

The Contribution of the Synod on Synodality Towards a Systematic Theology and Praxis of Leadership

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Abstract: The word “leadership” scarcely appears in Catholic magisterial documents on the Church’s life and ministry. Where it is used, the term is almost always co-identified with ordained ministry and its meaning is ambiguous. In the wake of the Synod on Synodality 2021–2024, a major shift has begun. Leadership emerged as a key issue in the synod consultations in terms of how it is exercised and by whom. The emerging theology of synodality also paves the way for leadership to be more explicitly recognized as an essential dynamic in a synodal church, extending beyond ordained ministry. In light of the Synod experiences and Final Document, leadership can be seen as a crucial driving force of synodality, comprising several key interventions. These include 1) orienting the community towards mission and transformation; 2) listening and taking decisions through communal discernment; 3) promoting charisms, vocations, and holistic development of all persons; 4) establishing effective structures and processes for participation; 5) embracing mutuality, co-responsibility, and interdependence; 6) cultivating communion and harmony in diversity; and 7) recognizing the primacy of divine grace. It is a call incumbent upon clergy and laity alike.

THE CALL TO HAVE MORE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS in the Church received much attention in the Synod on Synodality.¹ This call emerged in the local consultation reports from around the world as well as during the continental assemblies. The Synod’s Final Document upholds this call and points out that “there is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church: what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped.”² The paragraph in

¹ Hereafter referred throughout this article as “the Synod.”

² Pope Francis and XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Final Document,” October 26, 2024, no. 60, synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG--

question has received much attention because of the promises and concerns it raised for people on both sides of the gender divide. In my view, the way forward is not simply a matter of reconciling so-called traditionalist and progressive stances. Rather, there is a need to examine ambiguities around the notion of leadership itself. From a theological perspective, leadership is a borrowed category from the social sciences. The term is used with diverse meanings in secular scholarship as well as in ordinary parlance. Unlike governance, authority, and sacred power, the concept of leadership has not received as much treatment in Catholic theology and church legislation. How then is the term “leadership roles” (FD, no. 60) to be interpreted with a sound ecclesiological basis? What would be its relationship to synodality, authority, gender, and sacred orders? What would be the implications for leadership in a synodal church and for the role of women?

In this article, I trace the development of references to “leadership” in magisterial documents on ecclesial life, highlighting their muted presence on the whole and their co-association with the clergy. I contrast this with the increasing pastoral interest and theological discourse on this subject, which has nevertheless remained dispersed and piecemeal. I then point out how the Synod has raised attention to the topic of leadership in a decisive way. My main assertion is that the emerging experiences and theology of synodality over these recent years call for and enable the development of a systematic theology and praxis of leadership in the Church. I will point out from the Final Document how synodality requires not just hierarchical authority and active participation but also leadership. To this end, I offer an outline of what leadership might constitute based on the Final Document as well as the experiences of the synodal processes, in which I have been directly involved at all levels. Finally, I point out how these throw light on issues associated with authority and participation, including the role of women.

LEADERSHIP IN ORGANIZATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP AND CATHOLIC MAGISTERIAL TEACHING

In Catholic pastoral studies and ecclesial discourse, leadership is a notion that has been adopted recently from the social sciences. The term itself is relatively new. Although ancient writings in the religious, philosophical, and political domains have proffered various forms of counsel for those who govern and rule, the systematic study of leadership as a discipline in its own right emerged in the late

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nineteenth century. In *The Bass Handbook of Leadership*, Bernard M. Bass and Ruth Bass remark that leadership is a “sophisticated modern concept” which has its genesis mainly in Anglo-Saxon cultures.³ The word “leadership” arose as a neologism in the English language only during the first half of the nineteenth century in writings on political influence and government in Britain. Bass and Bass note that since then, interest in the topic gained momentum in the twentieth century during which a plethora of perspectives, conceptions, and definitions developed. This diversity has resulted in the word “leadership” meaning different things for different people, from influencing others and challenging the status quo to exercising directorship and governance in organizations. One consequence of this diversity is that misunderstanding and even conflict sometimes occur especially when it comes to expectations associated with leadership. Moreover, the term’s equivalent in other languages depends on which meaning is intended. Conversely, the use of “leader” and “leadership” in the English translation of a text from another language is inevitably influenced by the translator’s implicit notion of leadership, whether or not such notion has been consciously examined. A consequence of all this ambiguity is that any endeavor to make proposals about leadership in the Church will be affected by which meaning is being presumed.

Until recently, Catholic magisterial documents on ecclesial life and ministry have rarely used the terms “leader” and “leadership.” Much less have they delved into the topic comprehensively. Neither of these terms is found in the English translation of the Code of Canon Law where related terms such as “governance,” “authority,” “management,” and “administration” are explicitly used and dealt with directly.⁴ In the few magisterial documents where “leaders” and “leadership” are mentioned, the terms have been almost exclusively associated with persons holding formal authority, particularly the clerical hierarchy. For instance, in *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul VI writes that “the faithful as a community will indeed recognize that they belong to Christ’s Mystical Body when they realize that a part of the ministry of the Church’s hierarchy is to initiate men into the Christian way of life, to beget them, teach them, sanctify them, and be their leaders” (no. 37). The original Latin word which was translated into “leaders” was “*moderandi*” which could also have been translated as “moderators” or “regulators.” The documents of the Second Vatican Council show a similar tendency to co-identify leaders with ordained ministers.

³ Bernard M. Bass and Ruth Bass, *The Bass Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications* (Free Press, 2009), 15.

⁴ For example, see Can. 129–144 (“The Power of Governance”), Can. 330–367 (“The Supreme Authority of the Church”), and Can. 1273–1289 (“The Administration of Goods”).

Lumen Gentium points out that the assessment of gifts “belongs to those who are appointed leaders in the Church” (no. 12).⁵ The original Latin phrase is “*qui in Ecclesia praesunt*” which means those who rule or preside over the Church. In the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium*, this would refer to ordained pastors, especially bishops.⁶ More explicitly, LG 37 distinguishes the laity from “their spiritual leaders,” referring once again to ordained pastors. The original Latin word used is “*pastores*” and other English translations use the term “pastors” rather than leaders.⁷ LG 37 further hails the situation in which there is observed in the laity “a more ready application of their talents to the projects of their spiritual leaders.”⁸ In other references to leadership, LG 28 speaks of the priests’ efforts being “under the leadership of the bishops and the Supreme Pontiff.” Here, the original Latin phrase is “*ductu*” which means guidance and direction.⁹

In line with *Lumen Gentium*, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* applies the term “leaders” to priests whilst the word does not appear at all in *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People.¹⁰ *Christus Dominus* (hereafter CD) does not use the words “leaders” and “leadership” at all though the whole document deals with the episcopacy.¹¹ Only CD 15 mentions that “as those who lead others to perfection, bishops should be diligent in fostering holiness among their clerics, religious, and laity according to the special

⁵ Hereafter I will refer to *Lumen Gentium* as LG in the text. Unless otherwise stated, Vatican II texts cited in this article are taken from the English translation provided by the official website of the Vatican at vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm.

⁶ Other English translations do not use the term “leaders” but speak of “those who have charge over the Church” or “those who preside over the Church.” See Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (St. Pauls, 1975), 331; and Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (America Press, 1966), 30.

⁷ For example, see Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, 359.

⁸ It might be said that this somewhat uneven view of the lay-clergy relation is anomalous with the underlying ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium* (and with the principle of synodality), in which the laity are not mere supporters or assistants in the “projects” of pastors but can also take initiative as part of their co-responsibility for mission.

⁹ In LG 28, the word “leadership” is also used by Flannery and Abbott.

¹⁰ Vatican II Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*: “Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests,” December 7, 1965, nos. 13, 22. This is translated from “*educators*,” “*rectores*,” and “*duces*” in the original Latin. Flannery uses the phrase “instructors in the faith” and “rulers of the community” instead of leaders in no. 13. See Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, 781.

¹¹ Vatican II Council, *Christus Dominus*: “Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church,” October 28, 1965.

vocation of each.”¹² What is notable is that the English translations of conciliar texts use the terms “leader” and “leadership” in place of a wide variety of roles and metaphors that appear in the original Latin texts, including presider, shepherd, guide, educator, and rector. Moreover, some English translations use terms other than “leader” and “leadership.” This underscores the prevailing ambiguity surrounding the concept.

Continuing the pattern of the Council, *Christifideles Laici* makes no mention of the terms “leader” and “leadership” except for one reference to the Pope, citing Pius XII (no. 9).¹³ In contrast, both words are present though with low occurrences in the English translation of various documents issued by the Dicastery for the Clergy.¹⁴ In fact, in its instruction on clergy-lay collaboration, the dicastery states that “it is unlawful for the non-ordained faithful to assume titles such as ‘pastor,’ ‘chaplain,’ ‘coordinator,’ ‘moderator,’ or other such similar titles which can confuse their role and that of the Pastor, who is always a Bishop or Priest.”¹⁵ The Dicastery elaborates in a footnote that forbidden titles “should include all those linguistic expressions which in languages of the various countries, are similar or equal and indicate a directive role of leadership or such vicarious activity.”¹⁶ Thus, it appears that from this dicastery’s point of view at least at the time of the document, leadership is a role reserved only for the ordained and is directive in function.

The document from the Dicastery for Bishops *Apostolorum Successores* (hereafter AS) seems to espouse a slightly different stance.¹⁷ It associates the terms “leaders” and “leadership” with heads of conferences of religious congregations (no. 102) and with lay persons holding positions of responsibility in lay associations (no. 114) and charitable initiatives (no. 194). Nevertheless, the document applies these terms more frequently to bishops and ordained ministers in general. In fact, AS 93 states that “it is preferable that any office which involves supplying for the presence of a priest be assigned to a

¹² Flannery uses the phrase “as spiritual guides of their flocks.” See Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, 512.

¹³ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*: “Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988), no. 9.

¹⁴ These include *The Priest and the Third Christian Millennium: Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments and Leader of the Community* (1999); *The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community* (2002); and *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation* (2016).

¹⁵ Dicastery for Clergy, *On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), Article 1, §3.

¹⁶ Dicastery for Clergy, *Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful*, n. 58.

¹⁷ Dicastery for Bishops, *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops, Apostolorum Successores* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004).

deacon rather than to a layperson, especially when it is a question of providing some form of stable leadership (*collaborare stabilmente alla guida*) for a Christian community without a priest.” This gives some insight into the Dicastery’s implicit understanding of leadership as a role that maintains the integrity and stability of a community, and its view of the laity as being unsuitable for this role.

In summary, this brief survey of recent magisterial teachings on ecclesial life and ministry reveals that the terms “leaders” and “leadership” have relatively low occurrence in the English translations of the original texts and have been used to denote a variety of functions. Moreover, magisterial documents have tended to co-identify leadership with the clergy. What is more fundamental to note is that official church teachings and ecclesial discipline to date have been concerned largely with the role of ordained pastors and with issues of authority. The lack of attention, specificity, and consistency when it comes to the notion of leadership calls to question whether the term is relevant in ecclesial life and whether it even designates a distinct reality in the first place. It is with these questions that I turn now to developments in the pastoral field.

LEADERSHIP IN PASTORAL DISCOURSE

The topic of leadership in church organizations has been receiving increasing attention in the pastoral field over the past two decades. Tertiary institutions, formation centers, and specialist entities have begun offering degree courses, sabbatical programs, workshops, and advisory services in pastoral leadership. The volume of literature and multimedia resources has also increased greatly. Some observers attribute this trend to the clergy sexual abuse crisis and the shortcomings that it revealed in terms of governance, pastoral supervision, and clergy support. Others hold that the increased avenues for leadership training rightly redresses a mismatch between the demands of contemporary ministry and the relative lack of real-life pastoral skills preparation in seminaries and religious formation.¹⁸ Regardless of the initial reasons, this growth of training programs and resources testifies to the perceived relevance of leadership in pastoral practice.

¹⁸ See Kristen Hannum, “The Parish That Works: Business Practices for the Church,” *US Catholic*, July 17, 2011, uscatholic.org/articles/201106/the-parish-that-works-business-practices-for-the-church/; Alison Damast, “Mastering the Business of Church,” *Bloomberg Business*, January 4, 2008, bloomberg.com/news/articles/2008-01-03/mastering-the-business-of-churchbusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice?embedded-checkout=true; “Laypeople are Creating a Blueprint for the Church’s Success,” *US Catholic* 80, no. 10 (2015): 28–32.

The challenge is that new problems have arisen, particularly when principles and practices of secular leadership are adopted directly into ecclesial life. Contemporary leadership theories and tools have been developed mainly in the context of business and politics, and within cultures of Western societies. It can even be said that leadership thought has been driven by a predominantly male perspective and through the somewhat privileged lens of those in relative power.¹⁹ Although this has shifted more recently to include the voices of women, the nonprofit sector, and various cultural perspectives, mainstream secular leadership tools still contain lingering influences from the field's past. Hence, they tend to foster behaviors and outlooks that are Pelagian, self-referential, over-optimistic about outcomes from applying a tool, focused on the empirical and temporal, directed at organizational survival, and instrumental towards persons and the cosmos. There is also a tendency to over-generalize principles from context-specific cases, thus reinforcing blind-spots in terms of contextual, cultural, and gender biases.²⁰ Furthermore, certain approaches in leadership have become so well-promoted by their proponents that they assume a normative status, edging out alternative viewpoints from religious or other perspectives. For these reasons, the appropriation of knowledge and ideas from secular disciplines into religious life and theology is not without opposition from some Christian scholars.²¹

Compared with pastoral practice, Catholic theological scholarship on leadership has been relatively less developed. Theologians have tended to focus on issues related to ordained ministry and authority in the Church, as well as on participation, communion, and consultation in the wake of Vatican II. Nevertheless, some views from theologians on leadership *per se* can be brought to bear in this discussion, particularly in terms of what leadership is, who it pertains to, and how it is to be exercised. In *Orders and Ministry: Leadership in the World Church*, Kenan B. Osborne co-identifies leadership with the kingly ministry of Christ within the *tria munera* of all the baptized.²² He does

¹⁹ This view is shared by several scholars. For example, see Thomas E. Frank, "Leadership and Administration: An Emerging Field in Practical Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 10, no. 1 (2006): 131; and Michael L. Budde, "The Rational Shepherd: Corporate Practices and the Church," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21, no. 1 (2008): 96–116.

²⁰ For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Christina Kheng, "What Are They Saying About Church Management? Patterns, Problems, and Considerations for Proceeding," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 23, no. 2 (2019): 188–205.

²¹ For example, see John Milbank, "Stale Expressions: The Management-Shaped Church," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21, no. 1 (2008): 117–128.

²² Kenan B. Osborne, *Orders and Ministry: Leadership in the World Church* (Orbis Books, 2006), 85.

not define directly what Christ's kingly ministry constitutes but links it to the latter half of LG 12, highlighting the "various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the church."²³ Similarly, Ormond Rush, in addressing the issue of parish renewal, delineates leadership "in the broad sense" and applies the term to "anyone in the parish who has the responsibility of marshalling and organising and enthusing others."²⁴ Pastoral theologian Thomas E. Frank draws from Scripture and notes that *kybernesis* in 1 Corinthians 12:28 has been translated frequently into leadership and administration. Pointing out that the root word connotes "the steering of a ship," he remarks that this "requires both a prospective and retrospective view, as well as coordinated actions of many people who help the ship move toward its common destination."²⁵ Frank sees leadership as "particularly focused on oversight and strategic intervention."²⁶

Contributing another perspective, Anne Benjamin and Charles Burford suggest that leadership is "typically" viewed as "an influencing relationship," adding that "it is relational and exerts its influence within community."²⁷ Likewise, Donald Senior defines leadership as "the ability to influence others toward a common mission."²⁸ For Senior, leadership can be "formal" or "informal," depending on whether it is exercised from a position of official authority or as a spontaneous act without such official authority.²⁹ Senior further lists the key tasks of leaders based on "experience and common sense,"³⁰ which include guiding people towards the mission, securing and stewarding resources, and developing relations with external parties.³¹ Mady A. Thung brings in a more provocative dimension of leadership by viewing it as an intentional exertion of

²³ Osborne, *Orders and Ministry*, 86. In this regard, Osborne critiques the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for its almost exclusive emphasis on the ordained hierarchy when it comes to leadership. In his view, lay leadership is almost invisible or overshadowed in the Catechism.

²⁴ Ormond Rush, "Parish on Mission: A Reflection on a Renewed Sense of Parish Leadership and Ministry in the Present Realities of the Church in Australia," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 17 (2010): 100.

²⁵ Frank, "Leadership and Administration," 126.

²⁶ Frank, "Leadership and Administration," 127–128.

²⁷ Anne Benjamin and Charles Burford, *Leadership in a Synodal Church* (Garratt Publishing, 2021), 3.

²⁸ Donald Senior, *The Gift of Administration: New Testament Foundations for the Vocation of Administrative Service* (Liturgical Press, 2016), 23.

²⁹ Senior, *Gift of Administration*, 23–24. This appears to be the predominant view among secular leadership scholars. For instance, in *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (Sage, 2022), Peter G. Northouse teaches that leadership can be "assigned" or "emergent" (8).

³⁰ Senior, *The Gift of Administration*, 25.

³¹ Senior, *The Gift of Administration*, 25–27.

“counter-influence” against the pressures and prevailing influences in the environment.³² For her, leadership means dealing effectively with “the complicated social problems of our era.”³³

In terms of how leadership should be exercised, Linda Hogan cautions against “the cultures of masculinism, clericalism, and hierarchicalism that are embedded in the structures of institutional leadership in the church,” linking them to the underlying causes of abuse.³⁴ Rush calls out the tendency to simply follow secular styles of leadership and reminds parish leaders to be guided by Vatican II’s image of the Church, whereby all parishioners are co-responsible, inter-dependent, and diversely-gifted. He adds that the role of leaders is to discern and cultivate the people’s gifts, be “good scanners of talent,” and remember that “they are not the ones who do it all and know it all.”³⁵ Benjamin and Burford advocate a “transrelational” model of leadership which favors “the capacity to build relationships through collegiality, cooperation and teamwork.”³⁶ Hannah Vaughan-Spruce recommends a two-pronged approach characterized by “bold, visionary” on the one hand and “mild and tender” on the other, depending on the circumstances.³⁷ Others, such as Osborne and Senior, draw upon Scripture to highlight the exemplary leadership of Jesus and the Apostles.³⁸

Empirical studies in church leadership have also been conducted by scholars of religion. For instance, Emily Dykman makes an insightful contribution to the advancement of synodality by examining attitudes of the laity towards leadership.³⁹ She observes that lay people hesitate to call themselves leaders or to see themselves as leaders because they associate leadership more with ordained ministers. She traces their hesitation to a fear of being incorrect on matters of faith as well as to a view of themselves as not knowing enough, and a disbelief that their faith perspectives matter. Dykman then demonstrates how these mindsets can be changed through experiential practices of participatory Bible sharing. Similarly, Fides A. Del Castillo presents

³² Mady A. Thung, “An Alternative Model for a Missionary Church: An Approach of the Sociology of Organizations,” *The Ecumenical Review* 30 (1978): 23, doi:10.1111/j.1758-6623.1978.tb03497.x.

³³ Thung, “An Alternative Model,” 23.

³⁴ Linda Hogan, “Moral Leadership: A Challenge and a Celebration,” *Theological Studies* 82, no. 1 (2021): 152, doi:10.1177/0040563921993456.

³⁵ Rush, “Parish on Mission,” 101.

³⁶ Benjamin and Burford, *Leadership in a Synodal Church*, 44.

³⁷ Hannah Vaughan-Spruce, “Two ‘Fires’ of Leadership: Is It Possible to Listen and Lead Parish Cultural Change?” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, Special Issue 2 (2024): 195.

³⁸ Osborne, *Orders and Ministry*, 90–101; Senior, *Gift of Administration*, 27–41.

³⁹ Emily Dykman, “Synodality and the Move Toward a Collaborative Ecclesial Future,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 23, no. 2 (2024): 75–92.

data on church leadership roles that have been long-undertaken by Filipino women in basic ecclesial communities (BECs). She highlights these concrete experiences as contributing towards “the process of de-clericalization and lay empowerment in the new way of being Church.”⁴⁰ Likewise, Patricia Fox provides a detailed account of developments in an Australian diocese which led to the decisive and fruitful inclusion of women in the bishop’s pastoral leadership core team. She notes how this inclusive model of governance has been viewed as an attributing factor in the relatively low incidence of sexual abuse cases compared with other dioceses in the country.⁴¹ Monika M. Brzezińska presents research on gender differences in the exercise of leadership and observes from her empirical data that women tend to adopt a more relational style.⁴²

In summary, it can be seen that the notion of leadership has been acknowledged and elaborated in pastoral and theological circles more than in magisterial teaching. In these circles, leadership is delineated more broadly and its exercise is not limited to ordained ministers but includes women and other laity. There is also a strong relational dimension as well as an emphasis on mission, empowerment, collaboration, and even on challenging the status quo rather than simply maintaining stability. Nevertheless, shortcomings in the pastoral and theological discourse remain. The existence of leadership as a distinct reality is usually taken as a given, and some scholars co-identify it with having formal responsibility over a group whilst others extend it to spontaneous and even counter-cultural action. More importantly, the questions of what leadership is and who exercises it are often not critically examined or systematically derived but frequently based on prevailing societal norms and perhaps even personal biases. Attention has been placed more on how leadership should be exercised rather than on why it is relevant in ecclesial life. This begs the question of how a more coherent and systematic theology of leadership in the Church could be derived.⁴³ In my view, the Synod has elucidated a way forward.

⁴⁰ Fides A. Del Castillo, “Toward Synodality and Social Transformation: Lived Religion of Select Catholic Women Servant Leaders,” *Religions* 13, no. 963 (2022): 9.

⁴¹ Patricia Fox, “Power and Leadership of Women Within the Catholic Church in Australia,” *The Australasian Catholic Record* 95, no. 1 (2018): 10–19.

⁴² Monika Maria Brzezińska, “Can Women and Religion (Catholic) Save Modern Leadership?” *Religions* 14, no. 8 (2023): 1030, doi:10.3390/rel14081030.

⁴³ Frank raises similar concerns about the study of church leadership in his remark that “the most pressing task in shaping this field is in achieving some consensus about the exact subject of our teaching and research.” Franck, “Leadership and Administration,” 117.

EMERGENCE OF LEADERSHIP AS A THEME IN THE SYNOD

Before the Synod was initiated, the International Theological Commission's "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church" made four mentions of the term "leadership," all of which referred to the Pope (no. 106c), the bishops as individuals (nos. 79–80), and the episcopate as a college (no. 64).⁴⁴ In contrast, the *Vademecum* for the Synod consultation, prepared by the Commission for Methodology under the General Secretariat of the Synod, made several mentions of the terms "leader" and "leadership," referring to bishops only once and to lay people, including women more frequently.⁴⁵ Even so, the main driving force in calling attention to leadership and expanding its scope came not from Synod organizers at the Vatican but from people on the ground as a result of the Synod's unprecedented effort to tap the *sensus fidei*. In the Document for the Continental Stage (hereafter DCS), which synthesizes the feedback from around the world, leadership emerged as a major issue. Synod participants used the terms "leaders" and "leadership" in their local reports, referring to clergy, religious, and laity. They called attention to the ways in which leaders have not been synodal and appealed for a style of ecclesial leadership that is inclusive, consultative, and collegial.⁴⁶ Another significant outcome of the consultation was that the issue of women in relation to leadership was raised recurrently and with considerable elaboration.

These dual themes gathered momentum at the continental assemblies. The continental report from Europe, for instance, stated that "one of the most visible manifestations of common priesthood and synodality is the exercise of specific ministries and leadership, as well as participation in the governance of the Church at all levels. It is a way of realising the co-responsibility of all the baptised for the mission of the Church, based on their common baptismal dignity."⁴⁷ The report also quoted a response from the Netherlands that "without doubt: the participation of lay people and especially women at all levels in the Church is felt as a priority . . . the Church needs the voice and specific leadership and community building qualities of

⁴⁴ International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church," March 2, 2018.

⁴⁵ Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, "*Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality," September, 2021. For example, see nos. 4.2, 4.4, 5.3 and Appendices A and B. These terms were not defined explicitly but when read in context, they indicate roles of responsibility, steering, directing, and coordinating.

⁴⁶ Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, *Working Document for the Continental Stage* (Synod Office, 2022). See especially no. 59.

⁴⁷ Consilium Conferentiarum Episcoporum Europae (CCEE), "Concluding Dossier: Synod 2021–2024 European Continental Assembly," February 5–12, 2023), no. 73.

women.”⁴⁸ Likewise, these themes feature prominently in the continental report from Asia, which mentioned the terms “leaders” and “leadership” no less than nineteen times. It called for a “servant model” of leadership and highlighted “a deep concern on the lack of sufficient inclusion of women in governance and decision-making processes in the Church.”⁴⁹

Reflecting both the local and continental consultations, the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session of the General Assembly in October 2023 devoted one of its fifteen major discernment questions to the issue of how authority in the Church was to be exercised, whether by clergy, religious, or laity.⁵⁰ Another question was devoted to the issue of women’s participation, especially “in governance, decision-making processes and in the taking of decisions.”⁵¹ Notably, an attempt to delineate the meaning of leadership was made for the first time. Section B 3.1 stated that “authority, responsibility and governance roles—sometimes succinctly referred to by the English term leadership—take a variety of forms within the Church.” The section highlighted various dimensions of exercising authority, some synodal ideals including transparency and accountability, a distinction of roles, and formation. The need to consider knowledge from “leadership sciences” was also suggested.⁵²

At the First Session of the General Assembly, a significant development, in my view was that the communal discernment which took place over Section B 3.1 represents the first time in the Synod process—and perhaps even in official ecclesial meetings at the global level—that the issue of leadership, defined as above, was dealt with in a focused and inclusive way. Section B 3.1 was discussed by thirteen groups out of a total of thirty-six, with each group forming a table of ten to twelve members carrying out Conversations in the Spirit. Since group allocation at the assembly was largely based on participants’ personal choices, this meant that more than one-third of assembly members were most interested in and concerned about this issue relative to the other four topics in this segment.

Unfortunately, the Synthesis Report of the First Session did not contain a corresponding chapter dedicated to leadership in terms of the

⁴⁸ CCEE, “Concluding Dossier,” no. 76.

⁴⁹ Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), “Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality,” March 16, 2023, nos. 86, 65; see also nos. 95–97.

⁵⁰ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “*Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission,” October 2023, press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/06/20/230620e.html, no. 54 (hereafter IL 2023).

⁵¹ IL 2023, no. B 2.3.

⁵² IL 2023, no. B 3.1d.

synodal exercise of authority, responsibility, and governance. Instead, relevant points were integrated into various chapters, such as those dealing with bishops, priests, the religious, the laity in mission, and formation. Interestingly, the only mention of the word “leadership” was found in an expressed desire that women’s “pastoral leadership increase in all areas of the Church’s life and mission.”⁵³ The report did, however, dedicate a whole chapter to the issue of women in the Church. Similarly, in the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Session, the only mention of the word “leadership” was made in conjunction with the formation of a study group to look into theological and canonical questions around “the necessary participation of women in the life and leadership of the Church.”⁵⁴

The structure of the Second Session’s agenda precluded dedicated discussion on the topic of leadership *per se*. Nevertheless, the English translation of the Final Document makes seven mentions of the terms “leaders” and “leadership.” These are translated from a variety of words in the original Italian, including *guida* (nos. 59, 60, 84f), *ruoli di responsabilità* (no. 86), *animatori* (no. 142), and *capo di comunità* (no. 60). What is common is that none of these are limited explicitly to the clerical hierarchy alone. Instead, they are used in association with women, the laity, the religious, and pastors of communities. Having been officially adopted into the papal magisterium, this document thus heralds a significant departure from previous magisterial documents in their exclusive association of leadership with the clergy.

In my view, the Synod has resulted in at least three significant developments with regard to leadership in the Church. First, it has brought to light the importance of leadership as a pressing concern from the perspective of the people on the ground and the need to pay more attention to this issue at all levels of the Church. The notion of leadership associated with this feedback pertains more to the exercise of authority—specifically, how such authority is exercised and by whom. Second, the term “leadership” has been extended decisively in a magisterial document beyond the ordained clergy to include the non-clergy faithful with particular attention to women. Third, although the Final Document does not define leadership, the ecclesiology emerging from the Synod paves the way for leadership to shift from being an ambiguous term borrowed from the social sciences to a specific

⁵³ XVI General Ordinary Assembly, First Session, “Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission Synthesis Report,” October 4–29, 2023, no. 9.i, synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report_IMP.pdf.

⁵⁴ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “*Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Session: How to be a Missionary Synodal Church,” September 7, 2024, no. 30, press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/07/09/240709d.html (hereafter IL 2024).

theological category that is integral to a synodal church. The following section elaborates on this point.

THE CASE FOR A THEOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP IN A SYNODAL CHURCH

The Final Document defines synodality as “the walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God’s Kingdom, in union with all humanity” (no. 28). It goes on to elaborate that a synodal church is marked by being “closer to people and more relational,” a church that is “God’s home and family,” and “orientated towards mission” (no. 28). It highlights that synodality is manifested particularly by “gathering at all levels of the Church for mutual listening, dialogue, and community discernment . . . reaching consensus as an expression of Christ rendering Himself present,” and “reaching decisions according to differentiated co-responsibilities” (no. 28). Moreover, the document stresses that a synodal church undergoes a constant “path of spiritual renewal and structural reform” so as to be “more participatory and missionary” (no. 28).

In light of these characterizations of the Church, current categories in ecclesial doctrine and discipline, such as governance, authority, administration, and office, are no longer sufficient on their own. They serve a Church that is primarily concerned with hierarchical power, control, regulations, institutions, order, and conformity. Although these elements are still essential, a synodal church requires additional categories and perhaps even a new language to denote taking up responsibility and exercising influence, in resonance with a more dynamic, relational, agile, participative, and Spirit-led view of the Church. Moreover, the current categories connote a somewhat static and individualistic view of being in charge, with a disproportionate focus on ordained ministers. In contrast, synodality calls for a more fluid, forward-moving, and collective approach. At the other end of the spectrum, the principle of participation does not in itself suffice as a complement to institutional authority in making the Church synodal. This is because participation focuses on the broad-based engagement of all the baptized in the Church’s mission through their diverse charisms. There is still a need for a strategic and deliberate driving force which mobilizes collective movement to advance the Church’s mission amidst changing contexts and beyond the status quo. This driving force necessarily arises from both inside and outside positions of formal authority. In my view, the notion of leadership can potentially fulfill this gap.

As noted earlier, leadership is a concept that emerged relatively recently from the political and organizational fields. Although it has been diversely defined, a common set of elements is discernible in the scholarship on this subject. These include an emphasis on not just

goals but also on the process of moving towards goals; mobilizing, facilitating, and influencing people while taking into account human freedom and agency; fostering strategic vision and a forward-orientation that often involves transformative change; and attending to relationships and interactions.⁵⁵ The integral relation of these constitutive elements makes leadership a distinct reality that is not synonymous or identical with being in charge. As Bass and Bass succinctly point out, not all exercise of institutional authority is an exercise of leadership.⁵⁶ Hence, when terms such as *guida*, *ruoli di responsabilità* and *capo di comunità* are translated into “leadership” in the English language, a new meaning results. Despite its present shortcomings, the identification and study of leadership in secular disciplines represent a distinct and constructive contribution to the body of knowledge about human organizations and communities. A synodal church can potentially appropriate this term, evaluate it theologically, and delineate it in a more precise and systematic way in the context of the faith tradition. Indeed, the concept of leadership needs to be better understood and integrated into official Church teachings. This is because synodality requires not only institutional authority and broad-based participation but also leadership so that the Church’s life and mission move forward and flourish.

TOWARDS A SYSTEMATIC DELINEATION OF LEADERSHIP IN LIGHT OF SYNODALITY

It is worth noting that official church teachings on the task of theology have repeatedly emphasized the necessity for theology to appropriate, in critically evaluative ways, new categories developed by other disciplines so as to make progress in the faith tradition.⁵⁷ In the present case, the Church’s emerging theology of synodality can be brought into dialogue with leadership studies to delineate a theology of leadership for a synodal church. To this end, the synodal dynamic of wayfaring and the image of the Church as a pilgrim community provide a good starting point. The Final Document describes the Church as the People of God “still on pilgrimage through time” and “journeying towards the Kingdom” (no. 17). We are a people on the move, constantly navigating various contexts and carrying forward the

⁵⁵ Northouse notes a similar set of elements in Northouse, *Leadership*, 6.

⁵⁶ Bass and Bass, *Handbook of Leadership*, 23.

⁵⁷ For example, see International Theological Commission, “Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria,” November 29, 2011, no. 81, vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_tologia-oggi_en.html, and Pope Francis, *Motu Proprio: Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, November 1, 2023, no. 5, cultura.va/content/dam/cultura/docs/pdf/accademie/path/AdTheologiamPromovendam_EV.pdf.

mission of Christ through the diverse and coordinated responsibility of all. The Synod was itself an experience of wayfaring. Since the process was unprecedented, no single person knew beforehand how exactly to proceed through all the stages. In my observation, there was a general disposition of openness amongst both organizers and participants of the consultations, all learning to allow the Holy Spirit to lead without pre-determined end-results. The only compass for the journey was a collective desire to seek and do God's will, with a shared commitment to the Church's life and mission. By all counts, this was a novel experience of walking together one step at a time among and between all levels of the Church, adjusting and adapting as we went along. In light of this experience, leadership can be regarded as the animation and facilitation of such wayfaring in cooperation with God's Spirit, without which the forward, adaptive, and communal movement of the pilgrim Church would not be enabled. Although the explicit outputs from the Synod do not elaborate on synodal leadership *per se*, some provisional points can be constructed from the final text in light of how the synod process was lived. The following section is thus an attempt to lay out systematically what synodal leadership might constitute, based on the Final Document and the experience of the Synod.⁵⁸

1. Orienting the Community Towards Mission and Transformation as Pilgrims

The Final Document makes it clear that the Church exists for mission. It “‘aspires after the completion of the kingdom’ (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 5) when God will be ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15:28)” (no. 20). This necessitates that the Church is always on-the-way, endeavoring to expand the reaches of God's Kingdom across new frontiers. Leadership can thus be regarded as a driving force which animates and facilitates the community to explore and step forward on new paths in its mission. As a function that is not synonymous with governance, authority, or participation, leadership fills a distinct role of challenging community members to “discover new forms of commitment and new ways to fulfil their mission” (FD, no. 58). This implies an on-going

⁵⁸ On a methodological note, I have endeavored to ensure that this exploration maintains a connection with the common elements that define leadership in the secular field. As noted above, these include an emphasis on not just goals but also on the process of moving towards goals; mobilizing, facilitating, and influencing people taking into account human freedom and agency; fostering strategic vision and a forward-orientation that often involves transformative change; and attending to relationships and interactions. These are kept in view as indicative guideposts of the concept of leadership in secular disciplines and not as a deterministic framework. The ecclesiology of synodality remains the key reference point.

transformation of the community itself since “the call to mission is, at the same time, the call to the conversion of each local Church and of the whole Church” (no. 11). Accordingly, synodal leadership is exercised as a necessary complement between those in positions of formal authority and those outside of it who can bring alternative and new perspectives to bear.

In the Synod, creative exploration of new frontiers occurred in many ways such as in the unprecedented global process of consultation, the emphasis on reaching the peripheries, the inclusion of a continental phase, and the reconfiguration of the synod assembly into Conversation in the Spirit circles with its inclusion of non-bishop voting members. Indeed, a radical transformation of the whole synod process was initiated on many fronts not only by official organizers but also by people around the world who challenged and persuaded their local pastors to embark on the process. These initiatives were not without risks, uncertainties, criticisms, and even occasional failure. However, they were undertaken with the aim of moving forward in the synodal life and mission of the Church. For these reasons, I venture that the boldness of these initiatives was a concrete demonstration of the exercise of leadership. In this regard, the Final Document calls for “humility, patience and a willingness to forgive and be forgiven” (no. 43). Hence, alongside creativity in exploring new paths, leadership entails interior dispositions akin to those of pilgrims. It accepts vulnerability and acknowledges that the way to new life often passes through uncertainty as well as “our own inner emptiness, the darkness of fear, doubt and sin” (no. 14). Leadership promotes the need to “recognize mistakes” (no. 46), to redress scandals, abuses, and other “shortcomings” (no. 55) in the Church, while persevering on the path of conversion and reform. Inevitably, a pilgrim church also faces times of crisis in its understanding and interpretation of the faith tradition. The Synod itself was not without conflicts on the doctrinal front. In this light, leadership can be regarded as a driving force that encourages the community not to escape from but deal with such tensions and to see them as pathways of missionary transformation.

2. Listening and Taking Decisions Through Communal Discernment

In orienting the community towards its mission, synodal leadership promotes what I would call “collective navigation.” The Church’s teaching on the co-responsibility and *sensus fidei* of all the baptized requires leaders to promote mutual listening and discernment in the community. In the Final Document, the word “listen” and its conjugates are among the most mentioned, occurring a total of sixty-one times in the English translation. Conjugates of the word “discern” occur even more frequently at a total of eighty-five times. Both words

feature prominently in the meaning and dimensions of synodality established in nos. 28–33. The Final Document highlights the model of Jesus in the gospels “who is always in the act of listening,” welcoming everyone without exception, and meeting them as they are so as to lead them eventually to God (no. 51). Leadership thus begins with listening and understanding and avoids impulsive and isolated decision-making. The bishop, in particular, is exhorted to “spend time with the faithful to listen to them” during pastoral visits, “as part of his own ongoing discernment of needs” (no. 70). In fact, the whole Church is called to cultivate “a culture of ecclesial discernment” (no. 86) with its attendant practices and structures. Synodal leadership is thus evidenced when decision-taking is exercised in a manner which espouses communal discernment as a normative way of proceeding rather than as an exception.⁵⁹

These principles were borne out in the lived experience of the Synod. As mentioned above, the process began with a listening phase that engaged people at the grassroots level throughout the Church. Their joys, sorrows, concerns, and dreams were the starting points for synod reflections. Assemblies at the local, continental, and global levels were also designed with a participative and discerning way of proceeding, especially through the Conversation in the Spirit method and the inclusion of representatives from various sectors of the Church. As a facilitator at the General Assembly, I frequently noted participants’ endeavor to listen and arrive at a collectively-discerned proposal despite their initial disagreements and their diverse levels of ecclesial authority. Officials who coordinated the assembly also listened constantly to feedback from participants and made procedural adjustments accordingly. Modeling the way, Pope Francis was personally engaged throughout the process by listening, sharing, and dialoguing, thus “joining the ‘we’ of the Assembly” and adopting the Final Document as constitutive of his magisterial teaching.⁶⁰

3. Promoting Charisms, Vocations, and Holistic Development of Persons

Synodal leadership promotes the charisms, voice, vocation, and holistic development of every person. One of the major fruits of the Synod has been a newfound appreciation in the Church for the theology of charisms. Citing 1 Cor 12:4–7, the Final Document highlights the diverse gifts that the Holy Spirit has poured on all the baptized for the flourishing of Church and society (no. 57). The document calls for pastoral care to promote their recognition,

⁵⁹ See especially Final Document 88–93.

⁶⁰ See “Accompanying Note by the Holy Father Francis Pope Francis” in the Final Document.

nurturing, and activation for mission. It urges the mobilization of all that the Church has to offer so that the faithful can grow as missionary disciples in their particular contexts and vocations (nos. 58–59). This task of animating and accompanying the development of charisms and vocations can be regarded as another constitutive function of leadership. Although the Final Document singles out priests and bishops as having a role in “discerning charisms” (no. 72), it does not rule out the possibility of the non-clergy playing this role. For instance, no. 75 remarks that “charisms take the form of ministries when they are publicly recognised by the community and by those responsible for leading the community.” The latter phrase can be interpreted more widely since elsewhere the document speaks of catechists who “have always been responsible for communities without Priests” (no. 76). In exercising pastoral care and in the nurturing of charisms, the Final Document calls attention to “all the dimensions of the human person (intellectual, affective, relational, and spiritual)” so that the growth and formation of each of the baptized proceeds in a holistic way (no. 143).

The Synod saw an unprecedented activation of a wide range of charisms for its organization and implementation. At the frontline as well as behind the scenes, synod teams at the local, regional, and global levels mobilized people from all walks of life with a variety of talents and roles. These included people with expertise and experience in communication, theology, facilitation, creative arts, liturgy, digital media, administration, and logistics. There were also those who were better able to reach out to peripheral groups and other religious traditions. Additionally, a plethora of formation activities were available to help people participate meaningfully. In my observation, most organizers of the synod process at the global and local levels did not suppress but instead called forth the creative talents of people. As a result, the three years of the Synod saw a fruitful array of consultation methods, liturgies, creative media, pastoral resources, and theological scholarship. There were also testimonies from people who have left the Church but rediscovered their baptismal vocation after engaging in the synod process.⁶¹

4. Establishing Effective Structures and Processes for Participation

The participation of all persons with their diverse charisms and perspectives requires proper organization so that the plurality of gifts,

⁶¹ For example, see Rechilda Estores, “Philippines: A Catholic Parish Journeys Together, Living Synodality,” *Vatican News*, October 19, 2022, [vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2022-10/philippines-catholic-parish-journeys-together-living-synodality.html](https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2022-10/philippines-catholic-parish-journeys-together-living-synodality.html).

experiences, and voices is brought to fruitful synergy. The Final Document highlights, in particular, the importance of participatory bodies that facilitate co-responsibility in effective and meaningful ways (nos. 103–108). This goes beyond merely maintaining the status quo of such bodies. Instead, the Final Document calls for timely reviews of all ecclesial structures and processes, and for adjusting them where necessary so to better serve the Church’s mission (no. 114). It also highlights the need for subsidiarity and “sound decentralization” (no. 129) so that local communities are better able to respond to their specific contexts. In this light, the key elements of leadership can be regarded as including initiating the establishment of appropriate structures and processes, ensuring their synodal functioning, and paying attention to their improvement.

The Synod itself saw a plethora of structures for participation. Many local teams exercised effective leadership by tailoring suitable processes and platforms to engage diverse constituents at the grassroots level. At the General Assembly, various structures and processes for participation and co-responsibility were also put in place. These included not only the small groups for Conversations in the Spirit but also commissions for various purposes, such as communications and the drafting of the final text. An innovation of the Second Session was the insertion of an additional step in each module whereby rapporteurs from all small groups came together to share their group reports and discern the emerging themes. This enabled greater co-responsibility and deeper engagement with the topic compared with the process at the First Session, in which group reports were simply read out in the plenary. Moreover, at the Second Session, synod members could propose and vote on a list of topics which they considered to be of highest priority for plenary discussion. Despite the mixed views about the fruits of this revised process, the innovation nevertheless demonstrated leadership in terms of proactive endeavors to review and experiment with the assembly process in order to give members a greater role in shaping the proceedings, rather than simply maintaining the status quo.

5. Embracing Mutuality, Co-responsibility, and Inter-dependence

In a synodal church, leadership is exercised from among and within the community rather than apart from and above it. Pope Francis reiterates this point for bishops in his Opening Address at the Second Session of the General Assembly, but I suggest it applies to anyone exercising leadership. One key implication is that transparency, accountability, and evaluation are to be espoused by all. The Final Document emphasizes these manifestations of a co-responsible, faithful, and welcoming Church (nos. 95–100). Pastoral leaders are

particularly exhorted to be transparent and accountable with regard to decisions, lifestyles, planning, and other pastoral responsibilities. The absence of such transparency and accountability is a symptom of clericalism (no. 98). Notably, the Final Document stresses accountability to the community and not only to one's superiors (no. 99). This entails, among other things, regular evaluation so that ministry would be more effective and the capacity for spiritual discernment would grow in the community (no. 100). In my view, although calls for transparency, accountability, and evaluation are not new in the Church, the Final Document's novel contribution is its pointing out of the theological bases for these practices. Hence, adopting them is not merely an attempt to follow corporate leadership trends but a translation of ecclesiology into concrete action.

Over the three-year process, the level of transparency shown in the Synod was unprecedented. Reports from all stages were published online, and the global synthesis processes were given much visibility in the media. This helped to promote trust and engagement in the Synod. However, at the Second Session, a perceived fissure of trust and transparency occurred. During presentations by study groups which were formed to delve into specialized topics from the Synod, a group tasked with reviewing ecclesial ministries and the role of women was distinctly less forthcoming in disclosing information about its membership and way of proceeding. A subsequent closed-door meeting exacerbated the dissatisfaction felt by members with its continued lack of transparency.⁶² What is notable, in my view, is that the intensity of many assembly members' adverse reaction to this incident indicates not only the sensitivity of the topic but also the expected level of transparency and accountability, which by then had become an assumed norm, at least from the assembly members' perspective. I venture that such a level of expectation might not have existed prior to the Synod, or at least, it would not have been so freely expressed. As a result, the study group held a subsequent meeting where matters were discussed in an open and inclusive way, and the mutual understanding between all parties improved. Thus, synodality brings about an approach to leadership that is more co-responsible and transparent.

⁶² This incident has been reported widely in the media. For example, see Christopher White, "Outrage Follows Vatican Doctrine Chief's Absence from Synod Meeting on Secretive Women's Study Group," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 18, 2024, [ncronline.org/vatican/vatican-news/outrage-follows-vatican-doctrine-chiefs-absence-synod-meeting-secretive-womens](https://www.ncronline.org/vatican/vatican-news/outrage-follows-vatican-doctrine-chiefs-absence-synod-meeting-secretive-womens). See also Klara A. Csiszar, "The Role of Women in a Synodal Church: Cultural and Contextual Sensitivity," *Journal of Moral Theology* 15, Special Issue 1 (2026): 57–58.

Ultimately, the litmus test of synodal mutuality and inter-dependence is found in a collective and collegial approach to leadership. It is significant that the Final Document opens with the scene of the three disciples, including a woman, at Easter Morning (no. 13). The text highlights the distinctiveness of each one while also stressing the mutuality of their roles in the genesis of the Church. The Final Document stresses that such co-responsibility extends to the exercise of formal authority as well, including that of the clerical hierarchy. For instance, no. 69 points out the responsibility vested in the bishop for the local church while also emphasizing that the bishop “is not charged with prerogatives and tasks that he must perform alone.” It urges bishops to exercise their ministry in close partnership with others, especially priests and deacons. No. 74 further stresses that these ordained ministers need to “rediscover co-responsibility in the exercise of ministry, which includes collaboration with other members of the People of God.” Contrary to some anxieties expressed, this does not compromise the role and effective-ness of ordained ministers but rather strengthens them as leaven in a synodal church. Mutuality, co-responsibility, and inter-dependence, in turn, allow for vulnerabilities and limitations to be acknowledged without fear and to be met with support from the whole community. It is noteworthy that the Final Document acknowledges the fragility of bishops (no. 71) and priests (no. 72), highlighting their need for understanding and help from others. Indeed, synodality illuminates a co-responsible, collective, and collegial essence in the ontology of leadership. This serves as an antidote to the “strong-man paradigm” with its over-emphasis on individual personality and power. The latter often slides into over-dependence, self-referentiality, and even abuse.

6. Cultivating Communion and Harmony in Diversity

The Church’s witness as a sign of communion requires a “genuine relational conversion” (FD, no. 50) on the part of everyone. Promoting such conversion and fostering communion, inclusiveness, “flourishing interpersonal relationships” (FD, no. 34), and harmony amidst legitimate diversity can be regarded as another constituent task of leadership. As a driving force for relational conversion, leadership thus encapsulates another essential ecclesial function that is not immediately highlighted by the notions of authority or participation. The Final Document stresses that mutual self-giving love, especially for the neediest, is the hallmark of the Christian community (no. 50). It urges solidarity with “those made poor” (no. 19) and highlights communion with all creation (nos. 50, 115, 154). Additionally, synodality is manifested in the collaboration and exchange of gifts among churches at the local, regional, and global levels as well as

among Christian traditions, and between local churches and religious congregations.⁶³ Thus, synodal leadership pro-actively fosters all these dimensions of communion. In a Church not spared from conflicts and wounds, the exercise of leadership can also be regarded as including the fostering of “healing, reconciliation and the rebuilding of trust” (FD, no. 46) and the promotion of encounters not only “between people who already feel attuned to one another” (no. 110) but even more so between those who do not. Noting that the hierarchical structure of the Church is a means to serve the goal of unity, the Final Document highlights the roles played by bishops (no. 18), the Pope (no. 69), and ordained pastors (no. 33) in this regard. Hence, it is especially incumbent upon those in formal authority to pursue reconciliation and unity. However, in reality, conflicts sometimes exist among members of the hierarchy itself. This is where the leadership exercised by those without formal authority can play a complementary role by promoting dialogue, understanding, and mediation.

All these aspects of leadership were evident in the Synod. Its organizers proposed an approach that brought different people together—many for the first time—at the local, regional, and international levels. The process engendered an unprecedented level of interaction and co-operation among diverse persons and groups. Over the two sessions of the General Assembly, participants testified to a growing sense of fraternity, with many expressing a desire to persevere in understanding and collaboration with those who have different viewpoints and experiences. Spiritual guides, facilitators, and theologians at the assembly also took the initiative to promote mutual understanding and reconciliation through their preaching, facilitation, and input. The fruits of all these efforts are evident in the assembly members’ testimony that “we felt His presence in our midst as we lived conversation in the Spirit and listened to one another: the presence of He, who, in bestowing the Holy Spirit, continues to build among His people a unity that establishes harmony amidst differences” (FD, no. 1).

7. Recognizing the Primacy of Divine Grace

Finally, synodal leadership recognizes and proceeds in consonance with the primacy of God’s action in and through the Church. The Final Document stresses that “the renewal of the Christian community is possible only by recognizing the primacy of grace” (no. 44). This calls

⁶³ See especially Final Document, nos. 120–126. The “exchange of gifts” is an expression that features prominently in the Final Document, occurring no less than nineteen times.

for a disposition of discernment, humility, openness, and desire for union with God. At the Synod, members of the General Assembly underscored this when they admitted to the reality of fatigue and resistance to change but also recognized that “the mercy of God, our most loving Father, purifies our hearts, thus enabling us to continue along this journey” (FD, no. 6). Leadership thus includes fostering the “spiritual depth” that synodality calls for at both the personal and communal levels (no. 44). Ultimately, it is the Spirit of Christ that leads the Church, enlisting the close collaboration of various persons at various times.

IMPLICATIONS

In summary, the Synod has thrown light on a distinct cluster of tasks that are essential for synodality to be manifested as a constitutive dimension of the Church. These include orienting the community towards mission and transformation as pilgrims; listening and taking decisions through communal discernment; promoting charisms, vocations, and holistic development of persons; establishing effective structures and processes for participation; embracing mutuality, co-responsibility, and inter-dependence; cultivating communion and harmony in diversity; and recognizing the primacy of divine grace. As a cluster, these tasks could collectively be regarded as leadership. They go beyond a conventional understanding of the exercise of authority and reveal that, in fact, some ways of exercising authority are contrary to leadership. Several implications can be drawn from this delineation of leadership as a composite of the above elements.

First, the delineation clarifies that leadership is not synonymous with ordained ministry, in contrast with the position that some magisterial documents have tended to adopt. Leadership is an essential role in a synodal church and constitutes a category of intervention that would be expected from anyone with formal authority, whether clergy, religious, or lay. Those in charge of a ministry, institution, or ecclesial community would need to exercise not only administrative authority and governance but also leadership. As Pope Francis has remarked, “Synodality is the appropriate interpretative framework for understanding hierarchical ministry.”⁶⁴

Second, the constitutive elements of leadership show that it is an intervention to be exercised by those without formal authority as well. This echoes Senior’s view that leadership can be formal or informal. Those at the margins or outside the circle of authority often have privileged and unique perspectives to be brought to bear, especially

⁶⁴ See “Accompanying Note by the Holy Father Francis” in the Final Document.

when the status quo needs to be challenged. Thus, a creative tension and collaboration between formal and informal leadership enables the pilgrim people of God to move forward in its journey through changing contexts.⁶⁵

Third, the call for greater inclusion of women in “carrying out leadership roles in the Church” can now be seen to have two levels of meaning, both of which are essential. The first is a desire to have more women occupying formal roles of responsibility in the Church. The Synod has pointed out opportunities that are already provided for in current ecclesial regulations and encourages the creation of new roles and ministries where necessary (FD, nos. 60, 66, 76–77). What this discussion on leadership helps to highlight is that since every exercise of formal authority and role of responsibility must demonstrate good leadership, it is essential that such positions be filled not just by a homogenous group but by persons representing a diversity of genders, cultures, gifts, and vocations so that effective and dynamic leadership at the collective level can result. The second level of meaning is that women are called to exercise not only formal authority but also leadership as delineated theologically in this essay, including informal leadership, bringing their gifts and charisms to bear in synergy with others.

Fourth, this systematic delineation of leadership based on synodality moves leadership from an ambiguous and borrowed term arising in the secular field to a specific category with a theological basis that is indispensable in ecclesial discourse on a synodal church. It paves the way for dealing with the concept of leadership more attentively in magisterial documents on ecclesial life and mission. A theology of leadership enlightened and made possible by a theology of synodality would thus be an important step forward in the effort to develop and implement the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council.


Finally, the exercise of synodal leadership serves as a prophetic sign for a world frequently marred by failure of moral and effective leadership. The Synod has consistently pointed out the necessity of synodality as central to the Church’s lived witness to the world.⁶⁶ The elements of leadership outlined in this essay, though derived from the

⁶⁵ Associating informal leadership with “charismatic elements,” Osborne remarks provocatively that “dysfunctionality often sets in if charismatic individuals are not present, yet in neither the Federal Register of a government nor in the Code of Canon Law of the church is there formal recognition of this fact.” Noting the failures caused by excessive bureaucracy and institutional rigidity, he adds in *Orders and Ministry* that “the church, indeed, seems to find it difficult to admit that its leadership can be seriously dysfunctional and needs charismatic lay leadership to restore integrity” (164).

⁶⁶ See especially Final Document, nos. 47–48, 153.

Synod experience and Final Document, can be seen as applicable to organizations and communities outside the Church. Their underlying principles resonate with universal values and ethical approaches that currently exist in leadership scholarship. Moreover, synodality reflects “the condition and vocation of each human person as *homo viator*.”⁶⁷ Hence, as a community journeying through history towards its ultimate end, humanity would be well-served by a style of leadership that is elucidated by the Church’s theology and experience of synodality.

CONCLUSION

The concrete experiences of the Synod and its emerging theology have brought into clearer relief that the Church’s doctrinal and pastoral heritage needs to include not just the concepts of authority and participation but also leadership. In this article, I have attempted to delineate what leadership might comprise and how it could be defined, based on the various aspects of synodality. This delineation does not claim to be exhaustive, and contextual adaptations are also needed for particular cultural settings and types of ecclesial communities. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this discussion might inspire further efforts towards a systematic theology of leadership in a synodal church and support the renewal of pastoral practice and formation. It is also hoped that these insights might strengthen the conviction that authority and leadership in the Church need to be exercised collegially and inclusively through a perichoresis of gifts, genders, cultures, and vocations among all the People of God. 

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⁶⁷ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” no. 49.