

Janusz Bujak

University of Szczecin
ORCID 0000-0001-8881-3134

The Teaching of Pope Francis About Synodality in the Context of Contemporary Theological and Ecumenical Reflection¹

Abstract: The article deals with the ecclesiology of the local Church and synodality. Both topics have been present in Catholic theology since the time of the Second Vatican Council, which laid the foundation for the ecclesiology of the local/particular Church, collegiality of bishops and synodality. This ecclesiology was developed both theoretically and practically in the post-conciliar period, but there are some theologians who believe that during the pontificate of John Paul II there was a return to the universalist ecclesiology, as evidenced by the documents published by the Roman Curia, especially *Communio in notio*. Pope's Francis teaching on synodality and strengthening the Church at local and regional levels addresses the demands of those theologians who believe that Chapter III of the *Lumen Gentium* Constitution has not yet been properly implemented. The Pope emphasizes, that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church and therefore what the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense fully present in the word "synod" itself.

Keywords: Catholic–Orthodox ecumenical dialogue, ecclesiology, Pope Francis, local Church, Second Vatican Council, synodality

The documents of the Second Vatican Council are dominated by a universalistic ecclesiology. However, in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* we can also discern the

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beginnings of a theology of the local Church (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 11; *Lumen Gentium*, 23; *Ad Gentes*, 19–22; *Christus Dominus*, 11), which has its foundation in the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, and its sacramental nature finds its fullest expression in the celebration of the Eucharist.² The Church is communion and becomes it ever more so through the Eucharist, which is communion by its very nature.³ As Cardinal Ratzinger emphasizes, an ecclesiology of communion is at the heart of the doctrine of the Church presented at the Council as a new element and at the same time rooted in the beginnings of Christianity.⁴ Thanks to the idea of communion/community, the Council returned to the way of thinking about the Church and living her that was present in the first millennium of Christianity, which was certainly also due to contacts with the theological and liturgical heritage of the Eastern Churches and the Eucharistic ecclesiology of N. Afanassieff.⁵ The merit of the Council is undoubtedly rediscovering the Eucharist as a sacrament of the Church and showing the relationship between these two realities. Through its ecclesiology of communion, the Second Vatican Council restored a way of thinking about the Church and of living her that was present in the East and in the West in the first millennium, when the local Churches lived in communion thanks to

² Cf. W. Kasper, „Kościół jako wspólnota,” 31–34; H. Petri, “Die römisch-katholische Kirche und Ökumene,” 142; H. Döring, “Die Wiederentdeckung der Ortskirche,” 251; G. Philips, *La Chiesa e il suo mistero*, 87.

³ Cf. J. Rigal, *L'ecclésiologie de communion*, 72–73.

⁴ Cf. J. Ratzinger, “Eklezjologia Soboru Watykańskiego II,” 16–19; A. Cattaneo, *La Chiesa locale*, 11. The Swiss theologian recalls that, according to E. Lanne and H. Legrand, the Council brought about a “Copernican revolution” in ecclesiology, which consisted in the fact that the local Church no longer revolved around the universal Church, but the one Church of Jesus Christ centred around Jesus Christ, who becomes present in every celebration of the local Church thanks to the ongoing action of the Holy Spirit.

⁵ Cf. B. Forte, *La Chiesa nell'Eucaristia*, 51–52; where the author shows the influence of Orthodox theologians (N. Afanassieff, A. Schmemmann, J. Meyendorf) on the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. According to Forte, a particularly important role was played at the Council by N. Afanassieff, who was invited as an observer. Forte maintains that the first Schema *de Ecclesia* refers us directly to Eucharistic ecclesiology and to Afanassieff's work *La Chiesa che presiede nell'amore*; also Schemas II and III, now definitive, of *Lumen gentium* contain echoes of the Russian theologian's ecclesiology.

their many links with the Church of Rome as their point of reference.⁶ The ecclesiology of the Council also helped Christians from other Churches and ecclesial communities to realise that the Catholic Church is not a monolith, but that it is also accomplished in the local/particular Churches administered by their bishops.⁷ After the Second Vatican Council, there was a development of the ecclesiology of the local Church thanks to theologians such as J. Ratzinger, G. Philips, Y. Congar and H. de Lubac.⁸

The second discovery of Vatican II and its aftermath in the post-conciliar period was synodality. In order to re-invigorate synodal practice at the level of the universal Church, Pope Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops for the universal Church (18 Nov 1965) directly under the authority of the Pope and its task is to counsel him.

On the occasion of the Jubilee of the Year 2000, John Paul II, summarising the work of putting into practice the Council's teaching on the Church as communion, stated that – although a lot had been done – “[...] there is certainly much more to be done, in order to realize all the potential of these instruments of *communio* [...] in view of the need to respond promptly and effectively to the issues which the Church must face in these rapidly changing times.”⁹ In the more than fifty years that have elapsed between the last Council and today, awareness of the Church as a communion has grown in wide areas of the People of God and positive experiences of synodality have appeared at diocesan, regional and universal levels.¹⁰

The pontificate of Pope Francis brought new impulses for the implementation of the ecclesiology of the local Church and synodality. His teaching and reforms point to the growing importance of the local Church and regional structures in contemporary Catholic ecclesiology.

The aim of this article is to show Francis' teaching on this topic in the context of contemporary theological reflection, with reference

⁶ Cf. M. Hardt, “Papsttum und Ökumene,” 317.

⁷ Cf. H. Petri, “Die römisch-katholische,” 142–143; Bujak J., *Prymat biskupa Rzymu*, 35–37.

⁸ Cf. A. Cattaneo, *La Chiesa locale*, 124–130.

⁹ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, 44.

¹⁰ Cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, 41.

to the 2018 document of the International Theological Commission entitled *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* and to the documents of the Catholic–Orthodox theological dialogue.

1. Deficiencies of synodality during the pontificate of John Paul II?

Following the election of Pope Francis to the Holy See, many theologians have noted that during the pontificate of John Paul II there was a certain stagnation in the development of synodality due to the growing importance of the Roman Curia. Hermann Pottmeyer writes that John Paul II certainly embraced and deepened many aspects of *Vaticanum II*, but because of his frequent absence from the Vatican, the Roman Curia saw fit to contain the problem of polarisation in the Church by its own means, namely through directives and inspections.¹¹ Today, many ask the question whether the imposed centralism is not paralysing the Church in the same way as the dangers it seeks to address. There are many indications that Pope Francis wants to return to the reforms of Vatican II and Paul VI, as exemplified by giving a new dynamic to the institution of the Synod of Bishops. Centralism is characterised by a top-down style of government, emphasising authority and control. Francis gave a signal that he wanted to value communication going from the bottom up. He made this clear in an address to the Roman Curia on 22 December 2014, in which he criticised its activity and invited it to change its work style.¹² The real actors who decide about *aggiornamento* with the Pope are not the members of the Roman

¹¹ Cf. H.J. Pottmeyer, “La Chiesa in cammino,” 73.

¹² Francis, *The Roman Curia and the Body of Christ*. In his speech, the Pope listed various “diseases” that can threaten the Roman Curia, including the disease of *excessive planning and functionalism*: “When an apostle plans everything carefully and thinks that through perfect planning real progress is made, and he himself becomes an accountant or an accountant. Good preparation of everything is necessary, but one should never be tempted to tame and pilot the freedom of the Holy Spirit, which is always greater, more generous than any human planning (cf. John 3:8).”

Curia, but the bishops as successors of the Apostles and heads of their local Churches.¹³

The French Dominican Hervé Legrand also believes that the third chapter of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* – “On the hierarchical system of the Church and in particular on the episcopate” – was not properly implemented because after the Council it was read in the key of universalist ecclesiology, which prevented the discovery of what the Constitution says about the Church as *communio Ecclesiarum*.¹⁴ An example of the remnants of universalistic ecclesiology in the conciliar documents is, according to Legrand, the sentence from the 22nd number of *Lumen Gentium*: “Hence, one is constituted a member of the Episcopal body in virtue of sacramental consecration and hierarchical communion with the head and members of the body.” This formulation allowed after the Council

¹³ Cf. H.J. Pottmeyer, “La Chiesa in cammino,” 73. Spanish theologian Eloy Bueno de la Fuente has a different opinion on John Paul II’s style of governance. He stresses that John Paul II willingly used the institution of the Synod of Bishops for his great project of the new evangelization. In number 21 of his Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* the Pope wrote: “Part of the preparation for the approach of the Year 2000 is the *series of Synods* begun after the Second Vatican Council: general Synods together with continental, regional, national and diocesan Synods. The theme underlying them all is *evangelization*, or rather the new evangelization, the foundations of which were laid down in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Pope Paul VI, issued in 1975 following the Third General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. These Synods themselves are part of the new evangelization: they were born of the Second Vatican Council’s vision of the Church. They open up broad areas for the participation of the laity, whose specific responsibilities in the Church they define. They are an expression of the strength which Christ has given to the entire People of God, making it a sharer in his own Messianic mission as Prophet, Priest and King. Very eloquent in this regard are the statements of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*. *The preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000 is thus taking place throughout the whole Church, on the universal and local levels, giving her a new awareness of the salvific mission she has received from Christ. This awareness is particularly evident in the Post-Synodal Exhortations devoted to the mission of the laity, the formation of priests, catechesis, the family, the value of penance and reconciliation in the life of the Church and of humanity in general, as well as in the forth coming one to be devoted to the consecrated life.*” Cf. E. Bueno de la Fuente, “El fundamento teológico,” 647; L. Baldisseri (ed.), *Sinodo dei Vescovi*. The author has gathered the testimonies of bishops from five continents and the teaching of the last four popes: Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis on synodality.

¹⁴ Cf. H. Legrande, “*Communio Ecclesiae*,” 161–165.

for the separation of the *collegium episcoporum* from the *communio Ecclesiarum*, i.e. for the lack of correlation between bishops and their Churches, between the college of bishops and the communion of Churches. According to Legrand, the interpretation of the 22nd number of *Lumen Gentium* by members of the Roman Curia during the pontificate of John Paul II reduced the concept of *communio Ecclesiarum* to *communio Ecclesiae*, which is confirmed by documents issued during the pontificate of John Paul II: e.g., Code of Canon Law 1983 can. 336,¹⁵ Instruction on diocesan synods *De synodiis dioecesanis agendis* of 1997,¹⁶ which limits their significance and distances them from the theology of the People of God, *motu proprio Apostolos suos*¹⁷ and *Ad tuendam fidem*¹⁸ of 1998, which limit the significance of episcopal conferences, depriving their teaching of the significance of the normal Magisterium and finally, the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Communio notio*¹⁹ of 1992, where in point 9 it speaks of the ontological and chronological primacy of the universal Church over the particular Churches, relativizing the formulation *in quibus et ex quibus* of *Lumen Gentium* No. 23. Legrande believes that the relationship between the *collegium episcoporum* and the *communio ecclesiarum* should be renewed and an authentic interpretation of Chapter III of *Lumen gentium* should be implemented.²⁰

¹⁵ Cf. Code of Canon Law, can. 336: “The college of bishops, whose head is the Supreme Pontiff and whose members are bishops by virtue of sacramental consecration and hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college [...]”; T. Söding, “Synodalität aus katholischer Sicht,” 94–95. The author considers that the forms of synodality envisaged by the Code of Canon Law are clerical in nature and cause structural problems when it comes to the involvement of the laity, and that it is therefore necessary to renew the structures in order to find more open forms of synodality.

¹⁶ Cf. Congregation for Bishops, Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Instruction on Diocesan Synods*.

¹⁷ Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter issued as “*Motu proprio*” *Apostolos suos*.

¹⁸ Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio Ad tuendam fidem*.

¹⁹ Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “*Communio notio*.”

²⁰ Cf. H. Legrande, “*Communio Ecclesiae*,” 161–174. A similar opinion is held by the Italian ecclesiologist G. Canobbio, “Sulla Sinodalità,” 249–261, and also by

According to the aforementioned theologians, Pope Francis, in proclaiming the need to strengthen the synodality of the Church, returns to the authentic thought of the fathers of the Vatican Council and makes the transition from a universalist ecclesiology to a local Church ecclesiology, developed for more than forty years in the Catholic–Orthodox theological dialogue.

2. The significance of synodality and the local Church in the teaching of Pope Francis

Pope Francis, in an address delivered on 17 October 2015 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops by Paul VI, stressed that “It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”²¹ Synodality, the Pope stressed, is “a constitutive element of the Church” therefore “what the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word ‘synod’.”²² In the same address, Francis stressed that synodality concerns the Church at every level, but begins with the local Church: “The first level of the exercise of *synodality* is had in the particular Churches. After mentioning the noble institution of the Diocesan Synod, in which priests and laity

Roberto Repole, who believes that with Francis the theme of synodality, understood as a constitutive dimension of the Church, has returned. Repole considers the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “*Communio notio*,” to be the most significant example of the reversal of conciliar ecclesiology under the pontificate of John Paul II, which affirmed the ontological and temporal primacy of the universal Church over the local Churches; cf. R. Repole, “Per una Chiesa a misura di Vangelo,” 116–117; R. Repole, *Il sogno di una Chiesa evangelica*, 109. The document provoked a heated theological debate in which two German cardinals of the Roman Curia opposed each other: Cardinal W. Kasper, who defended the primacy of the local Churches, and Cardinal J. Ratzinger, who justified the ontological primacy of the universal Church, cf. J. Bujak, J. Bujak, “Pierwszeństwo Kościoła powszechnego,” 39–55; J. Bujak, *Dialog katolicko-prawosławny*, 58–62.

²¹ Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops; cf. P. Rabczyński, “Synodalność według papieża Franciszka,” 115–116; P. Coda, “Il cammino della Chiesa del Terzo Millennio,” 9; A. Spadaro – C. Galli, “La sinodalità nella vita e nella missione della Chiesa,” 55–70; J.R. Villar, “La sinodalidad en la reflexión teológica actual,” 69–82.

²² Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.

are called to cooperate with the bishop for the good of the whole ecclesial community, *the Code of Canon Law* devotes ample space to what are usually called ‘organs of communion’ in the local Church: the presbyteral council, the college of consultors, chapters of canons and the pastoral council. Only to the extent that these organizations keep connected to the ‘base’ and start from people and their daily problems, can a synodal Church begin to take shape: these means, even when they prove wearisome, must be valued as an opportunity for listening and sharing.”²³ However, since no local Church can exist except in communion with other local Churches, among which the Church of Rome is foremost, further degrees of synodality are necessary, at the regional and universal level, where local Churches are represented by their bishops.²⁴

The fact that Francis has chosen an ecclesiology of the local Church and synodality is also confirmed by the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, in which, following Vatican II, the Pope emphasises that the local Church is the full realisation of Christ’s Church: “Each particular Church, as a portion of the Catholic Church under the leadership of its bishop, is likewise called to missionary conversion. It is the primary subject of evangelization, since it is the concrete manifestation of the one Church in one specific place, and in it ‘the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative’ (CD 11)” (EG, 30).²⁵ In the same Exhortation, the Pope speaks of the excessive centralization of power in the papal office to the detriment of collegiality: “Excessive

²³ *Ibid.*; cf. M. Brunini, “In cammino verso la sinodalità ecclesiale,” 419–440.

²⁴ Cf. Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops; R. Repole, “Per una Chiesa a misura di Vangelo,” 118–119; R. Repole, *Il sogno di una Chiesa evangelica*, 110–111; P. Rabczyński, “Synodalność według papieża Franciszka,” 119–123.

²⁵ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 30; cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree *Christus Dominus*, 11; R. Repole, “Per una Chiesa a misura di Vangelo,” 118; F. Candia, *Collegialità e Sinodo dei Vescovi*, 115–120, where the author points out aspects of synodality contained in Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* such as *communitas* at the level of the universal Church, *sensus fidei* of all God’s people, co-responsibility and discernment; D. Vitali, «*Un popolo in cammino verso Dio*». On the relationship between the universal Church and the local Church in the teaching of Pope Francis T. Nawracała, “Kościół powszechny i Kościoły lokalne,” 23–39.

centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach" (EG, 32). Also in the Apostolic Constitution on the Synod of Bishops *Episcopalis communio* (18.09.2018), the Pope emphasises that the synod is an opportunity for the Pope, the bishops and the laity to listen to each other (cf. Nos. 5, 6, 8).²⁶ The change of the wording of canon no. 838 of the Code of Canon Procedure on the translation of liturgical books in the motu proprio *Magnum principium* (09.09.2017) leads in a similar direction, strengthening the competence of the Episcopal conferences in this matter.²⁷

3. Local Church and synodality in the Document of the International Theological Commission *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*

To better understand the meaning of synodality and the local Church in the teaching of Francis, it is useful to refer to the document of the International Theological Commission entitled *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, which was developed between 2014 and 2017.²⁸ The document, after receiving the approval of Cardinal Luis F. Ladaria, President of the Commission, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and the positive opinion of the Holy Father Francis, was published in 2018.²⁹ It consists of an introductory note, an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion.

²⁶ Cf. Francis, Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis communio*.

²⁷ On the need to strengthen the role of the bishops' conferences cf. H.J. Pottmeyer, "Die Bischofskonferenz," 37–42; A. Buckenmaier, "Synodalität und Bischofskonferenz," 164–169.

²⁸ Cf. discussion of the content of the document in: J. Bujak, "Dokument Międzynarodowej Komisji Teologicznej," 83–113.

²⁹ Cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 3; P. Coda, "La sinodalità esercizio di Chiesa," 173. The Italian theologian notes that the ITC encountered considerable difficulties in working on the document. The main difficulty concerned the clarification of the theological meaning of the concept of synodality as distinct from the concepts of communion and collegiality. At the beginning of the ITC's work, it was not even obvious to all its members that synodality was an important theological concept with a specific and proper meaning.

In the Introduction (Nos. 1–10), the authors of the text explain the meaning of the content of the term “synodality” and point to its presence in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and in the post-conciliar Magisterium (No. 2). The essence of synodality in the spirit of Vatican II is the communion of all the baptized, endowed with diverse charisms, vocations and ministries, which is most perfectly expressed in the Eucharistic assembly (No. 6). However, it is important to distinguish between synodality and collegiality. While the former term refers to the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church, the term collegiality denotes the exercise of the ministry of bishops at the service of the local Churches entrusted to their care and the communion between local Churches within the one universal Church of Christ realised through the hierarchical communion of the college of bishops with the Bishop of Rome. Collegiality is thus a specific form in which ecclesial synodality is manifested and realised through the ministry of the bishops at the level of communion among the local Churches in the region and at the level of communion among all the Churches in the universal Church. By its nature, every authentic manifestation of synodality requires the exercise of the collegial ministry of the bishops (No. 7).

The document refers to the teaching of Pope Francis who stresses that “*Synodality*, as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself”³⁰ and that, according to the doctrine of *sensus fidei fidelium*, all members of the Church are active agents of evangelization.³¹ Synodality is indispensable both for awakening the whole People of God to missionary zeal and for the ecumenical commitment of Christians, since it is an invitation to walk together along a path which leads to full communion and it creates space for the realization of unity in the diversity of gifts in the light of truth (No. 9).

³⁰ Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.

³¹ Cf. International Theological Commission, *Sensus fidei in the Life of the Church*, 91; Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 120.

The first chapter of the document, entitled *Synodality in Scripture, Tradition and History* (Nos. 11–41), shows the sources of the synodal form of the Church in biblical revelation, in which the Council of Jerusalem has a special place (Acts 15:4–29). The document then describes the development of various forms of synodality in the first and second millennium of the Church. The authors of the document note that the last Council, in the Decree *Christus Dominus*, emphasized the subjective value of the particular Church and called on bishops to exercise pastoral care for the Church entrusted to them in communion with the presbyterate, with the help of a senate or council of priests appointed for this purpose, and to establish in every diocese a pastoral council composed of priests, religious and laity. It also expressed the wish that, on the level of communion between the Churches in a region, the venerable institution of Provincial Synods be revived and encouraged the development of the institution of Episcopal Conferences (No. 40).

The second chapter entitled *Towards a Theology of Synodality* (Nos. 42–70) speaks of the Trinity as the foundation of the Church, so that one can say that the Church is *de Trinitate plebs adunata*³² (No. 43). Full, conscious, and active participation in the Eucharistic synaxis is the source and summit of synodality.³³ It is so “because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Cor 10:17). The Eucharist is also the meeting place of the various local Churches in the unity of the one Church, as is made clear by Church documents from the *Ordo ad Synodum* for the synods of Toledo in the seventh century to the *Caeremoniale Episcoporum* of 1984, which show the liturgical character of the synodal assembly by including the celebration of the Eucharist and the enthronement of the Gospel as its opening and central part (No. 47).

³² Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 2–4; Second Vatican Council, Decree *Ad gentes*, 2–4; For more on the Trinitarian dimension of synodality, see M.G. Masciarelli, *Le radici del Concilio*, 37–53. The author shows the synodal dimension of the relationships of the Persons of the Trinity who are the source and model for synodal relationships in the Church.

³³ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10, 14.

The document then points to the basic principles for a correct understanding of synodality in the perspective of the ecclesiology of communion contained in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*. The very order of its first chapters: the Mystery of the Church (ch. 1), the People of God (ch. 2), the Hierarchical Constitution of the Church (ch. 3) explains that the ecclesiastical hierarchy serves the People of God in order that they may fulfil their mission in accordance with God's plan of salvation (no. 54). Synodality means that all the baptized are *σύνοδοι*, companions on the journey, called to play an active role because they share in the one priesthood of Christ (LG 10) and receive various charisms given by the Holy Spirit with a view to the common good (LG 12, 32) (No. 55). All the faithful are called by virtue of baptism to bear witness to and proclaim the Word of truth and life, since they are members of the prophetic, priestly and royal people of God (Catechism of the Catholic Church 783–786). Bishops exercise their special apostolic authority in teaching, sanctifying and governing the local Church entrusted to their pastoral care in service of the mission of the People of God (No. 56).

Speaking of synodality in the dynamic of Catholic communion, the ITC document states that the Church makes universal what is local and local what is universal, so that the particularity of the local Church is fulfilled in the universal Church, and the universal Church is revealed and realized in the local Churches – in their unity among themselves and with the Church of Rome. The document quotes Paul VI's statement from the Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* No. 62: "Thus each individual Church that would voluntarily cut itself off from the universal Church would lose its relationship to God's plan and would be impoverished in its ecclesial dimension. But, at the same time, a Church *toto orbe diffusa* would become an abstraction if she did not take body and life precisely through the individual Churches. Only continual attention to these two poles of the Church will enable us to perceive the richness of this relationship between the universal Church and the individual Churches"³⁴ (No. 59).

³⁴ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandii*, 62.

The diversity of the local Churches, with their liturgical rites, theological heritage, spiritual gifts and canonical norms, “is splendid evidence of the catholicity of the undivided Church” (LG 23) (No. 71) The successor of Saint Peter, the *centre of unitatis*, “presides over the whole assembly of charity and protects legitimate differences, while at the same time assuring that such differences do not hinder unity but rather contribute toward it” (LG 13). The Petrine ministry is to serve the unity of the Church and at the same time guarantee the distinct character of each local Church (No. 61).

The synodal dimension of the Church expresses the subjective character of all the baptized and, at the same time, the specific role of the episcopal ministry in collegial and hierarchical communion with the Bishop of Rome. This ecclesiological vision invites us to promote the development of synodal communion between “all,” “some” and “one.” At different levels – at the level of the local Churches, at the level of their regional organization and finally at the level of the universal Church – synodality presupposes the exercise of the *sensus fidei universitas fidelium* (all), the ministry of the college of bishops together with the presbytery (some) and the ministry of the unity of the bishop and the pope (one) (No. 64).

In the Catholic and apostolic vision of synodality there is a mutual relationship between *communio fidelium*, *communio episcoporum* and *communio ecclesiarum*. The concept of synodality is broader than the concept of collegiality because it includes the participation of all in the Church and of all Churches. It implies the concept of collegiality and vice versa, since these two realities, which are distinct from each other, mutually support and authenticate each other. The teaching of Vatican II on the sacramentality of episcopacy and collegiality is a fundamental theological presupposition for a correct and integral theology of synodality (No. 66).

The third chapter entitled *Implementing synodality: synodal subjects, structures, processes and events* (Nos. 71–102) shows the possibilities for the practical implementation of synodality in the perspective of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council at the level of the local Church, regional organizations and the universal Church, pointing out the various subjects involved in synodal processes and events (No. 71). It stresses particularly

strongly the importance of Episcopal conferences (Nos. 89–91) and synods of bishops (Nos. 99–100).

The last, fourth chapter is entitled *Conversion to renew synodality* (Nos. 103–119). Synodal renewal of the Church is carried out through the re-vitalisation of synodal structures, but is first and foremost expressed in the response to God's gracious call to live as His people, who journey through history towards the fulfilment of the Kingdom (No. 103).

Renewed synodality also means an ecumenical commitment which involves the whole People of God and calls for a conversion of heart and openness to each other, in order to demolish the walls of diffidence which have separated Christians from each other for centuries and in order to discover, share and rejoice in the many riches which unite us as gifts of the one Lord in virtue of the baptism we share (No. 115). Ecumenical theological dialogue, especially with the Orthodox Church, emphasises the importance of synodality in the first millennium of the Church. The most recent document adopted so far – from Chieti in 2016 – states that in the first millennium the Church in East and West, living in communion, with firm roots in the Trinity, developed structures of synodality inseparably linked with primacy. The theological and canonical legacy of these structures is “a necessary reference point and a powerful source of inspiration for both Catholics and Orthodox as they seek to heal the wound of their division at the beginning of the third millennium” (No. 116).³⁵

The consensus on this vision of the Church allows us to focus our attention on important theological questions which still await resolution. These include, above all, the interpretation of the communion between the local Churches and the universal Church, which is expressed in the communion between their pastors and the Bishop of Rome. In this context, the implementation of synodal life and the deepening of its theological meaning represent a challenge and an enormous opportunity in continuing the ecumenical path (No. 117).

³⁵ Cf. Joint International Dialogue Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church (as whole), *Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium*, 21.

4. Synodality and the local Church in the documents of the Catholic–Orthodox dialogue

In his statements Pope Francis emphasized several times the importance of theological dialogue with Orthodox Churches for a better understanding of synodality and Eucharistic ecclesiology in the Catholic Church. In the *Evangelii Gaudium* exhortation he wrote: “How many important things unite us! If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us. To give but one example, 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. Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness” (EG 246). Also in an interview with Antonio Spadaro on 19th August 2013 the pope said: In ecumenical relations it is important not only to know each other better, but also to recognize what the Spirit has sown in the other as a gift for us. I want to continue the discussion that was begun in 2007 by the joint [Catholic–Orthodox] commission on how to exercise the Petrine primacy, which led to the signing of the Ravenna Document. We must continue on this path³⁶.

The exchange of gifts with the Orthodox Churches of which the Pope speaks concerns first of all the synodal structure of the local Church which is in communion with the universal Church through the membership of its bishop in the college of bishops.

In the Catholic–Orthodox dialogue since the first document entitled *The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity* accepted in 1980 in Munich by the Joint International Dialogue Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church (as a whole) Eucharistic ecclesiology has been present, that is the ecclesiology of

³⁶ Cf. A. Spadaro, “Interview with Pope Francis,” 466; P. Coda, “Scambio di doni,” 391, 394.

a local Church which gathers for Eucharist, presided over by the Bishop.³⁷ In the second part of the document we read that the Church of God is always revealed in history as a local community: “If one looks at the New Testament one will notice first of all that the church describes a “local” reality. The church exists in history as local church” (II, 1). The New Testament always speaks of a specific Church in Corinth, Thessalonica, Jerusalem or Rome, stresses Orthodox Metropolitan John Zizioulas.³⁸

The third document of the dialogue signed at Valamo in 1988, *The Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the Church with particular reference to the importance of Apostolic Succession for the Sanctification and Unity of the People of God*, states that the bishop, through participation in the college of bishops, represents his local Church in the universal communion of the Church. Communion between local Churches is expressed, among other things, in Episcopal ordination, which, according to the canons of the ancient Church, should be conferred by at least two or three bishops, as an expression of the communion of their Churches with the newly elected bishop (Valamo Document, 27). Paragraph 53 of the document presented various forms of synodal life in the first millennium of the Church. Particularly important was the role of the “first” of the bishops, who at various levels guaranteed unity among the local Churches and the canonicity of synodality. For in antiquity, synodal practice and primacy at different levels in the life of the Church were two interdependent realities.³⁹ Therefore, synodality is understood in the Valamo Document as collegiality, that is, the communion of bishops.

The fifth document of the Catholic–Orthodox theological dialogue that addresses the issue of interest to us is the 2007 Ravenna Document entitled *Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority*, about which Piero Coda wrote that it is of “strategic importance” for the unity of the two

³⁷ Cf. J. Bujak, *Jedność na nowo odkrywana*, 33.

³⁸ Cf. Giovanni di Pergamo (John Zizioulas), “La Chiesa come comunione,” 532.

³⁹ Cf. Bujak, *Jedność na nowo odkrywana*, 47–48.

Churches.⁴⁰ Also in this text local Church is the starting point. The members of the International Mixed Commission for Catholic–Orthodox Dialogue point to the Trinitarian source of synodality in the Church and its actualisation in the celebration of the Eucharist (Nos. 5–6). The synodal character of the Church should be visible at all three levels of its implementation: “The conciliar dimension of the Church is to be found at the three levels of ecclesial communion, the local, the regional and the universal: at the local level of the diocese entrusted to the bishop; at the regional level of a group of local Churches with their bishops who ‘recognize who is the first amongst themselves’ (Apostolic Canon 34); and at the universal level, where those who are first (*protoi*) in the various regions, together with all the bishops, cooperate in that which concerns the totality of the Church. At this level also, the *protoi* must recognize who is the first amongst themselves” (No. 10)⁴¹. More about the threefold implementation of synodality is said in the second part of the Document. It is emphasized there that: “The Church of God exists where there is a community gathered together in the Eucharist, presided over, directly or through his presbyters, by a bishop legitimately ordained into the apostolic succession, teaching the faith received from the Apostles, in communion with the other bishops and their Churches” (No. 18)⁴². Synodality is expressed in the plurality of offices that result from ordination (bishop, presbyter, deacon) and charisms that serve the local Church through the ministry of unity of the bishop, who is the head (*kephale*) of the local Church (No. 20). The relationship of the local Churches at the regional level is regulated by the 34th Apostolic Canon, which reads as follows: The bishops of each province (*ethnos*) must recognize

⁴⁰ Cf. P. Coda, “Scambio di doni,” 396–400. Above all, Coda stresses the existence of a close relationship between synodality and authority at all three levels of the Church: universal, regional and local, as stated in Apostolic Canon 34.

⁴¹ J. Bujak, *Dialog katolicko-prawosławny*, 37.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 39; cf. J.-M.-R. Tillard, *Église d'Églises*, 51. The ecclesiology of the Canadian theologian had a great influence on the Catholic-Orthodox dialogue and on the assimilation of the ecclesiology of communion in the Catholic Church. In his work Tillard presented the relationship between the local Church and the universal Church, emphasising that the Church of the Triune God exists before and above the local Church, in which the universal Church is always present; A. Cattaneo, *La Chiesa locale*, 311–316.

the one who is first (*protos*) amongst them, and consider him to be their head (*kephale*), and not do anything important without his consent (*gnome*); each bishop may only do what concerns his own diocese (*paroikia*) and its dependent territories. But the first (*protos*) cannot do anything without the consent of all. For in this way concord (*homonoia*) will prevail, and God will be praised through the Lord in the Holy Spirit” (Apostolic Canon 34) (No. 24). The third level of the realization of synodality and authority in the Church is that of the universal Church, understood as the communion of the local Church with the other local Churches that have been, are and will be, and with the glorious Church (p. 32). What unites the local Churches is the same faith, the Eucharist and the apostolic office (No. 33). Finally, the Ravenna Document recommends the need for a deeper study of the function of the Bishop of Rome in the communion of Churches (Nos. 45–46).⁴³

Nine years after the adoption of the Ravenna Document, a sixth document was worked out and adopted in 2016 in Chieti, Italy, entitled *Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium: towards a common understanding in service to the unity of the Church*.⁴⁴ Also here, representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches affirm the ecclesiology of the local Church, stating that “The one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of which Christ is the head is present in the eucharistic synaxis of a local church under its bishop. He is the one who presides (the *proestos*). In the liturgical synaxis, the bishop makes visible the presence of Jesus Christ” (No. 8). Synodality has its origin in the local Church, which the bishop, as her head, represents before other local Churches and in communion with all the Churches (No. 10).⁴⁵

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 41–42.

⁴⁴ Cf. Joint International Dialogue Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church (as whole), *Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium*; A. Kuźma, “Istota eklezjologii pierwszego tysiąclecia,” 109–120.

⁴⁵ Cf. The North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation, Washington DC, *A Response*. The North American Orthodox-Catholic Consultative Council, in its response to the Chieti document, noted that the document places great emphasis on the ministry of the bishop and little attention on presbyters. It also

When discussing the relationship of the local Churches at the regional level, the Document of Chieti traditionally refers to Canon 34, called Apostolic (No. 13),⁴⁶ while the primacy of the Bishop of Rome is shown within the framework of the Pentarchies and the universal councils of the first millennium, emphasising that this primacy was always exercised in the context of synodality (Nos. 15–19).

Referring to the “exchange of gifts” between the Eastern Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, Joseph Famerée notes that Orthodox ecclesiology is a Eucharistic, “episcopal” ecclesiology, which emphasises that the local Church is the full manifestation of the one, holy, universal and apostolic Church, whose source is the mystery of the Holy Trinity. However, the local Church (diocese, eparchy) can be a manifestation of Christ’s Church on condition that it maintains ties with other local Churches, each of which is one Church of Christ.⁴⁷ From the Orthodox point of view, the Church is both hierarchical and synodal (“collegial”), is universal, but is fully realised only in the local Eucharistic assembly. Synodal life (relations between the faithful and their bishop, between bishops and the primate) is therefore a matter of Eucharistic communion and only in second place is it related to authority and canonical rules.

In the documents of the Second Vatican Council we also find important indications leading to an ecclesiology of the local Church, which in the post-conciliar period has become better known in the

highlights the lack of recognition of the role of the clergy and lay faithful in contributing to the Church and witnessing to the Gospel in the world. He recalls that in the early Church the faithful were usually involved in the process of electing a new bishop. In the Chieti document, as in earlier documents of Catholic-Orthodox dialogue, little is said about the parish, yet for many of the faithful it is the parish, not the diocese, that is the true local Church in which they participate daily in the Eucharist.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* The members of the Consultative Council note that in discussing the relationship between synodality and primacy at the regional level, the authors of the Chieti document do not take into account the relationship between the bishop and the faithful, whereas in the first millennium of the Church the bishop was always linked to a particular community of believers, like in a conjugal relationship; S. Morandini, “Un dinamismo ecumenico,” 88–89.

⁴⁷ Cf. J. Famerée, “Scambio di doni,” 415.

Catholic Church (cf. SC 41, LG 23, CD 11) also thanks to the ecumenical dialogues with the Orthodox Churches and the World Council of Churches. It must be admitted, however, that official Catholic ecclesiology defends itself against the full reception of the ecclesiology of the *communio ecclesiarum* (*localium, regionalium*). This is indicated, among other things, by the possibility of becoming a bishop, a member of the episcopal college, by virtue of episcopal ordination alone, without any connection with a particular local Church. Meanwhile, in the light of Vatican II teaching, “absolute ordination” is a major problem, since Episcopal ordination is inseparable from the bishop’s pastoral function in the real local Church and is not exclusively “titular” ordination. Another issue is the need to value the local (diocesan) Churches in the Catholic Church and to recognise the presence of regional Churches in the Catholic which are a sign of “horizontal” communion in addition to the “vertical” communion between the individual bishop and the Pope.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The ecclesiology of communion initiated at the Second Vatican Council, which includes the ecclesiology of the local/particular Church, collegiality of bishops and synodality, has been developed in the post-conciliar period on both the theoretical and practical levels. However, there are quite a few theologians who believe that the pontificate of John Paul II was a period of a certain stagnation in the implementation of the ecclesiology of communion and, at the same time, of a return to the ecclesiology of the primacy of the universal Church over the local Church, as evidenced by the documents published by the Roman Curia, especially the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Communio notio*. However, in their criticism they forget, among other things, about the numerous Synods of Bishops convened by John Paul II, especially before the Jubilee of 2000 years of the Saviour’s birth, understood as a form of the new evangelisation. Besides, John Paul

⁴⁸ Cf. Ibid., 416–418; J. Famerée, “L’Église locale,” 164–165; J. Bujak, *Dialog katolicko-prawosławny*, 54–58.

II was aware that he did not succeed in implementing everything he intended in this regard.

Pope Francis has taken up the work of his predecessors of the reception of the Eucharistic ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, which emphasises the importance of the local Church in communion with other Churches, especially with the Church of Rome and her bishop.

In a way, Pope Francis' teaching on synodality is extended by the 2018 International Theological Commission document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, which discusses in detail the role of synodality at three levels of the Church: local, regional and universal. The document stresses that "The Eucharistic synaxis is the source and paradigm of the spirituality of communion. In it are expressed the specific elements of Christian life that are called to mould the *affectus synodalis*" (No. 109).

In the teaching of Pope Francis one can also perceive the reception of the Eucharistic ecclesiology present in the documents of the Catholic–Orthodox dialogue, according to which the Church of Christ is fully realised in the local Church, especially when she gathers for the celebration of the liturgy, presided by the bishop of that Church. This Church is in communion with other local Churches through regional structures and with the whole Church through the same faith and sacraments. Furthermore, an appreciation of the regional dimension of the Church's structures is noticeable in the Pope's statements – Pope Francis emphasises the importance of Episcopal conferences for organisation and teaching. The documents of the Catholic–Orthodox dialogue show the primacy of the pope in the first millennium of the Church within the Pentarchy and the synodal organisation, especially of the ecumenical council. Francis also points out that he is primarily the bishop of the Diocese of Rome. He also draws attention to synodality, which concerns the whole Church and especially the lay faithful who, thanks to the Holy Spirit, have the gift of *sensus fidei* (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 119), and to collegiality, i.e., the unity of bishops within synods at different levels. The Pope's teaching and action in favour of synodality and strengthening the Church at local and regional levels meets the demands of those theologians who believe that Chapter III of the

Constitution *Lumen Gentium* has not yet been properly implemented.⁴⁹

George Weigel stresses that synodality in the Catholic Church does not mean that individual local Churches differ on matters of doctrine, morals and pastoral care. Such a model has been adopted in Anglicanism, but it should not be copied in Catholicism, which is, however, already happening, as exemplified by the “synodal way” in the Catholic Church in Germany.⁵⁰

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⁴⁹ Cf. J.R. Villar, “La sinodalidad en la reflexión teológica actual,” 79–82.

⁵⁰ G. Weigel, *Następny papież*, 44; G. Weigel, *A paradigm drift to apostasy?*, writes about the “synodal way” of the Catholic Church in Germany, which leads to a federal model of the Catholic Church: “For what’s happening along the German synodal path is a true paradigm shift: a shift toward the notion of the Catholic Church as a federation of local Churches, each of which legitimately espouses its own doctrine, moral teaching, and pastoral practice. That, however, is not Catholicism. It is Anglicanism. And anyone who knows anything about world Christian demographics knows that local-option Anglicanism hasn’t turned out very well.”

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