

What is 'Synodality'? Experts explain

By [Ed Condon](#)

Vatican City, Oct 25, 2018 / 15:00 pm



October 3rd 2018 – Vatican City: The 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. CNA

As the 2018 synod of bishops considers a draft text of the meeting's final document, discussion has turned to the nature of the synod itself.

According to early reports, the third section of the final document focuses on the concept of "synodality." What is "synodality?"

The term is often used to describe the process of fraternal collaboration and discernment that bodies like the synod were created to express. But some critics have suggested that the term is vaguely defined, and could be used in a move toward a more democratic or parliamentary way of governing the Church and teaching doctrine.

Dr. Jessica Murdoch, associate professor of fundamental and dogmatic theology at Villanova University, told CNA that while the modern Synod of Bishops was established by Pope St. Paul VI in 1965, the practical reality of synodality is "nothing new."

"What the synod is, practically speaking, is an advisory panel. It is a body which gives the pope a way of discussing the issues of the day, and receiving feedback and advice from the episcopacy. St. Paul VI may have given it its current shape, but the reality is that popes have always done this, consulting with their bishops on different matters, in one form or another."

Murdoch said that synodality is a rich concept with a long history in the Church. "Synodality as a concept really just means collegiality. It is the way in which the different parts of the Church come together as the mystical Body of Christ," she said.

While this may seem a simple enough idea, Murdoch warned that it was prone to misinterpretation.

"The risk is that in coming together we get a flattening of the Church, with every member of the body acting like it is the same," Murdoch told CNA.

"There is an immense richness in the diversity of charisms in the Church, and each part has its own proper role. But when everyone is trying to do everyone else's job, not only do we lose that richness the body cannot function properly."

In March 2018, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's International Theological Commission published a document entitled "Synodality in the life and mission of the Church."

The document noted that in the history Church, synods and councils were nearly interchangeable terms for formal ecclesiastical assemblies. It said that the more modern view of a synod as something distinct from a council does not go back even as far as Vatican Council II, and that its development had been accompanied by the neologism of "synodality."

Speaking of the Church as "synodal" by its nature is something novel, the commission said, and requires "careful theological clarification."

The principle of synodality is defined specifically as "the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God," the document added.

Sensus fidei

The *sensus fidei* is another concept often invoked to advance a more collaborative approach to forming or articulating Church teaching. Like synodality, the sense of the faithful is prone to misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

Fr. Thomas Petri, O.P., a moral theologian and the Vice President and Academic Dean Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C., talked to CNA about those concepts.

Petri told CNA that, like synodality, the *sensus fidei* was an expression of proper communion among the members of the Church.

Some have suggested that the *sensus fidei* can be understood as empowering the faithful, either individually or as a body, to exercise a kind of authority separate from the hierarchy, or over the Church's tradition. This kind of authority could, it has been argued, serve as a counterweight to the hierarchy.

Not so, said Petri.

"Some commenters seem to reduce the *sensus fidei* to the mere expression of any individual or group's 'personal experience.' This is an impoverishment of what the *sensus fidei* actually is and runs the risk, in my view, of exalting human experience to be a font of revelation co-equal with scripture and tradition," he said.

Order of authority

Murdoch also cautioned against interpretations which negate the importance of the Church's order of authority.

The Church teaches that it is divinely founded, and its essential structure – the faithful, led by the priests, governed by the bishops under the pope – is divinely ordered. Other structures, like parish councils, national bishops' conferences, or the Synod of Bishops, are considered to be helpful, but are not considered to be a part of the Church's divinely ordered hierarchical constitution.

While the synod was and is intended to foster communion among the bishops themselves, and with the pope, Murdoch told CNA that it was important to remember that it is a distinctly human – not divine – institution.

"Good ecclesiology preserves the distinctions in the hierarchy and in the Church as a body," Murdoch said. "Ultimately, the bishops are under the authority of the pope and the Church is under the authority of God."

"A wrong understanding of synodality flattens the divinely instituted hierarchical order into a majoritarian mass. The collective wisdom and perspective of the bishops, and of others in the Church, can certainly be an important tool, but it has definite limits," she added.

No measure of synodal discussion, debate or voting can replace the true sources of authority in the Church. Those sources, Murdoch said, are divine revelation and the unbroken magisterium handed down by the Church together with, and guarded by, the authority of the pope.

When they depart from these, Murdoch said, synods can and have erred.

"There have been a number of 'synodal' attempts to replace or relativize these true sources of authority in the Church," Murdoch told CNA.

"Perhaps the most egregious example of this was in the eighteenth century, when the synod of Pistoia gathered to reform the Tuscan church, without the authority of the pope. While the attendees saw themselves as reformers, they ended up proposing a number of heretical Jansenist measures."

The Pistoian synod was, Murdoch explained, a clear historical warning about what can happen when bishops wrongly apply the concept of synodality and overstep their true authority.

"A wrong approach to synodality, one which gives it too much authority, can be devastating to the body of the Church. The experience of the Eastern Catholic Churches, where synodality is a much more formalized part of the ecclesiological structure, has its own particular history and value," Murdoch said.

"At the same time, the universal Church needs to consider carefully the lessons of the Anglican Communion and the Orthodox Churches, both of which are grave cautionary tales about where a wrong application of the concept can lead."

Petri agreed, telling CNA that those expecting the advancement of a more parliamentary approach to teaching and authority were misunderstanding the Church's nature.

"While such a view of divine revelation may be compatible with certain forms of Protestantism, it is not compatible with Catholic doctrine."

Petri also noted that the pope has warned against conflating intellectually or socially fashionable ideas with authentic developments in the Church.

"In *Episcopalis communio*, Pope Francis cautioned that the *sensus fidei* should not be confused with the changing currents of public opinion," Petri said.

"An authentic expression is one that is in continuity with magisterial teaching, comes from a life formed by the Word of God in the heart of the Church, and which seeks not only one's own salvation but the salvation of others for the edification of the Church and the advancement of the Kingdom of God."



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