “Synodality,” 692.

toward sociology, and disdainful of preconciliar extrinsicism, but he does not do away with the eternal Logos or absolutize history. He has thought through the meaning of history as an interplay of the universal in the concrete, and, as we shall see, of polar opposites in interaction, but the dialectic he develops on this basis is not conformable to Hegelian or Marxian historicisms. His focus is on *ad extra* mission, precisely as the “real penetration” of the Logos in history in and through the Church, which was the desideratum of Vatican II but has not even begun to be realized in contemporary culture.

In order to get at the truth of Pope Francis's mind, I think it is important to spell out the basis for the notion of synodality that has been present throughout his magisterium, and which he takes from his Argentinian theological background. His emphasis on synodality is largely motivated by the Church's imperative for mission as understood in this post-conciliar tradition of Latin American thought that he set forth in his own way early in his papacy, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, which Faggioli rightly says is “really the theological vision of Francis for his pontificate.”¹⁵ Hanby describes the Synod on Synodality as “A Political Process in Search of a Theology,”¹⁶ suggesting that it has no real theological basis except one that will be produced in *ad hoc* manner by historicizing, secularizing agitators in order to bend the Church to their wishes.¹⁷ The synodal process, in his view, was begun without any theological grounding to guide its unfolding, or at least one that is known. *After* Pope Francis had set the wheels in motion for the Synod on Synodality, it was left to the ITC to provide a *post hoc*, rather skimpy, theological justification for the process in its 2018 document on synodality that I shall discuss in the following section.¹⁸ This description of the process certainly inspires terror, but I want to suggest here that Pope Francis's theological and spiritual understanding of synodality is in fact already well-articulated in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG).¹⁹

¹⁵ Massimo Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis: Moving Toward a Global Catholicity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2020), 16.

¹⁶ Hanby, “Synodality,” 711.

¹⁷ Hanby, “Synodality,” 711. This sentence is title of a section heading.

¹⁸ Hanby, “Synodality,” 711.

¹⁹ See Luigi Gioia, “The Recent Practice of Synodality and its Ecclesiological Significance in the Light of Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*,” presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, November 21–24, 2015. Gioia rightly notices the importance of this exhortation in spelling out Pope Francis's understanding of synodality, but downplays the theme of mission in explicating the exhortation. See also Moira McQueen, *Walking Together: A Primer on the New Synodality* (Montreal: Twenty-third Publications, 2022), 22–29.

In this exhortation, Pope Francis speaks about synodality overtly only on one occasion, with reference to the Orthodox Church.²⁰ Yet, in fact, the pervasive, underlying theme of the document is the connection between all reforming, synodal notions and the missionary purpose of the Church: “missionary outreach is *paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity*” (*EG*, §15; emphasis original). In his *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (October 17, 2015 [*Ceremony*]), where he gave further explanation of the term “synodality,” Pope Francis said that it means “nothing other than the ‘journeying together’ of God’s flock along the paths of history towards encounter with Christ the Lord.” In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he emphasizes Christian life and faith as a common journey defined precisely as mission. The Church, in journeying together, in communion, is essentially missionary: “The Church’s closeness to Jesus is part of a common journey; ‘communion and mission are profoundly interconnected’” (§23; quoting John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* [1988], §32). Synodality is not just about establishing autonomous churches, but about the totality of the people of God walking together and proclaiming the Gospel. It is in the context of the mission of the Church that Pope Francis speaks of the conscious need to “promote a sound ‘decentralization’” (§16), which is, of course, a desideratum of synodality. The common journey of the Church in mission is one of internal conversion and transformation so that it may go outward more effectively, which Francis describes as “The Church’s Missionary Transformation” (the title of chapter 1 of *EG*). The conversion in question is not first and foremost for the sake of ecclesial reorganization but for evangelization, and confusion in this regard is the basis of the Pope’s public criticism of the German “synodal way.”²¹

In good Christian Platonist fashion, Pope Francis understands that the ultimate source of the mission of the Church is the relations and missions of the Trinity. Juan-Carlos Scannone, one of his philosophical mentors,

²⁰ *EG*, §246: “In the dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, we Catholics have the opportunity to learn more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and their experience of synodality.”

²¹ Ed Condon, “German Bishops Reject Plan for Francis-Style ‘Priority of Evangelization’ in Synodal Path,” *Catholic News Agency*, September 10, 2019, catholicnewsagency.com/news/42224/german-bishops-rejected-plan-for-francis-style-priority-of-evangelization-in-synodal-path. Some fear this confusion is present in Cardinal Mario Grech, the general secretary of the synod; see his interview by Andrea Tornielli, “Transformation of Synod to Create Space for People of God,” *Vatican News*, May 21, 2021, vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-05/cardinal-grech-interview-synod-secretariat-changes.html.

describes his theology of mission as incarnational and Pneumatological,²² but it is also, I would add, patrological. He holds that Christian mission is rooted in the Father's sending of the Son and the Spirit.²³ The missions of the divine persons are the true force behind ecclesial mission, for Pope Francis. I see no reason to dispute Scannone's assertion that the Pope possesses a "profound trinitarian theology."²⁴ The Church is for him—perhaps unlike some of his most vocal public supporters—a communion founded in the intra-Trinitarian life of God, whose ultimate source is the mercy of the Father (see Luke 6:36) revealed in the economy of salvation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.²⁵ "Mercy," Pope Francis says, "reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity."²⁶ God's intra-Trinitarian omnipotence, his infinite power, is perfect, radical love and gift manifested precisely in mercy.²⁷ In its journeying forth, the community of the Church has to show the Father's mercy to the world by virtue of and as requisite to its own closeness to his Son in the Spirit: "Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father's infinite mercy" (*EG*, §24). The Church cannot be the locus of this manifestation unless it goes forth, "pressing forward in . . . sowing of the good seed" (§21).

Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, says: "Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling. . . . Christ summons the Church as she goes her pilgrim way . . . to that continual reformation of which she always has need, in so far as she is a human institution here on earth."²⁸ What kind of reform is it that renders the Church truer to her own calling? In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis explains that it has to do with effective evangelization. Bad ecclesial structures that hinder this end must be reformed, and even good structures

²² Juan-Carlos Scannone, *Theology of the People: The Pastoral and Theological Roots of Pope Francis* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2021), 155.

²³ See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015), §238: "The Father is the source of everything, the loving and self-communicating foundation of all that exists."

²⁴ Scannone, *Theology of the People*, 161.

²⁵ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (2015), §1.

²⁶ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, §2.

²⁷ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, §6. Aquinas is directly quoted in the text: "It is proper to God to exercise mercy, and he manifests his omnipotence particularly in this way" (*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 30, a. 4). Pope Francis explains: "Thomas Aquinas' words show that God's mercy, rather than a sign of weakness, is the mark of his omnipotence."

²⁸ Second Vatican Council, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* (November 21, 1964), §6; quoted in *EG*, §26.

are of help only when they are driven, sustained, and assessed by “new life and an authentic evangelical spirit” (*EG*, §26). Renewal and reform of structures are necessary, then, “so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation” (§27). “All renewal in the Church,” the Pope explains, quoting Pope John Paul II, “must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion” (§27; quoting John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Oceania* [2001], 19).

The Pope’s discussion of particular churches in *Evangelii Gaudium* illuminates his understanding of synodality in the context of mission. The particular churches are heralded in the text as the primary subjects of evangelization and are themselves called to “missionary conversion.” They are not simply autonomous centers of self-government concerned with the equitable maintenance of an *ad intra* life. In this exhortation, “missionary conversion” and “pastoral conversion” are understood to be founded in ever-deepening relationship to Christ and aimed at inspiring all Christians to be more aware of their missionary mandate and more effective in their outreach in its concreteness. Each particular church, Pope Francis explains, must undergo a process of discernment. He insists that popes must listen to local bishops, while each local bishop, in his turn, must, at times, “listen to everyone” in his local church, not for the sake of ecclesial reorganization as final end, but for “the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone” (§31). Popes, bishops, and priests are called to a “pastoral conversion” which overcomes that undue centralization of the Church which “complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach” (§32). Church reform, in this optic, is a practical step toward the greater realization of the fundamental reality of the Church as a whole as essentially missionary: “The Church is herself a missionary disciple” (§40).

From all the preceding it is clear that reforms intrinsic to synodality are ordered to mission, but the nature of mission as Pope Francis understands it must be clarified. Pope Francis does *not* understand pastoral and missionary conversion to be a conversion of the Church to the secular consensus of the world, but he *does* emphasize the central importance of “inculturation” as a goal of mission, and this emphasis bespeaks a concern to reach the individual human being in his or her individuality as much as individual cultures. The Church penetrates history through inculturation. The concept of inculturation was developed in Argentinian theology, especially under the theological leadership of Lucio Gera (1924–2012), one of the founders of the Argentinian theology of the people. Gera helped inspire the central theme of Pope Paul VI’s papal exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* concerning

how the eternal truth of the Gospel can be embodied in diverse human cultures.²⁹ Pope John Paul II later adopted the term, comparing it to the Incarnation.³⁰ Pope Francis sees “evangelization as inculturation” (*EG*, §122), and he links inculturation as well as evangelization thematically both to the mission of the Son in the Incarnation and to that of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel, he urges, must take root in the particular cultures into which it is transmitted, forming these particular cultures with due respect for the legitimate autonomy of the cultural sphere, which is to say that the Church cannot impose everything top-down from a clerical center of power (§115). However, cultures must first *receive* the teaching of the Gospel, which *does* possess an intrinsic capacity to transform cultures: “Whenever a community receives the message of salvation, the Holy Spirit enriches its culture with the transforming power of the Gospel” (§116). Francis thinks that the Church needs to take genuine root in diverse manner in various cultures, respecting the diversities and specificities of each culture and each individual, penetrating into the lives of peoples in the depths of their own intrinsic and shared religious experience, affecting their spiritual practices in fidelity both to the Gospel and to what is good and true in their own cultural inheritance. He holds that inculturation is a matter of the proper expression of Catholic truth. It is only in the harmonious unity of many, concrete, diverse instantiations that “the Church expresses her genuine catholicity and shows forth the ‘beauty of her varied face’” (§116; quoted from John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Innuente*, 2001). Christianity should not be “mono-cultural and monotonous” (§117). The Church is “intercultural.”³¹ Pope Francis thus famously contrasts the image of the polyhedron to that of the sphere as the more adequate image of the unity of the Church as a unity-in-difference, with the interplay of the one and the many reaching every level (§236). The understanding of Trinitarian unity at the foundation of this vision of Church mission as inculturation is highly Pneumatocentric: “The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, transforms our hearts and enables us to enter into the perfect communion of the blessed Trinity, where all things find their unity. He builds up the communion and harmony of the people of God. The same Spirit is that harmony, just as he is the bond of love between the Father and the Son” (§117).

The Gospel’s transformation of the religious dimension of humanity evidences a fruit of mission. It is on the level of the devotional life of the

²⁹ Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014), 122.

³⁰ Scannone, *Theology of the People*, 155.

³¹ Scannone, *Theology of the People*, 162.

people, first and foremost, not that of their politics, that the verification of the truth of the Gospel is practically demonstrated. Popular piety, especially among the poor, is the fundamental locus of mission, for Pope Francis as for the theology of the people, and this approach urges that the Church should encourage all peoples to self-evangelize, albeit not without guidance from the bishops, whom they, for their own part, can help to evangelize. Pope Francis does think self-evangelization is crucial for the effective realization of synodality, but this understanding does not entail that mission comes to an end with the establishment of local churches, because all Christians have to go outward.

Pope Francis has never embraced a Marxian interpretation of religion according to which it is the opium of the masses to be done away with by an enlightened, liberationist theology. His approach to the theology of mission is practical and pragmatic but also metaphysical, albeit metaphysical in the register of the symbol. He recognizes in popular piety “a spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly.” He explains here that popular piety is very rich in theological meaning and should be a source for theology, which must be attentive to its symbolism: “Nor is it [popular piety] devoid of content; rather it discovers and expresses that content more by way of symbols than by discursive reasoning” (§124). The maxim *lex orandi, lex credendi* is focused here on popular devotion. This understanding of popular piety is deeply supernatural, and when Pope Francis exalts, in line with Aquinas, the “wisdom *per connaturalitatem*” that flows from the gift of faith, he privileges its presence in the poor whose hearts are able to be more fully open to God.³²

In the Argentinian theological context, the privileging of the poor is allied to the privileging of the devotional religiosity of the people as the authentic expression of the original evangelization of Latin America and crucial for the new evangelization.³³ The great proponents of the Argentinian theology of the people are not modernists, but neither are they anti-modern. Instead, they argue that the best sources of modernity in Latin America reside in Catholic culture itself.³⁴ In light of Hanby’s article, it should be mentioned

³² Scannone, *Theology of the People*, 165.

³³ Scannone, *Theology of the People*, 36–9.

³⁴ See Massimo Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s Intellectual Journey*, trans. Barry Hudock (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Academic, 2018), 85–99, 163–85. In these pages, Borghesi discusses the work of the Uruguayan philosopher Methol Ferré, who was very influential to Pope Francis and close to the Argentinian approach to liberation theology. Ferré development of the Catholic approach to modernity that I describe here is summarized in these pages. Borghesi refers to it as a

that Del Noce saw the importance of this Latin American argument for a Catholic modernity.³⁵ In Argentina, even sociology takes on a different face than what we are used to in the United States. Argentinian social science counters the “secularization thesis” common in many forms of social science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It locates the roots of culture in the irreplaceable religious depths of embodied human experience and holds that the standard sociological view according to which progress lifts humanity beyond its religious past and liberates it from the retrenchment of ancient memory is essentially bigoted toward the poor and is xenophobic.³⁶ On none of these fronts can Pope Francis’s theological sources or his own views be easily assimilated to contemporary secularizing theologies. These theologies have a precursor in the 1970s “death of God” approaches to the secular city promoted by the likes of Harvey Cox that were already held in suspicion by the Argentinians.³⁷

Yet, with all this said, we might be left to wonder about the real fruitfulness of the theme of inculturation and its conditions of possibility with respect to the secular city heralded by Cox. The theology of the people emphasizes the importance of ennobling the poor and already-evangelized peoples of Latin America in their devotional lives as a locus of reform and renewal in the Church for the sake of the new evangelization to which the goals of synodality are tied. This strategy might be effective in Latin America, but what about secularized Europe or North America (at least Canada and the United States), where the deeply rooted and still extant Catholicism of earlier centuries barely exists any longer? Does the Argentinian approach really possess universal efficacy? Is Pope Francis’s theological background too particularized to be practicable with respect to global Catholicism in its contemporary setting? Of course, these questions have been raised by Pope Francis himself, and by his most reliable theological allies. One important factor in evangelization of the secular West for the Pope and his collaborators is a renewed openness to the poor, what Scannone describes as “mercy and conversion toward the poor, excluded, refugees, Christian or

“dialectical Thomism.”

³⁵ Borghesi, *Mind of Pope Francis*, 163–85.

³⁶ Scannone, *Theology of the People*, 46–47: “The social sciences reacted against the modernizing sociology represented in 1950s Argentina by Gino Germani. This placed the traditional society (sacred) in opposition to the modern (secular), neglecting the cultural element in social analysis. This was just a step away from considering Argentinian popular Catholicism as a static element to a traditional agrarian society.”

³⁷ Scannone, *Theology of the People*, 19: “Latin American popular religiosity was able to resist the influence of both the Enlightenment and secularism, although it opened itself to the *plurality* or religious expression and confessions.”

not, who teach religiosity.”³⁸ The poor, Scannone explains, “will return to Europe the ultimate meaning of life and religion, if they [Europeans] only open their hearts to mercy.”³⁹ One may well question whether the poor can really work this prodigious miracle of conversion if they are not themselves Christian, or if they suffer from the same vices of pride, greed, envy, and lust as everyone else. How does this theology of the poor cohere with projects of social liberation that seek to lift the poor out of their impoverished state? Responses to these questions are certainly available. A lesson from *Laudato Si'* pertinent to this matter is that ecological crisis should awaken us anew in the West from our consumeristic slumber to embrace a certain *voluntary* poverty in our own lives in greater reliance on the providence of the triune God, who, as the Pope says, “fills it [the universe] completely” (§233).

At the same time, Pope Francis holds that the secular, cosmopolitan city is not without “seeds of the Word.” In the secular city, he insists, Christians must play the role of the Good Samaritan, entering into a relation of sharing with its denizens in their “struggle for survival,” a struggle that “contains within it a profound understanding of life which often includes a deep religious sense” (EG, §72). As essentially missionary, the Church has to go outside itself, but it also has to be fully incarnated in the world it encounters: “We are challenged to be a Church that is outward-looking and free of all worldliness, even as we live in this world, share people’s lives and journey with them in attentive listening and acceptance.”⁴⁰ Christians must “live within the secular city while nurturing the interior life, and to discover an interior peace that does not separate us from the world but teaches us how to live in it and to appreciate it, but also to maintain a proper detachment from it.”⁴¹ Detachment and “in-worlding” go together. The secular world may contain seeds of the Word, but it will be transformed in time by Christian mission and inculturation: in “profoundly secularized countries, it [inculturation] will mean sparking new processes for evangelizing culture, even though these will demand long-term planning. . . . Each culture and social group needs purification and growth” (EG, §69). Whatever processes Pope Francis has in mind here, they will not be realized through coercive feats of power. The gift of the Trinity can be communicated effectively through the Church to each individual and each culture only by way of “‘invitations, enticements and holy inspirations’” respecting human freedom, and not by

³⁸ Scannone, *Theology of the People*, 39.

³⁹ Scannone, *Theology of the People*, 39.

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, *Totum Amoris Est: On the Fourth Centenary of the Death of Saint Francis De Sales* (2022).

⁴¹ Pope Francis, *Totum Amoris Est*.

“chains of iron, like bulls or oxen” that can be externally imposed.⁴² (§69; quoting Francis de Sales).

The most developed aspect of Pope Francis's thought with respect to evangelization has to do with his theology of “polarity,” which the Italian theologian Massimo Borghesi has convincingly shown is in fact the central, governing theme in his theological vision. The theme runs through his magisterium as the red thread uniting all of the programs and initiatives he has brought forth.⁴³ He discovered it through the writings of his confreres Erich Przywara, Henri de Lubac, and Gaston Fessard. Fessard's commentary on St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* was an especially decisive influence on him in this regard.⁴⁴ Through his embrace of Fessard's dialectical reading of St. Ignatius, the future Pope began to envision in direct and explicit fashion spiritual life and theology in terms of mediated antinomies rather than polarized disjunctions. Borghesi explains that this dialectic theology has enabled Pope Francis to see beyond the polarizations in contemporary society and the Church in prospect of their potential transformation into a condition of genuine polarity. The future Pope hit upon this theme again later in life, discovering it during his doctoral research, in Frankfurt in the 1980s, in the work of Romano Guardini, who argued that the concept of polarity is of crucial significance for “concrete-living.”⁴⁵ Understood in the manner of Guardini, polarity is an approach to conflict resolution that realistically embraces the conflictual nature of human development without consecrating violence as the inevitable solution. Conflicts cannot be avoided, but they do not have to be understood primarily in terms of a friend–enemy dialectic. Guardini himself says: “The theory of opposites is the theory of confrontation, which does not happen as a struggle against an enemy, but as the synthesis of fruitful tension, that is, as a construction of concrete unity.”⁴⁶ Unity in the concrete requires back and forth, coming and going, dialogue, exchange, and living encounter, in a tension that cannot be annulled in this life but does not have to be made into a *causa belli*. On this understanding, reform in the Church has another concrete criterion for its truth or falsity: does it overcome the polarization of the friend–enemy dialectic? Bad

⁴² Pope Francis, *Totum Amoris Est*; quoted from St. Francis de Sales, *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, vol. 2, bk. 12, ed. André Ravier and Roger Davos (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 444.

⁴³ Borghesi, *Mind of Pope Francis*, 57–99.

⁴⁴ Gaston Fessard, *La Dialectique des “Exercices Spirituels” de Saint Ignace de Loyola*, vol. 1 (Paris: Aubier, 1956).

⁴⁵ Borghesi, *Mind of Pope Francis*, 105. See Romano Guardini, *Der Gegensatz: Versuche zu einer Philosophie des Lebendig-Konkreten* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1925).

⁴⁶ Borghesi, *Mind of Pope Francis*, 107.

interpretations of Pope Francis exalt the friend–enemy disjunction over the hermeneutic of reform rooted in the distinction between true and false understood in the manner of the former’s entailment of authentic polarity.⁴⁷

Borghesi shows throughout his book on the Pope’s intellectual biography how the understanding of polarity is operative everywhere in Pope Francis’s work, but I find a brief exposition that he gives of his 1980 paper, “Criteria of Apostolic Action,” particularly illuminating. In this article, the future Pope presented the meaning of Jesuit mission as an ability to live within dialectical tensions and antinomies rather than oppositional polarizations. The polarization that would pit the quest for social justice against faith is the test case in the article. In order to live the tension between traditional faith and the exigency for social justice, three steps are requisite: “first, to humble oneself and enter into direct contact with those in need; second, to carry out concrete works of mercy; and third, to become more aware of poverty in society and to reform unjust structures.”⁴⁸ These steps, as Borghesi explains, are not linear, but dynamically dialectic, requiring a return to direct contact and then to the new awareness. Borghesi attempts to clarify the manner in which Pope Francis’s dialectic of polarity is distinguishable from that of Hegel: “Unlike Hegel and his ascending dialectic, *which never returns*, Bergoglio’s dialectic lives by antinomies. This means that it is ‘circular,’ that its third moment—a deepening social awareness and the reform of structures—implies a return to the first stage: direct contact, *real and not merely theoretical*, with people and in particular with the poor.”⁴⁹

Francis accords global importance to this understanding of dialectic. He sees it as applicable to the life of the Church as a whole in mission in order to bring the Gospel message back to the center of political events, in secular culture, not by subsuming it into the political but so that it can enliven the political and be a source for overcoming of the polarizations in societies, in nations, and between nations that have led humanity into continuous global warfare. True polarity is also important for the concrete lives of individuals. The people of God, the Pope believes, need to be ever in a situation of encounter with the other whom it is their mission to serve. This encounter requires openness to concrete persons in their unique situations and an attitude of mercy, not papering over conflicts but also not turning them into opportunities for destructive response or escape. The polar

⁴⁷ See Ivereigh, *Great Reformer*, 93–94. Yves Congar’s *True and False Reform* is another one of Pope Francis’s most cherished sources.

⁴⁸ Borghesi, *Mind of Pope Francis*, 66–67. These are Borghesi’s own words explaining the future Pope’s position in the article.

⁴⁹ Borghesi, *Mind of Pope Francis*, 67 (emphasis original).

dialectic here described is present in *Evangelii Gaudium* in the enunciation of four fundamental principles essential for the effective embodiment of the Church as a school of communion in our time: (1) time is greater than space; (2) unity prevails over conflict; (3) reality is more important than ideas; (4) the whole is greater than the part (§§222–37). Pope Francis first developed these principles in response to leftwing ideological capture of the Jesuit order in the 1970s, but he clearly sees them as antidotes to the distortions coming from both wings of the Church and society at this point in history. He thinks that the doctrine of polarity will enable us to escape the paralysis of entrenchment in the Church in our wish to avoid the other or erase his concerns in a higher synthesis that never looks back.⁵⁰ Conflict is unavoidable, but it is not fruitful for the life of faith or for human existence if we try to take over the space of the other, or see the agonistic dimension of conflict as defining of the other's humanity over our common unity as human beings, or if we elevate our group over the good of the whole, or our ideas over living contact with the other. In this dialectical understanding, the Pope does not fail to recognize that the offer of the Gospel to the other can be violently opposed: "The disciple is ready to put his or her whole life on the line, even to accepting martyrdom, in bearing witness to Jesus Christ." Yet, he insists here, "the goal is not to make enemies but to see God's word accepted and its capacity for liberation and renewal revealed" (§24). It follows that, in the quest for a missionary synodality, in an age when the voice of the Church is neither heard nor listened to, it is incumbent upon the Church, for the sake of its duty to preach the Gospel to all people, to move beyond the friend-foe dichotomy of contemporary society. The goal of synodality is that God's liberating and renewing Logos might be more widely accepted, and, to the Pope's mind, the notion of polarity here described is an indispensable tool to attain this goal.

Pope Francis is not trapped in the framework of historicist or reductionist thinking in his theology of mission and synodality. I have mentioned that he highlights the mercy of the Trinity as an ontological reality, and this understanding is the ultimate basis of his missionary and synodal theology. This emphasis on mercy entails a particular notion of the eternal constitution of the intra-divine relationality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Pope Francis is versed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century renewals in Trinitarian theology, which is reflected in his understanding of the mission of the Church.⁵¹

⁵⁰ See Natale Ricardo Cristiano, "Francesco, il Natale e il Futuro della Chiesa," *Formiche*, December 26, 2022, formiche.net/2022/12/francesco-natale-futuro-della-chiesa-parla-borghesi.

⁵¹ See *Les Sources des Renouveau de la Théologie Trinitaire au XXe Siècle*, ed. Vincent

These renewals often pointed to the kenotic sharing of the divine persons in which there is an aspect of retreat and withdrawal in the divine life as the basis for God's own self-sharing love and to establish a "metaphysical space," as it were, for creation.⁵² This sort of direction of Trinitarian ontology is broadly congruent with Pope Francis's doctrine of polarity, except that, in God, it must be recognized, as Pope Francis himself does, the *coincidentia oppositorum* of the divine persons, who are other by way of relations of opposition, is eternally realized and mediated by the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is, as we have seen from *Evangelii Gaudium*, the very "harmony" of the divine life, as the eternal, personal bond of love uniting the Father with the Son. Because the Spirit is the Spirit of harmony in the interpersonal life of the Trinity, he can, in the economy, reconcile diversities in the Church, as well as in society and in creation as a whole, without abrogating the polarities constitutive of those diversities.

The International Theological Commission Document on Synodality

I have already referenced Pope Francis's address at the ceremony commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the synod of bishops on the meaning and importance Pope Paul VI's institution of the synod. He pointed out in this address that both Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II held that the instrument of the synod could be improved with time, and he said that the "world . . . which we are called to love and serve . . . demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission" (*Ceremony*, §1). The emphasis here—as usual for Pope Francis—was not on the internal self-preservation of structures in the Church, but on what the "world . . . demands" regarding the Church's mission. He thus confirmed *synodality* (the Church journeying together) as the path "which God expects of the Church of the third millennium" (§1). Synodality, as God's wish for the Church, serves the goal of evangelization, which cannot be carried out by a specialized group of professionals alone while the rest of the faithful would remain passive (§2; citing *EG*, §9). It is in this missionary context that the Pope heralds the supernatural sense of the faith, which gives to the entire people of God, walking together toward the Lord, an *infallibility in credendo*. Because the entirety of the faithful possesses the *sensus fidei*, the Church

Holzer and Emmanuel Durand (Paris: Cerf, 2008), and *Les Réalisations du Renouveau de la Théologie Trinitaire au XXe Siècle*, ed. Holzer and Durand (Paris: Cerf, 2010).

⁵² See Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to the Christian Life*, trans. William Madges (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 91–96. Pope Francis referred to this book in his first Angelus address as pope.

cannot be rigidly parceled in two between a teaching Church (*ecclesia docens*) and a taught Church (*ecclesia discens*). The Pope said, “the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church” (§2). So, the bishops and the pope must *listen* to the flock, for the sake of their own discernment, and not merely *hear* them. Synodality is, Pope Francis insisted, a “constitutive element of the Church” (§3), and it is exercised through a dialogue in which everyone has not only something to say but also something to learn. The Church is not thereby beholden to “the changing currents of public opinion,” and in the synodal process, the bishops and the pope have to exercise their unique charism as “interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church” (§2). Synodality does not entail a leveling down of the teaching authority unique to the bishops, who must act together *cum Petro, sub Petro*, but it does entail a pastoral conversion whereby they learn to practice more effectively the dialogical art of listening. Strikingly, the mission-centered meaning of synodality was reiterated in his 2018 apostolic constitution *Episcopalis Communio*, in light of *Evangelii Gaudium*: “Today, too, at a point in history when the Church is embarking upon a ‘new chapter of evangelization’ requiring her to be ‘throughout the world . . . permanently in a state of mission,’ the Synod of Bishops is called, like every other ecclesiastical institution, to become ever more ‘suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.’”⁵³

Naturally, neither the Pope’s initial address nor his later constitution went into comprehensive theological detail on the meaning of synodality, although, as I have suggested at length, its missional centering was already spelled out in *Evangelii Gaudium*. This larger, explicit reflection on synodality was taken up later by the ITC, which led to the issuance of their *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, a document that reflects and expresses Pope Francis’s understanding of the meaning of synodality and references his papal texts—including, several times, *Evangelii Gaudium*. *Episcopalis Communio*, for its part, sets out the concrete steps of the Synod on Synodality but does not develop the theology of synodality in the same depth as this ITC document. The title of the latter text, which speaks not only of “the life” but of “the mission of the Church,” indicates that the ITC understood the importance of mission and evangelization in the development of the theme of synodality that has been omnipresent in

⁵³ Pope Francis, *Episcopalis Communio* (2018), §1. The text references *EG*, §§1, 25, 27; Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes* (October 7, 1965), §29; cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), 23.

Pope Francis's teachings. Section 104 of the document gets to the heart of the concept of synodality and its importance for the renewal of ecclesiality in light of the Lord's Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20):

"Every renewal in the Church is essentially grounded in increase of fidelity to her own calling." So, in carrying out her mission, the Church is called to constant conversion, which is a "pastoral and missionary conversion," too; this involves renewing mentalities, attitudes, practices and structures, in order to be ever more faithful to her vocation. An ecclesial mentality shaped by synodal thinking joyfully welcomes and promotes the grace in virtue of which all the baptised are qualified and called to be missionary disciples. The great challenge for pastoral conversion that follows from this for the life of the Church is to intensify the mutual collaboration of all in evangelising witness based on everyone's gifts and roles, without clericalising lay people and without turning the clergy into lay people, and in any case avoiding the temptation of "an excessive clericalism which keeps them [lay people] away from decision-making." (§104)⁵⁴

The primary aim of synodality, the document makes clear, is not about power relations concerned with reversing the roles of clerics and lay people, but to encourage a greater sense of mission and evangelization by way of opening a more effective process of collaboration so that "everyone's gifts and roles" can be utilized more fully, as "all the baptised are qualified and called to be missionary disciples." All of this synodal envisioning of the Church is so that it may be truer to its own divinely given calling.

The ITC document begins with an etymological excursus on the meaning of "synodality." It is a word found in recent theological, canonical, and spiritual literature that derives from "synod," which indicates "the path along which the People of God walk together" as "followers of the Way" of Jesus Christ. The meaning of "synod" is convergent with the meaning of "council," which has reference ultimately to the Hebraic *qahal*, "the assembly convoked by the Lord," which is translated into the Greek as *ecclesia*, whose meaning in the New Testament is "the eschatological convocation of the People of God in Christ Jesus." The distinction between "synod" and "council" is established only with the 1983 Code of Canon Law of the Latin Church. We now speak, on the one hand, of a "plenary" council, as well as an "ecumenical" council, and on the other hand, of a "synod of bishops"

⁵⁴ Pope Francis quotes Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §6 and *EG*, §102.

or “diocesan synod.” “Synodality” extends the meaning of the renewal of a communion-focused ecclesiology that was central to Vatican II. It brings to the fore “the common dignity and mission of all the baptized, in exercising the variety and ordered richness of their charisms, their vocations and their ministries.” It is meant to encourage the reciprocal gift exchange of all Christians, journeying together, coming together in assembly, to enable better all the people of God to realize active “involvement and participation . . . in the life and mission of the Church” (§7).

I have just summed up important points from the introduction to the document. Chapter 1 carries out a relatively lengthy excursus on the basis of synodality in tradition and history, beginning with Scripture, starting with the Book of Genesis itself, with God’s creating man and woman together to bear his image and likeness socially. God establishes covenants with his people in order to draw them into communion with himself and each other. He convokes an assembly in Abraham and his descendants which is ratified in the covenant on Sinai. The *qahal* of the people of God in the desert is the first full disclosure of their “synodal vocation” (§13). Centered on the Lord, the assembly of the people of God includes Moses, the judges, the elders, the Levites, and all men, women, and children called out into the desert by the Lord. The prophets guide the people to renewed conversion in their joint calling through the hardships of history.

A new covenant is established in the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, whose person, deeds, and words, “reveal that God is a communion of love who, in His grace and mercy, wishes to embrace the whole of humanity in unity” (§15). He never acts alone in his mission, and he always carries out the wishes of his Father. The plan of the Father in his Son is fulfilled in the Paschal Mystery, “when Jesus gives His life to take it up again in the resurrection . . . and to share it with His disciples as sons and daughters, sisters and brothers in the outpouring ‘without reserve’ of the Holy Spirit” (§15). Jesus is himself the way to the Father, which—the ITC text makes clear—is alone the way to salvation. Jesus possesses an authority, by the power of the Spirit, to send his apostles to the nations, to teach the people and baptize them in the name of the Trinity.

God’s authority in Christ is realized through the communication of a myriad of charisms shared by the Spirit “among the People of God for the upbuilding of the one Body of Christ” (§18). Here, the apostles have first place in the community of the faithful, with Peter being preeminent among them. They are, together, “entrusted with the ministry of guiding the Church in fidelity to the *depositum fidei*, . . . always in terms of mutual submission and service: since the highest gift, the one that regulates them

all, is love” (§18). The text highlights the importance of the Acts of the Apostles and the “Council of Jerusalem” for establishing the paradigm for synodality: “Everyone plays an active part, though with varied roles and contributions”; The apostles and elders make a final decision, exercising “their specific ministry with authority” (§21).

The ITC text then considers the presence of synodality in the Church in two separate subsections, the first dealing with the first millennium of the Church, and the second dealing with the second millennium. The text moves from St. Ignatius of Antioch writing to the Church in Ephesus saying that all members are *synodoi*—“companions on the journey”—“by virtue of the dignity of baptism and their friendship with Christ” (§25), to the Council of Nicaea, with brief mention of the *modus procedendi* of subsequent local synods throughout the first millennium, emphasizing that synodal procedures in the Church were largely carried out by “diocesan and provincial Synods” (§30). Of greatest significance with respect to the Council of Nicaea was canon 6, which “recognized the pre-eminence . . . and regional primacy of the sees of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch” (§26). Apostolic canon 34 is referenced, which established the need for synods whenever a decision transcended the capacity of a local bishop. The text notes: “Although the Synods celebrated periodically from the third century onwards at diocesan and provincial levels dealt with disciplinary, cultic and doctrinal matters that had arisen locally, there is a firm conviction that the decisions taken were an expression of communion with all the Churches. This ecclesial sense is a sign of awareness that each local Church is an expression of the one Catholic Church” (§28).

The section on synodality in the second millennium of the Church begins with the breakdown of communion between the Christian East and the Christian West and notes that synodal procedure took on a different form in the two, broad regions as a result of their increasing schism. The focus is on the presence of the synodal process in the West throughout this time period. Of particular note is how the text relates Vatican II to earlier modern history. This Council is rightly read as having taken up the work of Johann Adam Möhler, Antonio Rosmini-Serbati, and John Henry Newman in the nineteenth century, “who returned to the normative sources of Scripture and Tradition, heralding the providential renewal that came with the biblical, liturgical and patristic movements.” They stressed the Church as “communion, which implies an ordered synodal practice on every level, giving due importance to the *sensus fidei fidelium*, intrinsically related to the specific ministry of the Bishops and the Pope” (§38). *Lumen Gentium* embraced their view of the Church as communion. The mystical and sacramental outlook that comes through their work enabled an emphasis to emerge on

the Church as a people journeying together in faith toward the heavenly homeland, sharing a common mission by virtue of their shared baptism, seeing the episcopacy in collegial union with Rome, as all together are members of this one people. However, the Church in the period of Vatican I also embraced a synodal approach in consultation with the whole of the people of God regarding the promulgation of new Marian dogmas, as well as in bringing forth episcopal conferences. The document reminds us, pertinently to Pope Francis's background, that "Leo XIII convoked a plenary Latin American Council, which brought together the Metropolitans of the ecclesiastical province of the continent" (§39).

Chapter 1 is lengthy relative to the rest of the text, but it is still highly compressed and schematic. Contrary to some readings, it does not support the view that synodality pops into being miraculously with Vatican II so that the Church can be at long last true to the "Way of Jesus." It recognizes the presence of elements of synodality throughout the second millennium of the Western Church. If, as the text says, synodality "appears from the start as the guarantee and incarnation of the Church's fidelity to her apostolic origins and her Catholic calling," there are periods of waxing and waning of this fidelity throughout its entire history—and not only the second millennium—for, *ecclesia semper reformanda est*. The text indicates that the period we are in now is a developmental period of self-understanding in the sense of development meant by Newman. It is characterized by organic development, on the basis of what has been given, of what it means for the Church to "journey together" in realization of the Great Commission. The new paths that have opened up for the Church today are not creations *ex nihilo*. They stem from the "apostolic origins of her Catholic calling" (§24).

Still, the historical section is only a kind of outline, and one that would have to be filled in at much greater length to assuage concerns that the Synod on Synodality has elicited in some quarters as an absolute novelty with respect to the Gospel itself. Chapter 2 seeks to get more deeply at the theological foundation of the meaning of synodality and is, in my view, the most significant chapter in the text. It roots the notion of synodality in Trinitarian communion and in an overarching ecclesiology of communion that is, of course, deeply inspired by the Second Vatican Council and the sorts of *ressourcement* approaches mentioned above. The Church is a unity, according to this vision, because it "has her source, her model and her goal in the unity of the Blessed Trinity . . . She is the People of God on pilgrimage on earth in order to reconcile all people in the unity of the Body of Christ, through the Holy Spirit" (§45). Her holiness and catholicity likewise flow from her rootedness in the mystery of the Trinity, and the principle of

synodality has a basis that is equally Christocentric and Pneumatocentric: “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. Actually, as the *nexus amoris* in the life of God as Trinity, the Spirit gives this same love to the Church, and she is built into the ‘communion of the Holy Spirit’” (§46). With Pope Francis, the ITC document emphasizes the unity of communion that only the Spirit can give, both *ad intra*, in the eternal life of the Trinity, and *ad extra*, in the economy.

This section of the document appropriately spells out, with some precision, what it means to speak of “mission” in the context of synodality: “Synodality is lived out in the Church in the service of mission; . . . she exists in order to evangelise. The whole People of God is an agent of the proclamation of the Gospel. Every baptised person is called to be a protagonist of mission since we are all missionary disciples” (§53; this particular text does not reference *Evangelii Gaudium*, but it might just as well have done so). Clearly, the fundamental motivation for the synodal understanding is to unleash the energy of evangelistic testimony in word and deed through the multiplicity of charisms: “The Church is called, in synodal synergy, to activate the ministries and charisms present in her life and to listen to the voice of the Spirit, in order to discern the ways of evangelisation” (§53). What is the endpoint of mission, the goal of evangelization? Does “pastoral conversion” or “missionary conversion” or “spiritual conversion” mean converting the Church to the customs and desires of secular liberalism? To the contrary. The ITC document—congruently with Pope Francis—sees mission and evangelization in Trinitarian and Christological terms as drawing all things to Christ as head in the Spirit, not in blind obedience to the world but, nevertheless, through the diversity of cultural forms (§53).

The entire human family is called to communion with Christ in his Church, but his Lordship is liberating, not coercive. It is *not* the imposition of a single cultural paradigm on the totality of the human family. It entails an ecclesiology of ministry extending to all levels of the faithful. The Church should be “a Church of participation and co-responsibility” (§67), as it is constituted as a single missionary subject. Governance in the Church cannot be effectively realized in the manner of the separation of pastors from their communities, but in consultation of the former with their flock, through which the rightful and unique charism of the lay faithful is realized (§68). Synodality has a specific meaning pertaining to “*structures and ecclesial processes* in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed at an institutional level, but analogously on various levels: local, regional and universal” (§70b). It involves “synodal events” where the Church is brought together in assembly by the rightful authorities. But

these structures, processes, and events are meant to enliven the mission of the people of God as a whole, gathered together as a single subject, called to gather the totality of the human family together into Christ and thus into full Trinitarian communion.

Chapters 3 and 4 of the text reflect more fully on certain practical considerations in regard to how synodality may be effectively realized in the Church. Chapter 3 stresses that the entirety of the people of God must be consulted in “processes of discernment in the framework of synodal structures” (§73). The “co-essentiality between hierarchical gifts and charismatic gifts” must be promoted: significantly, the polarity of lay and clerical states is not denied but highlighted (§74). The charism of theology must be duly recognized, as theologians should carry out their work in a synodal manner, in dialogue with societies and cultures, but always filled with the light of the Gospel (§75). Synodality must be effected on all levels, and the text makes some very cursory suggestions with regard to each level: in the local Church; in diocesan synods and eparchial assemblies; in other structures serving synodal life in the local Church; and at the parish level. Working gradually toward structures with more universal scope, the document considers the question of synodality with respect to ecumenical councils, synods of bishops, and the synodal exercise of the Petrine primacy in service to the Church.

Chapter 4 of the text emphasizes yet again that “Synodality is established to energise the life and evangelizing mission of the Church in union with and under the guidance of the Lord Jesus, who promised: ‘where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them’” (§103; Mt 18:20). The energy behind the synodal push is especially articulated in this chapter with respect to mission, and I began this brief overview of the ITC document with a quotation drawn from this chapter which clearly summarizes much of Pope Francis’s own wishes regarding synodality and the need for conversion to a more synodal understanding in order to motivate a sense of co-responsibility among all the faithful for the Church’s shared work of evangelization. The chapter suggests a “spirituality of communion and formation for synodal life,” so that the Church more fully shows itself as “the home and school of communion” (§107). Toward this communal end as expression of mission, there must be “conversion of heart and mind and . . . disciplined training for welcoming and listening to one another.” And so the chapter thematizes practical approaches for “listening and dialogue for communal discernment” (section heading 4.3). Humility must have primacy, in this understanding. Pope Francis’s principle that “unity is greater than conflict” should be of paramount concern for all the faithful (§111). All disciples of Christ should contemplate not only the Word of God but also his people (§114). Synodality should, furthermore, open up to a more fully realized ecumenical journey,

starting with the Orthodox Church, and I should mention that the motive of ecumenism—particularly with the Christian East—is also a large factor in the increasing emphasis on synodality, although that is not my focus in the present essay, because, it seems to me, the universal imperative of mission is the paramount concern of synodality in Francis’s mind, and ecumenism is understood as an essential (but not the only) dimension of mission. The quest for social justice for the totality of the human family is also in deep congruence with the synodal understanding of the Church, according to the document (§119). In every respect, the document is reflective of theological accents present in Pope Francis’s teachings and does not seem to be an expression of a political process in search of an extrinsic theological expression so much as an articulation of the mind of the magisterium as it comes through the guidance of the current pope.

A Reformed Trinitarian Ontology of Communion and Mission

Pope Francis and his most astute theological allies envision the Synod on Synodality as a way of opening processes in the Church that will enable it more effectively to carry out its mission of evangelization, the aim of which is to bring all humanity in its living cultural diversity into communion with the Holy Trinity through the community of the people of God, who should, walking together in the way of the incarnate Lord, manifest the Father’s mercy as the “school of communion” *par excellence*. The Trinitarian, Christological, and Pneumatological underpinning of this synodal concept is indeed a form of “Christian Platonism,” an expression of traditional Christianity and not the birth of something so essentially new that the continuity of the one subject Church in the midst of the current reform is truly threatened. However, this Tradition is now filtered through nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments in personalism, transcendental Thomism, *ressourcement* Trinitarian ontology, and Catholic phenomenology. These trends of thought deeply impacted the Argentinian theology of the people and the interpretation of Vatican II that theologians in this school have proposed in continuous form for decades, which, it should be pointed out, is largely responsible for the theology of the Latin American CELAM (Conselho Episcopal Latino-Americano) conferences at Puebla and Aparecida that prefigure Pope Francis’s papal magisterium.

This direction of thought has developed a dimension of the Council that some American theologians seem to find disturbing, or irrelevant, but that is, in fact, crucial to the message of the conciliar texts and their papal interpretation taken as a whole. In doing so, it takes up a modern line of Christian Platonism in the Church. I am referring here to the presence

in the theology of Vatican II and its immediate sources, as well as in its Argentinian interpretation, of a kind of phenomenological method, what the American theologian Robert Sokolowski has named, with reference to broader trends of thought, a “theology of disclosure.”⁵⁵ Christian Platonism in the patristic and monastic styles was not itself so much a speculative theology concerned to give a comprehensive overview of immutable, divinely revealed truths, but a theology of manifestation, concerned to attend to divine self-presentation in creation and salvation history as “emanation, splendor, presence, concealment, and imaging,” showing how the revelation of God and of man are realized simultaneously in the Incarnation.⁵⁶ The modern theology of disclosure that Sokolowski describes took up these same themes, albeit now in the face of the challenges of philosophical skepticism and historical consciousness. It addressed the historical dimension of revelation as a serious thematic concern but elucidated therein the essential and unique structures of givenness by which the light of divine revelation is presented to human experience in the Church in history.

Another American theologian, John Kobler, confirmed that the deployment of phenomenological method was a crucial feature of the theology of Vatican II. His two dense books on the subject show convincingly, in my view, that a kind of phenomenological approach is indeed a key to interpreting the conciliar texts, although not the only key.⁵⁷ Kobler holds that these texts exhibit the fruits of what he considers to be a collegial, corporate exercise in the phenomenological articulation of ecclesial self-consciousness in relation to Christ for the sake of a renewed self-understanding, so as to show forth, in the light of faith, the meaning of human existence as such in all its dimensions. The Council was meant to disclose, in view of the Church's own continuing reception of divine revelation in Christ, what Pope Paul VI

⁵⁵ Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 5–12.

⁵⁶ Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence*, 10. See also Thomas Michael Tomasic, “William of Saint-Thierry on the Phenomenon of Christ: The Paradigm of Human Possibilities,” *Analecta Cisterciensia* 31, no. 2 (1975): 213–45, at 214: “The Christian Neoplatonist views the Incarnational event, this *visio Dei in terram*, as the primal and ultimate *doxa*, i.e., glory, illumination, unconcealment, in which a phenomenology of God and of man is accomplished in a single stroke.”

⁵⁷ John Kobler, *Vatican II and Phenomenology: Reflections on the Life-World of the Church* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985); Kobler, *Vatican II, Theophany and the Phenomenon of Man: The Council's Pastoral Servant Leader Theology for the Third Millennium* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991).

referred to, in his final talk at the Council, as the *Totus homo phaenomenicus* (the whole of man as phenomenological reality).⁵⁸

Kobler highlights an intervention at the Council by Cardinal Suenens on December 4, 1962.⁵⁹ In this intervention, Suenens expanded the central vision for the Council as articulated by John XXIII in his radio address on September 11, 1962: “The Church of Christ as the light of mankind.”⁶⁰ Suenens did so by furthering a dialectical device for the unfolding of the conciliar method already incipiently present in Pope John XXIII’s radio address. This device is a “distinction” between *ad intra* and *ad extra* common to a certain kind of technical phenomenology.⁶¹ The deliberations at the Council would oftentimes be realized by elucidating the structures of disclosure of divine revelation and the meaning of the Church as received in its corporate consciousness in and through its unique historical positioning. In terms of its *ad intra* self-understanding, the Church was recognized as the Mystical Body joined to Christ as Head.⁶² But the *ad intra* understanding was reiterated and deepened at the Council in order to “transfigure . . . whatever *exterior actual image* . . . the Church may project for mankind in empirically discernible ways.”⁶³ These are two poles—the *ad intra* and the *ad extra*—which must be kept together and in balance, yet the *ad intra* self-recognition “constitutes” the *ad extra* presentation in the *phenomenological* sense. Kobler suggests that a renewed *ad intra* self-recognition required *ad extra* reform. The Church thus clarified new dimensions of evangelization entailing social mission, the teaching of communion, and the elucidation of the true depths of humanization, centered in Jesus Christ, on behalf of a bruised and battered world that has found itself on the brink of self-destruction. It is with reference to the *ad extra* pole of ecclesial presentation that Kobler situates the theology of the people of God at the Council.⁶⁴ The symbol “people of God” manifests the Church as Mystical Body in its reality as communion in service of “a new ‘civilization of global solidarity’ for mankind.”⁶⁵ Kobler insists that

⁵⁸ Quoted by Kobler, *Vatican II, Theophany and the Phenomenon of Man*, 136 (cited from *Sacrosanctum Oecumenicum Concilium Vaticanum II: Constitutiones, Decreta, Declarationes*).

⁵⁹ Kobler, *Vatican II, Theophany and the Phenomenon of Man*, 118 (for the text of Suenens’ speech and his written addenda, Kobler refers the reader to *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticana II*).

⁶⁰ Kobler, *Vatican II, Theophany and the Phenomenon of Man*, 118.

⁶¹ Kobler, *Vatican II, Theophany and the Phenomenon of Man*, 118.

⁶² Kobler, *Vatican II, Theophany and the Phenomenon of Man*, 118.

⁶³ Kobler, *Vatican II, Theophany and the Phenomenon of Man*, 132–33.

⁶⁴ Kobler, *Vatican II, Theophany and the Phenomenon of Man*, 182–84.

⁶⁵ Kobler, *Vatican II, Theophany and the Phenomenon of Man*, 166; quoting Pope Paul

it is not understood correctly by those who herald it as the consecration of modern notions of democratic process and individualism in the intrinsic functioning of the Church.

Kobler laments that North American theologians have been as oblivious to the phenomenological method of the Council as they have been to phenomenology in general. However, what he describes in his books aligns with the conciliar theology that was very much present in the Argentinian theology of the people and in the episcopal texts produced at Puebla and Aparecida. The theology of the people is steeped in French Christian hermeneutics and phenomenology—such as in Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Luc Marion. It maintained its own “theology of disclosure” in interpreting the Council in the context of Latin American theology, and thus sought to extend the “collegial” proportions of the Council’s methodology to the totality of the people of God, privileging the already-evangelized poor. The ecclesial consciousness scrutinized at Vatican II was that shared by the bishops and experts present. The theology of the people proposes that this exercise of scrutinization should be an ongoing endeavor, but one that involves the whole Church, with a preferential option for the poor, not only in regard to what people of material means have to offer to them, but what they have to offer to people of material means on the basis of their inherent religious wisdom. The theology of the people suggests how ecclesial mission understood in this light can more effectively realize the social demands of the Gospel and of Church teaching by reasserting the Catholic basis of the modern in the universal realization of communion and justice. Moreover, this ongoing endeavor should always co-involve a consideration of the distinction between the *ad intra* and the *ad extra*, such as Suenens suggested and Pope Paul VI himself adopted. Indeed, *Evangelii Gaudium* is founded on this distinction in overt manner with direct reference to Pope Paul VI’s own employment of it in *Ecclesiam Suam*, which is quoted near the beginning of the text: “The Church must look with penetrating eyes within herself, ponder the mystery of her own being. . . . This vivid and lively self-awareness inevitably leads to a comparison between the ideal image of the Church as Christ envisaged her and loved her as his holy and spotless bride (cf. *Eph* 5:27), and the actual image which the Church presents to the world today. . . . This is the source of the Church’s heroic and impatient struggle for renewal: the struggle to correct those flaws introduced by her members which her own self-examination, mirroring her exemplar, Christ,

VI, Encyclical Letter on the Development of Peoples *Populorum Progressio* (March 26, 1967), §73.

points out to her and condemns" (*EG*, §26, quoting Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* [1964], §§9–11).

The polarity of a corporate self-examination that is both *ad intra* and *ad extra* should lead to what Pope Francis refers to as "ecclesial conversion" for the sake of mirroring more fully Christ and the mercy of the Father to the world. Kobler explains that the faith phenomenology of the Church carried out by the Council fathers was for the sake of the Church's renewed presentation of herself to the world as "Good Samaritan," which draws already from Pope John XXIII's text convoking the Council, *Humanae Salutis* (1961). "This supernatural order," John XXIII said, "must reflect its *efficiency* in that other order, the *temporal* one, which on so many occasions is unfortunately the *only* one that occupies and worries men."⁶⁶ This dictum became the basis for the Council's expansive understanding of mission that includes, in its broad scope, such features as action to combat social injustice and increased dialogue. Dialogue, it should be insisted, is not the opposite of mission!⁶⁷ Pope Benedict XVI clarified that in our contemporary age we have to understand mission as being first and foremost a matter of "being for" the other in love.⁶⁸ "Ecclesial conversion" is a matter of the Church's expanded, corporate deliberation whereby it allows itself to be freed by the grace of the Spirit to go out to the other in love, and this going-out is, for Pope Francis, a non-negotiable element of Christian life, meant to be realized by every member of the Church, regardless of their special charism or their state in life. His understandings of a "culture of encounter," of "mercy," of "polarity," of "inculturation," of the need for "interpreting the spirit of the age, without pandering to it,"⁶⁹ and of "synodality" have to be understood on the basis of the missionary principle of "being for the other in love," with the Church knowing herself better and showing herself more completely as what she is as the ultimate school of communion, as the people of God manifesting the eternal love of the Trinity, in a world that remains in a situation of self-devastation, as Pope Francis himself acknowledges. The text of his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* should be viewed in light of this missionary understanding of the Church. The Church does not oppose the world as an

⁶⁶ Kobler, *Vatican II, Theophany and the Phenomenon of Man*, 7 (italics Kobler's).

⁶⁷ I get this statement from Gavin D'Costa. It was in a presentation he gave, but I cannot remember when or where the presentation was given.

⁶⁸ Benedict XVI and Jacques Servais, "Full Text of Benedict XVI's Recent, Rare, and Lengthy Interview," *The Catholic World Report*, March 17, 2016, catholicworldreport.com/2016/03/17/full-text-of-benedict-xvis-recent-rare-and-lengthy-interview/.

⁶⁹ Pope Francis, *Totum Amoris Est*.

enemy, but applies its resources towards its healing. It needs a more effective unlocking of those resources. Hence, synodality.

The theology of disclosure present in this vast resourcing of the Church institutionalized at Vatican II and carried out throughout the post-conciliar papacy entails a Trinitarian ontology of which Pope Francis is very much aware, and which, as I suggested in the first section of this article, he very much embraces. It is an ontology that links together economy and theology—history and metaphysics—in a non-reductive manner, seeking to overcome the divide between historicism and extrinsicism, in line with the best theologians associated with Vatican II, either by their presence at the Council or the inspiration their work provided, either in shaping the Council in its original convoking or in regard to its post-conciliar papal interpretation. The ontology implied in this understanding is, as I indicated, kenotic, centering on the kenosis of Christ, which reveals at the heart of the history of salvation the mystery of the inner life of God as supereminent, loving self-gift. The eternal love of God is shown forth in the mystery of the Incarnation, where the high abases itself in the low, where divine immensity and omnipotence is a radiant, glorious presence in the cradle of the incarnate Lord and on the Cross of his suffering. The Church is the universal sacrament of salvation, founded in the *a priori* life of the Trinity, but it shows itself in its true proportions only in humility, in suffering for the other, in the joy that comes only from self-gift, from sacrifice freely accepted as a non-negotiable requirement of Christian life. Pope Francis does not think first and foremost in terms of power relations and political processes, but in terms of Trinitarian communion such as has been articulated in modern Trinitarian ontologies that develop the Tradition but that are oftentimes sternly rebuked in conservative quarters in the English-speaking world.

Yet, even given all that I have said, I do not want to come across as a thoroughgoing naïf in reading Pope Francis and his sources. The possible abuses of synodality are clear. Is the Church sufficiently unified so as to rest its understanding of valid dogma on beliefs universally held, as many maintain? A clear example of contra-indication in this regard is the biblical, Christian understanding of marriage and sexual difference versus the pansexualism of contemporary society. The people of God, whether poor or not, are greatly divided on these matters, and it is difficult if not impossible to imagine resolution of them by recourse to the idea of polar mediation. Does the concept of polar mediation in fact tamp down the Church's prophetic voice in these matters and in a host of other matters, ranging from bioethics to the war in Ukraine to all that is entailed in *L'affaire Rupnik*? Moreover, one can point to worries that the theology of the people encourages a certain

level of religious syncretism with respect to popular piety. However, the most fundamental concern reaches to the level of Trinitarian ontology, this highest of dogmatic spheres around which the totality of the content of faith revolves. Has the Trinitarian dimension of the *ad intra* pole in ecclesial self-reflection been sufficiently articulated by the current pope? The accent on kenosis in the theologies that inspired so many eminent ecclesial figures associated with Vatican II can and has been coopted by philosophers and theologians in the service of forms of Christian atheism or pantheism that naturalize Trinitarian thought. Proponents of political Christianity on the ecclesial left sometimes take kenotic Trinitarianism to be symbolically powerful as the instrument by which humanity has finally freed itself from the yoke of religion and of all hierarchy, so that contemporary humanity no longer has to take anything the Church says as uniquely divine in origin.⁷⁰ The world of the Enlightenment and modern democracy tells the Church what is true, not the other way around. One does not have to go quite this far in the process of Trinitarian naturalization in order to present a problem to the Church. There are degrees of atheism. Nevertheless, wherever ecclesial visions of democratization triumph to the point that numerical majority is identified as the supreme measure of truth, something has gone terribly awry on the level of Trinitarian thought.⁷¹

Ecclesial conversion by way of synodal “walking together” does not, of course, have to mean that the story of the kenosis of Christ is but a symbol for the death of God as the transcendent source of being, for the advent of secularization, or for humanity’s pulling back within itself the prerogatives of its own self-divinization from which it had become alienated by religion, but this secularizing hermeneutic is too often the barbed enclosure in which the field of interpretation is ensnared. Pope Francis’s call to ecclesial conversion and mission in the synodal path is not meant to be the pathway to consecration of Christian atheism articulated in the modality of historicizing metaphysics and death of God, (a-)Trinitarian ontologies that equate the progress of human consciousness in its self-realized, political emancipations with the symbolic coming into fullness of divine Spirit. It is meant to be the pathway to a fuller embrace of the Gospel theology of love in all of its practical consequences. One way of better articulating the theology of Trinitarian love in his line is to show that the Christian understanding of ecclesial “hierarchy” should not be equated with politically reducible structures of

⁷⁰ See Gianni Vattimo and Richard Rorty, *The Future of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁷¹ See Roch Kereszty, “Synodality, the Magisterium, and the Faith of the People of God,” *Communio* 4, no. 48 (2021): 638–62.

power, that it entails different levels of service, different gifts, including the special prerogatives of bishops and popes, but that in the Church, as in the life of the Trinity—where only the Father is Father, the Son is Son, and the Spirit is Spirit—no one on any level can be what he is or keep what he has except by giving of self away to the other. Hierarchy, in reflecting the Trinity, entails an ecclesiology of service, not of power. By contrast, a purely democratic leveling of gifts entails a shirking of responsibility and a failure to be who one is in service to the other. Bishops and popes must listen to the flock, but were they to forsake their mandate also to teach and to shepherd it, they would enact their ministry in an anti-Trinitarian fashion, not being receptive to the unique gifts of the Spirit they have been given in order to serve the people of God in the way they should do. Pope Francis understands and embraces all that I have just said. It is entailed in his Trinitarian theology of divine love, which one can glean from his various writings and sources, and in the concrete actions he has taken as pope, wherein he has shown that he is not afraid to exercise his papal authority, and in his insistence that the synodal process will be completed by the bishops in their collegial interpretation with authority, as they work together *cum Petro, sub Petro*.

The difficulties of the synodal path should not cause implicit rupture with the Roman see. Theologians would better serve the Church by understanding and, yes, embracing the quite legitimate mandates of synodality as interpreted in the line of Pope Francis, which are to orient the life of the Church, on all levels, to show forth more fully the love and mercy of God through personal encounter, social engagement, dialogue, and full respect for both individual cultures and individual persons. These pastoral and missionary ends necessitate a Trinitarian ontology that would fully express the radicality of divine love. Theologians should help the pope to clarify this missionary understanding of the Church and its ontological basis in the context of the synodal endeavor. Pope Francis is quite clear that the Church is not assimilable to a modern democracy, and that *ad intra* reform serves the *ad extra* end of the full communication of the Trinity to the world through the free mediation of each and every Christian disciple joined to Christ by the love of the Spirit in the sacramental life of faith. It seems to me that Pope Francis has a thing or two to teach us in these matters, but too few of us allow ourselves to be taught. Yet one thing that a sound grasp of synodality entails is that even the bishop of Rome deserves to be listened to and not only heard.