

## Catholic Social Teaching, Women, and the Synod

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**Abstract:** This article offers a participant observer analysis of the Synod on Synodality through the interpretive framework of Catholic social teaching (CST), focusing on the interrelated themes of human dignity, subsidiarity, and the participation of women. Drawing on the author’s involvement across the local, continental, and universal stages of the Synod, the study demonstrates how gendered patterns of appointment, visibility, and role allocation shaped the possibilities for women’s substantive influence within synodal processes. A close reading of major Synod documents reveals that CST was only marginally engaged and that the principle of subsidiarity was ultimately overshadowed by the less normatively precise language of “differentiated co-responsibility.” This conceptual shift, combined with persistent structural asymmetries, limits the Church’s ability to reconcile its social teaching on equal human dignity with the lived experiences of women within ecclesial life. The article employs imaginative positionality—considering the author’s potential contributions as a theological expert and as a voting member—to explore how women’s fuller participation in interpretive and decisional ministries could strengthen synodal discernment and governance. The conclusion identifies avenues for further research on integrating CST more robustly into synodal structures, processes, and the development of teaching, thereby enhancing the credibility of the Church in addressing its mission.

**S**YNODALITY PROPOSES A FORM OF ECCLESIAL LIFE IN WHICH the People of God walk together in co-responsibility for mission, grounded in the equal baptismal dignity of all. Yet the credibility of this vision depends on its coherence with the Church’s internal practices, especially where the experiences of women are concerned.<sup>1</sup> This article argues that the Synod on

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<sup>1</sup> A lack of coherence between women’s experiences of the Catholic Church and its teachings is extensively documented in Tracy McEwan, Kathleen McPhillips, and

Synodality, while path-breaking in participatory intent, exhibits unresolved tensions between Catholic social teaching's (CST) insistence on equal human dignity and the gendered structures and processes through which synodal discernment and decision-taking are enacted.

Adopting a participant-observer approach, I draw on my involvement at the local, continental, and universal stages of the Synod to analyze how appointments, visibility, process design, and decisional architectures shape the substantive influence of women. In the international Assemblies of the Synod, women's presence was most balanced in facilitation but markedly thinner among recognized theological experts and voting members. In other words, in the roles that author and decide. The distribution of roles, and the burdens of secretarial and rapporteur work, sometimes amplified women's visibility without securing equivalent text-shaping or decision-bearing influence.

Methodologically, the article combines process-level observation with a close reading of key Synod documents to assess how CST was engaged conceptually and operationally. While the Synod documentation references social concerns and CST vocabulary, the analysis shows that CST's normative framework, especially the principle of subsidiarity, was unevenly applied. Notably, the Final Document's preference for the language of "differentiated co-responsibility" displaces subsidiarity's focus on the multi-level allocation of rights and duties among groups, weakening guarantees for participation at the appropriate level and obscuring mechanisms of accountability. This conceptual drift matters practically for women's participation, where "difference" can mask inequality.

I argue that appeals to baptismal dignity require explicit grounding in equal human dignity as articulated by CST, so that ecclesial rhetoric about inclusion is matched by institutional reform. Without concrete standards such as transparent selection, representational thresholds, and evaluative reporting, synodal culture risks reproducing structures that normalize women's ancillary roles. The article therefore situates proposals for synodal governance within CST's anthropological claims and practical demands for participatory rights, subsidiarity, and accountability.

Finally, the article deploys imaginative positionality to illuminate how role assignments contour outcomes. I consider what might have

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Miriam Pepper, *International Survey of Catholic Women: Analysis and Report of Findings* (University of Newcastle, 2023); Marie Macdonald, Peter Carpenter, Sandie Cornish, et al., *Woman and Man One in Christ Jesus* (Harper Collins, 1999); Sandie Cornish and Andrea Dean, eds., *Still Listening to the Spirit: Woman and Man Twenty Years Later* (Office for Social Justice of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2019).

been contributed to synodal discernment had I served not as an expert facilitator but rather as a recognized theological expert or as a voting member. This exercise surfaces methodological proposals such as a more embedded practical-theological drafting approach, and governance implications that could strengthen synodal reception. The conclusion identifies research pathways for integrating CST more robustly into synodal structures and for the development of social teaching, thereby enhancing the Church's credibility and mission.

## **PARTICIPATION IN THE SYNOD PROCESS**

My participation across the local, continental, and universal stages of the Synod revealed three recurring dynamics that inform my subsequent analysis of the themes of human dignity, subsidiarity, and women's participation in the Synod. These are: how appointments shape recognition and visibility; the influence and limits of process design and facilitation; and the uneven exercise of subsidiarity under real-world constraints. Together they demonstrate gendered patterns of marginalization within synodal spaces. At the universal stage, these dynamics crystallized around the distinct roles of facilitators, theological experts, and voting members, each of which entailed different tasks, powers, and constraints.

### *Appointment, Recognition, and Visibility*

I was called to serve the Assemblies of the Synod as an expert. Considering my experience in the synodal process, and in organizing and conducting research and consultation for the development of local social teaching, and leading the drafting of a variety of Church documents, I imagined that I might be asked to assist the Assemblies with documentation, analysis of data, and drafting. However, I was explicitly designated as a facilitator rather than a theological expert. This decision shaped how, when, and whether my expertise could influence texts.

Before the First Assembly twenty-eight theological experts were appointed, but only four were women. Out of 363 voting members fifty-four were women. The only role in which there was gender parity was the group of facilitators, which included seventeen women and seventeen men.<sup>2</sup> This gendered distribution of roles matters because

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<sup>2</sup> These figures are based on information provided to the appointed Synod experts. No official list of the theological experts and expert facilitators can be found on the website of the General Secretariat of the Synod as of February 8, 2026. An unofficial list of participants, which does not distinguish between the two categories of experts is available at EWTN, "Synod on Synodality: Read the Final List of Delegates,"

the roles carry different pathways to textual, procedural, and decisional influence.

The distribution of roles made public can also obscure visibility of women's intellectual labor in the broader Synod process. For example, I was one of the core drafters of the Oceania continental response to the Document for the Continental Stage and I proposed and was the principal drafter of the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences in Oceania (FCBCO) Pastoral Reflection that accompanied it. However public accounts of these processes do not name the women who led these efforts, muting recognition.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, I was appointed as one of the *periti* for the Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia, which effectively served as the local stage of the Synod in Australia, and was publicly named as a member of the Drafting Committee.<sup>4</sup>

The Members of the international Assemblies, including women, exercised a decisive influence on the content of the Synod documents. It was their communal discernment that theological expert drafters were tasked to articulate. Members spoke at the tables and in plenary sessions and ultimately shaped what would be voted on and adopted. The Members also elected table Rapporteurs, and some Members were directly approached at the initiative of the Synod Secretariat, with advice from facilitators and others, to serve as Secretaries. These roles, especially the Rapporteur roles, were disproportionately filled by women and younger laity. While this boosted visibility, these roles carried documentation burdens that often restricted women's and young people's own voices. While visibility is important, it can be problematic because highly visible procedural roles can dilute substantive participation.

Gendered gatekeeping in role assignment hinders synodality. Appointment patterns determine who gets to speak into content, who shapes process, and who decides. Hence, they determine whose

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September 22, 2023, [ewtnnews.com/vatican/tk-full-list](https://ewtnnews.com/vatican/tk-full-list). The twenty theological experts, including five women, who analyzed the responses to the Synthesis Report of the First Assembly providing input to the development of the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Assembly are listed here: General Secretariat of the Synod, "A Church Alive and on the Move," June 14, 2024, [synod.va/en/news/a-church-alive-and-on-the-move.html](https://synod.va/en/news/a-church-alive-and-on-the-move.html).

<sup>3</sup> Susan Pascoe and Ormond Rush, "Care for People and Planet: Discernment from the Continental Synodal Stage in Oceania," in *The People of God Have Spoken: Continental Ecclesial Assemblies Within the Synod on Synodality*, ed. Myriam Wijlens and Vimal Tirimanna (Columba Books, 2023), 321, 324–325. In addition to Associate Professor Orm Rush as coordinating drafter and Honorary Professor Susan Pascoe, Dr. Trudy Dantis, Mrs. Anne Dickinson, Dr. Therese Latua, Professor Renée Köhler-Ryan and myself drafted the Oceania Response to the DCS.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, "Members and Key Roles," [plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/members/](https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/members/).

theological imagination and lived experience is elevated. Ensuring greater presence of women in the theological expert and voting member roles would have helped the Synod to witness more credibly to the equal dignity of women and men and to the co-responsibility of the whole People of God.

### *Influence Through Process Design and Facilitation*

As we have seen, women were most adequately represented in facilitation roles at the international Assemblies. They were also influential in process design and facilitation at the local and continental stages. For example, I designed parish listening processes (including three women-focused evenings) for the local stage of the Synod and played an incisive role in the design of the continental process in Oceania.

I was invited by Archbishop Loy Chong of Fiji, who was then President of the FCBCO, to join an international advisory group assisting him as the host of the 2023 FCBCO Assembly. We developed a detailed process with participatory online preparatory events to enable the reflection of the whole Church, and of people beyond the Church with experience or expertise in the issues to be addressed, to inform the bishops' discernment at their Assembly.

This work was already well progressed when the Synod was announced. The FCBCO Executive were faced with a dilemma. The limited financial and human resources of the Oceania churches were already stretched and fully allocated. The FCBCO Assembly itself was dependent on funding via grants we obtained from development agencies which could not be redirected. I proposed a way of dovetailing the processes for consultations for the Australian Plenary Council, the Synod, and the preparation for the FCBCO Assembly, with the Assembly fulfilling the functions of the continental assembly for the Synod. Appointed Chair of the Secretariat for the FCBCO Suva General Assembly, I recorded a video presentation of the proposal at the request of the FCBCO Executive Committee members for them to take to their Bishops Conferences for approval. I presented it live online to the Australian Bishops. All four Conferences endorsed my proposal.

Later I supported the FCBCO Executive by presenting an analysis of the syntheses of responses to the Document for the Continental Stage from the four Bishops' Conferences of the region using data visualizations. I then accompanied them in a process of discernment identifying two more themes for the General Assembly to complement the previously agreed theme of care for the ocean. This selection of themes is glossed over as having "synergy with discernment on the Document for the Continental Stage in Oceania" in the account given

by Pascoe and Rush in *The People of God Have Spoken* obscuring the significance of the work of a female expert in designing processes, analyzing data, and leading bishops in a collective discernment.<sup>5</sup>

In the universal stage of the Synod, the round tables were the heartbeat of the Assemblies. The facilitators played the crucial role of stewarding the process of Conversation in the Spirit at the tables. As a member, group guide, and executive leader within the lay Ignatian Christian Life Community, I was very familiar with this structured process of communal discernment grounded in prayer, intentional speaking, and active listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit, typically undertaken in three rounds. The facilitators guided turn-taking and prayerful listening, safeguarded the method, and supported communal discernment. Our task was to hold the process, not to speak our word into the table's content, to author text, or to vote on formulations. Our authority was procedural, not textual or decisional. The emotional load, especially amid the Members' growing sense of urgency to produce tangible outcomes at the Second Assembly, was significant.

The theological experts, on the other hand, were tasked with shaping the methodology of drafting and the expression of texts. They were not seated at the round tables; rather, they listened to plenary reports, read written submissions, and worked largely outside the Synod hall on articulating the Members' discernment. Because they were not embedded at tables, their data came largely from summaries and personal interventions, not the full context of table conversations. For this reason, I argue for a more embedded practical-theological approach in future.

A more synodal process design would include women more equitably in all three key roles. Women's presence as facilitators helps ensure the listening climate and discernment culture reflect women's experiences and communicative styles, which in turn influences what surfaces for tables and rapporteurs. This has an upstream effect on the eventual text. Without women as co-authors of theological expression, the articulation of discernment risks abstracting from women's lived realities. Including more practical theologians, many of whom are women, in addition to systematic theologians, would support integration of praxis and experience-in-context into documents. Ultimately, decision-taking determines content. If women are underrepresented there, co-responsibility remains rhetorical. Women must be present and speaking in proportionate numbers where texts are discerned and voted on.

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Pascoe and Ormond Rush, "Care for People and Planet," 315.

*Exercising Subsidiarity and Co-Responsibility in Practice*

Subsidiarity requires that people and social groups affected by a decision have opportunities to participate in the making of the decision even if they are not part of the eventual decision-taking. Furthermore, the principle requires that decisions are taken at the most local level possible with effective capacity to safeguard the common good. Initially synodality was couched as subsidiarity within the Church.<sup>6</sup>

Some aspects of the Synod process did not support subsidiarity well in practice. The heavily text-based processes and the circulation of key documents in colonial languages hindered the participation of non-Western communities, especially those whose epistemologies are more orally based. Furthermore, the processes and timelines presumed a level of human and financial resources unavailable to some local churches, especially the poorest. Nor did they adequately consider the variety of local languages into which documents would need to be translated in order to authentically engage grassroots people—more than eight hundred languages in Papua New Guinea—or the immense distances and transport difficulties in places like the Central Pacific, or the impact of summer holiday periods in the southern hemisphere.

Women were among those who exercised a creative adaptive subsidiarity under constraint. For example, in Oceania when the time allowed for the local consultation was extended but the deadline for the continental stage remained firm, the number of planned ecclesial events feeding into the FCBCO Assembly had to be reduced from three to one. In response I convened a Theological Working Group with members from across the four bishops' conferences to provide videoed theological inputs to the Assembly. This is an example of creatively keeping multi-level participation alive despite structural pressures.

After the First Assembly, ten Study Groups and five Commissions were formed to carry forward issues that had been raised through the synodal consultations, but which would not be included in the *Instrumentum Laboris* and scope of the Second Assembly.<sup>7</sup> This could also be seen as an adaptive form of subsidiarity. I was appointed Coordinator of Study Group 2 on better hearing the cry of the poor and the earth, which presented its interim report in the first plenary session

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<sup>6</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Preparatory Document," no. 9, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-desktop/en\\_prepa\\_desktop.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-desktop/en_prepa_desktop.pdf) (hereafter PD).

<sup>7</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, "Study Groups for Questions Raised in the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to be Explored in Collaboration with the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia," February 22, 2024, [synod.va/en/resources/documents/documents-for-the-third-phase/study-groups-for-questions-raised-in-the-first-session-of-the-xvi-assembly.html](https://synod.va/en/resources/documents/documents-for-the-third-phase/study-groups-for-questions-raised-in-the-first-session-of-the-xvi-assembly.html).

of the Second Assembly and hosted dialogues with participants during the Assembly. As Coordinator I ensured that the Study Group members included an equal number of women and men. Study Group 2 was the only Study Group to achieve gender parity in its membership.<sup>8</sup> My appointment as one of only two women to coordinate Study Groups was an instance of co-responsibility enabling leadership outside the narrow domain of facilitation, acknowledging the multi-dimensional capabilities of women.

When women exercise agency across procedural (facilitator), textual (theological expert), and decisional (member) domains, subsidiarity becomes tangible rather than aspirational. Their participation enables voices closest to lived realities to participate in decisions that affect them and the communities they represent.

### *Gendered Patterns of Marginalization*

Women were present at the international Assemblies as facilitators on par with men but there were markedly fewer women theological experts, and women were a minority among voting members. Thus, women were disproportionately channelled into roles that support discernment but do not author or decide. Facilitators held the process but could not speak our word, while many women Members undertaking rapporteur or secretary tasks had less time to voice their own discernment. Both patterns dampened women's text-shaping influence. This structural asymmetry has implications for respect for the equal dignity of women and men and for the credibility of the Church.

These role-bound dynamics that determine who may speak, draft, and decide are not incidental. They are ecclesial structures through which, or against which, human dignity and subsidiarity are enacted. The next sections analyze how these patterns appear in the Synod documents and what a more coherent alignment with CST would require.

## **CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND THE SYNOD**

Analysis of the Synod's process documents,<sup>9</sup> reports from listening to the People of God at the continental and universal stages,<sup>10</sup> and documents feeding back analyses for further reflection, reveals that

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<sup>8</sup> Members of the Study Groups are listed here: [synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/2024/infographics/il/ELENCO\\_10\\_GRUPPI.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/2024/infographics/il/ELENCO_10_GRUPPI.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, "The Synodal Process," [synod.va/en/the-synodal-process.html](https://synod.va/en/the-synodal-process.html).

<sup>10</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, "Documents," [synod.va/en/resources/documents.html](https://synod.va/en/resources/documents.html).

CST was not a major concern of the Synod. The table below lists the documents analyzed.<sup>11</sup>

<b>Document</b>	<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Stage</b>	<b>Type</b>
Africa Continental Report	AFRCR	continental	listening
Asia Continental Report	ASICR	continental	listening
Digital Synod	DS	continental	listening
Europe Continental Report	EURCR	continental	listening
Latin America and Caribbean Continental Report	LACCR	continental	listening
Middle East Continental Report	MECR	continental	listening
North America Continental Report	NACR	continental	listening
Oceania Continental Report	OCECR	continental	listening
First Assembly Letter to the People of God	1ALPOG	universal	listening
First Assembly Synthesis Report	SR	universal	listening
Final Document of the Synod on Synodality	FD	universal	listening
Letter to Priests	1ALPRE	local / national	process
Preparatory Document	PD	local / national	process
Suggestions for the Preparation of the Synthesis	SPS	local / national	process
Synodal Process	SP	local / national	process
<i>Vademecum</i>	VAD	local / national	process
Working Document for the Continental Stage	DCS	continental	process
Establishment of Study Groups		universal	process

<sup>11</sup> Not all of the syntheses of listening at the local level by bishops' conferences are publicly available, hence I have not attempted to include them in my analysis.

How to be a Synodal Church in Mission	HTB	universal	process
Regulations for the First Assembly	REG	universal	process
<i>Instrumentum Laboris</i> for the First Assembly	1AIL	universal	process
Towards October 2024	TO	universal	process
Worksheet for Receiving the Synthesis Report of the First Assembly	WSSR	universal	process
<i>Instrumentum Laboris</i> for the Second Assembly	2AIL	universal	process

The social dimension of mission was not a key focus of the *Vademecum* but was present to varying degrees in the syntheses of local churches.<sup>12</sup> The Document for the Continental Stage (DCS) then picked up social concerns from the local churches, and this was affirmed in the continental responses to the DCS. Social issues were discussed at the First Assembly, hence part four of the Synthesis Report (SR) addressed people experiencing poverty.

Eleven paragraphs in eight of the documents analyzed refer to Catholic social teaching or Catholic social doctrine.<sup>13</sup> The Latin American and Caribbean Report alone presumes CST is widely

<sup>12</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, “*Vademecum*: For a Synodal Church,” September 2021, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/vademecum/en\\_vade.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/vademecum/en_vade.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent: Working Document for the Continental Stage,” no. 46, October 24, 2022, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/20221025-ENG-DTC-FINAL-OK.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/20221025-ENG-DTC-FINAL-OK.pdf) (hereafter DCS); XVI General Ordinary 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](https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/06/20/230620e.html) (hereafter IAIL); Digital Synod, “Document of the Digital Synod for the Continental Stage,” in General Secretariat of the Synod, *The Synodal Journey Documents* (Gaudium, 2023), 259 (hereafter DS); “Final Document of the Continental Stage in Latin America and the Caribbean,” no. 68, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final\\_document/ennewdoc/Latin-America-EN.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final_document/ennewdoc/Latin-America-EN.pdf) (hereafter LACCR); “Final Document of the Continental Stage in North America,” no. 37, [synod.va/content/dam/synodcommon/phases/continental-stage/final\\_document/en-newdoc/North-America-EN.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synodcommon/phases/continental-stage/final_document/en-newdoc/North-America-EN.pdf) (hereafter NACR); “Final Document for the Continental Stage in Oceania,” nos. 113, 137b, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final\\_document/en-newdoc/Oceania-EN.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final_document/en-newdoc/Oceania-EN.pdf) (hereafter OCECR); XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission, First Session,” October 28, 2023, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/English.2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/English.2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf) (hereafter SR); FD, no. 151.

known. The others call for formation to make CST better known and understood, and to guide action.<sup>14</sup> For example, the North American Continental Report desires “to understand more deeply the social mission of the Church” and concludes “Formation in evangelization and Catholic Social Teaching is crucial to walking the synodal path.”<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Assembly notes “The Church’s social doctrine is often considered the prerogative of experts and theologians and disconnected from the daily life of communities,” questioning how to “encourage its re-appropriation by the People of God as a resource for mission.”<sup>16</sup>

Several CST concepts appear with varying frequency and depth in the documents. They include human dignity, the common good, subsidiarity, solidarity, integral human development, integral ecology, structures of sin, and a preferential option for the poor. CST themes of violence and peacemaking and the functioning of political, cultural, and economic systems are also present.<sup>17</sup>

Human dignity and subsidiarity emerged as key concepts for the Church’s relationship with marginalized groups, including women, hence my focus in this paper is on these two concepts and on the content concerning women.

### *Human Dignity*

The dignity of the human person is widely regarded as the bedrock of CST, yet nearly two-thirds of the Synod documents’ references to dignity discuss “baptismal dignity”—the equal dignity of all Church members, grounded in baptism—and only about a quarter address human dignity.<sup>18</sup> Only one document explains the source of human dignity in *imago Dei*.<sup>19</sup>

Eight paragraphs link the equal human dignity of persons in society with equal baptismal dignity within the Church.<sup>20</sup> For example, the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Assembly urges a synodal Church to “offer greater recognition of women’s baptismal dignity and reject all forms of discrimination and exclusion faced by women in the Church and society.”<sup>21</sup> The SR suggests that counter-witness to equal

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<sup>14</sup> LACCR, no. 68.

<sup>15</sup> NACR, no. 37.

<sup>16</sup> IAIL, Questions for Discernment, no. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Analysis of these concepts and themes in the documents appears in more detail in Sandie Cornish, “Lessons from the Synod Documents for the Content of Catholic Social Teaching,” *International Journal of Practical Theology*, forthcoming.

<sup>18</sup> See for example SR, no. 1a and FD, no. 60.

<sup>19</sup> NACR, no. 14.

<sup>20</sup> NACR, nos. 14, 19; IAIL, nos. 22, 54, B2.3c; SR, nos. 9g, 16b; FD, no. 98.

<sup>21</sup> IAIL, no. B2.3.

human dignity within the Church “weakens the credibility of our proclamation to the world”<sup>22</sup> while the Final Document (FD) links the need for transparency and accountability with “how the Church respects human dignity.”<sup>23</sup>

Some commonalities in the experiences of marginalized groups in the Church emerged in the Synod documents. One such commonality was being considered “less than” in stark contradiction to the principle of the dignity of the human person, a dignity which all persons possess equally.<sup>24</sup> The ecclesial expression “baptismal dignity” can hinder clarity about the anthropological basis of human dignity. We have infinite dignity and value because we are unique human beings with the capacity for relationship, reason, freedom, and moral agency, made in the image and likeness of God—not because we are baptized. Those who are not baptized do not have lesser human dignity. Because the equal dignity of human beings should be reflected in both social and ecclesial relations, it could be clearer to speak of equal human dignity and an equal baptismal mandate to take responsibility for mission.

Greater reflexivity in relation to the connection between human dignity and baptismal dignity is needed. If the equal baptismal dignity of Church members is to be juxtaposed to society’s unjust denial of equal human dignity, why is the Church seen as lagging behind society in recognizing the equal human dignity of women?<sup>25</sup>

The Final Document frequently invokes dignity, especially baptismal dignity, to motivate a synodal culture of participation,<sup>26</sup> yet its governance proposals seldom explicitly ground dignity in CST’s anthropological foundations or derive rights-bearing participation from it. The FD does make a crucial link pointing out that transparency and accountability pertain to how the Church respects human dignity, including in internal working conditions.<sup>27</sup> However, the text does not develop the implications of CST such as rights, duties, and remedies that would bind this commitment to criteria for judgement or mediating norms such as clear standards and evaluation criteria. An explicit move from dignity language to providing guarantees consistent with CST such as mandating participation, entrenching due process and non-discrimination, and adhering to labor standards in the

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<sup>22</sup> SR, no. 9g.

<sup>23</sup> FD, no. 98.

<sup>24</sup> For example, “Final Document for the Continental Stage in Europe,” February 22, 2023, no. 38, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final\\_document/en-newdoc/Europe-EN.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final_document/en-newdoc/Europe-EN.pdf) (hereafter EURCR).

<sup>25</sup> Macdonald, Carpenter, and Cornish, et al., *Woman and Man*, viii; McEwan, McPhillips, and Pepper, *International Survey of Catholic Women*, 22–23.

<sup>26</sup> FD, nos. 21–27, 60.

<sup>27</sup> FD, no. 98.

Church's own governance and employment is missing, together with mandated public reporting and evaluation beyond the general accountability culture envisaged in the FD.<sup>28</sup>

### *Subsidiarity*

Another key CST concept for the theme of women in the Church is subsidiarity. Subsidiarity addresses the multi-layered organization of responsibility among groups at different levels and affirms the right of groups to participate in decisions that affect them. Organizations at a higher level of aggregation have a duty to support or assist those of a lower, or more local order for the sake of the common good, but they should not interfere where smaller or more local groups are able to handle matters themselves.<sup>29</sup> A right to participate may be seen as an implication of subsidiarity, and respect for agency may also be seen as a demand of human dignity.

The Preparatory Document for the Synod desired “a Church capable of communion and fraternity, of participation and subsidiarity” and the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Assembly, the DCS, and responses to it from Africa and Madagascar, Latin America and the Caribbean, and from Oceania, also link synodality with the exercise of subsidiarity within the Church.<sup>30</sup> For example, the Conclusions of the African Continental Report state that “synodality should strengthen subsidiarity on all levels of the Church’s life so as to promote the inclusion, participation and communion of all the members, especially women, the youth, and persons living with disability,”<sup>31</sup> while the Oceania Report recommends the establishment of forums at all levels of the Church where bodies that are “synodal by nature” are lacking in order to “promote subsidiarity within the church.”<sup>32</sup> Others, especially beyond the global South, use co-responsibility as a synonym or alternative to it.<sup>33</sup>

Subsidiarity was seen in the documents as supporting inclusion, participation, and communion among church members and entities at various levels and providing opportunities for all to contribute.

<sup>28</sup> FD, nos. 95–106.

<sup>29</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2004), no. 189.

<sup>30</sup> For example, the IAIL, the DCS and the AFRC, LACCR, and OCECR.

<sup>31</sup> AFRC, no. 6.

<sup>32</sup> OCECR, no. 133e.

<sup>33</sup> The DS, NACR, SR, General Secretariat of the Synod, “XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Session: How to be a Missionary Synodal Church,” July 9, 2024, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly2024/il/pdf/ENG---Instrumentum-laboris-2.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly2024/il/pdf/ENG---Instrumentum-laboris-2.pdf) (hereafter 2AIL); and the FD.

Subsidiarity within the Church was also associated with the need for transparency and accountability, and with leadership fostering co-responsibility for mission.<sup>34</sup> Church structures and the “mentality of many priests” were identified as barriers to subsidiarity and greater co-responsibility for mission.<sup>35</sup>

The SR suggests that “the articulation of synodality, collegiality, and primacy should not be interpreted in a static or linear form but according to a dynamic circularity, in a differentiated co-responsibility.”<sup>36</sup> This insight can inform the expression of subsidiarity in a networked, postmodern world that does not comprise neatly articulated entities and actors operating at increasingly large levels of aggregation. It could even support a more networked, less strictly hierarchical expression of Church.

Importantly, the exercise of subsidiarity within the Church must confront the concentration of decision-taking in ordained roles and the impact of the exclusion of women from these roles on their ability to participate in decisions that affect them, their families, and communities. For example, while women may have opportunities to contribute to the development of the content of CST, and even draft teaching documents as I have done, they are never the decision-takers.

The word subsidiarity does not appear in the FD, seemingly replaced by the expression “differentiated co-responsibility.” The qualifier “differentiated” in differentiated co-responsibility can in practice provide space for inequality rather than simply difference, for example via clericalism. Unequal interpretations of differentiated co-responsibility are often played out in exclusion from decision making and liturgical roles, as the Synod documents attest. The qualifier “differentiated” can also be used to justify or impose essentializing gender stereotypes that hinder women’s participation in leadership and decision-taking and impede their vocation to become all that God created them to be. Care should be taken that women are not overrepresented in ancillary or supporting roles such as facilitation and underrepresented in visible, substantive, or higher status roles such as being voting Members or being recognized as theological experts.

Subsidiarity demands that conscious efforts are made and explicit processes implemented to ensure that women’s experiences and perspectives are included and given equal weight to men’s in discernment, decision-making, decision-taking and the development of Church teaching, including CST.

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<sup>34</sup> For example, LACCR, no. 88.

<sup>35</sup> DCS, no. 66.

<sup>36</sup> SR, no. 20e.

The FD misses the opportunity to mobilize the greater normative precision of subsidiarity compared with differentiated co-responsibility as a CST principle guiding the discernment of rights and duties among and between people and groups at different levels. The FD's robust sections on decision-making, participatory bodies, and accountability would be stronger if they named subsidiarity and specified minimum decision-taking responsibilities at parish, diocesan or provincial, and episcopal conference levels.<sup>37</sup> The Synthesis Report had already gestured to a needed governance approach of "dynamic circularity" among synodality, collegiality, and primacy within differentiated co-responsibility, but did not consolidate this with CST's subsidiarity/participation framework. The FD could have closed that gap.<sup>38</sup> An explicit subsidiarity framework is missing in the FD's proposed canon-law review, which could define competences, mandate decisions at the lowest competent level, and bind higher levels to support lower levels without overriding them.<sup>39</sup>

### *Women in the Church*

The Synod documents address to varying degrees a range of marginalized groups within the Church, including women, First Nations people, people with disability, LGBTQIA+ people, asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees. Analysis of the Synod documents' treatment of these groups reveals a common pattern of being considered "less than," not being heard, exclusion from decision making and liturgical roles, limited participation, and unrecognized contributions, all of which hinder the Church's evangelizing mission.<sup>40</sup> The importance of listening to excluded or marginalized groups, respecting them as protagonists of mission, and relational and structural change to enable their active contribution, emerges from the analysis of the documents.

Women constitute the largest marginalized group within the church, and they may also be members of other marginalized groups. Hence in order to understand the marginalization experienced by women in the Church, and by particular groups of women within the Church, the impact of intersectionality must also be considered.

The documents view unequal treatment of women within the Church as an obstacle to its credibility and evangelizing mission.<sup>41</sup> Calls from every continent urged respecting women's baptismal

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<sup>37</sup> FD, nos. 87–108.

<sup>38</sup> SR, no. 20e.

<sup>39</sup> FD, nos. 92–93, 129.

<sup>40</sup> Cornish, "Lessons from the Synod Documents."

<sup>41</sup> For example, SR no. 9g.

dignity, valuing their contributions, and increasing their participation in decision making, governance, and leadership at all levels.<sup>42</sup> Sex discrimination, cultural assumptions of inequality, and lack of recognition of women's contributions were also common concerns. For example, the European Response to the DCS said the Church "practising a second-class status of women" was in tension with the changes the Church demands of society.<sup>43</sup> The Asian response decried "women being considered secondary or simply discarded as being an assistant to men,"<sup>44</sup> and the North American response declared that "there can be no true co-responsibility in the church without fully honouring the inherent dignity of women."<sup>45</sup> The intersection of clericalism and gender is highlighted in calls to consider women's admission to the permanent diaconate and ordained ministry.<sup>46</sup>

The Synod documents challenge the Church to practice in its own internal life what it preaches to society concerning the dignity and rights of women. They parallel CST's approach to the role and status of women in society by asking Church structures, processes, institutions, attitudes, and Canon Law to respect the equality of women and men, making more space for women's voices and experiences, and receiving their contributions.<sup>47</sup> The FD's recommendations address the use of language and images, increasing women's visibility in lectionary readings, including references to female saints, theologians, and mystics in Church documents, and including women among document drafters.<sup>48</sup>

The Synod did not say anything new about the role and status of women in the Catholic Church. Analysis of the findings of the *International Survey of Catholic Women (ISCW)*,<sup>49</sup> the 1999 Australian research report *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus* on the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia,<sup>50</sup> as well as the content of Decree 4 of the Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia on witnessing to the equal dignity of women and

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<sup>42</sup> For example, AFRCR Conclusions, no. 6; "Final Document for the Continental Stage in Asia," no. 65, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final\\_document/en-newdoc/Asia-EN.pdf](http://synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final_document/en-newdoc/Asia-EN.pdf) (hereafter ASICR); EURCR, no. 26; LACCR, no. 39; "Final Document for the Continental Stage in the Middle East," no. 41, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final\\_document/en-newdoc/Middle-East-EN.pdf](http://synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final_document/en-newdoc/Middle-East-EN.pdf) (hereafter MECR); NACR, no. 19; OCECR, no.102.

<sup>43</sup> EURCR, no. 38.

<sup>44</sup> ASICR, no. 96.

<sup>45</sup> NACR, no.19.

<sup>46</sup> For example, OCECR, nos. 58, 68.

<sup>47</sup> For example, AFRCR, no. 4; ASICR, nos. 65, 66; EURCR, no. 46; LACCR, no. 39; MECR, nos. 41, 42; NACR, no. 19; OCECR, nos. 99–102.

<sup>48</sup> FD, no 60.

<sup>49</sup> See McEwan, McPhillips, and Pepper, *International Survey of Catholic Women*.

<sup>50</sup> Macdonald, Carpenter, and Cornish, et al., *Woman and Man*.

men,<sup>51</sup> and the continental and universal stage documents of the Synod on Synodality,<sup>52</sup> reveals four key reforms for which women have consistently called over several decades. They are: 1) confronting the abuse of power and authority; 2) rectifying the non-recognition of the equality of women and men; 3) equitable inclusion of women in decision making, leadership, and governance; and 4) the desire for greater opportunities for women in ministry and the service of mission.<sup>53</sup>

The ISCW reported that twenty-nine percent of 17,200 respondents strongly agreed or agreed that without reform there was no place for them in the Catholic Church.<sup>54</sup> There is a risk of women not receiving synodality if it fails to respond to listening with transformative action. Simply reporting back to women one more time what they have been saying for decades will not demonstrate to them that they have been heard. Conversion of relationships, processes, and structures is required, not episcopal mansplaining.

Church structures and processes that fail to adequately include women could be considered structures of sin because they marginalize women's experiences and perspectives, entrenching and normalizing inequality. The Synod took small but significant steps towards addressing structures that exclude women by including some women as voting members and others as expert facilitators or theological experts. The move from a Synod of Bishops that includes a small number of women, to holding an Ecclesial Assembly in 2028 has potential to advance the equal participation of women in Church processes. While this is a structural response, the participation of women will remain dependent on appointment by men. All of my opportunities to contribute to synodal processes have relied on being approved of and appointed by men (or not).

While the FD calls for some measures that would boost the visibility and leadership of women,<sup>55</sup> they are not grounded in CST's insistence on equal human dignity and participation as a right, nor linked to remedial mechanisms such as redress when appointments or bodies structurally exclude women. The FD's strong chapters on

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<sup>51</sup> Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia, "Decree 4: Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men," August 2022, [plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/FINAL-Decree-4-Witnessing-to-the-Equal-Dignity-of-Women-and-Men.pdf](https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/FINAL-Decree-4-Witnessing-to-the-Equal-Dignity-of-Women-and-Men.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, "Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies," [synod.va/en/synodal-process/the-continental-stage/final\\_document.html](https://synod.va/en/synodal-process/the-continental-stage/final_document.html).

<sup>53</sup> Sandie Cornish, "Moving from Listening to Action: Exploring the Potential of Synodality to Address the Disaffiliation of Catholic Women," panel presentation at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Boston, November 22, 2025.

<sup>54</sup> McEwan, McPhillips, and Pepper, *International Survey of Catholic Women*, 36.

<sup>55</sup> FD, no. 60.

decision-making and participatory bodies stop short of requiring gender-balanced composition or parity targets, and they attach no consequences for non-compliance.<sup>56</sup> The Synthesis Report had already flagged the credibility gap if internal practice fails to honor women's equal dignity; the FD echoes the concern but under-specifies structural remedies consistent with CST.<sup>57</sup> Guarantees of participation that are consistent with CST such as thresholds or quotas, transparent selection criteria, or public dashboards are missing in the FD. So too is accountability via evaluation and corrective action for all decision-shaping bodies, which would concretize equal dignity and respect for human dignity inside the Church, not only in society.<sup>58</sup>

Taken together, the Synod documents reveal that while CST language, especially that of dignity, participation, and care for the marginalized, was present, its normative force was inconsistently applied. The displacement of subsidiarity by the more diffuse category of "differentiated co-responsibility" weakened the articulation of rights, duties, and decision-making guarantees within ecclesial life, particularly for women, whose contributions the documents acknowledge, yet fail to structurally secure. The gap between proclaimed equal human dignity and lived ecclesial practice thus remains significant, limiting the credibility of synodality and its potential to reshape governance in ways that are consonant with CST. These findings highlight that structural coherence, not merely rhetorical affirmation, is required if CST is to animate synodal reform. This sets the stage for a closer examination of how positionality within synodal roles shapes influence and agency—an exploration developed in the following section, where shifts from facilitator to theological expert and to voting member illuminate what more equitable participation might entail.

## CHANGING PLACES

Synodality begins with the whole People of God listening together, but listening alone does not produce teaching, policy, or reformed practice. The Church also needs ministries that interpret what has been heard in continuity with scripture and tradition, and ministries that assume responsibility for decision-taking. The FD presents the practices of ecclesial discernment, structured decision processes, and transparency, accountability, and evaluation as both interlinked and integral to a synodal Church, not add-ons to consultation.<sup>59</sup> Within this

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<sup>56</sup> FD, nos. 87–108.

<sup>57</sup> SR, no. 9g; FD, no. 60.

<sup>58</sup> FD, nos. 98, 103–108.

<sup>59</sup> FD, nos. 79–80, 87–101.

ecosystem, facilitators steward the method so all can be heard, while theological experts help the Assembly to articulate and test the theological coherence of what has been heard and voting members bear the authority and accountability to decide.

### *From Facilitator to Theological Expert*

As a facilitator, my mandate was to hold the process of Conversation in the Spirit, ensuring prayerful listening, equitable turn-taking, and clarity in table reports, not to speak my own word or to draft text. This deliberate self-effacement highlights why theological experts are indispensable: their task is to mediate between lived experience and the Church's doctrinal memory, testing consonance with revelation and tradition, refining language, and helping the Assembly move from rich testimonies to articulated discernment that the Church can responsibly receive.<sup>60</sup> In the Synod's process this is not so much a technocratic division of labor as an exchange of gifts. Wide participation is fostered by facilitated listening, and the charism of theology then serves the whole by giving faithful expression to what has been heard.<sup>61</sup>

Women were even more under-represented among the recognized theological experts than among the Members. However, in common with several of the women who were voting Members or expert facilitators, I have a doctorate in theology and teach in a theology faculty at a university. Together with at least three other English-speaking female facilitators, I have expertise in practical theology. Given that practical theology concerns the praxis of Christian living and requires empirical skills, it would seem that articulating the discernment of the Synod Members was a practical theology rather than systematic theology task.

The details of the methodology used by the theological experts are not publicly known, but it was observable that they were not seated at the round tables that were the heartbeat of the Synod. Had I been appointed as a theological expert, I would have advocated for a more embedded approach, accompanying the Members in their discernment. Imagine theologians sitting at the tables listening attentively, taking the notes, maybe even producing draft reports for the approval of the table groups. These responsibilities often restricted the voices of the Members appointed as Secretaries or elected as Rapporteurs. The Rapporteurs providing this support work were disproportionately women, and younger lay Members. Their visibility in this role did not serve their own voices. An embedded approach would have provided

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<sup>60</sup> FD, nos. 81–83, 85.

<sup>61</sup> FD, nos. 81–83, 85.

the theologians with richer, more holistic data with insight into the worlds of experience-in-context behind the words of reports—in other words, more direct “knowledge of people’s common sense” as *Ad Theologiam Promovendam* puts it.<sup>62</sup>

Very few tables called on assistance from the theological experts. This was also the case for the *periti* of the Australian Plenary Council. Seating theologians at the tables to assist with documentation could have made them more visible and accessible. They could have helped the Members to name their needs and pass requests to the most relevant theological experts.

If the theological experts had been more representative of the diversity of the People of God—including gender diversity—would their approach have been different? Had more of them been previously engaged in theologizing with and among those made poor, would their approach have better reflected Pope Francis’s call in *Ad Theologiam Promovendam* not to “settle for a desk theology” but rather to reflect from the frontiers?<sup>63</sup> Perhaps the marginalization of theologians noted above reflects a perception of theology as the very “desk theology” that *Ad Theologiam Promovendam* seeks to displace? Would the inclusion of more practical theologians have made a difference to their methodology and produced a document expressed in language more intelligible to the People of God?

Taking a further imaginative step, I now consider what I might have contributed had I been appointed as a voting member of the Synod.

#### *From Facilitator to Voting Member*

While theological experts serve the Church’s intelligence of faith, voting members assume responsibility for decisions. It was their communal discernment that the drafters were tasked with articulating. Without the step of decision-taking, synodal listening would remain consultation rather than governance. The FD frames decision-taking as distinct yet inseparable from consultation, obliging authorities to listen, to seek consensus, and to explain when departing from the fruits of consultation. It also calls for a synodal revision of canon law to clarify consultation–deliberation reciprocity.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Pope Francis, *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, November 1, 2023, trans. Christopher Longhurst, no. 8, [researchgate.net/profile/Christopher-Longhurst/publication/378709692\\_AD\\_THEOLOGIAM\\_PROMOVENDAM\\_On\\_Promoting\\_Theology/data/65e66790adf2362b6377e2ca/English-Translation-of-Ad-Theologiam-Promovendam-by-CELlonghurst.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Christopher-Longhurst/publication/378709692_AD_THEOLOGIAM_PROMOVENDAM_On_Promoting_Theology/data/65e66790adf2362b6377e2ca/English-Translation-of-Ad-Theologiam-Promovendam-by-CELlonghurst.pdf).

<sup>63</sup> Francis, *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, no. 3.

<sup>64</sup> FD, nos. 87–94.

Pastorally, decisional ministries create accountability for implementation, for example, via plans, timelines, and evaluation, so that listening leads to change, not consultation fatigue.<sup>65</sup> Because synodality claims credibility from co-responsibility, ensuring women's presence among voting members is not merely representational or symbolic but essential to the integrity of the process. Women's presence among Members means that they are among those who determine who enacts the Assembly's discernment with authority and who ensures that commitments are received, resourced, and reviewed.<sup>66</sup>

Had I been appointed as a Member, I would have spoken for a more explicitly integral approach to mission, a stronger, more intentional, linkage of internal Church reform with mission in and for the world, a clear emphasis on the mission of the laity lived in and for the world, and the courage to learn from others beyond the Church about operationalizing values and principles and aligning practices and structures with mission.

As we have seen, the social dimension of mission did not emerge as a priority in the Synod documents. Without due emphasis on it, faith risks being seen, and perhaps even experienced, as a purely private matter that does not animate the whole of life. The unity of love of God and love of our neighbors—even “enemies”—shapes the focus and scope of mission. As *Dilexi Te* makes clear, there is no authentic Christianity without love for the poor.<sup>67</sup>

The Synod focused on how to become a more synodal Church on mission. Inevitably this resulted in a significant amount of introspection concerning Church structures and processes. The coherence of the Church's internal life with its espoused mission is significant for its credibility and effectiveness in mission as my analysis of the Synod documents has demonstrated in relation to the social dimension of mission. As a Member I would have spoken for a clearer and stronger link to be made in all documentation between internal Church reform and external action for mission in the world. The purpose of becoming a more synodal Church is more authentic and effective mission transforming the world.

Since Vatican II the Church has acknowledged that it has much to learn from the world, as well as something to teach. Operationalizing values and principles and aligning practices and structures with mission in organizational life is a specialized area of study and practice that can inform the Church's efforts to become more synodal.

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<sup>65</sup> FD, nos. 95–102.

<sup>66</sup> FD, nos. 60, 101–102.

<sup>67</sup> Pope Leo XIV, *Dilexi Te*: “Apostolic Exhortation on Love for the Poor,” October 4, 2025, [vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/20251004-dilexi-te.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20251004-dilexi-te.html).

As a Member I would have drawn attention to practical theologians such as Christina Kheng and theological ethicists such as Stephanie Puen, who can help to interpret the best of knowledge in the disciplines of management and organizational change for the life of the Church.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore I would have emphasized that the practice of subsidiarity in the Church cannot be reduced to differentiated co-responsibility in isolation from the principle of the equal human dignity of all persons. Unless women share equally with men in Church decision-taking, co-responsibility for mission will remain a slogan that does not express equal human or baptismal dignity.

The FD has been critiqued for its lack of emphasis on the “lay apostolate” or mission of the laity.<sup>69</sup> The vast majority of Catholics live the lay vocation in the heart of the world; however, lay people were a small minority of voting Members of the Synod, and most of them were full-time Church workers. As a Member I would have advocated for the Synod to at least note that the more common experience of lay people being on mission outside of Church employment and ministry roles requires further attention grounded in lived experience.

Finally, as a Member I would have emphasized nurturing greater personal and communal reflexivity as part of formation, continually examining ourselves as actors, as a resource for becoming more synodal and authentically on mission. How well did we listen in each stage of the Synod to the People of God, to humanity, and to creation? Which voices were missing and why? Can community engagement approaches to theological research be incorporated into the listening and discernment of further synodal action and the preparation of Church documents? Have we mobilized local cultural resources or imposed Eurocentric processes? Do we need to decolonize synodality?

## CONCLUSION

This article argues that the credibility of synodality, and the ongoing development and more effective reception of CST, turn on the quality of the Church’s relationships with those who are marginalized, including women. Where these relationships remain

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<sup>68</sup> See for example Christina Kheng, “The Church and Management: Synthesis of a Reorientation Framework for Management Theories through a Theological Engagement with Management Science” (PhD diss., Australian Catholic University, 2017); Stephanie Puen, “Operationalizing the Vision of Catholic Social Thought Using Change Management,” *Religions* 13, no. 6 (2022): 483, doi:10.3390/rel13060483.

<sup>69</sup> For example, Stefan Gigacz, “Lay Apostolate vs Lay Ministry According to AI,” February 22, 2025, [synodality.substack.com/p/lay-apostolate-vs-lay-ministry-according](https://synodality.substack.com/p/lay-apostolate-vs-lay-ministry-according).

marked by unequal role allocations and constrained agency, CST's claims about equal human dignity risk functioning as rhetoric rather than moral norms. Visibility without text-shaping and decision-bearing influence in synodal processes normalizes exclusion and erodes witness. The documentary record shows that while CST language appears in the Synod documents, its normative framework is inconsistently applied. The displacement of subsidiarity by the more diffuse term "differentiated co-responsibility" weakens guarantees of participation and obscures accountability. These trends impact most heavily on women.

Synodality requires more than a lexicon. It requires converted relationships and structures that instantiate equal human dignity in ecclesial practice. My analysis shows that the credibility of synodality and the integrity of CST depend on structures that enable those at the margins to contribute to interpreting experience, authoring texts, and taking decisions. Where relationships with marginalized groups mature into mutual recognition and shared authority, both the content of CST and the processes by which it is developed are renewed. Conversely, relational failures stunt CST's development and blunt its mission. Accordingly, a morally coherent synodal ecclesiology must embed CST's normative framework through the specification of participation rights at various levels, transparent selection for roles, evaluation, gender-balanced composition of decision-shaping bodies, and public accountability for reception. Such measures are not managerial add-ons. They are necessary for evangelization in which the Church's life and witness honors the dignity it proclaims and thus strengthens its mission in and for the world. **M**

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