

The growing pains of a Church that's both local and universal

How Pope Francis is working to develop synodality at every level of Catholicism

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A butterfly's sneeze can actually change the weather thousands of miles away – or so they say. It's not very different from the dynamics of synodality in the Catholic Church today.

The impact of what happens locally can have an effect on the universal Church, especially when it is in a state of transition.

Since the very beginning of its history, the Christian Church has held numerous local *synods* or *councils*. Despite the difference of terminology, both were assemblies of bishops and included the limited presence of non-bishop participants.

Local conciliarity paved the way to ecumenical councils, the official list of which began in the year 325 when (Roman) Emperor Constantine convoked the Council of Nicaea.

But synodality is somewhat different from conciliarity.

Paul VI establishes the Synod of Bishops

Its current form has been embodied the past six decades in the Synod of Bishops, an institution that Paul VI created to give expression to papal primacy cooperating with episcopal collegiality. Its genesis was a doctrine that was developed between 1962-1964 during the first three sessions of the Second Vatican Council.

Paul surprised the Council Fathers when he opened the fourth and final session in September 1965 by [announcing](#) the establishment of this new institution – the Synod of Bishops.

He said it would be a gathering of bishops from around the world, convoked periodically (every few years) in Rome by the pope to discuss whatever topic he should choose. It was to be a purely consultative body.

Further developments under John Paul II

John Paul II further developed the Synod of Bishops and provided for the possibility of having "special assemblies" for particular parts of the world, like the one Pope Francis presided over last October for the Amazonian region.

This was codified in the new [Code of Canon Law](#) of 1983:

"The synod of bishops can be assembled in a *general session*, that is, one which treats matters that directly pertain to the good of the universal Church; such a session is either ordinary or extraordinary.



(AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

It can also be assembled in a *special session*, namely, one which considers affairs that directly pertain to a determinate region or regions" (can. 345 with emphasis added).

The first "special assembly" of the Synod of Bishops actually took place three years before its codification in new code.

The "Dutch Synod": a message to the entire Church

John Paul, who had been elected in the autumn of 1978, called a Synod for the Netherlands for January 14-31, 1980.

It was to deal with the turbulent post-conciliar situation in the northern European country, including the controversy caused by the very popular and widely translated "Dutch Catechism," which the bishops of the Netherlands issued in 1966.

The "Dutch Synod" was very different from the Amazon Synod. First of all, there were only 19 participants (all bishops and priests) at that first special assembly, compared to the 260 people (including non-clerics and women) at last October's assembly.

The special Synod assembly for the Netherlands was aimed at a local Church, but with clear implications for the universal Church. It was John Paul II's message of how Vatican II should be applied or interpreted by Catholic leaders around the world.

There have been other special [Synod assemblies](#) since that first one in 1980. They included one for one particular country (Lebanon in 1995) and several for the various continents (beginning with the first "European Synod" in 1991 up to the "Middle East Synod" in 2010).

The "Amazon Synod": regional issues with global significance

The so-called Amazon Synod was unique among all the special assemblies in that it was not meant for one country, but for a trans-national region with global importance. In this, it reflected Francis' view of the world map, where national borders are points of passage more than perimeters.

No other special assembly has had the same resonance and repercussions that we experienced (and are still experiencing) from the Amazon Synod.

The assembly was convoked to address a very particular situation – the ecological survival of the region – in its social, political, economic and ecclesial dimensions.

Never before had a Synod assembly have the existential threat to the entire planet as its topic of discussion. This is one of the reasons that the message that was expected from the Synod was supposed to have global relevance.

The interconnectedness of the local and the universal

Since Paul VI's establishment of the Synod of Bishops at the end of Vatican II the interconnectedness of the local and universal has come into sharper focus. As often happens in Catholicism, it is a matter of symbols and, in this case, of place.

All Synod gatherings to date – including special assemblies for one particular country or continent – have taken place in the Vatican, the home of the Bishop of Rome.

In the case of the assembly for the [Amazon](#), the universal value of the gathering was clear: it was a reflection of Pope Francis' new approach to Church governance.

He intended that this Synod assembly for a particular region should be experienced as part of a global synodal process. The diverse national origins of the thirty-three people he specially appointed as members of the assembly attest to this.

The Amazon Synod recast the relationship between the global and local of today's Catholic Church in light of Francis' pontificate. But it also revealed the limits of our theology and institutions of synodality.

The three levels of synodality

In theory, synodality exists at three levels: the universal (for the entire Catholic Church), the regional (national, continental, or sub-continental) and the local (diocesan or parish).

But in actual fact, it currently functions almost exclusively at the universal level (the Synod of Bishops).

The irony is that the Synod was never conceived as an institution of real ecclesial synodality, but of papal primacy using episcopal collegiality. At the regional and local levels, the results of synodality vary widely (to say the least).

When Paul VI established the Synod he hoped it would extend the conciliar experience of Vatican II, but without keeping the entire episcopate in Rome for years on end and paralyzing the normal business of the Catholic Church.

The pope remains in control

The periodic convocation of the Synod would provide an ecclesial moment of discussion among bishops, with the input of theologians (male and clergy), and in the presence of auditors (some women) and ecumenical observers.

But it would remain under the control of the pope and the Roman Curia.

The Synod of Bishops was born when the papacy that was still overly imperial and ecclesial authority was even more heavily centralized. Local Churches were expected to apply that – and only that – which the center approved.

However, there have been developments since 1965 that have changed that assumption.

Theological, institutional and cultural shifts

Theologically, there is an ecclesiology of the local Church, a largely post-conciliar evolution that asserts the specificities of the local dimension in the universal Catholic Church.

Institutionally, there has been a great diversification in global Catholicism, between local Churches in different parts of the world, but also between different ways to live the Catholic faith in the same local Church (parishes, ecclesial movements, the "believing but not belonging", etc.).

At the same time the papacy now is much more present and visible in local Churches than before. One could say this is a long-lasting effect of Vatican I in the 19th century.

And *culturally*, there has been a dizzying revolution in the use of mass media, both secular and Catholic. Events in the Church are inseparable from the information and media system. What happens in Rome does not stay in Rome – unless strict secrecy rules are applied, as in the case of a conclave.

The pope's voice

The Synod's secretariat in Rome [recently announced](#) that the next ordinary general assembly of the Synod of Bishops is to take place in 2022.

The pope decided the date, but he has not yet revealed the topic he wants the assembly to discuss.

Until the Council of Trent in the 16th century, the most important voice in the decision to call a council was the emperor's. In modern times – that is, since Vatican I – that voice is the pope's.

Synodality (a dimension that involves the whole Church, both clergy and laity) is still a development of *conciliarity* (where bishops are the vast majority). It remains under the control of the *primacy* (the pope in Rome).

Tensions in the shift from old system to new

As such synodality must deal with the tensions inherent in the shift from an old system to a new one. One of these is the tension between the local and the universal.

This is a Catholic Church where the local has become much more universal. In the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, for example, Masses are celebrated in something like 42 different languages.

At the same time, the universal dimension has also become more local, in the sense that the Church relies on the vitality of local communities to sustain itself sociologically and culturally. There is no longer an empire or a Catholic culture that, by default, makes the Church relevant.

This change of roles between local and universal is not surprising.

For centuries the ecumenical or general councils were made up of bishops coming exclusively, or at least overwhelmingly, from a limited geographical area. They were from Asia and the Mediterranean in early centuries, and mostly from Europe in the Middle Ages until Trent.

But the effects of those very European councils were applied universally to the whole Church, even to local Churches that had no representatives at those gatherings.

So it should not be surprising that the discussions and proposals that emerged at the Synod's special assembly for the Amazon region are affecting ecclesial debate even in faraway countries like Germany or Australia, to name just a couple.

In the global Catholic Church, the relationship between the local and the universal has become much more complicated than before.

And institutional issues, such as the ordination of married men to the priesthood, are only at the surface of this shifting landscape.

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