

Synodality in the Catholic Church: Toward a Conciliar Ecclesiology of Inclusion for LGBTQ+ Persons

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POPE FRANCIS'S CALL TO SYNODALITY HAS FUELED DIALOGUE on LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church. Appeals to welcome LGBTQ+ persons featured prominently in various regional synodal reports throughout the world¹ and were recognized in the Vatican's continental working document, "Enlarge the Space in Your Tent."² While the synodal process—which involved a worldwide consultation through local synodal sessions in parishes throughout the globe—is still in its infancy, the long-term impact of this consultation upon the universal church is still to be determined. In this undetermined future, I argue that the potential for LGBTQ+ persons to experience fuller integration in the church could become a reality.

LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church is a pressing matter. The alarming disproportionate rates of mental health challenges, economic disadvantages, and suicide indicate that this marginalized population

¹ New Ways Ministry analyzed mentions of LGBTQ+ issues in various synodal reports. See Robert Shine, "As Global Synod Progresses, LGBTQ+ Inclusion a Prominent Issue in National Reports," *Bondings 2.0* (blog), Sutust 2022, www.newwaysministry.org/2022/08/25/as-global-synod-progresses-lgbtq-inclusion-a-prominent-issue-in-national-reports/. For direct access to some reports, see United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "US National Synthesis 2021–2023 Synod," www.usccb.org/resources/US%20National%20Synthesis%202021-2023%20Synod.pdf; Conferencia Episcopal Argentina, "Sínodo de la sinodalidad: síntesis de Argentina," episcopado.org/assetsweb/cont/3469/argentina_sintesis_final_sinodo_21-23.pdf; Southern Africa Catholic Bishops Conference, "SACBC Synod Synthesis Report," June 9, 2022, sacbc.org.za/sacbc-submitted-a-synod-synthesis-report/; Conferencia Episcopal Española, "Síntesis sobre la fase diocesana del sínodo sobre la sinodalidad de la Iglesia que peregrina en España," June 11, 2022, www.conferenciaepiscopal.es/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/SINTESIS-FINAL-FASE-DIOCESANA-DEL-SINODO.pdf.

² General Secretariat of the Synod, "Enlarge the Space of Your Tent: Working Document for the Continental Stage," October 2022, no. 39, www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf.

is at risk.³ There is also indication that religion is often used as supporting rationale for the exclusion of LGBTQ+ persons,⁴ which exacerbates the mental and/or economic challenges they face. Catholic teaching on the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable should urge the church to consider avenues that go beyond simply hearing their stories to actually recognize their dignity as persons made in the *Imago Dei*.⁵ Furthermore, the exclusion of LGBTQ+ persons from the church may also affect non-LGBTQ+ persons, especially youth, who sometimes cite disagreement with Catholic doctrine or their perception of the church as unwelcoming to marginalized populations as a reason for disaffiliation.⁶ Thus, for both moral and pragmatic reasons, LGBTQ+ inclusion should be considered a priority for the church.

In this article, I argue that genuine LGBTQ+ inclusion in the Catholic Church can only take place if the synodal vision of Pope Francis successfully moves beyond a consultative process and infuses its ecclesiology into the church's structure. Catholic theology on synodality, including the teachings of Vatican II, supports an ecclesiological vision leading to greater LGBTQ+ inclusion. To demonstrate this, I will propose a synodal ecclesiological model synthesizing Pope Francis's statements, contemporary theology on synodality, and the church's principle of the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. Part one of this article will synthesize this ecclesiological model, and part two will apply it to the question of

³ James Martin, "Why Should the Church Reach Out to LGBTQ People? Some Shocking Statistics Can Answer That," *America*, August 2, 2021, www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/08/02/james-martin-lgbtq-catholics-statistics-241139.

⁴ The Trevor Project, "Religiosity and Suicidality among LGBTQ Youth," April 14, 2020, www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/religiosity-and-suicidality-among-lgbtq-youth/.

⁵ Space does not allow me to develop this argument fully so, provisionally, I will note that Pope Francis's encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti* repeatedly links human dignity to the plight of the vulnerable of the world who suffer in many ways.

⁶ In 2017, Saint Mary's Press commissioned a study to understand better why young Catholics disaffiliate from the church. After surveying youth, the researchers found that many cite disagreements with the church about hot button topics (such as homosexuality) as the reason for disaffiliation. See Robert J. McCarthy and John M. Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2018), 14–21. Another broader study about why Americans disaffiliate from any religion also found that disagreement with their congregation about LGBTQ+ inclusion was a significant reason. See Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, and Robert P. Jones, "A Shifting Landscape: A Decade of Change in American Attitudes about Same-Sex Marriage and LGBT Issues," Public Religion Research Institute, www.prii.org/research/2014-lgbt-survey/.

LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church. Finally, the conclusion will reflect on the importance of such structural changes and raise questions for future research.

TOWARD A SYNODAL ECCLESIOLOGY

Historical Catholic ecclesiology, as articulated by popes and councils prior to Vatican II, overemphasized the hierarchical component of the church as primary and described the role of the laity as passive and secondary. This perspective is perhaps best captured in Pope Pius X's encyclical *Vehementer Nos*, in which he states:

The church is essentially an *unequal* society, that is, a society comprising two categories of persons, the pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful. So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society and directing all its members towards that end; the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors.⁷

The Second Vatican Council significantly reoriented this model. This new direction called for a hierarchical decentralization that balances the power of the institutional church with the role of the lay faithful, grounded in their baptismal reality. In the words of Richard Gaillardetz, "The baptismal foundation encouraged a new mode of theological reflection on who we all are as church."⁸ On this shift, John O'Malley further remarks that "the symbolism of the change was potent: the first reality of the church is horizontal and consists of all the baptized, without distinction of rank. Only then comes the vertical reality, hierarchy."⁹

Further reflecting on this development, Cardinal Avery Dulles, in his classic work *Models of the Church*, outlines various ecclesiological modalities of the church in addition to its institutional reality.¹⁰ Among the six models outlined by Dulles the *Mystical*

⁷ Pius X, *Vehementer Nos*, February 11, 1906, no. 8, www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_11021906_vehementer-nos.html.

⁸ Richard R. Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making*: Lumen Gentium, Christus Dominus, Orientalium Ecclesiarum (New York: Paulist, 2006), 148.

⁹ John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2010), 178.

¹⁰ Dulles explains six ecclesiological models of church, which are: institutional (considering the hierarchical structure of the church), herald (focused on the proclamation of the Gospel), sacramental (emphasizing the visible presence of an invisible reality), servant (focused on the charitable and justice-based mission of the

Communion model, which synthesizes views of the church as the “Body of Christ” and the “People of God,”¹¹ combined with the teachings of Vatican II discussed below, serve as primary foundation for Pope Francis’s calls for synodality. According to Gerard Mannion, “Pope Francis has clearly rehabilitated the sense of the church understood as the People of God and likewise sought to reemphasize and encourage other key aspects of Vatican II in a new fashion for these times, including a participatory sense of magisterium, collegiality, and co-responsibility in the church.”¹² Emile Kouveglo remarked, “*El papa Francisco sitúa su pontificado en la línea de la continuidad de la aplicación efectiva del Concilio Vaticano II, y la Iglesia sinodal que él espera no es más que el rostro de la Iglesia que debía surgir de la eclesiología del Concilio.*”¹³ Massimo Faggioli agrees, “Francis did not introduce this path to synodality as an innovation, but in continuity with the tradition of the previous 50 years. ... But Francis put emphasis on the synodal church in the context of the world today.”¹⁴ Thus, Pope Francis’s synodal vision retrieves and implements key teachings of Vatican II with specific emphasis on collegiality and collaboration.

The Conciliar Theology of Synodality

Several key teachings of the Second Vatican Council serve as foundation for Pope Francis’s collegial synodal ecclesiology: the emphasis on the church as baptized “People of God” (*Lumen Gentium*, nos. 9–17), the doctrine of the *sensus fidelium* (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 12), the teaching on conscience (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16), the

church in the world), the mystical Body of Christ (considering the church a communion united under Christ who leads it as a people), and the Community of Disciples (emphasizing the relationship between the community of believers and the person of Christ). See Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded edition (New York: Doubleday, 1987).

¹¹ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 39–54.

¹² Gerard Mannion, “*Sensus Fidelium* and the International Theological Commission—Has Anything Changed Between 2012 and 2014?,” in *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei*, ed. Bradford E. Hinze and Peter C. Phan (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 84.

¹³ “Pope Francis situates his pontificate in continuity with the effective application of Vatican II, and the synodal church he hopes for is nothing other than the face of the church that should emerge from the Council.” See Emile Kouveglo, “La sinodalidad en la actualidad, a la luz del Concilio Vaticano II,” *Revista de investigación de La Cátedra Internacional Conjunta Inocencio III* 1, no. 7 (October 30, 2018): 293, vergentis.ucam.edu/index.php/vergentis/article/view/93.

¹⁴ Massimo Faggioli, “From Collegiality to Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis’s ‘Listening Primacy,’” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (2020): 357, doi.org/10.1177/0021140020916034.

church's interpretation of the signs of the times (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4), and the role of magisterial authority (*Lumen Gentium*, nos. 12 and 25; *Dei Verbum*, no. 10). These concepts have historically reflected a certain tension between the competence of the laity (having authority of conscience and a *sensus fidelium*) and the authority of the magisterium (having responsibility over interpreting revelation and formulating teaching).¹⁵ In response to this tension, I maintain that—taking into consideration the historical theological context of the Council and including pre-conciliar theology as well as the effects of the Council—Vatican II moves in a direction placing more emphasis and authority on the competence of the *sensus fidelium* and de-emphasizing the authority of the magisterium (without removing it). Vatican II moves toward synodality as a structural ecclesiological reality where collegiality permeates all levels of the church.

This new ecclesiology is also reflected in Vatican II's persistent calls for the faithful to participate in the life of the church. Ormond Rush expounds on this by stating, "Full and active participation of all the faithful means appropriate participation by the laity in the *teaching, sanctifying, and governing* of church life, and in the mission of the church in the world, since the whole People of God, 'from the bishops down to the last of the lay faithful,' share in the prophetic, priestly, and kingly offices of Christ."¹⁶ Thus, the ecclesiology of Vatican II calls the baptized lay faithful, along with the ordained magisterium, to walk together and discern how God is calling them to respond to the signs of the times.

This collegial ecclesiological shift is largely propelled by the Council's new understanding of the *sensus fidelium*, which Gaillardetz defines as "this capacity that allows a believer, almost intuitively, to sense what is of God and what is not."¹⁷ In 2014, the International Theological Commission explained the *sensus fidelium* as "an instinct for the truth of the Gospel, which enables [the faithful] to recognise and endorse authentic Christian doctrine and practice, and to reject what is false. That supernatural instinct, intrinsically linked to the gift of faith received in the communion of the church ... enables Christians

¹⁵ The International Theological Commission identified this tension in their 2012 document "Theology Today." Commenting on ITC documents, Gerard Mannion notes, "On the one hand, the Vatican affirmed that the whole people of God are charged with making sense of and bearing witness to the faith, but also that the pope and episcopal hierarchy are responsible for authentically (that is, authoritatively) interpreting the faith" (Mannion, "*Sensus Fidelium*," 73).

¹⁶ Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2004), 82–83.

¹⁷ Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making*, 49.

to fulfil their prophetic calling.”¹⁸ The *sensus fidelium* equips the faithful with a special competence to discern new movements of the Spirit in their lives and the world. In the words of Ormond Rush, “Revelation is happening here and now, and the Spirit’s gift of *sensus fidei* enables its faithful interpretation. . . . God continues to surprise us and provoke us. And the *sensus fidei* is the antenna for sensing those surprises and provocations.”¹⁹

According to *Dei Verbum* no. 10, the magisterium retains the authority to interpret revelation and formulate doctrine. However, it is more likely to do so accurately if it adopts a collegial ecclesiology uniting and balancing the hierarchy with the “antenna” for sensing God’s revelation, that is, the *sensus fidelium*. According to Peter Phillips, “The gift of authority is that gift of the Spirit to the church which mediates between an oppressive and stultifying uniformity and an anarchic diversity. Each isolation is destructive. Held together we have a ‘foretaste’ of the unity for which Christ prayed.”²⁰ Such collegiality between the laity and the hierarchy is key for the responsible and genuine exercise of magisterial authority, and Pope Francis’s call to synodality reflects an attempt to strike a new balance between these two components of the church. Moreover, such a shift requires that the magisterium reorient itself to enter into meaningful dialogue with the *sensus fidelium* made manifest through the lives of the faithful.

Pope Francis’s Call for a Synodal Church

At the 2014 World Meeting of Families, Pope Francis said, “To find what the Lord asks of his church today, we must lend an ear to the debates of our time and perceive the ‘fragrance’ of the men of this age, so as to be permeated with their joys and hopes, with their griefs and anxieties. At that moment we will know how to propose the good news on the family with credibility.”²¹ He began to lay the groundwork for a synodal church by drawing on *Gaudium et Spes*’ call

¹⁸ International Theological Commission, “*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church,” no. 2, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html.

¹⁹ Ormond Rush, “The Church as a Hermeneutical Community and the Eschatological Function of the *Sensus Fidelium*,” in *Learning from All the Faithful*, 145–146.

²⁰ Peter Phillips, “Synodality and the Gift of Authority,” *Theology* 103, no. 815 (2000): 323, doi.org/10.1177/0040571X0010300502.

²¹ Francis, “Address of His Holiness on the Meeting of Families,” October 4, 2014, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141004_incontro-per-la-famiglia.html.

to listen to “the signs of the time and [interpret] them in the light of the Gospel.”²²

Pope Francis’s first explicit call for a synodal church that listens was issued at the 2015 Synod on the Family, which marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Synod of Bishops first convened by Pope Paul VI after the Second Vatican Council. During his address to the bishops, Pope Francis explained that “a synodal church is a church which listens, which realizes that listening ‘is more than simply hearing.’ It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth,’ in order to know what he ‘says to the churches.’”²³ The pope also offered the powerful image of an inverted pyramid:

In this church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base. Consequently, those who exercise authority are called “ministers,” because, in the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all. It is in serving the people of God that each bishop becomes, for that portion of the flock entrusted to him, *vicarius Christi*, the vicar of that Jesus who at the Last Supper bent down to wash the feet of the Apostles.²⁴

Thus, the pope strives to implement an ecclesiology balancing the authority of the institutional hierarchy with the role of the laity; where the magisterium is deeply connected to and dependent upon those it serves. Furthermore, by distinguishing between “listening” and “hearing” through a pneumatological lens, Pope Francis is calling for an approach that goes beyond simply consulting and strives toward renewal. Synodality should result in Spirit-led transformation of the church. According to Massimo Faggioli, “Francis represents a moment of renewal in the Catholic ecclesiological tradition about synodality and a new development in comparison to the way papal magisterium addressed the issue since Vatican II.”²⁵

²² Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4, www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

²³ Francis, “Address of His Holiness at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops,” October 17, 2015, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

²⁴ Francis, “Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary.”

²⁵ Faggioli, “From Collegiality to Synodality,” 13.

Synodal Ecclesiology in Practice

I propose that a synodal ecclesiology contains three key dynamics that facilitate this collegiality. The first dynamic is the inversion of the pyramid proposed in 2015 by Pope Francis.²⁶ Under this dynamic, the magisterial hierarchy is placed at the service of the People of God. In the words of Ormond Rush, “The church is, *in the first instance*, a community of faith, a community of flesh and blood believers who respond to God’s offer of revelation and salvation in Christ through the Spirit.”²⁷ Such an inversion prioritizes a consultation of the *sensus fidelium* as a crucial first step in the exercise of magisterial authority.²⁸ This is not simply pragmatic but also pneumatological because it acknowledges that the Spirit works through the lives of the faithful and can guide the church in new directions. Further developing the pneumatological character of a synodal ecclesiology, Amanda Osheim explains that synodality is “rooted theologically in the presence of the Holy Spirit throughout the church.”²⁹ In the words of Bradford Hinze, “Consulting the faithful ... is based on the central conviction that the Spirit is actively at work in the faithful as they receive the Word of God, understand the self-communication of God, and apply this received revelation.”³⁰ Thus, synodality is more than simply consulting the faithful as a preparative process ultimately distinct from the exercise of magisterial authority. Rather, this dialogue with the laity is an essential constitutive component of the life of the church to be fully integrated into the whole process of “teaching” (that is, the *magisterium*).

This leads me to the second key dynamic, which instills a circular modality in the exercise of the *magisterium*. According to Rush, “The church’s interpretation of divine revelation can be imagined as a circle, a hermeneutical circle, of understanding.”³¹ This includes the revelation present through the *sensus fidelium*, which “should function

²⁶ Francis, “Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary.”

²⁷ Ormond Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church,” *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2017): 317, doi.org/10.1177/0040563917698561 (emphasis original).

²⁸ Rush argues that for Pope Francis, active listening to the *sensus fidelium* of the People of God is the linchpin holding together the tensions between hierarchy and faithful in the church. See Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid,” 311.

²⁹ Amanda C. Osheim, “Stepping toward a Synodal Church,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2019): 371–372, doi.org/10.1177/0040563919836225.

³⁰ Bradford Hinze, “Can We Find a Way Together? The Challenge of Synodality in a Wounded and Wounding Church,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (2020): 28, doi.org/10.1177/0021140020926595.

³¹ Rush, “The Church as a Hermeneutical Community,” 152.

in a critical way in the process of the church learning and teaching.”³² This hermeneutical circle operates as a theological dynamic within which the faith of the individual believer through assent (*fides qua creditur*) and the substance of the faith tradition as transmitted by the magisterium (*fides quae creditur*) affect each other.³³ Obviously, the doctrinal faith of the magisterium affects the faith of the believer through the process of teaching. But perhaps less obviously, the opposite is also true: the faithful’s reception of magisterial teaching (assent) or lack thereof (dissent) also affects how the magisterium teaches. This process thus becomes a constant dialectic that helps reinforce the first dynamic of an inverted pyramid. Under this second dynamic, while the word *hierarchy* continues to refer to the bishops and the pope in charge of formulating doctrine, the term *magisterium*—which refers to the “teaching offices” of the church—takes new meaning and becomes more inclusive of the *sensus fidelium* constantly informing it. Osheim remarks, “Rather than dividing the church into those empowered to teach and those rendered docile to teaching, through the Spirit all church members are both learners and teachers.”³⁴ Hence, the second dynamic creates an ecclesiological structure facilitating genuine collegiality between ordained and lay members of the church.³⁵

The third dynamic, often absent from ecclesiological theology on synodality, emphasizes the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. A concept often relegated to the work of liberation theology and Catholic social teaching, I argue that the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable should serve as a key component of this synodal ecclesiological dialectic. Central to this analysis is an understanding of this preferential option as grounded in *structural reform* and not just *charitable actions*.³⁶ The preferential option for

³² Rush, “The Church as a Hermeneutical Community,” 153.

³³ Ormond Rush, “*Sensus Fidei*: Faith ‘Making Sense’ of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 62, no. 2 (2001): 235–236, doi.org/10.1177/004056390106200201.

³⁴ Osheim, “Stepping toward a Synodal Church,” 371–372.

³⁵ An interesting structural development of this sort has already taken place at the Vatican when Pope Francis published *Predicate Evangelium*, a new constitution opening doors for lay men and women to serve in Vatican offices. See Francis, *Praedicate Evangelium: Apostolic Constitution on the Roman Curia and its Service to the Church and to the World*, March 19, 2022, no. 10, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/20220319-costituzione-ap-praedicate-evangelium.html#General_Norms.

³⁶ Martin Schlag outlines how Pope Francis’s treatment of the preferential option for the poor moves beyond charity and seeks to reform cultural structures, market economies, and politics through a comprehensive effort involving everyone. See

the poor and vulnerable requires collective action against social structures that perpetuate their victimization.

In light of synodality, I reclaim the principle of the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable and apply it *intra-ecclesiam* as part of the participatory synodal ecclesiological process, which must include the *sensus fidelium* of the most vulnerable. Referencing liberation theology, Martin Schlag observes that “the preferential option for the poor is not just an aspect of love for those in need but presents itself as the universal pre-condition for any reflection on faith.”³⁷ Based on this notion, I argue that the magisterium—including the ordained hierarchy and lay leaders—must make special efforts to solicit the “full and active” participation of those marginalized in our church. Indeed, one of the most significant challenges to synodal discourse precisely is the lack of inclusion of underrepresented Catholic voices,³⁸ which could incapacitate the magisterium by depriving it of the ability to listen to the *sensus fidelium* of the marginalized. Adopting a genuine synodal ecclesiology requires the church to go to the peripheries and engage in meaningful dialogue with those who are ostracized, especially those ostracized by the church itself. This is an important exercise of the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable through synodal discourse.

As alluded to before, this third dynamic may result in a practice of *intra-ecclesiam* liberation theology, which has already been proposed by several scholars. For example, in his foundational text, Gustavo Gutierrez re-locates theology to the peripheries by arguing that God is revealed throughout history on the side of the marginalized.³⁹ Leonardo and Clodovis Boff moreover state that “before we can do theology we have to ‘do’ liberation.”⁴⁰ Space does not permit in depth exploration of the relationship between synodality and liberation theology; I will simply assert that a synodal ecclesiology that encompasses a structural reform committed to listening to all faithful

Martin Schlag, “Social Justice or Preferential Option for the Poor?,” *Studia Moralia* 58, no. 2 (July 2020): 367–368.

³⁷ Schlag, “Social Justice,” 363.

³⁸ The 2022 Continental Working Document “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent” recognizes the challenge that is the lack of inclusion in the church. See General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent: Working Document for the Continental Stage,” nos. 38–40.

³⁹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, revised edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

⁴⁰ Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 22.

must involve efforts to reach out to those marginalized throughout history with special attention to those marginalized by the church.⁴¹

Perhaps the biggest challenge to this synodal ecclesiological vision is the question of humility: these three synodal dynamics require bishops to abandon the security found in doing things always the same way. According to Strzelczyk, “The criterion, ‘but it has always been done this way,’ cannot serve as the basis for discernment—it cannot block bold and creative new ways of doing things.”⁴² A synodal ecclesiology should inspire bishops and other church leaders to get comfortable with messiness and uncertainty. Communal dialogue and discernment are difficult and require embracing and (sometimes blindly) walking toward the unknown with the support of others. In the words of Éamonn Fitzgibbon, “The synodal way is difficult—it is particularly difficult for those who want clarity and definite answers.”⁴³ Ecclesial humility is at the heart of synodality: recognizing that we are all close to the ground, journeying together, scared of uncertainty, filled with hope, and guided by the Spirit.

Summary: Toward a Synodal Ecclesiology

In part one, I argued that synodality is more than a simple process of consulting the faithful but rather encompasses broader structural reform in the life of the church. After exploring historical ecclesiological developments that outline the often tense relationship between the hierarchy and lay faithful, I observed that Pope Francis’s call to synodality addresses this tension by forwarding Vatican II’s vision for the church in which the *sensus fidelium* actively informs and participates in the *magisterium* along with the hierarchy. While the hierarchy is ultimately in charge of articulating doctrine, synodality should inspire them to do so in unison with lay persons whose

⁴¹ In a relevant essay, Ladislav Orsy questions how the church’s teachings on religious freedom grounded in human dignity (following *Dignitatis Humanae*) apply as an intra-ecclesial mandate toward those who dissent from Catholic teaching. He further argues for a degree of tolerance and mutual listening on any matter of dissent peripheral to the core of Catholic doctrine. While space does not allow me to develop this argument further, I wonder how this form of tolerance can bring forth a sense of liberation within the church toward those oppressed due to their disagreement with magisterial doctrine on sexual morality. See Ladislav Orsy, “The Divine Dignity of Human Persons in *Dignitatis Humanae*,” *Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (2014): 17–18, doi.org/10.1177/0040563913519565.

⁴² Grzegorz Strzelczyk, “Synodality: An Epiphany of the Spirit,” *Studia Teologii Dogmatycznej* 5 (2020): 144, doi.org/10.15290/std.2019.05.12.

⁴³ Éamonn Fitzgibbon, “Together on the Way—Pope Francis and Synodality,” *The Furrow* 68, no. 10 (2017): 539, thefurrow.ie/product/together-way-pope-francis-synodality/.

“fragrance” permeates through their ranks by means of collegial discourse. This structural reform guided by the *sensus fidelium* represents a church led by the will of the Holy Spirit as revealed through the lives of the faithful. Crucially, a genuinely synodal ecclesiology is characterized by a commitment to include underrepresented voices in the church. In sum, by (1) inverting the role of the church’s hierarchy toward service of the faithful and the world, (2) engaging in a circular dialectic with the *sensus fidelium*, and (3) exercising a preferential option toward the marginalized in the church, Pope Francis’s calls to synodality could transform the church for the better by transcending the initial process of consultation and reshaping the church’s ecclesiological structures as it humbly journeys through an uncertain path under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁴ In the next part, I will apply this synodal ecclesiology to the question of LGBTQ+ inclusion in the Catholic Church.

SYNODALITY AND LBGTQ+ INCLUSION IN THE CHURCH

The US Catholic Church’s tumultuous journey with LGBTQ+ people is fraught with controversies. Dismissals of LGBTQ+ educators and parish ministers, exclusion from sacraments and other church rituals, a significant degree of silence during the aftermath of the Pulse Nightclub and Q-Bar shootings, denial of transgender healthcare, refusal to allow adoption by same-sex parents, and continuous lobbying against LGBTQ+ legal protections in the name of religious freedom have all colored the experience of LGBTQ+ Catholics.⁴⁵ Internationally, magisterial silence in the face of the death

⁴⁴ The first two phases of the Synod on Synodality have been completed. Phase one consisted in local listening sessions throughout the world. Phase two, named the “continental stage,” consisted in the regional/continental synthesis of the local diocesan reports. The final phase of the Synod will take place from October 2023 through October 2024 and consist of an Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in the Vatican. See Courtney Mares, “Pope Francis Announces Decision to Extend Synod on Synodality to 2024,” *Catholic News Agency*, October 16, 2022, www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/252560/pope-francis-announces-decision-to-extend-synod-on-synodality-to-2024.

⁴⁵ There are many documented anecdotal examples of such hurt. See Francis DeBernardo and Robert Shine, “Employees of Catholic Institutions Who Have Been Fired, Forced to Resign, Had Offers Rescinded, or Had Their Jobs Threatened Because of LGBT Issues,” New Ways Ministry, September 21, 2021, www.newwaysministry.org/issues/employment/employment-disputes/; Jo Yurcaba, “Catholic Diocese Says Gay and Trans People Can’t Be Baptized or Receive Communion,” *NBC News*, December 10, 2021, www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/catholic-diocese-says-gay-trans-people-cant-baptized-receive-communion-rcna8217; Robert Shine, “After Colorado Shooting, Bishops’ Responses Muted, Other Catholic Leaders Speak Out,” *Bondings 2.0* (blog), November 23, 2022,

penalty and criminalization laws, in addition to similar opposition to LGBTQ+ legal protections in the US,⁴⁶ have caused deep hurt to many LGBTQ+ Catholics.⁴⁷

Despite this current state of exclusion, I argue that Pope Francis's synodal ecclesiology holds significant promise for LGBTQ+ persons in the church. To discuss this, I will first analyze the interactions between Pope Francis and LGBTQ+ Catholics. Second, I will reflect on Pope Francis's statement on "listening to" versus "hearing" the witness of LGBTQ+ Catholics in light of the synodal ecclesiology proposed in part one. Finally, I will hypothesize what would happen if a synodal ecclesiological structure inclusive of LGBTQ+ persons were to be implemented in the broader church.

Pope Francis and LGBTQ+ Catholics: An Inconsistent Message

Without question, Pope Francis has ushered in a new era of inclusion for LGBTQ+ Catholics in the church. However, there are disagreements among scholars about the long-term impact of his work. While, on the one hand, Pope Francis has frequently met with LGBTQ+ persons, issued statements for decriminalization, and

www.newwaysministry.org/2022/11/23/after-colorado-shooting-bishops-responses-muted-other-catholic-leaders-speak-out/; James Martin, *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity*, revised expanded edition (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 14–15; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Discrimination against Catholic Adoption Services," www.usccb.org/committees/religious-liberty/discrimination-against-catholic-adoption-services; Jonah McEown, "US Bishops Say Religious Freedom Protections in Same-Sex Marriage Bill Are 'Insufficient,'" *Catholic News Agency*, November 17, 2022, www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/252849/us-bishops-religious-freedom-same-sex-marriage. A devastating case involves a lesbian teen who died by suicide in Denver and her family blamed the church. See Elizabeth Hernandez, "Family Blames Religious Conversion Therapy for Alana Chen's Death, Looks to Spark Hope with New Foundation," *The Denver Post*, January 6, 2020, www.denverpost.com/2020/01/06/alana-chen-conversion-therapy-suicide/.

⁴⁶ For a chronology of international issues of Catholic LGBTQ+ inclusion, see Robert Shine, "Anti-LGBTQ Criminalization and the Catholic Church: A Chronology," New Ways Ministry, July 14, 2019, www.newwaysministry.org/resources/catholic-responses-criminalization/.

⁴⁷ As an example, a testimony by Andrew Sullivan highlights the pain caused by the church's exclusion of LGBTQ+ persons. See Thomas H. Stahel, "Interview: Andrew Sullivan on Being Openly Gay and Catholic," *America*, November 10, 2022, www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/11/10/vantage-point-america-andrew-sullivan-244119. Another example is voiced in the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative's video of LGBTQ+ Catholics expressing their laments and hopes for an inclusive church. See Marianist LGBTQ+ Initiative Team, "Living Our Marianist Charism: Embracing the LGBTQ+ Community Video," Marianist Social Justice Collaborative, July 2020, marianistsjc.net/lgbtq-initiative.

seemingly supported civil same-sex union,⁴⁸ he has also repeatedly upheld the current doctrine of the church excluding same-sex marriage and condemned the so-called “gender ideology” (a theory that presumably affirms transgender identities).⁴⁹ Given this discrepancy, some argue that Pope Francis’s inclusiveness toward LGBTQ+ persons can be categorized only as a pastoral practice with no bearing upon the structure and doctrine of the church.

In 2023, to commemorate the ten-year anniversary of Pope Francis’s pontificate, New Ways Ministry conducted a survey asking various scholars to “grade” Pope Francis’s efforts toward LGBTQ+ inclusion. The results were varied but mostly they view the pope’s initiatives as simply pastoral. Christopher Lamb gave the pope an A, arguing that “the Pope has modelled an approach of listening, accompaniment, and mercy, which itself is rooted in the Gospel.” Bryan Massingale, who conferred a B-, praised the pope’s unprecedented public witness of accompaniment, but also noted that “there are real limits to what can be achieved only through pastoral openness and active listening.” Lisa Fullam criticized the Pope with a C-, stating that “Magisterial doctrine on LGBTQ+ issues wounds the People of God. Pope Francis should decide where he stands.” Many others issued similar praises and critiques.⁵⁰

The survey by New Ways Ministry reflects a significant “question underneath the question” of LGBTQ+ inclusion: would including LGBTQ+ persons into the synodal life of the church bring about a development of doctrine on matters of sexuality? In 2017, Jorge Aquino lamented that Pope Francis’s reforms of the church would not

⁴⁸ See Stephanie Kirchgaessner, “Vatican: Pope’s Only ‘Audience’ Was with Gay Former Student—Not Kim Davis,” *The Guardian*, October 2, 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/02/pope-francis-kim-davis-audience-gay-student; Nicole Winfield, “Pope Francis Meets Transgender Guests of Rome Church,” *Associated Press*, August 11, 2022, apnews.com/article/pope-francis-religion-rome-208b6a50c4872fde0e04335868b9d9e8; Jeanine Gramick, “Pope Francis Has Condemned LGBTQ Criminalization. Now What?,” *National Catholic Reporter*, February 27, 2023, www.ncronline.org/opinion/guest-voices/pope-francis-has-condemned-lgbtq-criminalization-now-what; and Nicole Winfield, “Francis Becomes 1st Pope to Endorse Same-Sex Civil Unions,” *AP News*, October 21, 2020, apnews.com/article/pope-endorse-same-sex-civil-unions-eb3509b30ebac35e91aa7cbda2013de2.

⁴⁹ Francis, “*Amoris Laetitia*,” March 19, 2016, nos. 52, 59, www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

⁵⁰ For the list of responses, see Robert Shine, “From ‘A’ to ‘D-’: How Catholic LGBTQ+ Leaders Grade Pope Francis at Ten Years, Part I,” *Bondings 2.0* (blog), March 14, 2023, www.newwaysministry.org/2023/03/14/from-a-to-d-how-catholic-lgbtq-leaders-grade-pope-francis-at-ten-years-part-i/.

bring about reform on matters of human sexuality. He thus states, “In re-subscribing to the natural-law assumptions underwriting prior magisterial instructions on sexuality, Francis has kept the doors of change firmly closed.”⁵¹ He further predicts that we would not see much change on the matter during Pope Francis’s pontificate. In contrast, Massingale argued that the pope’s famous statement “Who am I to judge?” in response to whether gay priests could be ordained—while appearing to be merely pastoral—contains an implicit doctrinal development in the church considering the established mandate that barred men with “deep seated homosexual tendencies” from entering the priesthood.⁵² In Massingale’s words, “There is a change of tone, to be sure. But that tone masks a definite doctrinal development now underway—a change of beliefs that is cautious, incremental, tentative, tense yet nonetheless real.”⁵³ He moreover notes that this push for development goes beyond the Pope, as evidenced by the Synod on the Family deliberations where the bishops considered crafting more accepting language for same-sex unions and two drafted paragraphs that simply restated doctrine on homosexuality failed to acquire the necessary votes to pass.⁵⁴ This tension among the bishops was also reflected in 2023 when the German Synodal Way issued a public call for a development of doctrine on sexual morality and liturgical reforms accommodating blessings for same-sex couples despite objections from the Vatican.⁵⁵ All of this indicates that the bishops themselves are wrestling with a potential development of doctrine on

⁵¹ Jorge A. Aquino, “No Queer *Aggiornamento* this Time: Resubscribing to the Philosophy of Natural Law, Pope Francis Forecloses Reforms of Catholic Teaching on Sexuality,” *Politics and Religion Journal* 11, no. 2 (2017): 225, doi.org/10.54561/prj1102217a.

⁵² See the 2005 Vatican Instruction banning priests with deep seated homosexual tendencies from ordination: Congregation for Catholic Education, “Criteria for the Discernment of Vocation for Persons with Homosexual Tendencies,” November 4, 2005,

www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20051104_istruzione_en.html.

⁵³ Bryan Massingale, “Beyond ‘Who Am I to Judge?’ The *Sensus Fidelium*, LGBT Experience, and Truth-Telling in the Church,” in *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei*, ed. Bradford E. Hinze and Peter C. Phan (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 170–171.

⁵⁴ Massingale, “Beyond ‘Who Am I to Judge?,’” 175–177.

⁵⁵ See Associated Press, “Germany’s Catholic Bishops Vote to Approve Blessings for Same-Sex Couples,” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 10, 2023, www.ncronline.org/news/germanys-catholic-bishops-vote-approve-blessings-same-sex-couples and A. C. Wimmer, “Vatican Warns Threats of Germany’s ‘Synodal Way’ to the Church,” *Catholic News Agency*, July 21, 2022, www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/251841/vatican-warns-of-threat-to-the-unity-germany-synodal-way.

this matter. Space does not allow for a comprehensive treatment of the relationship between synodal ecclesiological discourse and the development of magisterial doctrine, so I relegate this question to future research by simply acknowledging the potential for such developments. I briefly highlight the magisterial tension over doctrine to argue that the latter should not serve as a basis to shut down discourse on matters of LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church given the contentious debate among bishops.

Based on the foregoing, I hold that Pope Francis's posture toward LGBTQ+ persons has been more than a simple act of pastoral accompaniment (though it certainly is that): while it has not brought forth explicit development of doctrine, the pope's pastoral treatment of LGBTQ+ persons reflects and models a new ecclesiological reality, a new way of being in the church; it is for this reason that his actions have sparked such contentious conversations about the potential development of church doctrine. Therefore, I give more credit to Pope Francis compared to others who claim that the Pope has only issued a change in tone. Ecclesiological reform is more fundamental. A singular development of doctrine on this issue, without the ecclesiological structures necessary to uphold a climate of inclusive dialogue in the church, could easily be reversed by a future, less conciliar pope. For this ecclesiology to fully take hold and realize the full range of potential for LGBTQ+ inclusion, new structures must be codified into the operative documents of the church (e.g., the Code of Canon Law, Vatican documents, and other forms of magisterial decrees) and the spirit of synodality must permeate the global culture of the church.

"Listening" to LGBTQ+ Persons as a Synodal Ecclesiological Practice

Let us revisit two key statements Pope Francis issued on synodality. First, he explained that "a synodal church is a church which listens, which realizes that listening 'is more than simply hearing.' It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth,' in order to know what he 'says to the churches.'"⁵⁶ Second, he asserted, "To find what the Lord asks of his church today, we must lend an ear to the debates of our time and perceive the 'fragrance' of the men of this age, so as to be permeated with their

⁵⁶ Francis, "Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary."

joys and hopes, with their griefs and anxieties. At that moment we will know how to propose the good news on the family with credibility.”⁵⁷ As argued above, these two statements define a synodal process that transcends consultation. *Listening*, for Pope Francis, involves a transformation of the church through the action of the Holy Spirit revealed through the lives of the faithful (that is, the *sensus fidelium*). This has significant implications for how Catholic parishes and institutions should respond to LGBTQ+ Catholics on a day-to-day basis. Namely, their policies, procedures, and practices should aim to offer welcoming Catholic environments, where LGBTQ+ persons can experience communion with the church and where church leaders can tap into the *sensus fidelium* revealed through their lives.

In order to effectively listen to LGBTQ+ persons, Catholic leaders must first recognize that LGBTQ+ persons are already meaningfully participating in various church spaces (parishes, schools, hospitals, charities, etc.) through various roles (church attendees, ministers, pastoral associates, teachers, religious, priests, bishops, nurses, volunteers, or others). In parishes or dioceses where LGBTQ+ persons do not feel welcome, or where no openly LGBTQ+ persons are serving or participating, local church leaders must endeavor to create and facilitate spaces where LGBTQ+ persons can be drawn into Catholic community. LGBTQ+ Catholics are baptized and, therefore, according to Vatican II, part of the People of God, through which the Spirit actively works. Thus, from their various roles throughout the church, their authentic life witness should be listened to and affirmed as a valid expression of grace. Considering that synodality involves mutual listening and that LGBTQ+ Catholics have already been listening to the magisterium for years through the various roles they exercise in the church, it is time for church leaders to also genuinely listen to them. Punitive measures or exclusive acts on behalf of the magisterium on the basis of LGBTQ+ identity constitute violations of the conciliar collegial synodal ecclesiology the church is moving toward.

This welcoming perspective has been repeatedly advanced by Fr. James Martin, who often gives popular lectures on LGBTQ+ inclusion. In *Building a Bridge*, he proposes that the church adopt an attitude of “community first, conversion second.” He further explains that “conversion” refers to a process of mutual transformation in light of the Gospels, which affects LGBTQ+ persons as well as the church

⁵⁷ Francis, “Address on the Meeting of Families.”

as a whole.⁵⁸ A lived example of this approach was highlighted by Michael O’Loughlin in *Hidden Mercy*, where he chronicles the church’s response to the HIV crisis and, crucially, how making space for LGBTQ+ persons in the process of ministry transformed some of these church communities.⁵⁹ Finally, a comprehensive overview of the church’s transformative ministry with LGBTQ+ persons was offered by Jason Steidl’s *LGBTQ Catholic Ministry*, which contains a historical analysis of how the church has transformed and been transformed by the lives of LGBTQ+ persons.⁶⁰ While these examples underscore the benefits of LGBTQ+ inclusivity in local Catholic communities, yet to be seen is an ecclesial effort to create these spaces in the national and global church.

Creating spaces for LGBTQ+ persons in the church and society would represent a significant step toward allowing the magisterium to listen to what the Spirit communicates through their lives. It would allow the church hierarchy and other leaders to perceive the fragrance of LGBTQ+ lives. I believe this is why Pope Francis expressed support for the decriminalization of homosexuality and for civil same-sex unions: not because he is trying to change magisterial doctrine just yet (though, in the case of the latter, his statement seems to support such development),⁶¹ but rather because he is trying to model an inclusive synodal ecclesiology granting space to communal Spirit-led discernment regarding LGBTQ+ persons. Such discernment is not possible if the church preemptively pathologizes LGBTQ+ persons and excludes them from the synodal ecclesiological community. A synodal ecclesiology calls for inclusion into community *first* and collective transformation *second*.

Most importantly, I argue that this matter of LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church is particularly pressing as evidenced by: (1) the prominence

⁵⁸ Here James Martin is referring to the conversion of hearts and minds—*metanoia*—all persons need. He is not referring to conversion therapy. See James Martin, *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity*, 2nd edition (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 71.

⁵⁹ Michael J. O’Loughlin, *Hidden Mercy: AIDS, Catholics, and the Untold Stories of Compassion in the Face of Fear* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf, 2021).

⁶⁰ Jason Steidl, *LGBTQ Catholic Ministry: Past and Present* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2022).

⁶¹ In 2003, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a document condemning civil same-sex unions and the act of supporting them. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons,” June 3, 2003, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_2_0030731_homosexual-unions_en.html.

of the issue in various synodal reports throughout the globe calling for more inclusion and (2) the alarming adverse statistics facing LGBTQ+ persons. Regarding the latter, I appeal to the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable: considering the disproportionate rates of violence, suicidal ideation, depression, and homelessness (among other issues) suffered by LGBTQ+ persons, the church has a particular responsibility to care for this *vulnerable* population. Moreover, because the suffering experienced by LGBTQ+ persons has often been caused by the church itself, Catholics have a particular responsibility to (1) discontinue harmful practices and (2) recognize, welcome, and affirm the lived experience of LGBTQ+ persons.

In opposition to this call for inclusion, many bishops and church leaders cite magisterial doctrine on homosexuality as justification for exclusionary acts. They are afraid that welcoming LGBTQ+ persons in the church would cause confusion about doctrine, corrupt the minds of the faithful, and weaken the Catholic identity.⁶² In response to these concerns, I observe that Catholics are: (1) already interacting with LGBTQ+ persons, (2) engaging their perspectives regardless of whether they are allowed to live openly LGBTQ+ lives in Catholic spaces, and (3) gradually shifting to support LGBTQ+ rights.⁶³ Furthermore, as discussed before, there are indications that shifts in support of LGBTQ+ people are already observed among bishops. Perhaps all of this is evidence of sin and corruption—as some bishops forewarn—or of the *sensus fidelium* at play, slowly transforming the hearts and minds of church members through encounter and synodal dialogue. To discern this (and more broadly where the Spirit is leading the church on the matter of doctrine), Catholics need to enter into meaningful dialogue with LGBTQ+ persons (many of whom are

⁶² A prime example of this train of thought is seen in San Francisco Archbishop Cordileone's address to school employees on why he implemented LGBTQ+ exclusive morality clauses into diocesan school employment contracts. See Salvatore Cordileone, "Knowledge, Virtue, and Holiness," *Catholic Culture*, February 6, 2015, www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=10849.

⁶³ Research shows Catholics have grown in support of LGBTQ+ persons. See David Cray, "Rejection or Welcome: Transgender Catholics Encounter Both," *AP News*, February 26, 2022, apnews.com/article/lifestyle-religion-united-states-gender-identity-marquette-368a622737d78df1f254a1e8e68aaf; Jeff Diamant, "How Catholics around the World See Same-Sex Marriage, Homosexuality," Pew Research Center, November 2, 2020, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/02/how-catholics-around-the-world-see-same-sex-marriage-homosexuality/; Michael Lipka, "Young US Catholics Overwhelmingly Accepting of Homosexuality," Pew Research Center, October 6, 2014, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/10/16/young-u-s-catholics-overwhelmingly-accepting-of-homosexuality/.

Catholic) in the context of a Catholic community (a Catholic space for LGBTQ+ persons).⁶⁴ Synodality provides that opportunity.

Walking a Synodal Journey with LGBTQ+ Persons

I believe that a synodal ecclesiology providing listening spaces for LGBTQ+ persons would be beneficial because it would better equip the church to fulfill its mission of spreading the Gospel and building the Kingdom of God. While many local and even some national communities have already created LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces, a global effort for inclusion is yet to be seen. For that reason, I can only briefly hypothesize how such effort would be beneficial by drawing from the work of Craig Ford, who synthesizes the queer theory of Jose Esteban Muñoz with the natural law theory of Thomas Aquinas.⁶⁵ As Ford explains, Muñoz observes that brown queer persons often find themselves disidentified from their social contexts and begin to formulate a sense of utopia. Ford also notes that Aquinas proposes an account of natural law in which human beings possess a rational sense of their own flourishing and an innate inclination to work toward it. Synthesizing both theories, Ford constructs a theological understanding of brown queer persons who, after experiencing oppression, develop—through the rational exercise of natural law—a particular imagination of flourishing and utopia. Due to the oppression they face in society, queer persons can begin to distinguish “what is” from “what should be” and imagine what the eschatological utopic Kingdom of God looks like. Furthermore, Ford argues that queer people then exercise the virtue of hope in an effort to gradually approximate that eschatological vision in solidarity with fellow queer and brown persons. For this reason, Ford recognizes that LGBTQ+ (and brown) persons have a “privileged epistemology;” a unique, distinct, and useful way of experiencing the current oppressive world in a way allowing them to imagine a better one and strive toward it in community.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ The need for inclusive spaces was acknowledged in the Synodal Continental Report, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent.” See General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent: Working Document for the Continental Stage,” no. 39.

⁶⁵ Craig A. Ford, Jr., “Black Queer Natural Law: On Brownness and Disidentification,” Political Theology Network, November 11, 2022, politicaltheology.com/black-queer-natural-law-on-brownness-and-disidentification/.

⁶⁶ Ford also makes a similar point regarding transgender persons in Catholic schools by arguing that natural law bestows upon trans persons an understanding of human flourishing and the inclination to work toward it. He further claims that Catholic schools should provide space for that exploration to unfold. See Craig A. Ford, Jr., “Transgender Bodies, Catholic Schools, and a Queer Natural Law Theology of Exploration,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 7, no. 1 (2018): 70–98,

By accepting Ford's understanding of the dynamics of LGBTQ+ (and brown) persons, I predict that the inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons through synodal ecclesiological dialogue would allow the church to access this privileged epistemological eschatological vision as it fulfills its mission. According to Ford, LGBTQ+ persons can offer invaluable contributions to the world by virtue of their positionality as oppressed individuals: they can imagine a Kingdom of God inclusive of all persons and envision ways to attain it. If the church took seriously its mission to announce the Gospels to all nations, it would significantly benefit from the LGBTQ+ imagination to communicate the Good News effectively to the most vulnerable.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that genuine LGBTQ+ inclusion in the Catholic Church can only take place if the church's synodal journey becomes an ecclesiological reality and not just a consultative process. This inclusion is important given alarming statistics concerning LGBTQ+ persons in the church. The inclusion of LGBTQ+ voices would allow the church to access their privileged eschatological epistemology as it carries out its mission. This synodal ecclesiology rests upon a conciliar understanding of the *sensus fidelium* as developed by Vatican II, adopts a circular hermeneutic of understanding in the context of an inverted hierarchical pyramid, and is committed to a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. Such an ecclesiological vision is difficult to imagine as it depends on church leaders who exercise humility, abandon certainty, and risk discomfort by holding space for dialogue on contentious matters. Nevertheless, I argue that the work of Pope Francis has already begun to steer the church in this direction. What I propose is for Pope Francis to continue encoding this synodal vision into the governing structures of the church so that the official meaning of "magisterium" more formally includes the participation of the *sensus fidelium*, and especially the *sensus fidelium* of those marginalized by the church, through collegial dialogue.⁶⁷

jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/11382-transgender-bodies-catholic-schools-and-a-queer-natural-law-theology-of-exploration.

⁶⁷ Some initial signs of these structures include the consultative process requiring all dioceses to hold listening sessions and the new policy allowing seventy non-bishops (out of which half must be women) to vote at the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. See General Secretariat of the Synod, "The Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops," April 17, 2023, www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2023-04-26_punto_stampa/2024.04.26_EN_FAQ_Partecipanti_Assemblea.pdf.

Applied to LGBTQ+ inclusion, a synodal ecclesiology has significant implications for day-to-day church life. Obvious applications of this process involve allowing LGBTQ+ persons to worship in Catholic spaces, receive sacraments, and participate in other programs such as retreats, service opportunities, and fellowship. However, I also argue that LGBTQ+ persons should be integrated into the ministerial life of the church as educators, campus ministers, liturgical ministers, spiritual directors, as well as in other ministerial roles. I have previously demonstrated that LGBTQ+ educators can serve as suitable, unique, and indispensable ministers in Catholic schools⁶⁸ and I argue that this blessing of LGBTQ+ ministers can extend to other ministerial roles in the church. For this reason, Catholic leaders must cease firing LGBTQ+ ministerial employees on the basis of their identity. Finally, creating a safe space for LGBTQ+ persons involves advocacy beyond church walls. Catholic leaders should stop lobbying for anti-LGBTQ+ legal initiatives (such as banning same-sex marriage and banning transgender persons from serving in the military), support healthcare services for LGBTQ+ persons (including gender-affirming care), support adoption of children by same-sex couples, and advocate for national and international LGBTQ+ rights. These shifts would make the church more hospitable to LGBTQ+ persons and would, in turn, grant Catholic leaders greater access to the *sensus fidelium* of this marginalized population.

My exploration of synodality as an ecclesiological modality yields some questions for future research. The first question addresses the relationship between synodality and liberation theology. Since both approaches involve a theological shift that deemphasizes the centrality of the hierarchy, one could explore further points of connection regarding the material, economic, and social conditions necessary for true synodal discourse to unfold. The second question, which I hope to address in another article, explores the relationship between synodality and the development of magisterial doctrine. Because a synodal ecclesiology involves an inverted pyramid, a circular hermeneutic, and spaces for dialogue and transformation, the next logical question is: can such dynamics result in a change or reversal of Catholic doctrine on homosexuality and gender? To explore this

⁶⁸ Ish Ruiz, "The Stones That Have Been Rejected: Contributions of Queer Educators in Catholic Schools," in *The Human in a Dehumanizing World: Reexamining Theological Anthropology and its Implications*, ed. Jessica Coblenz and Daniel P. Horan, The Annual Publication of the College Theology Society 67 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022).

question, one must delve into matters of doctrinal inerrancy and historical developments of doctrine in addition to a theology of *sensus fidelium* central to a synodal church.

I conclude this essay with a reflection on hope, which animates my support for synodality in the church. I base this work on the conviction that Pope Francis's efforts to promote a synodal church are somehow guided by the Spirit and form part of a divine plan slowly unfolding throughout history. Synodality makes little sense without hope, and I find comfort in adopting a broad historical view that clearly illustrates how meaningful change (even on this question of LGBTQ+ inclusion) has slowly unfolded in the past decade and will continue to unfold. While it is easy to despair given the repeated exclusion and marginalization of LGBTQ+ persons in the church, I trust that the synodal ecclesiology of Pope Francis will bring about a new horizon of possibility for LGBTQ+ Catholics, helping the church more closely resemble the Kingdom of God. Those of us committed to LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church should embrace this synodal vision and endeavor to make it a reality. 

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