

Listening a Synodal Church into Being: Learning Points from the Methodology of the Synod 2021–2024 and the Asian Experience

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Abstract: This article examines the multiple dimensions of listening entailed in the Synod on Synodality and highlights some challenges posed by the context of Asia. It then examines the outcomes of the synod consultation on the Asian continent and identifies key elements which enabled fruitful listening experience despite the anticipated barriers. These elements include a concerted stance of radical welcome in word and deed, the building of relationships along with structures, the integration of theology “from above” and “from below” through a pilgrim hermeneutic, and the use of consultation methods that embodied a spirituality of communion. The article discusses these elements alongside theological scholarship and church teachings on synodal processes, *sensus fidei*, and theological method. As such, its elucidation of these elements could help encourage synodal listening in practically effective and theologically relevant ways. It is hoped that this might in turn support future efforts to harness the *sensus fidei* and promote a more synodal way of being church and doing theology.

THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH HAS been unprecedented in many ways. Among its notable features is an emphasis on listening, underscored in official documents, press statements, speeches, and publicity materials to an extent that listening has become synonymous with the synod. Yet the notion of listening in this synod is not a straightforward one. There are complexities and challenges inherent in the desired form of listening prescribed for the synod. Concrete experiences of implementing the synod process have also produced several unexpected outcomes and provide valuable learning points with regard to methodologies and practices for a synodal church.

In this article, I will discuss the listening intended in this synod, the anticipated challenges of implementation especially in the Asian context, and the results produced by the process. I will then propose a pneumatological key to view these experiences and elaborate on lessons that can be reaped for a method of fruitful listening in the church and beyond.

Personally, I have been closely involved in designing and accompanying the work at the universal church level as well as within Asia. The approach I take in this study is one that leverages my direct experiences as well as examines the global synod process that has occurred to-date, alongside data from the Asian churches. In particular, I will revisit and highlight direct testimonies from synod reports of local churches, which are a rich and relatively untapped source of data from the field. These serve as valuable windows into the realities of local contexts as well as into the reception of the synod process on the ground and the impact of certain ways of proceeding.¹ I will present this data in dialogue with church teachings and recent theological scholarship on synodal listening and the *sensus fidei* so that insights about contextually-effective methods of listening in synergy with the developing faith tradition can be reaped. Some areas for further theological and pastoral research will also be highlighted. As the synod on synodality proceeds towards the implementation phase, I hope this study will contribute to the strengthening of synodality on the ground especially in Asia so that the hopes and dreams enkindled by this process among the people will be fulfilled.

THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY AND ITS MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF LISTENING

A fundamentally new approach towards the Synod of Bishops in the Catholic Church was first signified in early 2021 when a decision was announced to postpone the synod assembly for a year from October 2022 to October 2023. According to the press statement from the Synod Office, this was to enable the adoption of a “new method” envisaged to “make possible a true listening to the People of God to ensure the participation of all.”² Concretely, this comprised a multi-phase, iterative, and lengthier process that required dedicated efforts at the diocesan, continental, and universal levels. Citing *Episcopalis Communio*, the Press Statement called for “mutual listening to the Holy Spirit at every level of the Church’s life” including “all of the baptised, who are the subject of the *sensus fidei*, infallible in *crendo*.”³ Cardinal Mario Grech, in one of his first interviews as the newly-appointed General Secretary of the Synod, remarked that these changes were made because “the time was ripe for a wider participation of the People of God in a decision-making process that

¹ For a methodological discussion on the use of these synod reports, see Appendix.

² Holy See Press Office, “Note of the Synod of Bishops,” May 21, 2021, press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/05/21/210521b.html#.

³ Holy See Press Office, “Note of the Synod of Bishops,” May 21, 2021.

affects the whole Church and everyone in the Church.”⁴ Some months later, Pope Francis reiterated these views in his address to the Diocese of Rome and emphasized that “the exercise of the *sensus fidei* . . . is not about garnering opinions, not a survey, but a matter of listening to the Holy Spirit.”⁵

All these remarks highlight an inherent complexity in the notion of listening in the synod. At least three dimensions of listening can be identified, each having a distinct nature and requiring distinct capabilities. First, every participant in the synod process “listens” to, or more accurately, takes note of personal intuitions, feelings, experiences, and viewpoints in response to the synod questions, in accord with the nature of the *sensus fidei* as a “vital instinct” or “spontaneous and natural knowledge” as described by the International Theological Commission (ITC).⁶ Second, participants share their responses with one another and listen attentively to each other. Third, they endeavor to listen collectively to the Holy Spirit through these conversations. There is thus a simultaneous exercise of the corporeal, mental, affective, social, and spiritual senses. The Synod Office has used the term “discernment” in relation to the consultation processes.⁷ It also called upon bishops in each episcopal conference to gather together after the local consultations and “listen to what the Spirit has inspired in the churches entrusted to them.”⁸ The latter point introduces a fourth dimension of listening, done at a meta-level by bishops in assembly, reflecting on the outcomes of local church conversations in which they themselves might have taken part. In fact, the actual practice of the synod process saw many layers of meta-level listening whereby group reports were brought together and collectively reflected upon to arrive at a synthesis. Within local churches, there were often successive tiers of meta-level listening from small neighborhood communities to residential zones, parishes, regional districts, and dioceses.

This communal, layered, and multi-dimensional nature of listening distinguishes the present synod from prior endeavors to tap the *sensus fidei*. In earlier centuries, the task mainly comprised inquiring and

⁴ Cardinal Mario Grech, cited in Andrea Tornielli, “Synod on Rome on Synodality Postponed to 2023,” *Vatican News*, May 21, 2021, republished in English in *Exaudi Catholic News*, www.exaudi.org/cardinal-grech-explores-new-synodal-process/.

⁵ Pope Francis, “Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome,” September 18, 2021, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html.

⁶ International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2014), nos. 54 and 49.

⁷ Holy See Press Office, “Note of the Synod of Bishops,” May 21, 2021.

⁸ Holy See Press Office, “Note of the Synod of Bishops,” May 21, 2021.

ascertaining what the faithful already believed and practiced.⁹ In recent synods, consultation took the form of gathering feedback and experiences from relevant groups of people. The present synod, however, calls for the whole church to enter a concerted and coordinated process of communal discernment so as to find out what the Holy Spirit is asking of it. The attendant listening even extends to those normally seen as being outside the church, including people of other faiths, secular groups, and local communities, with special attention to those on the margins of society. This represents yet another dimension of listening in which the faithful are reminded to “not neglect all those ‘intuitions’ found where we would least expect them.”¹⁰ It is an attentive listening to the signs of the times. As expansive and demanding as this is, the objective of the synod goes even further. The *Vademecum* for the synod highlights that “the whole Synodal Process aims at fostering a lived experience of discernment, participation, and co-responsibility, where a diversity of gifts is brought together for the Church’s mission in the world.”¹¹ In other words, communal discernment, with its attendant listening, is not simply a means to an end. The goal is for people to have a concrete experience of synodality through the very process of listening. For the first time, the theme of the synod is to be directly experienced and not just talked about. This collective experience is then envisaged to shed new light on synodality and how the church is called to live it more faithfully. Herein lies a final dimension of listening, which might be expressed as “listening to the listening.” The whole experience is observed and reflected upon by the community in order to gain awareness about itself, to see where the Holy Spirit is leading, and thus respond accordingly. This signifies a dynamic approach to ecclesiology as a living tradition which moves forward through an active and participative listening praxis.

The desired ways of proceeding in the synod find resonance in recent theological scholarship on synodal listening, discernment, and the *sensus fidei*. For instance, Ormond Rush highlights the ecclesiological reversal made by the Second Vatican Council in prioritizing the baptismal dignity and co-responsibility of all the People of God, prior to any distinction in ecclesial office or functions. He also underscores the Council’s teaching on the *sensus fidei* bestowed on all the faithful by the Holy Spirit. Hence, listening to

⁹ Some examples are given in ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, chap. 1, no. 2.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, “Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome.”

¹¹ Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality* (VD) (Vatican City: Synod Office, 2021), no. 1.3.

“what the Lord asks of His Church today” involves everyone.¹² Likewise, Hervé Legrand highlights that “if [the church] is the temple of the Holy Spirit, this means that the whole range of the gifts of the Spirit, in their diversity, can only be found in the whole of the people of God, and since no one Christian, and no one Church, has a monopoly of these, that implies a system of listening to each other and co-responsibility.”¹³ More specifically, Dario Vitali emphasizes the need for reciprocal listening between the Magisterium and the People of God as a whole, in light of the *sensus fidei*.¹⁴ Elaborating on communal discernment as the means for such reciprocal listening, Jos Moons highlights the necessity of “speaking out” in terms of sharing “what one believes to be the Spirit’s inspiration” based on prayer and “thinking before speaking,” among other factors.¹⁵ He also underscores the disposition of mutual listening with genuine interest to hear what the Holy Spirit is revealing in the conversation.¹⁶ Similarly, Amanda Osheim emphasizes the importance of “prayer, dialogue, and self-reflection” as well as mutual listening.¹⁷ These views resonate with the first three levels of listening envisaged in the synod as discussed above. Myriam Wijlens recalls Vatican II’s affirmation that “the church exists in and from the local churches” and that “circularity between the different entities” including the local, regional, and universal churches would be mutually enriching.¹⁸ Thus, fruitful reception of the Spirit’s inspiration necessitates several rounds of meta-level listening as planned in the current synod, attending reverently to every grassroots community, to “neighbouring dioceses,”¹⁹ and the wider church. Wijlens also alludes to the action-research method in the synod and remarks that “the object is at the same time the method Hence, the church convoked in synod may

¹² Ormond Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church,” *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2017): 321, doi: 10.1177/0040563917698561.

¹³ Hervé Legrand, “Synodality is a Matter of Practice: A Plea for Learning,” *Concilium* 2 (2021): 120–121.

¹⁴ Dario Vitali, “The Circularity between *Sensus fidei* and Magisterium as a Criterion for the Exercise of Synodality in the Church,” in *For a Missionary Reform of the Church*, ed. Antonio Spadaro and Carlos M. Galli (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2017), 196–217.

¹⁵ Jos Moons, “A Comprehensive Introduction to Synodality: Reconfiguring Ecclesiology and Ecclesial Practice,” *Roczniki Teologiczne* 69, no. 2 (2022): 86, doi.org/10.18290/rt22692.5.

¹⁶ Moons, “Comprehensive Introduction to Synodality,” 87–88.

¹⁷ Amanda C. Oshiem, “Stepping Toward a Synodal Church,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2019): 374, doi: 10.1177/0040563919836225.

¹⁸ Myriam Wijlens, “The Church of God is Convoked in Synod: Theological and Canonical Challenges Concerning the 2021–2023 Synod,” *Centro Pro Unione Bulletin* 99 (Fall 2021): 95–96.

¹⁹ Wijlens, “The Church of God is Convoked in Synod,” 96.

reap some of the fruits of a synodal conversion as all engage in experiencing it, reflecting upon it and sharing what they have learned.”²⁰ This underscores the importance of “listening to the listening” as highlighted above.

CHALLENGES IN THE CONTEXT OF ASIA

The goals of the synod, noble as they are, face many challenges in the Asian context. A relatively large proportion of people struggle with daily instabilities from poverty, conflict, and systemic oppression. These stark realities, alongside geographical remoteness, deep-seated social prejudices, and a plurality of local languages present formidable barriers to the synodal process. Moreover, a hierarchical culture prevails in many Asian societies, where listening is more often associated with unquestioning obedience to seniors, elders, and those in authority. A reversal in the direction of listening would not find easy reception on either side. As noted in the Central Asia synod report, “Our people are not accustomed to engage in any sort of explicit ‘synodality’ or to evaluate in open discussion the workings or intentions of those charged with authority within society, the family, or religion.”²¹ Similarly, Pakistan highlighted that “priests and heads of commissions used to normalize their people’s perspective with the purpose to create harmony” and hence, they were more accustomed to speaking and intervening rather than listening.²² Even among equals, speaking frankly with *parrhesia* or voicing disagreement and contrary opinions are behaviors which many Asians, being relatively reserved, tend to avoid. The synod report from Japan noted that “it is very difficult to gather the voices of people who even if they come to church do not want to speak.”²³

²⁰ Wijlens, “The Church of God is Convoled in Synod,” 87.

²¹ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Central Asia (CECAC), “Synthesis Report: Synod of Bishops 2021–2023,” 32, FABC Papers no. 176, www.fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-176/. The synod reports from most episcopal conferences in Asia are available publicly on the website of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) at www.fabc.org/document-library/. Quotations from the local churches cited in this article are taken from these synod reports unless stated otherwise.

²² Pakistan Catholic Bishops’ Conference (PCBC), “Synthesis Report: Synod of Bishops 2021–2023,” 46, FABC Papers no. 178, www.fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-178/.

²³ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan (CBCJ), “Synthesis Report: Synod of Bishops 2021–2023,” 18, FABC Papers no. 177, www.fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-177/. At this juncture, two important qualifiers regarding my comments on cultures in Asia need to be made. First, there is always the risk of stereotyping whenever cultural traits are being discussed. A systematic ethnographic study would identify and explore such traits more comprehensively especially with regard to whether they facilitate or inhibit synodality. However, that is beyond the scope of this

Besides listening and speaking, the very notion of participating in a synod consultation is foreign to many of the laity. A devotional approach to religion prevails in much of Asia where co-responsibility for mission and ecclesial life is not widely understood or exercised. As noted in the Malaysian report, “Some negative comments and lukewarm reception may have been due to a lack of knowledge and understanding on the synod, synodal process, functions of the parish, diocese, and the wider church.”²⁴ Additionally, the practice of discernment, whether personal or communal, is not widely known, let alone understood or exercised. Consequently, there is a general lack of prior experience to tap on. This is exacerbated by the fact that some ecclesial structures for consultation have not fostered genuine participation or effected real change. The report from Sri Lanka noted that “there are efficient pastoral structures like parish pastoral councils, already within the Church, for the people to speak out and express themselves. Yet the laity finds it difficult to speak out.” As a result, an attitude of skepticism has settled in many places. As highlighted in the Korean report, “At the very beginning, the main obstacle to be overcome was passive attitude. This was especially shown in those dioceses where they hardly experienced meaningful changes through their own synod.”²⁵

RESULTS OF THE PROCESS

Despite these challenges, the synod process showed some notable positive outcomes in Asia. All seventeen episcopal conferences in the

essay. For the time being, I have drawn upon direct quotes from the synod reports of the local churches themselves. To some extent, these indicate how they see their own cultural and ecclesial tendencies in relation to various aspects of synodality. Second, I acknowledge that general characterizations do not do justice to the diversity of social and ecclesial cultures across Asia and even within each local community. Nevertheless, I am of the view that such diversity need not preclude attempts to identify some commonalities, at least provisionally and broadly, as starting points for pastoral collaboration and theological networking at the continental level, increasingly called for in the church’s synodal process. A similar approach has been taken by the FABC in its recent major documents. See “Journeying Together as the Peoples of Asia: FABC 50 Bangkok Document,” March 15, 2023; “Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality,” March 16, 2023; “The Asian Face of Synodality,” August 2024, www.fabc.org/document-library/. Going forward, further research can be done on cultural distinctions and similarities so as to aid our walking together as church.

²⁴ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei (CBCMSB), “Synthesis Report: Synod of Bishops 2021–2023,” 5, FABC Papers no. 178, www.fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-178/.

²⁵ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Korea (CBCK), “Synthesis Report: Synod of Bishops 2021–2023,” 31, FABC Papers no. 177, www.fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-177/.

Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) organized synod teams and carried out consultations more or less in the manner proposed by the *Vademecum*. Although participation rates varied, the overall reception surpassed the expectations of most synod teams. An observer from Malaysia remarked that the response "demonstrated a kind of groundswell never seen before."²⁶ Throughout the Asian churches, one of the most prominent reactions encountered was that of enthusiasm. Timor Leste reported that "through consultations from the bottom, we discovered the enthusiasm and the spirit of participation of the faithful which were really very gratifying."²⁷ Similarly, the report from Indonesia remarked that "the enthusiasm of the faithful to participate is very high; they really appreciated the synod process because they felt heard and welcome."²⁸ A similar enthusiasm was seen in the many ground-up and spontaneous initiatives to create, produce, and share materials that aided and accompanied the synod process. These ranged from graphical explanations, videos, songs, and toolkits designed by diverse individuals, to dedicated web portals and formation resources provided by institutions and pastoral centers. Observing these proactive initiatives, the Asian continental synthesis team expressed its view that "the general sense of concern for the church as demonstrated in the participation of all in this process reflects a natural or organic inclination to authentic synodality."²⁹ I would add further, as a personal viewpoint from my own observation of these unfolding events, that it seemed something latent in the hearts of people was awakened and brought to life.

Another relatively unexpected outcome in Asia was the openness and honesty with which people spoke. This enabled the listening process to gather not only positive experiences in the church but also experiences of pain and sorrow. Viewpoints that were mutually contrasting could also be surfaced. It was particularly remarkable that many of the laity spoke frankly about problems in the church, including their difficult experiences with clergy and other pastoral leaders. Participants were candid in calling out shortcomings in transparency, accountability, pastoral care, and competence on the part of those holding ministerial positions. The report from Myanmar,

²⁶ Clarence Devadass, "Towards a Synodal Church: Asian Models and Initiatives—Malaysia & Singapore," in *Towards a Synodal Church: Moving Forward*, vol. 1, ed. S. G. Kochuthara and J. J. Kochumuttom (Bengaluru, India: Dharmaram, 2023), 363.

²⁷ Catholic Bishops' Conference of Timor Leste (CET), "Synthesis Report: Synod of Bishops 2021–2023," 41, FABC Papers no. 179, www.fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-179/.

²⁸ Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia (KWI), "Synthesis Report: Synod of Bishops 2021–2023," 3, FABC Papers no. 177, www.fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-177/.

²⁹ FABC, "Asian Continental Assembly," no. 46.

for instance, remarked that “people reacted negatively to the homilies with emphasis on the sins and failures of the people who are taking part in the liturgy instead of on the joy of being children of God.”³⁰ These spontaneous views of the faithful are valuable in potentially indicating the *sensus fidei* regarding a more evangelical way of proceeding in ministry. Minority voices were also heard and frank testimonies about their experiences of discrimination were expressed. For instance, the Vietnam church highlighted that “expatriates and domestic migrants feel isolated and abandoned due to a lack of social and pastoral care, even sometimes have feelings of not being welcome or excluded.”³¹ The report from Laos echoes the sentiment expressed by many of the other Asian churches: “The process of consultation . . . produced unexpected fruits: the people of God expressed themselves; they shared their joys, their hopes, their concerns, as well as many criticisms. . . . That Laotian Christians have dared to share what they think and hope testifies to their maturity and their capacity to accept changes that will be beneficial to the local Church.”³²

All around Asia, the synod experience generated fresh insights about synodality and the way of being church. What is significant is that such insights frequently came hand-in-hand with strong expressions of joy and consolation. As reported in Vietnam, “They experienced great joy when participating in the consultation process because of many reasons: (1) feeling a ‘new fresh wind’ blowing into the life of the Church; (2) having the opportunity to listen to the Church’s teachings and to have their voices heard; (3) experiencing more clearly to be living members of Christ’s Church.”³³ In India, a synod facilitator remarked that “it is heartwarming to know that several women cried when asked to share, as this was the first time it had happened in the Church.”³⁴ As a result, the Indian synod report noted that “the most significant experience was that all those who participated in the consultation realized their communion with one

³⁰ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Myanmar (CBCM), “Synthesis Report: Synod of Bishops 2021–2023,” 28, FABC Papers no. 178, www.fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-178/.

³¹ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Vietnam (CBCV), “Published National Syntheses,” www.synod.org.pl/vietnam-catholic-bishops-conference-of-vietnam/.

³² Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Laos and Cambodia, “Synthesis Report: Synod of Bishops 2021–2023,” 59, FABC Papers no. 177, www.fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-177/.

³³ CBCV, “Published National Syntheses.”

³⁴ “Delhi Archdiocese’s Synodal Sessions Help Focus ‘Unnoticed Persons,’” *Matters India*, May 4, 2022, mattersindia.com/2022/05/delhi-archdioceses-synodal-sessions-help-focus-unnoticed-persons/.

another.”³⁵ In many countries, this realization was accompanied by an increased desire to engage those not present and include people at the peripheries. In particular, participants were able to identify the marginal groups in their own contexts neglected by the local church, beyond the examples given in the official synod guiding documents.

A palpable transformation was observed in some churches. In Korea, for example, it was reported that “the greatest fruit was that many of the People of God in Korea participated in the synodal path, deepened communion and experienced the synodal Church. In result, the Catholic Church in Korea saw the stronger will and hope to carry out her mission emerging.”³⁶ Concrete improvements in various aspects of ecclesial life also took place, such as in the Philippines, which reported that “many remarked how the consultations positively affected the celebration of the liturgies” and that the synodal process “has succeeded in pushing them (the dioceses) to finally implement the abolition of the *arancel* system.”³⁷ According to the synod reports, some people who have left the church also started coming back after the synod consultation. Hence, more than a participatory exercise to experience synodality as originally envisaged, there seems to have been some signs of communal conversion. As expressed by the Taiwanese team, “This synthesis report is not an end, but the beginning of a new way of dialogue for a synodal Church in Taiwan.”³⁸

SENSUS FIDEI AND THE DYNAMIC PROCESS OF CONVERSION: A PNEUMATOLOGICAL KEY

The responses described in the Asian reports bear some semblance to the ITC’s description of dispositions for authentic manifestations of the *sensus fidei*.³⁹ These include statements in the reports about participants’ openness, enthusiasm, solicitude for the church, desire for unity, fidelity to the tradition of church teachings, willingness to engage in the process with faith and reason, and most of all joy, which seemed akin to that of “the person who has found the treasure of

³⁵ Conference of Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI), “Synthesis Report: Synod of Bishops 2021–2023,” 47, FABC Papers no. 176, www.fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-176/.

³⁶ CBCK, “Synthesis Report,” 31.

³⁷ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), “Synthesis Report: Synod of Bishops 2021–2023,” 56. 72, FABC Papers no. 178, www.fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-178/. The *arancel* system in the Philippines refers to the local church fee-based system for administration of the sacraments. These fees have sometimes caused church sacraments to be beyond the reach of the poor.

³⁸ Chinese Regional Bishops’ Conference, “Synthesis Reports: Synod of Bishops 2021–2023,” 5, FABC Papers no. 179, www.fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-179/.

³⁹ ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, nos. 87–105.

salvation.”⁴⁰ In studying these responses, the Asian continental synthesis team expressed its view that much of the people’s feedback and desires, whether associated with consolations or desolations, conveyed “a deep love for the Church.”⁴¹ I venture that a sense of *sentire cum ecclesia* was perhaps engendered to some extent and this enabled people to speak freely out of faith and love. What is even more significant are the signs that point to the transformative action of the Holy Spirit in participating communities, creating a synodal church and fostering conversion in the course of the listening process. The Korean report, for instance, recounted that participants began with skepticism, but “in the process of gathering, listening, and discernment, the people in many communities shared their experience of faith, listened to one another, and finally confessed that they gradually and strongly recognized the presence of the Holy Spirit among them.”⁴² Similarly, despite the initial hesitation, Japan reported that “in the process of gathering opinions, there was a growing understanding that it is important for all who have received the blessing of baptism to walk together, sharing and discerning the guidance of the Holy Spirit who calls them. . . . Each believer realized the importance of regularly sharing their ‘feelings for the Church.’”⁴³

These testimonies of transformation have significant implications for the listening process in the synod. They show that an authentic viewpoint is something emergent rather than pre-existent, ripening through a process of mutual engagement and communal conversion. What each participant brings initially to the table might contain either a seed of insight or even something contrary to the *sensus fidei fidelis* since, as the ITC points out, a variety of opinions can exist in the “mental universe” of believers which influence and sometimes distort their intuitions of the *sensus fidei*.⁴⁴ A communal discernment process with its accompanying conversion can enable a refined viewpoint to emerge which more authentically manifests the inspirations of the Holy Spirit since it comes from believers who have grown together in faith, hope, and love. In fact, from the results encountered, it can be said that the answer to the synod question of what steps the Holy Spirit is calling the church to take in order to grow in synodality lies in the very processes participants have been undergoing. It is thus useful to examine the whole synod process thus far to identify those elements which have helped to foster a fruitful experience of communal discernment and synodal conversion, especially in light of the barriers

⁴⁰ ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, no. 102.

⁴¹ FABC, “Asian Continental Assembly,” no. 50.

⁴² CBCK, “Synthesis Report,” 31.

⁴³ CBCJ, “Synthesis Report,” 17.

⁴⁴ ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, no. 55.

anticipated in the Asian context. This would then illuminate how methodological principles outlined by theological scholarship could be translated into concrete pastoral practice. No doubt cause and effect can neither be correlated definitively nor even measured in religious matters, especially when the Holy Spirit is considered to be the main agent. Nevertheless, the following section presents some elements which have been relatively prominent in this synod and more evidently made an impact on the participants and outcome.

KEY ELEMENTS ENABLING A FRUITFUL LISTENING PROCESS

The main factors that have helped to enhance the effectiveness of the listening phase in the synod process can be traced to four key elements. These include a stance of radical welcome communicated consistently in word and deed, the building of relationships along with structures, the integration of theology “from above” and “from below” through a pilgrim hermeneutic, and the use of consultation methods that embody a spirituality of communion.

A Stance of Radical Welcome Communicated Consistently in Word and Deed

In line with the synod’s inclusive approach, a message that has been communicated resoundingly about the listening process is that all are welcome and no one should be left out. This has been reiterated in synod documents and publicity materials, in media statements from synod officials, and especially in speeches from Pope Francis.⁴⁵ One

⁴⁵ The Holy Father underscored this point in his homilies and messages throughout the synod process. Among the most prominent quotes is his emphasis that “*La Chiesa delle porte aperte a tutti, tutti, tutti!* (The doors of the Church are open to everyone, everyone, everyone!)” Pope Francis, “Homily at the Opening Mass of the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” October 4, 2023, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2023/documents/20231004-omelia-nuovi-cardinali.html. On this point, there is some notable divergence in the theological scholarship. For instance, echoing Pope Francis, Jean-François Chiron emphasizes the authoritative voice of the poor by virtue of their connaturality with the suffering Christ while Declan Marmion points out that “the Church has much to learn from the experience of its sceptical.” (Jean-François Chiron, “*Sensus Fidei* et vision de l’Église chez le Pape François,” *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 104 [2016]: 187–205; Declan Marmion, “A Church that Listens: Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” *New Blackfriars* 120, no. 1100 [July 2021]: 450, doi:10.1111/nbfr.12609). In contrast, other scholars underscore the importance of holiness, alignment with the faith tradition, and involvement in the church as among the necessary qualities for exercising the *sensus fidei*. (For example, see Bernhard Blankenhorn, “The *Sensus Fidei* and Synodality: Theological Epistemology and the *Munus Propheticum*,” *The Thomist* 87 [2023]: 311–338 and Moons, “Comprehensive Introduction to Synodality,” 84.) It would appear that the Synod Office has adopted

integral aspect of this inclusiveness and radical welcome is the encouragement to speak with freedom, honesty, and confidence since every voice matters, especially those from the margins. In my view, such an inclusive stance is not only consonant with the dignity and uniqueness of every human person as upheld in Catholic anthropology but also recognizes the possibility, as highlighted by the ITC, that the “minority” and “little ones” can sometimes give better witness to the true faith.⁴⁶ Consequently, it was deliberately stressed in the *Vademecum* that “we must personally reach out to the peripheries, to those who have left the Church, those who rarely or never practice their faith, those who experience poverty or marginalization, refugees, the excluded, the voiceless, etc.”⁴⁷ The *Vademecum* also emphasized that minority or divergent viewpoints should be included in the final consultation report. The communications team of the Synod Office reinforced this message by using its newsletters and social media platforms to feature outreach efforts to often-marginalized groups such as the differently-abled, migrants, and LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, in keeping with a welcoming image, many of its communications and publicity materials were also unprecedented in their user-friendly and visual appeal.

All these initiatives at the global level seemed to have been effective in prompting local churches to be more mindful about inclusiveness and welcome and helped counter to a certain extent the stigma that had prevented engagement or even explicit acknowledgment of certain groups. As a result, many synod teams in Asia went the extra mile to widen participation. The India report, for example, highlighted that “the dedication of the organising teams was commendable, some making long journeys into remote villages and working within the time that the people could offer.”⁴⁸ Similarly, the Korea report noted that “some dioceses were outstanding in putting special efforts to listen to the voice of those on the peripheries such as the lukewarm Catholics, the people with special needs, migrants, refugees, sexual minority, North Korean defectors as well as . . . believers of other religions and other denominations and the civil society.”⁴⁹ These gestures made a difference to the targeted participants, especially those who felt included for the first time, as

the former stance, in line with the approach of Pope Francis, consistent with his ongoing emphasis on the peripheries.

⁴⁶ ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, no. 118ii.

⁴⁷ Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum*, no. 4.1.

⁴⁸ CCBI, “Synthesis Report,” 36.

⁴⁹ CBCK, “Synthesis Report,” 30.

testified in the India report that “the efforts by the Synod teams of lay faithful, religious, and priests touched the hearts of those they met.”⁵⁰

A stance of radical welcome necessitates additional effort to adapt the listening process to certain segments of the population. In the Asian context, this often meant translating synod materials into a myriad of local languages by carefully exploring and employing terms that ensured the right reception in each culture. The questions were also adapted to be relevant to the context and capacity of each target group. Some synod teams made further adjustments to suit people’s livelihoods, especially when these inhibited their presence in the church community. In these cases, listening often took more time to develop. As reported in Pakistan, “It was difficult to engage people who are not regular to go to Church, therefore, meetings were conducted with brick kiln workers, farmers, and other neglected groups. After regular contacts and series of consultations, they shared information, their problems and expectations to the Church.”⁵¹ The Philippines also reported that “one parish reimbursed the sectors’ forgone day’s labor since they lost their income when they attended the consultations.”⁵² Sometimes, additional adjustments had to be made to ensure conditions for speaking freely. For instance, the India report pointed out that “special efforts to encourage candid feedback were made in certain cultural contexts like organising women-only consultation groups.”⁵³ Moreover, in Asian cultures where relationality is highly emphasized, a personal and informal approach also proves effective. In this regard, a respondent in the Philippines who considered himself an “inactive Catholic” gave the following testimony: “I was invited by a friend who is dear to me and was paying respect to an invitation, so I attended. It was memorable when we were sharing experiences. . . . It makes me more eager to know more about God and read more about God’s words.”⁵⁴ Complementing this personal face-to-face approach, the synod process included online channels of outreach such as the Digital Synod, which successfully connected with many who had left the church or tended to be on the peripheries. All these outcomes show that when global and local gestures are mutually reinforcing in conveying a clear stance of radical welcome in word and deed—not unlike the example shown by Christ

⁵⁰ CCBI, “Synthesis Report,” 36.

⁵¹ PCBC, “Synthesis Report,” 42.

⁵² CBCP, “Synthesis Report,” 55.

⁵³ CCBI, “Synthesis Report,” 36.

⁵⁴ Cited in Rechilda Estores, “Philippines: A Catholic Parish Journeys Together, Living Synodality,” *Vatican News*, October 19, 2022, www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2022-10/philippines-catholic-parish-journeys-together-living-synodality.html.

in the gospels—they can foster the participation of those who would otherwise be left out in the listening exercise.

Building Relationships along with Structures

A second element which can be seen to contribute significantly towards a fruitful listening process is the building of relationships along with structures. For the first time, the synod comprised a three-tier listening phase corresponding to the local, continental, and universal levels alongside concurrent consultations in trans-geographical associations such as religious and lay communities, Vatican dicasteries, and institutes of higher learning. These multiple loci of listening are not mere structures for organizational efficacy. Rather, they resonate with theological and social markers of identity, belonging, and mission. Moreover, as highlighted by Vatican II and elaborated in the theological literature, the church is fully present in each local church with its unique contexts. Hence, the structure of the consultation process enabled the synod to obtain diverse perspectives from multiple domains. Reports were also synthesized and re-circulated so that communities could respond further and deepen the reflection from their own contexts. This enabled the whole church from the grassroots to the provincial, continental, and universal levels to be in mutual dialogue. Circularity was also seen in synod assembly meetings, where plenary and small group sessions alternated in conversation, reflection, feedback, and refinement of syntheses. Similarly, communities at the parochial level came together in progressive stages. Although these iterations entailed additional effort and might have seemed repetitive at times, they fostered greater dialogue and resulted in a more coherent yet polyhedrally-enriched output while also facilitating concrete experiences of synodality. As highlighted in the Asian continental report, “What the DCS (Document for the Continental Stage) has been able to do is be the catalyst for more profound spiritual conversations. In many places, it was indeed experienced as a moment of living synodality in the Church through a process of shared identity and shared responsibility.”⁵⁵ To this I would add that the synod’s way of promoting circularity has given flesh to the theological concept of existential “perichoresis” among the local, universal, and all other levels of the church.⁵⁶

In the process of consultation, existing structures were utilized while new ones were also formed. Some dioceses leveraged their official pastoral committees, while others assembled new teams

⁵⁵ FABC, *Asian Continental Assembly*, no. 45.

⁵⁶ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2018), no. 60.

specifically for the synod. An appendix to the Philippines report highlighted that “most synodal teams created committees that attended to various concerns: program, communications, spirituality, synthesis drafters, content, facilitators, respondents, IT logistics, secretariat work, documentation, etc.”⁵⁷ This detailed glimpse into the granular realities of operating more synodally brings to life theological principles about identifying, activating, and coordinating diverse charisms. Alongside structures, there were also unprecedented efforts in relationship-building and personal outreach. For instance, the Synod Secretariat conducted frequent meetings with episcopal conferences and other groups to clarify the method, encourage participation, promote mutual learning, share best practices, and exchange updates. There were also multiple channels for raising questions and giving feedback. Many synod teams expressed their appreciation for the closer communication and greater openness on the part of the Synod Secretariat. Within each locality, peer accompaniment was promoted through the initiatives of episcopal conference and diocesan coordinators. This inter-parochial interaction was novel for some teams and provided a concrete experience of walking together beyond parochial silos. In this regard, Indonesia reported that “the virtual consultation process between diocesan contact persons is very helpful. . . . The process of journeying together and inspiring each other, guiding each other is very pronounced at this stage.”⁵⁸ Likewise, the continental assemblies catalyzed new collaborative structures, friendships, and a greater sense of belonging.

In line with relationship-building, deliberate efforts to be more flexible and transparent could be observed throughout the synod process. The Synod Office made several adjustments in extending deadlines and modifying the process in response to feedback from the ground. There has also been unprecedented transparency in the publication of reports, processes of syntheses, composition of various official teams, and rationale for various decisions taken. Senior officials at the Synod Office made personal visits to local churches and regions around the world throughout the process. These initiatives helped to build trust and demonstrate the spirit of synodality. For Asian churches, such role modelling by the centers of authority is often influential. In the words of the Timor Leste report, “The hierarchy of the Church must approach and actively create a climate of trust so that the faithful can participate more actively in the Church’s mission.”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ CBCP, “*Salubong* (Welcoming Encounter): The Philippine Catholic Church Synodal Report,” Attachment 1, 11, August 15, 2022, www.synodphilippines.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Philippines_National-Synodal-Report.pdf.

⁵⁸ KWI, “Synthesis Report,” 3.

⁵⁹ CET, “Synthesis Report,” 43–44.

The report also noted that people at the grassroots called for “the hierarchy of the Church to, not only [meet] the representatives in the councils, but also listen to all members, . . . opening up themselves to the local problems that the members of the community and society may have.”⁶⁰ This feedback from the people resonates with the ITC’s emphasis that “it is always within the communion life of the Church that the magisterium exercises its essential ministry of oversight” even as it has final responsibility for confirming the *sensus fidei*.⁶¹ Thus, authentic encounter and genuine human relationships, rather than faceless bureaucracies, are what make structures for listening effective.⁶²

*Integrating Theology “from above” and “from below” through a Pilgrim Hermeneutic*⁶³

Though the synod guidelines emphasized a disposition of radical openness in listening to what the Holy Spirit was asking of the church, the process did not begin with a blank slate. Existing church teachings on synodality had been conveyed to participants as an integral part of the process especially through the Preparatory Document and *Vademecum*. A plethora of formation activities were also initiated by dioceses, educational institutions, pastoral centers, and individuals around the world. Notably, the questions for reflection provided in the official materials were in themselves instructive on synodality. Along with the main question for consultation, ten areas were elaborated upon, each with specific accents that helped unpack the composite notion of synodality. The questions also called for drawing upon real life experiences, reflecting on them more deeply, and conversing about them with one another. Hence, the underlying pedagogy of the questions was as formative about synodality as the religious teachings

⁶⁰ CET, “Synthesis Report,” 44.

⁶¹ ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, no. 77.

⁶² The need for effective structures alongside a genuine relational spirit has been highlighted in the theological literature. For example, see Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid,” 322–323; Wijlens, “The Church of God is Convoked in Synod,” 88–89; and Rafael Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (New York: Paulist, 2022), 44. The present synod has now brought to life this theoretical principle by providing the opportunity for synod teams at all levels to experience it firsthand and reflect on the experience.

⁶³ The terms “from above” and “from below” have been used in varied ways in relation to theologizing. In this article, I use the term “theology from above” to imply an approach to theological reflection which takes as its starting point the existing body of religious doctrine and tradition. These serve as the predominant and orienting point of reference. Conversely, “theology from below” begins with experience and context, and tends to privilege these perspectives in theological reflection. For a brief discussion on these approaches, see Rajesh Kavalackal, “New Paradigms for an Integral Theological Education Today,” *Asian Horizons* 12, no. 4 (Dec 2018): 638.

that accompanied them. For those conducting the listening exercise, the *Vademecum* offered detailed steps designed to model a synodal approach, such as in the diverse composition of local synod teams and the encouragement of trans-parochial collaboration. Overall, there was a deliberate effort to be more instructive in the local phase. This enabled people to organize and participate in the listening exercise more meaningfully. As highlighted in the Myanmar report, “Our people have never heard of synodality as a nature of the Church until the opening of this Synod.”⁶⁴ Similarly, Japan reported that the consultation process fostered a growing understanding of synodality which was “the result of efforts by the Synod Secretariat in each diocese to create and explain various useful materials.”⁶⁵ These testimonies attest to the view underscored by the ITC that theology has an essential role in formation “to explicate the Church’s faith” as passed on in Scripture and Tradition so that the *sensus fidei* will be more authentically manifested.⁶⁶

At the same time, the synod process made room for theology “from below.” Without this emergence of theological reflection from experience, the listening exercise would have been futile and the church’s teachings on synodality would lack the opportunity to grow as a living tradition. Hence, most of the official guidelines stressed openness and adaptation to contextual realities in the synod consultation process, and allowing for creativity. The reflection questions themselves sought local stories and perspectives, and encouraged participants to draw upon their own experiences. As a result, new contextual and cultural perspectives on synodality were reaped. For instance, the Philippines report highlighted that “the synodal journey has brought out the innate synodality in the Filipino culture. Indigenous symbols and images help explore the depth of communion, participation, and mission in Filipino culture.”⁶⁷ New accents and dimensions of synodality initially not featured in the official guiding documents also emerged from the consultations in Asia. These included the family as a locus of synodality, the importance of basic ecclesial communities, the complexity of interfaith relations, the richness of Indigenous communities, and the centrality of inculturation. Such fruits are evidence that effective space had been created for the emergence of new perspectives or particular accents that can potentially enrich the church’s understanding of synodality. On a global level, the *Vademecum* encouraged direct

⁶⁴ CBCM, “Synthesis Report,” 36.

⁶⁵ CBCJ, “Synthesis Report,” 19.

⁶⁶ International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles, and Criteria* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2012), no. 35.

⁶⁷ CBCP, “Synthesis Report,” 71–72.

quotes in the synod reports so as to convey participants' voices more vividly. The DCS similarly preserved the integrity of viewpoints from ecclesial grassroots. Likewise, the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the October 2023 synod assembly presented provisional conclusions and questions that emerged from the listening process. These approaches are consonant with the theological view that "the concrete reality of the existential situations" of believers, especially the laity, enriches their experiences and makes an indispensable contribution towards refinement of church teaching.⁶⁸

Resonating with this view, Rush highlights that "the people of God's intuition in the contexts of today regarding faith and morals should be a primary consideration in the process of the hierarchy's teaching."⁶⁹ Similarly, Wijlens points out that "the living faith is an important witness and source of faith and thus a *locus theologicus*."⁷⁰ At the same time, Moons stresses that "this does not discard other essential faith convictions, such as God's self-revelation in Christ."⁷¹ The views of these scholars thus indicate the need to bring theology "from below" and "from above" together in an integral path. Luciani expresses this integration well when he notes that "it is in that communal interaction [of "all ecclesial subjects"] that the contents of faith are discerned and reinterpreted in the light of tradition and with the help of theological reflection from a particular context, thus producing something new."⁷² The synod experience has shown that navigating this path has not been without challenges. The Philippines report, for instance, noted that "it was also important to reorient the facilitators about their listening role since they were used to lecturing."⁷³ In Malaysia, it was highlighted that "two polarities emerged, one side citing that the church was too hierarchical and rigid, and needed more flexibility; while the other side wanted to see more reverence and tradition brought back to church as they felt too much accommodation was made to modernism."⁷⁴ At the global synod assembly in October 2023, scriptural and theological inputs as well as sharing of experiences were all integral parts of the meeting and reflection materials. Yet some participants felt that too much attention was given to current experiences at the expense of church traditions and teachings while others felt that there was not enough consideration of experiences, especially of people at the peripheries. Indeed, even

⁶⁸ ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, no. 59.

⁶⁹ Rush, "Inverting the Pyramid," 312.

⁷⁰ Wijlens, "The Church of God is Convoled in Synod," 94.

⁷¹ Moons, "Comprehensive Introduction to Synodality," 79.

⁷² Luciani, *Synodality*, 95–96.

⁷³ CBCP, "Synthesis Report," 62.

⁷⁴ CBCMSB, "Synthesis Report," 11.

though Vatican II had underscored the developmental nature of the church's understanding of divine revelation and the dynamic interaction of Scripture, Tradition, and lived experience as integral poles of revelation, there will never be precise formulae for the relative proportion of each pole. Consequently, conflicts will continue to occur and are perhaps even necessary for the church to navigate the right balance.

In my view, a fruitful way of proceeding could be to adopt a "pilgrim hermeneutic" as offered by Pope Francis.⁷⁵ This implies seeing and interpreting with the lenses of one travelling along the path of history, mindful of being always at the crossroads of past and present, known and unknown. Guided by an ultimate horizon, such a wayfarer "is always journeying" through an evolving context, striving to be faithful to the tradition "begun in the Acts of the Apostles" while also being open to newness.⁷⁶ Thus, each step is taken with humility and strives towards integrity between the past, present, and desired future as authentically as possible, even amidst risk-taking and learning from trial and error. The Pope highlights that this way of proceeding can be fostered "by praying and opening our eyes to everything around us; by practicing a life of fidelity to the Gospel; by seeking answers in God's revelation."⁷⁷ I would add that a pilgrim hermeneutic also bears in mind that divine mystery is inexhaustible and can never be fully penetrated, even as the Christ event constitutes God's definitive revelation. Echoing this, Catherine Clifford highlights Pope Francis's stance on the development of doctrine, noting that "Francis makes clear that while Christ has revealed God's saving love for us once and for all, the church can never exhaust its understanding of this unfathomable mystery. Indeed, its understanding of revelation can grow and mature" and the church can "learn to 'interpret better' what it has received."⁷⁸

The crucial task, in my view, is that amidst a diversity of experiences, cultural and scientific developments, signs of the times, and even interpretations of the faith tradition, the church needs to rediscover the kernel of its beliefs whenever new questions are faced. To this end, the ITC highlights that the *sensus fidei* illuminates "the core of the faith" and "what is essential for an authentic Catholic faith."⁷⁹ At the same time, the *sensus fidei* enables the believer to identify those aspects of religious practice or teaching that are

⁷⁵ Pope Francis, "Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome."

⁷⁶ Pope Francis, "Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome."

⁷⁷ Pope Francis, "Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome."

⁷⁸ Catherine Clifford, "The 'Hierarchy' of Truths in a New Context," *Theological Studies* 85, no. 1 (2024): 32, doi: 10.1177/00405639231225145.

⁷⁹ ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, no. 64.

incidental or “indifferent”⁸⁰ and thus adaptable to specific contexts so that the core message of the Gospel can be lived more fully. As conveyed in Luke’s account of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:6–21, this “core of the faith” is not a doctrinal formula that can be applied mechanically to every new situation, as though an algorithm could replace the role of a discerning community. Rather, it is a living insight rediscovered anew and developing from the community’s sincere effort to acknowledge present tensions, create spaces for genuine listening and dialogue, grow in understanding of the historical tradition, and seek ongoing conversion towards a *sentire cum ecclesia* which fosters, in due course, a consensus inspired by the same Spirit of God.⁸¹

Consultation Methods that Embody a Spirituality of Communion

Finally, one of the most impactful factors that have enabled the listening process to be fruitful is the method of consultation recommended in this synod. Its essential elements include encounter, equality in participation, authenticity in contribution, spiritual depth, holistic epistemology, and collective emergence. As such, it promotes a “spirituality of communion” that undergirds the dispositions for authentic manifestation of the *sensus fidei*.⁸² This method has proven effective in facilitating the multiple dimensions of listening as discussed above. In fact, an observer from Asia noted that “the synodal process was a breakthrough because for the first time, though the methodologies may have varied slightly, the entire diocese and also the Conference of Bishops had a method to create a ‘safe space’ for faith and life conversations.”⁸³ Given the positive reception, it is useful here to elaborate on the key elements of this method.

First, to promote meaningful encounter, the *Vademecum* called for interpersonal and communal meetings as the preferred form of

⁸⁰ ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, no. 64.

⁸¹ Rush alludes to such a process when he offers the model of a “hermeneutical circle” comprising iterative acts of understanding, interpretation, and application. In this cyclical pattern, a faith community makes sense of the present by drawing upon the past and in doing so emerges with a new view and understanding of the past itself. (Ormond Rush, “*Sensus Fidei*: Faith ‘Making Sense’ of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 62, no. 2 [2001]: 233.) Likewise, Luciani points out that it is the communal discernment undertaken by all the faithful in their diverse charisms that “mediates the correct comprehension of the *depositum fidei* (“the body of revealed truth in the Scriptures and Tradition”) according to each time and epoch” (Luciani, *Synodality*, 94). Thus, the foundations of the faith tradition are not static formulae but a living insight.

⁸² See ITC, *Synodality*, no. 108.

⁸³ Devadass, “Towards a Synodal Church,” 364.

consultation over individual surveys and contributions.⁸⁴ Diversity of group composition was also encouraged, thus enabling participants to discover the realities of those with whom they seldom interacted. In the Asian context where informal social bonding is often an important precedent to focused conversation, many synod teams integrated communal moments of conviviality into the consultations. For instance, the Philippines highlighted that “food and fellowship were always part of the experience. From the initial gathering to every consultation in the parishes and chapels, there was ‘*salu-salo*’ (sharing of food).”⁸⁵ Along with the principle of encounter, the consultation method emphasized equality in participation through conversation tools that ensured each person an equal turn to speak and express himself or herself as freely as possible, as well as to hear and respond to others. A facilitator was usually involved, who had to be skilled at creating a conducive group atmosphere, encouraging observance of the adopted conversation rules, and countering any unevenness in power and seniority which might affect participation. Consequently, many participants in the synod process have been able to speak with *parrhesia*. As observed in Thailand, where deference to elders and seniors is deeply entrenched, “the atmosphere of the meetings opened wide and fostered direct dialogue and sharing. It made everyone, especially the youth, to be able to open up and have courage to express themselves with different opinions.”⁸⁶ In turn, this enabled the “mutual exchange of gifts” so integral to synodality.⁸⁷ Just as important was the fostering of authentic contributions in which, after proper preparation, participants shared genuinely from their own experiences. Since “faith, not opinion, is the necessary focus of attention” in the *sensus fidei*,⁸⁸ the required preparations centered around prayer and reflection with the suggested materials, supported by formation where necessary on the topic at hand.

Closely related to this, another central element in the consultation method was spiritual depth. As reported in Korea, “An emphasis on listening, discernment, and prayer in silence allowed the diocesan synodal path to be experienced as spiritual process, not merely as a

⁸⁴ Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum*, no. 5.1.

⁸⁵ CBCP, “Synthesis Report,” 56.

⁸⁶ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Thailand, “Synthesis Report: Synod of Bishops 2021–2023,” 22, FABC Papers no. 179, www.fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-179/.

⁸⁷ ITC, *Synodality*, no. 76. Resonating with this, Gilles Routhier remarks that “synodality presupposes an effort, for everyone must pull their weight, demonstrate solidarity, and have desire to end up with consensus, a shared conviction. It presupposes the desire to collaborate, to accept and agree, to give and receive” (“Synodality as a Constitutive Dimension of the Church and an Expression of the Gospel,” *Concilium* 2 [2021]: 95).

⁸⁸ ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, no. 118i.

series of meetings, discussion, and preparation of the synthesis.”⁸⁹ The synod guiding documents frequently stressed the importance of prayer and interior attentiveness in personal preparation as well as in communal dialogue. Ample suggestions for liturgies and scriptural reflections were also provided throughout the synod process. At all levels of assemblies, regular moments of prayer and silence have become a distinct feature of the synod. The global assembly even included a retreat, a pilgrimage, and special events of prayer in addition to the regular Eucharistic celebration and other liturgies at the meeting. All these helped participants grow in union with the Divine Presence as they shared and discerned. The measures taken gave concrete form to Richard Gaillardetz’s apt description that a synodal church “transcends itself in a posture of openness and receptivity to God’s self-disclosure” and that “the whole Christian people are enjoined to listen for God’s Word.”⁹⁰ Listening to what the Holy Spirit was asking of the church also meant starting the process not with predetermined conclusions but open-ended questions and a disposition of radical trust in God’s accompaniment. At the same time, spiritual depth implies a heart of charity that listens with love and compassion towards one’s conversation partners.

Another element integral to the consultation method was a holistic epistemology. This meant that participants listened and expressed themselves not just through literal means and at the level of the intellect but also in ways that engaged their feelings and interior movements. The synod documents suggested some non-literal ways for participants to articulate their intuitions and viewpoints, such as the use of images, symbols, stories, and various forms of art. Conversation groups were also prompted to note the deeper sentiments, affectivities, and energies palpable in the course of their dialogue, and to include these in their report. In particular, moments of consolation and desolation in the group were valued as important cues in recognizing the issues that needed attention. As remarked by the synthesis team in the Asian continental report, “Listening to all and feeling the pulse of the participants aided the discernment process in the writing of the Final Document.”⁹¹ The ITC describes the *sensus fidei* as “a knowledge by empathy, or a knowledge of the heart.”⁹² Hence, it is “akin rather to a natural, immediate, and spontaneous reaction” and might be “compared to an instinct because it is not

⁸⁹ CBCK, “Synthesis Report,” 31.

⁹⁰ Richard Gaillardetz, “The Synodal Shape of Church Ministry and Order,” *Concilium* 2 (2021): 99.

⁹¹ FABC, “Asian Continental Assembly,” no. 32.

⁹² ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, no. 50.

primarily the result of rational deliberation.”⁹³ Rather than intellectual discourse, the *sensus fidei* might be manifested as an “accent, desire, or attitude” or through “symbolic or mystical language.”⁹⁴ In the Philippines, participants were asked to use Indigenous cultural symbols to grasp and convey what synodality meant for them.⁹⁵ Elsewhere, various actions done spontaneously by participants such as sharing resources with one another or going the extra mile to visit people in remote areas could be seen as ways in which they expressed spontaneously and non-linguistically what they intuited about synodality. Similarly, having firsthand experience of the consultation process instead of just reading or hearing about it was essential in enabling people to better understand synodality. At the same time, intellect and reason remained indispensable because they enabled participants to examine and evaluate their experiences and form new insights.

The relevance of a holistic epistemology in discernment has been noted by various theological and pastoral scholars. For instance, Moons asserts that “the affective domain has revelatory value,” while Rush points out that “the *sensus fidelium* interprets revelation and expresses its insight more on the level of love. Thus, the contribution of the *sensus fidelium* is not to be found in neat, systematic theological precision.”⁹⁶ Commenting on the Holy Spirit’s movements in human interiority, Ladislav Orsy explains that “we discover such knowledge by experiencing peace, gladness, joy, and encouragement in God’s presence. Such psychological signs are certainly not the logical outcome of a reasoning process.”⁹⁷ Going forward, perhaps more theological and empirical study are needed on the epistemological aspect of the *sensus fidei*, including the association, if any, between the fruitful presence of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) and the movements of human affectivity and interiority.⁹⁸ For now, what this

⁹³ ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, nos. 54 and 49.

⁹⁴ ITC, *Sensus Fidei*, nos. 82i and 82iii.

⁹⁵ Subsequently, these symbols were discussed in the group dialogue between participants and the synod teams, and their meanings were communicated in written form in the final text of the synod report.

⁹⁶ Jos Moons, “Synodality and Discernment: The Affective Reconfiguration of the Church,” *Studia Canonica* 56, no. 2 (2022), 391; Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid,” 322.

⁹⁷ Ladislav Orsy, *Discernment: Theology and Practice, Communal and Personal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020), 9.

⁹⁸ Certain spiritual traditions within the church have attended to this matter in varying degrees. For instance, Ignatius of Loyola describes spiritual movements of consolation and desolation as indicators of the influence of the spirits (nos. 313–336 in *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph*, trans. Louis Puhl [Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951]). However, these insights have yet to be comprehensively explored and systematized in the corpus of mainstream Catholic teaching. Contemporary scholar Beáta Tóth has noted the “bi-

synod has helped underscore was that synodal listening is exercised not just with scientific intellect but also with the affective sensitivity of a contemplative heart which hears “the sometimes silent cry that goes up from the People of God.”⁹⁹

A final element in the consultation method was collective emergence. The synod guiding documents highlighted that it was not enough for participants to simply share their individual responses and listen to each other attentively. Thereafter, they needed to note the reactions, themes, directions, or even new questions that emerged from the sharing and listening. These might pertain to viewpoints that had wide resonance within the group, as well as those in mutual conflict or which aroused curiosity and tension. Further exploration, reflection, and dialogue by group members in a prayerful manner then enabled more evolved insights to be formed. The aim was to advance in collective understanding and gradually recognize what the Holy Spirit might be revealing to the group as a whole. Such a way of engendering the collective emergence through iterative stages of conversation often led to a widening of each participant’s perspectives, a maturation of viewpoints in the group, and even conversion of heart. It can be said that the final output is a new creation which emerges from a generative listening methodology showing that “the whole is greater than the part, but it is also greater than the sum of its parts.”¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the synod guiding documents highlighted that group reports were not to be synthesized by simply summarizing what each group had said but by prayerfully discerning the themes and movements that emerged collectively. This discernment involved listening not only to the answers obtained from the listening process but also “listening to the listening,” which meant observing the process and noticing significant aspects of the experience, including the moments of consolation and desolation in the group. For this reason, both the DCS and the *Instrumentum Laboris* began by highlighting key observations about the experiences of the synod process around the world as these were also indications of what the Holy Spirit was generating in the church. In my view, the endeavor to identify the collective emergence is possibly the most challenging aspect of the consultation method because it requires an honest exchange of viewpoints, exploration of divergences and disagree-

polar anthropological scheme” espoused in the ITC document on the *sensus fidei* and calls for more focused efforts to construct an adequate epistemological framework in relation to the *sensus fidei*. See Beáta Tóth, “Knowledge of the Heart: Notes on the Definition of the *Sensus Fidei* in the Personal Life of the Believer,” *New Blackfriars* 104, no. 1110 (2023): 204, doi:10.1111/nbfr.12788.

⁹⁹ ITC, *Synodality*, no. 114.

¹⁰⁰ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World (*Evangelii Gaudium*) (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2013), no. 235.

ments, openness to tensions, willingness to learn and change assumptions when needed, and patience to give time for insights to ripen. As the Asian continental report remarked, “The process of having the synodal conversations as requested has sometimes been painful and unsettling, while at the same time, making us vulnerable to each other.”¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, such processes potentially create, in the words of the ITC, “a vital field where conflicts, tensions, and opposites can reach a pluriform unity which generates new life.”¹⁰² In this regard, collective emergence is the touchstone of synodality.¹⁰³

A particular format of dialogue found to incorporate many of the above elements is Conversation in the Spirit. Participants at the local, continental, and universal levels have found it effective in enabling a synodal listening experience. As reported in the Philippines, “Although diverse in personalities and backgrounds—socio-political, cultural, and religious, as well as different in theological mindsets—the spiritual conversations brought forth joyful as well as painful realizations about our church’s life and mission.”¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Pakistan highlighted that “the joy of experience lay in experiencing how the Holy Spirit is poured out on each person and encountered in spiritual conversation. Listening and speaking to each other under guidance of the Holy Spirit proved joyful, liberating, and encouraging.”¹⁰⁵

CONCLUSION

The Synod on Synodality has sought to discern what the Holy Spirit was asking of the church with regard to communion, participation, and mission. Based on the testimonies of many participants in the consultation phase, it might be said that the answer is to be found not at the end of the synod process itself but in the very way the church has been living it these recent years. The approaches adopted in listening reflect a transformation in the church to some extent, and elucidate key elements that make for fruitful communion, participation, and mission. As such, a synodal church could be described as one which demonstrates a stance of radical welcome in word and deed, builds relationships along with structures, integrates

¹⁰¹ FABC, “Asian Continental Assembly,” no. 43.

¹⁰² ITC, *Synodality*, no. 111.

¹⁰³ Luciani alludes to this when he writes that “while expressing and living Christianity, the faithful will become aware of the great multitude of actors that sustain the ecclesial structures, people who are diverse in terms of gender, experience, training, and culture. The complex interactions among them will give birth to a new sense of faith” (*Synodality*, 96).

¹⁰⁴ CBCP, “Synthesis Report,” 57.

¹⁰⁵ PCBC, “Synthesis Report,” 44.

theology from above and below through a pilgrim hermeneutic, and adopts consultation methods that embody a spirituality of communion. Indeed, the method is the message. Through appropriate adaptations to local contexts as seen in Asia, these ways of proceeding have helped foster a disposition of *sentire cum ecclesia* and enabled church teachings on synodality and the *sensus fidei* to be not only put into practice but also developed further with the benefit of present experience. Some of the key elements might also be illuminative for dialogue in polarized societies and evangelization through mutual listening. Admittedly, what has been achieved to-date in the Synod on Synodality is far from perfect. Several conflicts remain unresolved and many people at the grassroots level have yet to engage or even feel included. As anticipated at the beginning, this will all take time because “listening is the true pastoral conversion of the Church.”¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, from the joy and fruits experienced by many people around the world so far, there are signs of hope that we are slowly but surely listening a synodal church into being. **M**

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGICAL NOTE ON THE USE OF DATA FROM LOCAL CHURCH SYNOD REPORTS

This essay draws primarily from the final reports reviewed and approved by the college of bishops in each episcopal conference and submitted to the Synod Secretariat. As mentioned in the above discussion, these reports were cumulatively synthesized through successive rounds of meta-level listening from the grassroots to the country level. The *Vademecum* stressed that synthesis teams “should read all the submissions in a spirit of prayer” and “the team meetings themselves should be synodal and spiritually discerning, listening to the living voice of the People of God across the diocese under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰⁷ In other words, the primary method of synthesis, including report-writing, was to be that of communal discernment. As further recommended by the *Vademecum*, synodal assemblies were also held at the diocesan level so that grassroots representatives could discuss and validate the final diocesan report. Some episcopal conferences and dioceses circulated their reports for verification. Nevertheless, there are obvious gaps in these processes. Not all dioceses held assemblies or circulated their final reports. More fundamentally, there were few or no formal audits, quantitative surveys, participant observations, or ethnographic interviews to verify independently the degree to which successive levels of syntheses

¹⁰⁶ Cardinal Mario Grech, cited in Andrea Tornielli, “Synod of Rome on Synodality Postponed to 2023.”

¹⁰⁷ Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum*, Appendix D.

represented the views of participants in a fair and accurate manner. Neither was it possible to verify the extent to which the syntheses resulted from prayerful listening to the Holy Spirit and genuine communal discernment. Nevertheless, the synod reports still represent an unprecedented source of data from this first attempt by the Catholic Church to undertake a comprehensive global consultation. Some resonances are also evident between the final reports and testimonies given via other platforms by those directly involved at the grassroots level.¹⁰⁸ Going forward, there is much potential for further research, especially in how social science methodologies and independent sources of verification could complement the religious, personal, and spiritual nature of synodal listening, communal discernment, and the *sensus fidei*.

Another issue pertains to how the contents of the synod reports have been appropriated in my research for this article. Most of the synthesis teams in Asia followed the format and content structure suggested by the *Vademecum* for the final reports, which included a description and reflection on the consultation experience, key points which have “strong resonance” among participants, points “particularly significant, surprising, or unexpected,” and minority viewpoints that were noteworthy.¹⁰⁹ I have compared the contents of all the Asian episcopal conference reports to ensure, as far as possible, that the points highlighted in this essay represent a fair view of the local churches as conveyed in the reports. Besides noting what the synthesis teams have themselves highlighted as significant, I have also attempted to note relative proportions of the text occupied by various viewpoints, their repetition or corroboration in similar statements, and inclusion in summaries and conclusions. Additionally, some comparisons were made with the reading done by others at the global and Asian continental levels.¹¹⁰ Hence, the points highlighted in this essay reflect the main thrusts of the reports. Nevertheless, there is potential for further research in terms of a more systematic textual analysis or even thematic studies focusing on various issues raised.

¹⁰⁸ For example, see Shaji George Kochuthara and Joby Jose Kochumuttom, eds., *Towards a Synodal Church: Moving Forward* (Bengaluru: Dharmaram, 2023), Parts V–VI.

¹⁰⁹ Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum*, Appendix D.

¹¹⁰ For instance, see Secretaria Generalis Synodi, *Working Document for the Continental Stage*, Vatican City, October 24, 2022; and FABC, “Asian Continental Assembly.”

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