SYNODALITY: THE CHURCH THAT STILL LISTENS AND LEARNS[*]

JOSEF MIKULÁŠEK

ABSTRACT

This article addresses one specific aspect of the synodal vision of the Church which is currently discussed in the Catholic Church. This aspect consists of the vision of a Church that is still a Church learning who to be and how to be. Using the construct of a community of practice, adopted from the field of the sociology of learning (Etienne Wenger), I analyse how the synodal Church, preferring the theology of the local Church, is open to new learning. As I demonstrate in the article, such an understanding contains within it a rich heuristic for our understanding of Revelation of God, including implications for an understanding of continuing revelation, as well as a revision of the Church's concept of the Magisterium (sg.) in favour of the Magisteria (pl.). The article, therefore, shows a surprising point of view: How basic ecclesiological themes help us illuminate the Christian understanding of divine Revelation as an ongoing Revelation in human history.

Keywords

Community of practice; Learning Church; Synodality; Revelation; Ecclesiology; Vertical and horizontal accountability in the Church; Priority of the local Church.

The Vatican Council II's reception is still a work in progress in the Catholic Church. Scholars in this field agree that we are currently experiencing the third phase of this reception. Its starting point is usually identified in 2013 and is linked to Jorge Mario Bergoglio's election

to the office of the Roman pontiff.[1] While the first phase of this reception (1965–1985) underpinned an optimistic outlook on the implementation of the ecclesiology contained, especially in the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church *Lumen gentium*, the second phase (1985–2013) could be depicted as a silent dilution of the uniqueness and novelty of Vatican II.[2] This has significantly changed since 2013 both in the everyday life of the Catholic Church (Pope Francis's 'daily' hermeneutics of the Council in the form of homilies at morning Mass at St. Martha's House) and in the work of many brilliant theologians, who have been encouraged to return to genuine conciliar ecclesiology by the accent placed by Pope Francis on the category of the 'holy People of God', remarkably present in his speeches and documents published since his election in 2013.[3] Perhaps this 60-year period, running from Vatican II to the current day, reminds us that *to speak* and *to publish* new documents does not itself mean *to act*. What I would like to argue is that every reception must shape a concrete way of actualisation, paved by real, firm, convincing, and normative theological categories and visions. The other option is, as James Gustafson expressed, a 'theological reductionism'[4] of the Church's language ending in an abstraction that has no possibility 'to touch' real life.[5]

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[1]   See, for example, Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle of Meaning* (New York: Paulist, 2012).

[2]   See, for example, John Paul II's 1998 Motu proprio *Apostolos suos*, which significantly restricted the doctrinal autonomy of bishops' conferences against their promotion by *Lumen gentium* 23. See John Paul II, *Motu proprio Apostolos suos on the Theological and Juridical Nature of Episcopal Conferences* (21 May 1998), accessed April 23, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/my6ujrx3. More generally, the gradual disappearance of the category of the people of God is also due to the 1985 Second Extraordinary Synod of Bishops and its Relatio finalis, in which the image of the Church as communio is clearly preferred. See Dario Vitali, *Popolo di Dio* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 2013), 181; Giuseppe Colombo, '"Il popolo di Dio" e il "mistero" della Chiesa nell'ecclesiologia postconciliare,' *Teologia* 10, no. 2 (1985): 97–169, here 107.

[3]   For an introduction to the theology of the People, see J. C. Scannone, *Theology of the People: The Theological and Pastoral Roots of Pope Francis* (New York: Paulist Press, 2021).

[4]   See J. M. Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (New York: Harper, 1961).

[5]   The results of the first two (diocesan and national) phases of the Synod of Bishops of the Catholic Church (2021-2024) show some important points across countries in Europe: Lack of entrusted co-responsibility to all the baptised, lack of effective inclusion of women in decision-making processes in the Church (and thus not appreciating the specificity of the female perspective in decision-making), insufficient formation of informal spaces in the Church communities where pastoral visions are formulated in discussion, and insufficient care for newcomers and the marginalised, etc.

One of the fruitful approaches to the reception of the whole 'corpus' of the Vatican II documents is one that sees – based on the 'principle of pastorality'[6] – the crucial role of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei verbum* (and, especially its chapter 2) for the proper hermeneutics of both the event of Vatican II and all the published texts. There the holy People of God, the bearer of the *sensus fidei*, is seen as the active subject (this means the 'transmitter', not the object) of the *Traditio viva*.[7] The conciliar fathers insert consciously into the text what theologians Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger argued in conciliar years: 'Revelation always and only become a reality where there is faith.'[8] It means where it is possible to speak of the reception of the Revelation of God from within the human race.

The holy People of God are, therefore, still discovering themselves as active interpreters of God's message and its meaning for human life. The theology of Revelation and the theology of the Church – the latter as the collective act of faith of Christians – are necessarily closely connected. The text of *Dei verbum* thus overcomes the model of Revelation called 'instruction-theoretical'[9] and speaks of a *modus conversationis*[10] as the way God encounters humanity. What is the main difference between these two models? The latter differs significantly inasmuch as

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[6] On the centrality of this principle for the hermeneutics of the council and its documents, see Christoph Theobald, *La reception du concile Vatican II: Accéder à la source* (Paris: Cerf, 2009), 281–493. It is important to note here an important assumption of this approach: it can only be applied if we consider all the published documents, not just the official ones. Thus, also e.g. all the conciliar schemes, the entire conciliar discussion, the personal diaries of the participants (both bishops and theological experts). Or to be more concrete, the deep connection between the conciliar event and Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter *Ecclesiam suam* or the (unfortunately still little known) Pact of the Catacombs, i.e. the Pact signed by 42 Catholic bishops on the evening of 16 November 1965, in which they pledged to live the poverty of the common people they serve. See 'A group of Synod Fathers renews the "Pact of the Catacombs",' *Vatican News*, accessed April 15, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/76mpjb9w.

[7] Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), 8.

[8] Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Offenbarung und Überlieferung* (Freiburg im Br.: Herder, 1965), 35.

[9] This model is usually linked to the theology of Divine Revelation as presented in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius* of the First Vatican Council. See Max Seckler, 'Der Bergiff der Offenbarung,' in *Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie 2. Traktat Offenbarung*, eds. Walter Kern, Hermann J. Pottmeyer and Max Seckler (Freiburg im Br.: Herder, 1985), 60–83.

[10] See Pope Paul VI., *Encyclical on the Church Ecclesiam suam* (August 6, 1964), 70, where the dialogical character of Revelation itself and of the life of the Church is stressed. Accessed April 10, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/2p8uk62x.

here the *entire* People of God is part of the transmission process of Revelation, i.e., its real interpreters.[11] The whole Church is still learning *what* it means to live in communion with God. Here a heuristic function of the supernatural sense of the faithful for the faith is underlined and enhanced.

This fact can be understood in two slightly different ways: 1) As the 'theological theory' of the development of Christian doctrine inherited mainly from John H. Newman,[12] but also 2) as an interpretation of the Christian faith in the different contexts and historicity of human life. As Leonardo Boff once wrote on the creative reception of the Vatican Council II, the original 'message does not remain a cistern of stagnant water' but becomes 'a font of living water, ready to generate new meanings, by prolonging and concretizing the original meaning'.[13] The Revelation of God is not just a 'text' of articles of Christian faith (i.e. a doctrine), but more likely a still ongoing 'ground' where the original message generates new meanings, takes new forms, and shapes symbols.

As I will argue in the following paragraphs, to reshape the Church into its more synodal form, a methodological option is needed: to abandon the 'universalist ecclesiology'[14] (expressed exclusively in theological terms) and to prefer the theology of local churches. Since the Church is also a complex social reality and lives at many structural levels,[15] we are in search of a powerful heuristical model that could be appropriated from the realm of the social sciences and, especially, of the sociology of knowledge. Such a model and its correct theological appropriation demonstrate what kind of processes and what kind of dynamics are intrinsically present and inscribed within *each* social

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[11] Christoph Theobald, 'The Theological Options of Vatican II: Seeking an 'Internal' Principle of Interpretation,' *Concilium* no. 4 (2005): 87–107.

[12] John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989). For a contemporary understanding of Newman's idea of the development of doctrine, see Pavol Hrabovecký, 'Esej o vývine doktríny a aspekty Newmanovej apologetiky na premýšlanie o viere v súčasnom kontexte,' *Studia Theologica* 22, no. 3 (2020): 111–125, doi: 10.5507/sth.2020.041.

[13] Leonardo Boff, 'Theology of Liberation: Creative Acceptance of Vatican II from the Viewpoint of the Poor,' in *When Theology Listens to the Poor* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 1–31, here 18.

[14] A synthesis of the discussion on the preference of the universal or local Church is offered by Kilian McDonnell, 'The Ratzinger/Kasper Debate: The Universal Church and Local Churches,' *Theological Studies* 63, no. 2 (2002): 227–250.

[15] See my 'Hope Through a Renewed Church. Epistemology of Complexity and its Challenges for Restructuralization of the Catholic Church,' *Acta Missiologica* 14, no. 1 (2020): 46–56.

reality. This way of thinking will be able to strengthen and feed the ongoing reflection of the ecclesiology of local churches.

In the first part of this article, I will therefore provide an analysis using a fresh and powerful model from within the theories of social organisations, especially from within the sociology of knowledge. Its analysis will empower us with highly effective skills and eye-opening ideas as to how the basic dynamics of *every* social organisation work. As I will argue in the second part of this text, an accurate, thoroughly wise, and audacious appropriation of these ideas will have a beneficial heuristic effect on how to understand the Church as a communion of churches based on a preference for the local churches' theology which is inherently an option for the synodal Church. The logic of the entire text, then, will focus on the depiction of the *learning* aspect of the Church, the community of Christ's disciples.

1. A Look into the Social Organisations' Theories

To be part of systematic theology means one thing for ecclesiology: this branch of theology focused on the phenomenon of the Church is not only a part of the system of theology but also requires a *systematic* understanding, capable of analysing all kinds of elements in the widest scale of epistemological tools. The following is therefore needed for a reflection on the Church. The Church – without any bracketing its divine origin and, thus, God's actions in history in and through the Church – is a social, i.e. formed by (and of) men, reality. Then, the Church – not as a metaphysical idea of the Church, but as a lived reality in human history – is obviously subjected to the human dynamics of human cooperation, forming shared practices, and discovering its social meaning, not to mention the entire range of written or unwritten symbolic codes that the Church lives by.[16] The Church's history is,

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[16] Roger Haight argues: 'The localization and compartmentalization of theology is a temptation for many today. Some theologians have become seduced by the very systems of modernity and postmodernity which they attack. That is, they try to escape them by isolating the church from culture and conceiving of theology as a purely confessional and fideist discipline.' In Roger Haight, 'The Church as Locus of Theology,' *Concilium* no. 6 (1994): 13–22. See also the *Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes*, 62. From this point of view, it is crucial what P. Berger and T. Luckman call a *social construction of reality* to be described analytically as the series of processes of habitualisation, typing and the creation of the 'objective world' of humans carried by these processes. In P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967). In the

therefore, the ongoing process where the collective human intersubjectivity is expressed in 'statements and texts (…), but also through choices, actions, and events, through the development of institutions and the differentiation of roles, through the elaboration of rites and the codification of laws, and in a thousand other ways'.[17] This is, in other words, through the emerging structure of the Church's life. As we will see in the following paragraphs, to adopt the concept and method of a sociology of knowledge means decrypting and fruitfully analysing what would otherwise remain on the fringes of a systematic ecclesiology. The option I will argue for is the conscious interdisciplinary cooperation of the theologian with the tools offered by the social sciences. In the following text, I am going to discuss some elements which can be drawn from the thought of Etienne Wenger (born 1952), an American social organisations consultant. He, and his several colleagues, has been theorising about the construct of *Community of Practice* for more than two last decades.[18] A community of practice, he argues, is a kind of organisational unit, typically set into the net of a global organisation, which is an example of socially developed thinking.

1.1 Distributed knowledge

Communities of practice, as Wenger adds, develop everywhere.[19] These are not only random and voluntary connections of people arising for an instant or short-term target. Communities of practice are more likely of long-term durability and are characterised by the following three dimensions: mutual commitment, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.[20] They can be formed both across global organisations or in local conditions.

Regardless of the field of human cooperation, communities of practice are based on the crucial role of shared knowledge whose sources

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proper philosophical-theological term, we can refer to what K. Rahner calls *Selbstvollzug* (self-constitution) of the Church. See Karl Rahner, *Sämtliche Werke. Band 19: Selbstvollzug der Kirche*, ed. K. H. Neufeld (Freiburg – Basel – Wien: Herder, 1995).

[17] Joseph A. Komonchak, 'Lonergan and the Task of Ecclesiology,' *Foundations in Ecclesiology*, ed. Fred Lawrence (Boston: Boston College, 1995), 50.

[18] Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[19] Examples of communities of practice are offered by Wenger himself: companies like Hewlett–Packard, McDonald's or we could use the case of associations like the World Scouting or only religions.

[20] For more details about *community of practice*'s analysis, see, Josef Mikulášek, *Chiesa come comunità di pratica* (Canterano: Aracne Editrice, 2019).

are the human beings themselves. Knowledge is not just information[21] which could be saved on a USB drive or in a written manual. Knowledge instead stems and is shared by those who dwell in a specific community based on some knowledge. The specificity of this kind of organisational unit is, therefore, to appreciate the fact that human knowledge has a dynamic and developing character, distributed in different persons. This means that the participation of a human being is an engine that the central organ of the organisation cannot hinder or limit the still continuing negotiation of the meaning of this practice: 'Knowledge is created, shared, organized, revised, and passed on within and among these communities.'[22] We can hardly imagine a branch of human research which would one day proclaim a 'golden era', i.e. the final stage of its knowledge. (Saying: 'Now we have reached the peak of our knowledge, we do not need any further research.')[23]

Communities of practice are not, however, automatic conflict-free environments. Wherever there are people and social interactions, conflicts, sooner or later, appear. One of the crucial questions in this regard is to take care of the kind of relationship between the central organ and the local communities within an organisation. What does their mutual relationship consist of? They are drifting between imminent paternalism or exaggerated control and, on the other hand, the complete freedom and autonomy of units. The task, therefore, is to seek a balanced proportion between *vertical accountability* (the central organ and local units) and *horizontal accountability* (intra-communitarian environment).[24]

Vertical accountability is an inherent part of every organisation. Its peak is a control centre which guarantees the organisation's future. It is therefore essential to predict interventions of the central organ in legitimate and necessary moments, whenever the inner stability is falling apart or when an exaggerated disharmony compromises the whole

[21] Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice. A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 8–12.

[22] Etienne Wenger, 'Communities of Practice: Learning as a Social System,' *Systems Thinker*, 1998, accessed March 28, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/yc6zmav2.

[23] According to the National Register of Scientific and Technical Personnel, there were 154 scientific sectors in the 1950. Twenty years later, there were more than 900 of them. See Badaracco, *The Knowledge Link: How Firms Compete through Strategic Alliances* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1991).

[24] Etienne Wenger, 'Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems: The Career of a Concept,' in *Social Learning Systems and Communities of Practice*, ed. Chris Blackmore (London: Springer, 2010), 179–198.

organisation. Units, based on a shared and developed practice, need, however, estimation and support. They need to feel their contribution to the whole organisation when they will be appreciated, welcomed, and used, i.e. 'their voice will be heard'. This is one of the crucial moments to enhance *horizontal accountability*. Indwelling in a concrete (local) community – an individual human person is no longer a *neutral observer* but an *active practitioner* – increases the level of effective identification of members in the community. Therefore, a high level of trust and an active engagement in innovation and further development is guaranteed.[25] E. Wenger regrets any objection against downplaying the power of horizontally distributed accountability – 'A common mistake in organisations is to assume that horizontal relationships lack accountability.' He further specifies: 'Participation in a community of practice can give rise to very strong horizontal accountability among members through a mutual commitment to a learning partnership.'[26]

1.2 Learning and Practice: A Bottom-up Approach

The above-depicted ontology of communities of practice is reflected in the specific shape of learning and the further development of these communities. In any social organisation, earlier or later, a central organ is formed, which will have a control function regarding the local units of the organisation. Which direction in the flow of knowledge should be preferred between the centre and the regional units, and what kind of mutual relationships between them should exist? The *top-down* direction flows from the centre to the local environment. It is the working procedure that ensures control, harmony in the field of interest and unification of procedures, universally used. This approach has its dark side when its excessive use leads to the isolation of the centre from the peripheries, i.e. from the very places of the practice and life itself – 'the people in the headquarters do not understand ourselves' – and, therefore, to the loss of the identification of members in local units, since these cannot overcome their own feeling of being mere executors of the above coming commands. Their own efforts decline, and their creativity is close to zero.

For the healthy development of organisations – and, also, much more difficult to set the right balance – the *bottom-up* approach prefers

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[25] Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, 15.
[26] Wenger, 'Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems,' 195.

the voice and opinion of the local conditions in which the communities live. This strategy enables listening to the 'lived reality', as only practitioners can tell how the knowledge was put into action, where *knowledge* is no longer just a theory but their own practice (i.e., an embodied, developed, and evaluated theory). Therefore, these voices arising from different regions can realistically witness what kind of new views, new meanings, and new discoveries their practice brings. This *bottom-up* strategy is much more effective and valuable, especially in the epoch of historic-cultural changes, when it is desirable to allow the peripheries to speak out their own wisdom, their own contribution to the whole (and to the centre), without losing consciousness of their cohesion with the whole.

1.3 Distributed Communities

We are moving toward a discussion of the last of the elements by which a social organisation – developed in the form of communities of practice – can be depicted. As we have seen, the *top-down* and *bottom-up* are two distinct and contradictory (although both necessary in real life) ways through which an organisation is run. Thus, the question is: should a 'universalist' concept of the organisation be preferred (i.e. centralisation of power), or should there be, instead, a 'regional voice' preferred, which arises out of a variety of local settings and living conditions?

Using Wenger's terminology, we can speak of the difference between *locating* or *localising* single communities.[27] What do these terms mean? As Wenger argues, *localising* means the strategy within which vertical accountability is stressed, and the creativity of local communities is retrieved from them. They have no real access to decision-making; everything is planned in the 'centre'. The flow of knowledge is one-directional, *top-down*. In contrast, the term *locating* underlines the *bottom-up* orientation, which takes into serious account the experience, the variety of contexts and the originality of the local conditions. This could lead to the more successful implementation of the community in the given space, to the creation of new peripheral zones or of new, unpredictable kinds of practices, all this under the conditions of vivid contact with the local environment and with other social units in the

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[27] Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 260–262.

given location.[28] This is the way we can legitimately argue that *life is the source of new learning*.

E. Wenger emphasises that this is not an arbitrary superficial option. While every social organisation demands a certain level of 'alignment' (of its own local units), if its level is too high and exhibits extraordinary pressure on the single units, there is the danger of losing engagement and creative imagination on the side of the unit's members.

The neuralgic point, especially in the life of global organisations, is therefore as follows: How should the chance that a 'voice will be heard' be enhanced so that every community is 'visible' and 'meaningful' in the entire system? As the danger of fragmentation (i.e. of local diversification) can be varied, Wenger talks about so-called 'distributed communities' that associate single units according to their local participation and their cultural diversity.[29] At the global level, this means that a global organisation needs to be conceived as a community of regional communities, where each one must be seen as a *pars pro toto* in their autonomy. Speaking of this from a personalistic point of view, this indicates the crucial role and mission of coordinators of these distributed communities. These cannot be seen as mere 'superintendents' of the life of their communities (in the logic of the *top-down* strategy). They instead have to assume the role of being representatives and bearers of the 'voice' of the community entrusted to them. Their primary mission is not a *top-down* flowing of instructions, but they are more likely to be supporters and catalysers of the creativity of their community.[30] What is described here is a vision of an organisation's future that does not need to fear globalisation as a homologation regardless of the local environment. It is quite the opposite: an

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[28] Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, 169–170.

[29] Ibid., 113–137. A simplistic vision of the transcultural communication within a global organisation could overlook the following dynamics: 'People from different cultural backgrounds can have very different ways of relating to one another and to the community, and this is likely to affect the development of global communities. People's willingness to ask questions that reveal their 'ignorance', disagree with others in public, contradict known experts, discuss their problems, follow others in the thread of conversation – all these behaviours vary greatly across cultures.' Ibid. 118.

[30] 'They pay particular attention to voices, levels of participation, and issues of power. They are the guardians of trust and relationships in the group. They are aware of constituencies, boundaries between them, and diverging perspectives and learning needs.' (Etienne Wenger and Brenda Wenger–Trayner, 'Leadership Groups. Distributed Leadership in Social Learning', 12, accessed April 17, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/5at8cnp5.)

'authentic globalisation' can turn into a process of growing up for both the single units and the entire system.

2. The Learning Church

Social science's approach to the dynamics of knowing as a distributed and developing process contains enormous potential for ongoing work in ecclesiology, especially in solving questions about the methodological option between the universalist and the local Church's theology. As Joseph A. Komonchak, an American Catholic ecclesiologist, reminds us, a 'systematic inquiry asks (further) questions about what is taken for granted'.[31] Is it not true that merely the opening up of systematic-theological issues to an interdisciplinary research (which is powerfully applicable, especially in the realm of ecclesiology) helps us cross the path from a superficial, naïve (and sometimes also potentially dangerous) common sense to elaboration of a theory which – based on a meticulous analysis and on a wide register of methodological procedures – becomes normative, i.e. normatively orienting every future church's realisation?[32] This is what is meant by the transition from *speaking* of *Lumen gentium* to *realisation* of its paragraphs.

In the following text, I am therefore going to argue that the above-presented construct of communities of practice can serve as a heuristic model able to grasp and manage the basic aspects of the ecclesial life of Christians and thus can be fruitful and healing for Catholic ecclesiology. The pallet of discussed issues is broad and goes beyond the limits of this article. I will therefore limit my argumentation only to 1) the Church's structures performed as a global community of practice (a fundamental-ecclesiological issue) and 2) the inner dynamics

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[31] Joseph A. Komonchak, 'Ecclesiology and Social Theory,' *Foundations in Ecclesiology*, ed. Fred Lawrence (Boston: Boston College, 1995), 58. A few pages later, Komonchak legitimises the interdisciplinary nature of method in ecclesiology by asking: 'How can one work out a systematic ecclesiology without working out first such terms as 'individual,' 'community,' 'society,' 'meaning,' 'change,' 'structure,' 'institution'?' Ibid., 69.

[32] Compare the two approaches described by Bernard Lonergan as different points of view of one same reality: 'There is a systematic exigence that separates the realm of *common sense* from the realm of *theory*. Both of these realms, by and large, regard the same real objects. But the objects are viewed from such different standpoints that they can be related only by shifting from one standpoint to the other.' Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1990), 81.

of the *bottom-up* learning process included in such an outlook of the Church conceived as the Church of churches (a fundamental-theological issue).

2.1 The Centre and the Periphery

As demonstrated in the previous paragraph, the *bottom-up* managerial approach bears an awareness of the diversity of local units that are gathered in one global community without being subject to excessive centralisation.[33] As Yves Congar wrote in his book *True and False Reform in the Church*, 'we might obtain tranquillity and a peaceful conformity (…) by police measures, but at the same time we risk destroying any taste for initiative and any possibilities for creative activity.'[34] We should consequently ask ourselves: what ways of reform are urgent in our current time to keep us from getting to that point? The Church structures conceived as synodal and 'walking together' outline the concrete shape of what Congar argues as inner Church reform: to *heal the Church through the Church itself* and not to wait – or blame – for reform pressure from the outside.[35]

Although it might sound too easy, it is nevertheless still pertinent to stress the term usually used for those who follow Jesus in their own life from the Gospel stories: we all are His *disciples*. The entire Body of Christ, the Church, *must* think of itself as a community of disciples, whose Lord, the Master, is only one, Jesus Christ. Did the Church not lose Jesus's appeal quoting that the Spirit of God, the Spirit of truth, 'will guide you into all the truth' (John 16, 12-15)? Is not this Gospel quotation confirmation of the fact that the Revelation of God is still *in actu* and, therefore, Christians still need to be attentive to Him?[36]

The image used by Pope Francis for his vision of the Church is relatively well-known in the theological circles of the Catholic Church:

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[33] See Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 204.

[34] Ibid., 204.

[35] At this point we could oppose the reference to Gaudium et Spes 4, where the topic is the 'signs of the times'. I am referring to one concrete point here: under the influence of the signs of the times there was a clarification about the pastoral character of Vatican Council II in the time of its planning and preparing.

[36] For the discussion of the ongoing (dependent) Revelation, I refer to Gerald O'Collins, *Revelation. Towards a Christian Interpretation of God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 101–120.

The 'inverted pyramid'[37] where the part that needs to be focused on is the broadest 'base' that speaks of the Church as the holy faithful People of God (cf. LG chap. 2). The inverted pyramid is not only an affective expression of the proximity to everyone or, on the other hand, a repeated term on the lips of clericalism's opponents. It is instead a model of the whole Church's structure and its base. What kind of heuristic potential may be grasped from this point of view? That the relationship between communities in their local settings and the central governing body clearly needs to be described as follows: The central body is at the service of those who live and act in local communities. The *raison d'être* of the whole central organ is predominantly to support the local communities. To put it in another way: The nature of the mission of *the one* (i.e., of the whole Roman Curia apparatus, of the Roman Pontiff, but also on the local level: the mission of the bishop) needs to be legitimated by a view from below, from the base, i.e., from *all*. The first is in service to all who are united in the same Christian dignity by baptism. To all those who are co-bearers of the responsibility, that is an essential and reciprocal characteristic of equal dignity (LG art. 9–10). How else can the equality of baptismal dignity be described if not through the effective ways in which it is realised? Is it not the case that chapter 2 of Lumen Gentium is thus far more of a vision, a dream, a desire, than an already realised description of what the *proprium* is for all Christians?

One more point is worth mentioning here. The above-analysed construct of Wenger concerning the community of practice shows us clearly the proper place of the representative of each local (or at a higher level: distributed) community – that is, the person we would call a bishop in Christian terminology. In principle, three types of considerations about its function would be possible. Either as 1) an engaged reporter of the central authority (*top-down* management), 2) as a neutrally understood intermediary between the local and the global level (practically difficult to imagine and theologically unjustified), or 3) as a representative of the local community, whereby by belonging to it and 'coming from it' he received a mandate to represent the local community on a global scale. While the first two options would indicate the bishop's position 'outside/

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[37] Pope Francis, *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (October 17, 2015), accessed April 20, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/2vc3jx4y.

indifferent' to the local community, the third option expresses his position as the father and shepherd of the whole *Portio Populi Dei* entrusted to him. He is the bishop, who represents his own local community in the *communio ecclesiarum* of the global Church. It seems that the ongoing reforms in the Catholic Church – the Roman Curia's reform[38] or the ongoing Synod of Bishops[39] – suggest a sensitivity in this direction. Through their full application, it is possible to ensure that the central body is not isolated from the regions and that a process is opened through which the regions' problems are 'represented' in the Roman Curia.[40]

2.2 An Ongoing Revelation?

We have to ask ourselves at this point: What do the bishops promote and represent? Here we have to realise how our basic understanding of the Church touches on the real foundation of Christianity, which is the Revelation of God. If the whole of Christianity is based on the reality of the Divine Revelation and his permanent presence, the entire Church is the ongoing narration of the founding *memoria Iesu Christi*, which has not yet been exhausted but is being given new consequences. The Church is a community of narration (not just of static repetition) and thus reviving (and revitalising) the consciousness of Christ's presence in human history.[41] Is it possible to think that, through mutual listening, the Orbis (i.e. *the entire world*) constantly brings to the Urbs its hopes and its requests, and thus brings to the whole (to the global community) much more, the divine-human reality, new manifestations of God's revelation (discovered and applicable *today* because of God's desire *today*)?

In this sense, I argue, it would be partial and extremely limiting to relegate the role of *sensus fidelium* only to the *receptive* function of the

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[38] Pope Francis, *Apostolic Constitution on the Roman Curia and its Service to the Church and to the World Praedicate Evangelium* (March 19, 2022), accessed April 20, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/2aehx6pw.

[39] The synodal process of consultation of the People of God began in October 2021 in all the dioceses of the Catholic Church all over the world. The next stage will be celebrated in February/March 2023 by the Presynodal meeting of single continents. The peak of the entire synodal process will be the celebration of the 16th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023 and – according to the recent announcement – its continuation in October 2024..

[40] See Congar, *True and False Reform*, 262.

[41] For this point of view, I suggest the work of Ghislain Lafont, *Imaginer l'Église catholique* (Paris: Cerf, 1995).

Magisterium of the Church.[42] I find very illuminating the words of Yves Congar in this context. He compares an 'intellectualist' and a 'real-ist' vision of the life of the Church (i.e. the locus of recognition of the divine revelation), which – not coincidentally – closely resembles the two distinct conceptions of divine revelation that have been commented on in the recent history of Catholic fundamental theology.[43] The Rev-elation of God cannot be 'grasped' by humans as a *reine Vernunft*, as a few sacred texts/doctrines. Congar instead argues that 'Christianity is a reality' that 'was given to us as a life to be received and practiced and not simply as a text to be consulted'.[44] We are opening here a new chapter in the treatise on divine revelation that will be aware that '(T)he revelation of God cannot be received except in fragile human vessels, limited by the particularities of time and place.'[45] Thus, God's 'grace supposes (*a specific human*) culture' and that 'God's gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it'.[46] As can be seen above, it is not the central organ but rather the single local communities which are the true places of the life of the *Christian faith as a social practice.* These latter are the 'bodies' of the uniqueness of the Holy Spirit's presence, shaping the 'people of many faces' and of the local conditions in which these people live.[47]

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[42] This means to reconstruct the *Magisterium* to the *Magisteria.* See Peter C. Phan, 'From Magisterium to Magisteria: Theologies of the Learning and Teaching Functions of the Church,' *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2019): 393–413. A similar way is suggested by Ormond Rush, 'A Synodal Church. On Being a Hermeneutical Community,' in *Beyond Dogmatism and Innocence: Hermeneutics, Critique, and Catholic Theology*, eds. Brad-ford E. Hinze and Anthony Godzieba (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017), 160–175.

[43] For a deeper analysis of Revelation as a 'doctrine' and as a 'symbolic mediation', see Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1983), 36–52 and 131–154.

[44] Congar, *True and False Reform*, 274.

[45] Avery Dulles, 'The Church Always in Need of Reform: *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda*,' in *The Church Inside and Out* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1974), 37–50. See also two contributions in the recent volume *Sinodalità e riforma. Una sfida ecclesiale*, eds. Rafael Luciani, Serena Noceti, and Carlos Schickendantz (Bres-cia: Queriniana, 2022). Chap. 1: Myriam Wijlens, '"La Chiesa è convocata in sinodo". Sfide teologiche e canoniche sul sinodo 2021–2023,' 29–61, esp. 40–42 on a new under-standing of Revelation based on DV and LG, and chap. 11: Ormond Rush, 'Sinodalità, tradizione e consenso,' 225–238.

[46] Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 115, accessed April 25, 2022, https://tinyurl .com/n3mryv4e.

[47] See Georgia Masters Keightley, 'If the Church Makes the Laity, the Laity Make the Church: *Ecclesiology and the 99 Percent*,' in *A Realist's Church. Essays in Honor of Joseph*

3. New Challenges in the Ongoing Synodal Reshaping
   of the Church

The outlined interdisciplinary approach to foundational ecclesiological issues opens up a number of questions and points out possible paths to solve them. The synodal Church is still more a *task to be fulfilled* than a settled reality which we are able to overview in its complexity, structures, and dynamics of life. The synodal Church is, intrinsically, a Church that still *learns* itself. Specifically, learning *what* it means to be the Church of Christ and *how* to be it in terms of the effectiveness and structures of the Church itself that implement what is written in *Lumen gentium*, chapter 2.[48]

The appropriated construct of the community of practice opens up many topics in the field of fundamental theological reflection when carefully analysed. These are, for example: What steps need to be taken to make the life of Christians in their local communities *meaningful* and *meaning making*? If, as is evident, we are led to rethink our understanding of Christians from mere *consumers* to *producers* of new meanings, then we can ask: What implications does this shift have for understanding the living tradition and God's ongoing Revelation? And this, in turn, means: What form is to be given to the authoritative teaching in the Church so that it is truly authentic teaching in which the whole people of God can participate? It means: Is the whole Church an *Ecclesia docens*? On the other hand, the outline of the local church theology shows us how helpful and fruitful it is to turn our mental image of the 'boundaries' of the church into 'peripheries' in a perpetual dialogue and negotiation with the local conditions. And therefore: How is Christianity ready, institutionally equipped, and willing to be still an *Ecclesia discens*, that must continue to live in a position of listening and learning not only from external motives but also from its own internal need to understand itself?

These and other questions must be perceived as consequences of God's ongoing Revelation that leads the Church itself into a deeper truth

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A. Komonchak, eds. Christopher D. Denny, Patrick J. Hayes, and Nicholas K. Rademacher (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015), 185–201, especially 194–196.

[48] Here the dignity and co-responsibility of all the baptised, of the whole People of God, is described.

about itself of *who* the Church is and *how* to be that.[49] The questions arising from this thesis require an *effective* application of synodality that does not remain merely *affective* talk. Several of the themes raised in this article show that 'spiritual' issues (i.e. identification and participation of Christians) are directly related to 'structural' issues, i.e. to the image of the Church as holy People of God on the journey.

Sts. Cyril and Methodius Faculty of Theology
Palacký University Olomouc
Univerzitní 22
77900 Olomouc
Czech Republic
E-mail: josef.mikulasek@upol.cz

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[49] 'Calling existing forms into question, if that must be done, should proceed not from a weakening but from a strengthening of fidelity. Without that, instead of adaptations, you end up with mitigations that will only be sterile.' In Congar, *True and False Reform*, 298.