

Vatican II and since on Collegiality and Synodality



FIGURE 3-1. Christ flanked by the Apostles Peter, Paul, and Andrew and Saint Luke. Credit: *Apse mosaic of the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls (1220)*—Roma, Italy. Wikimedia Commons, Photo by Alberto Fernandez Fernandez. Creative Commons Generic License 3.0.

In his opening address at the Second Session of the Second Vatican Council, the newly elected Pope Paul VI referenced the great image of the *Pantocrator* in the apse of the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, which was just about all that survived of the older basilica that was razed in the great fire of 1823.¹ Made in 1220 by artists who had worked on St. Mark's in Venice, the mosaic has an immense figure of Christ presiding over and blessing the assembly. This scene was reflected in the assembly of bishops in St. Peter's, the pope observed, and Christ's message in the Gospel book

he carries was intended for them: “Come, you blessed of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”² The paradisaical nature of that kingdom is suggested in the surrounding flora and fauna. To his left are the apostles Peter and Andrew; to his right are Paul, the pontiff’s name-saint over whose tomb the basilica is built, and Luke, Paul’s biographer, whom he said was the only one who stayed with him to the end.³ Celebrating Christ’s true nature, Jesus blesses in the Greek fashion with his ring finger joined to his thumb, the three standing fingers pointing to the Trinity, and the two joined fingers suggesting his two natures. St. Peter holds a scroll with his profession of faith: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”; St. Paul’s says, “At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven, on earth, and under the earth.”⁴ In the band below, the apostles surround a jeweled cross and other symbols of the passion. On the cusp between the two is a comically small depiction of the then pope, Honorius III (1216–27), kissing Christ’s foot. By drawing attention to the tiny prostrate Honorius, St. Paul VI stressed that the true actor of the Council would not be the pope, the prelates, the experts, or even the documents themselves, but rather Christ the Incarnate Word. Only if they put Christ at the center and his successors in communion around him would the church be led in the right direction.

In this chapter I seek to outline and synthesize some developments in the church’s understanding of episcopal fraternity from the Second Vatican Council onward, especially through the articulation of the concepts of *communio* and collegiality in the documents of the Council and the concept of synodality in the pontificate of Pope Francis.

THE CHURCH AS SACRAMENT

Perhaps the most provocative self-description of the church provided by the Second Vatican Council was the idea of the church as *sacrament* found in several of the documents.⁵ Thus the Council fathers said:

“The wondrous sacrament of the Church” came forth from Christ’s side on the cross⁶

the church is “the universal sacrament of salvation,” “simultaneously manifesting and exercising the mystery of God’s love,” “a sign and instrument both of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race”⁷

those who by faith see Jesus as the author of salvation are established as the church “so that, for each and all, it may be the visible sacrament of this saving unity”⁸

but the faithful “are united and ordered under their bishops,” and it is the great commission given to the apostles and their successors that founds the mission to take the sacrament of the church to all humanity.⁹

This sacramental understanding of the church had precedent in St. Augustine and other church fathers,¹⁰ but it would be crucial for the conciliar and post-conciliar recovery of another patristic self-understanding: that of the church as *koinonia-communio*.¹¹ We might think of the transcendent grace of the Mystical Body of Christ as mediated by the earthly people of God to the rest of humanity, just as the grace of baptism is mediated by water and that of the Eucharist by bread and wine. It is for the bishops and their clergy to speak Christ’s words to “inform” that “matter” and effect that grace. Sourced from the eternal love of the Trinity, yet also on pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem, the single reality of the church might thus be considered from two different vantage points, the vertical and the horizontal.¹² As Pope Benedict XVI counseled, through understanding the church as sacrament we insulate ourselves from reductionist understandings of the church and the episcopacy after the fashions of secular corporate or bureaucratic thinking.¹³ So, too, Pope Francis, warning against conceptions of synodality that amount to parliamentary or opinion poll thinking, recalls that “being a synodal Church means being a Church that is the sacrament of Christ’s promise that the Spirit will always be with us.”¹⁴

To be found in St. Petersburg, Florida—not Russia—is Salvador Dalí’s painting *The Ecumenical Council*. Painted in 1960–62, just before the opening of the Second Vatican Council, it celebrated Dalí’s hope for renewed religious leadership after the world wars and dictatorships and the “breath of fresh air” that was “Good Pope



FIGURE 3-2. *The Ecumenical Council*. Salvador Dalí, 1960. Oil on canvas. Collection of The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, FL (USA); Gift of A. Reynolds & Eleanor Morse. United States © Salvador Dalí Museum, Inc. St. Petersburg, FL 2022 / Worldwide ©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2022; Photo © Doug Sperling and David Deranian, 2021.

John.” At the top of the painting we see, in a niche of St. Peter’s Basilica, God the Father rather unusually depicted as an eternal youth, extending his arm out to creation, his face obscured. Below him is Christ holding his cross and the Holy Spirit as a dove floating above the Virgin Annunciate, who here is also the church. We see crowds of bishops in prayer, conversation, and solemn assembly. Dali includes his wife and himself in the work, for the council fathers brought “the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of the people of this age” with them.¹⁵ The bishops are united by the common faith and endeavor at the Second Vatican Council as they were at Nicaea and many gatherings since; but they are there to reflect, among other things, on the nature of the church as sacrament and their own role and relationships with it.

LUMEN GENTIUM ON COLLEGIALITY

If the concept of the church as sacrament provoked controversy as well as fruitful new thinking after the Council, so too did the concept of collegiality, also developed in *Lumen gentium*. Though linguistically novel, the concept had some ancestry in previous councils and also, as Avery Dulles noted, in the early church fathers.¹⁶ Chapter III of the constitution attends to the church’s hierarchy.¹⁷ It was Christ himself who willed that the apostles and their successors the bishops shepherd his church until the end of time, and he who gave them the wherewithal to accomplish their mission.¹⁸ But Christ did not simply appoint them as gifted individuals. “He formed these apostles after the manner of a college or stable group, over which he placed Peter,” the Council fathers said. Though each bishop is granted a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit for sanctifying, teaching, and governing, yet he receives these graces through sacramental consecration by the other bishops and exercises them “in hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college.”¹⁹ Episcopal collegiality is here firmly grounded in the calling, company, formation, and mission of the Twelve found in the Gospels. Rather than being an optional association of like-minded or like-missioned ministers, the *college* of bishops is intrinsic to episcopacy; rather than being simply the sum

of individual bishops and their functions, it is something chronologically and ontologically prior to each bishop, and by consecration he is incorporated into it.²⁰ This helps explain how curial bishops, nuncios, auxiliary bishops, and emeriti—though lacking regional jurisdiction—can share in the responsibilities of the bishop of Rome and the other bishops for the whole church, and why the Directory for Bishops and Code of Canon Law direct ordinaries to have solicitude for those beyond their diocesan boundaries.²¹

In paragraphs 22 and 23 of *Lumen gentium* we get the fullest magisterial treatment of episcopal collegiality up to that time. The bishops are “joined together” like the apostles, constituting one apostolic college. The unity of the churches and of the faithful within them was “by very ancient practice” established by the communion of their bishops with each other and the pope “in a bond of unity, charity, and peace.” Every bishop, “as a member of the episcopal college and legitimate successor of the apostles, is obliged by Christ’s institution and command to be solicitous for the whole Church.” Hence bishops together engage in promoting and safeguarding the unity of faith and common discipline of the Church, have a particular concern for other parts of the church that are poor or suffering, supply priests and resources for the missions, take part in episcopal meetings and commissions, coalesce into geographic and ritual churches, and promote an understanding of the church that is more than local.²²

Seeking to balance the universal jurisdiction of the pope with the local jurisdiction of the bishops and their various jurisdictions with their joint solicitude for the whole church, the Council pointed out that the collegiate action of the bishops is always exercised in communion with the Roman pontiff.²³ The bishops also engage with the pope through *ad limina* meetings, membership of pontifical dicasteries, involvement in consultations by the pope, and promotion of his teachings, events, and appeals, collaboration with his nuncios, and so on. “Without the action of the head, the bishops are not able to act as a college.”²⁴

In the delightful 2002 Canadian-American romantic comedy *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, the mother, Maria Portokalas (played by

Lainie Kazan), explains to the bride-to-be Toula (played by Nia Vardalos), “Let me tell you something Toula: the man is the head [of the family], but the woman is the neck and she can turn the head any way she wants.”²⁵ While the bishops may not quite turn the papal head “any way they want,” they do connect the papal head to the body of the faithful; and just as a head upon a stiff and uncooperative neck has trouble turning to see and communicate, so both head and neck are needed for the healthy functioning of the church.²⁶ Pivotal to all of this is the role of the Holy Spirit, who, like the soul of the body of the church, “supports its organic structure and harmony.”²⁷

The insistence on the model of Peter and the Twelve, of continuing responsibility for the apostolic tradition and the unity of the church, and of the solicitude of each bishop for all, marks out a very different “order” and mission for the church from that of a secular government.²⁸ A particular difference is that the relationship of the bishops as brothers, with a common love for the Lord and solicitude for the church, should be one of fraternal charity, something no one expects of politicians or business leaders! In his teaching on synodality, Pope Francis has built on the conciliar aspiration to collegiality, which he thinks has been only partially realized in the national and regional bishops’ conferences and international synods, and which prompts him to consider some decentralization of church governance and some learnings for the exercise of the Petrine and episcopal ministries from the synodal traditions of the Oriental churches.²⁹

COMMUNIO AFTER THE COUNCIL

While the church-as-sacrament and the bishops-as-college were somewhat original ecclesiological ideas at Vatican II, it was the *church-as-communio* that was the big hit. In the final report of the 1985 Synod of Bishops, the fathers noted that:

The ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council’s documents. *Koinonia-communio*, founded on the Sacred Scripture, has been held in great honor in the

early Church and in the Oriental Churches to this day. Thus, much was done by the Second Vatican Council so that the Church-as-communion might be more clearly understood and concretely applied to life.³⁰

Sure enough, *κοινωνία* played a crucial role in the post-conciliar magisterium on the church—as it did in most post-conciliar ecclesologies and ecumenical dialogue.³¹ The word appears around 100 times in each of John Paul II’s documents: *Christifideles laici* (1988), *Redemptoris missio* (1990), *Ut unum sint* (1995), *Novo millennio ineunte* (2000), *Pastores Gregis* (2003), and *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003).³² Communion and/or fraternity feature strongly in Pope Benedict XVI’s *Deus caritas est* (2005) and *Sacramentum caritatis* (2007), and in Pope Francis’s *Evangelii gaudium* (2013), *Amoris laetitia* (2016) and *Fratelli tutti* (2020).³³ Other important documents giving considerable attention to communion include *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), the *Relatio finalis* of the 1985 Synod, the CDF document *Communio notio* (1992), the *Directory for Ecumenism* (1993), and the *Directory for Bishops* (2004).³⁴ In what follows I will attempt to summarize in a few paragraphs what those many documents say about *communio*, especially amongst the bishops.

First and foremost, *κοινωνία* is always framed by the mystery of the personal union between the persons of the Blessed Trinity (often described as the “transcendent” dimension of communion); all other communion is a participation by us in that divine life and love. Secondly, *κοινωνία* is the personal union of the believer (and the body of believers) with the divine Persons (often described as the “vertical dimension” of immanent communion). Thirdly, *κοινωνία* is the personal union of believers with each other (the “horizontal dimension”). And, fourth and finally, *κοινωνία* is sometimes used analogically to describe the union between all human beings and their natural communities with the rest of humankind and even the rest of creation.³⁵ Here grace builds on nature, communion upon natural affinity and friendship; but grace then heals and elevates natural community into a spiritual communion. This is initiated by God the Father, creating us in love to share in his

divine life and the lives of others, by God the Son assuming our human nature to reintroduce us to this life with God and our fellows, and by God the Holy Spirit continuing to inspire and deepen that fellowship.³⁶ This spiritual or vertical *communio* is therefore a gift, received as faith through word and sacrament, by each believer while on earth, and fulfilled as beatitude in the communion of saints in heaven.³⁷

Secondly, building upon the idea of the church as sacrament, ecclesial *communio* is rooted in baptism, which conforms us to Christ, and fed by the Holy Eucharist, “the creative force and source of communion among the members of the Church.” The Eucharist makes the church one body and grounds a “eucharistic ecclesiology.”³⁸ It is the Spirit of Truth that maintains this ecclesial communion, who distributes hierarchical and charismatic gifts for the building up of the church, and who adorns the church with spiritual fruits.³⁹ The church is united, not merely as a federation of local churches, but so each local church manifests the one universal church. Thus the *church makes the churches and the churches make up the church*; to belong to the church is to be at home in any and all of them.⁴⁰ Ecclesial communion also unites the church to the poor and persecuted and permanently opens her to missionary endeavor.⁴¹ It drives efforts to heal imperfect communion with individuals or with other churches and Christian communities through prayer, penance, study, dialogue, and collaboration.⁴² Ecclesial communion unites the living and the dead as one church, founding the Catholic devotion to the saints and prayers for the dead, and it is consummated in the ultimate unity of humanity in heaven.⁴³

Thirdly, the effects of this communion upon believers are manifold. It enables them to conform their minds and wills to Christ’s and informs their identity, values, and actions; their communion is in turn strengthened when they do so or ruptured when they fail to do so.⁴⁴ It should bring spiritual solidarity and union in prayer and charity, faith, and hope.⁴⁵

Fourthly, it falls to the bishops to be visible signs and mediators of communion in all their governing, teaching, and sanctifying work.⁴⁶ This means, above all, evangelizing, catechizing, and other-

wise encouraging their flock in their union with the Blessed Trinity, the communion of saints, and fellow believers.⁴⁷ But what is to unite the bishops themselves? *Christus Dominus* (1965), the Council's decree on the pastoral office of the bishop, repeated *Lumen gentium's* teaching about the bishops' forming a single college or body under the pope, with a common concern for the whole church, some joint responsibilities, and collegiate activities.⁴⁸ As the bishops in the early centuries, moved by fraternal charity and zeal for the universal mission entrusted to the apostles, pooled their gifts by clustering into ritual churches under a patriarch or major archbishop and synod or into provinces under a common metropolitan, so the Council now made more comprehensive provision for national episcopal conferences, ecclesiastical provinces, and bishops holding inter-diocesan offices.⁴⁹ In 1998 Pope St. John Paul II's *motu proprio Apostolos suos* confirmed the importance of the episcopal conference as a mechanism for encouraging collegial spirit and collaboration.⁵⁰ And the 2004 *Directory for Bishops* further elaborated the theology of episcopal conferences.

Important as these documents and the new *Code of Canon Law* were for establishing collegial structures, what mattered most, according to the pope, was the fraternal charity that should motivate them.⁵¹ While having concrete expression in institutional structures such as episcopal conferences, collegiality must ultimately be understood as an ecclesial sensibility, a particular way in which we understand ourselves as bishops and our relationships to one another. The *Directory* explains that "the Bishop is never alone because, through 'affective collegiality' (*collegialitas affectiva*), he is constantly united with his brethren in the episcopate and with the one chosen by the Lord to be the Successor of Peter."⁵² *Effective* collegiality builds on *affective* collegiality.

By their teaching and preaching the bishops must be conduits of the apostolic tradition, ensuring they and their people are faithful to the Gospels and the magisterium and that their local church authentically manifests the faith and life of the universal church.⁵³ Such teaching will help gather the faithful into Eucharistic communities where the bishop or a priest deputed by him presides at the Eucharistic sacrifice, and will help promote devotion to "that

wonderful sacrament” of Communion with Christ and the church.⁵⁴ It fosters devotion, also, to the church itself as the home and school of communion, and to the saints as the goal and fulfillment of all communion.⁵⁵ The bishop must also encourage an intimate brotherhood amongst his clergy, manifested in the spiritual, material, pastoral, and personal help they give each other, and in their gatherings and sharing of life, labor, and charity.⁵⁶ And he is to discern and unite the pluriform temperaments, charisms, states of life, liturgical traditions, and cultures of his people as one family, enabling their participation and co-responsibility.⁵⁷ Evolving understandings of co-responsibility in the church would find expression in the concept of synodality during the papacy of Pope Francis.

In his Christmas address to the Roman curia in 2021, the pope returned to Vatican II’s themes of collegiality and communion, which he said are essentially about our relationship with Christ. Only with Christ in the center of our lives and thinking, only by praying together, listening together to God’s word, and helping each other will bishops and curial officials be more than strangers working for the same company or rivals for influence and personal advancement. Communion requires a magnanimity toward others, including those with whom we do not necessarily agree on everything, humbly accepting that the differences between us can contribute to the richness of the church and an effort to build relationships that goes beyond our official meetings and common work tasks.⁵⁸

SYNODALITY IN THE MAGISTERIUM OF POPE FRANCIS

In rehearsing *Lumen gentium*’s teaching on episcopal collegiality and applying it to bishops’ conferences, *Christus Dominus* also commended the practice of international synods. Here, too, the Council was retrieving and building upon an ancient practice whereby church teaching was settled and discipline regulated by synods and councils of bishops. The Council fathers declared that they earnestly desired “that the venerable institution of synods and councils flourish with fresh vigor. In such a way faith will be deepened

and discipline preserved more fittingly and efficaciously in the various churches, as the needs of the times require.”⁵⁹

Even before *Christus Dominus* was promulgated, Paul VI had issued his *motu proprio*, *Apostolica sollicitudo* (1965), instituting the Synod of Bishops as a permanent ecclesial institution that would foster unity and collaboration between the bishops.⁶⁰ This was animated by a desire both to retrieve episcopal associations that had served the church well in its earliest centuries and to build upon the positive experience of the bishops gathered at the Vatican Council. In an address given in 1974, Pope Paul clarified that the Synod of Bishops was not a standing ecumenical council nor a sort of ecclesiastical congress or parliament.⁶¹ Rather, it is a unique gathering of bishops from each nation, heads of Roman dicasteries, some religious superiors, and some others appointed by the pope that serves the common good of the church by uniting the bishops and offering counsel to the Holy Father.⁶²

Drawing inspiration from the Acts of the Apostles and the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis has stretched the concept of synods in various, sometimes analogical, ways. While the noun *σύννοδος* (synod) has a long history in Catholic thought and practice⁶³ and its own particular iterations in Eastern Christianity,⁶⁴ the pope has broached the subject of “synodality” in addresses to the Synods on the Family, Youth, Amazonia, and Synodality and in other places.⁶⁵ He has also used its adjectival and adverbial progeny “synodal” and “synodally” in various contexts.

As a noun, *synodality* is said to be “an expression of the Church’s nature, form, style and mission.”⁶⁶ It is “the whole Church,” “one great people ... *Fratelli tutti*,” “an open square where all can feel at home and participate.”⁶⁷ It imagines a church aware of people’s needs and aspirations, formally gathered to reflect upon a common theme, and led in that process by the Holy Spirit. Here Pope Francis emphasizes the elements of journeying and togetherness—what he calls “a pilgrim hermeneutic.”⁶⁸ It has a leveling effect: on this journey, all are heard and their opinions valued, the ordinary faithful no less than the prelates, and even social outcasts.⁶⁹ A synod is a “point of convergence” where the ideal of “a listening Church” is actualized: not just a consultation among the lay faithful, followed

by a talkfest of bishops, followed by a document from the pope, but an evolving process, now being refashioned as “a privileged instrument for listening to the People of God.”⁷⁰

As a verb “synoding” captures certain ways of being and acting as a church: stopping, listening “with the ear of the heart,”⁷¹ encountering, discussing, discerning, praying together; in the process, coming closer to each other, encountering Christ, evolving and handing on the tradition,⁷² and serving the People of God. Synoding is ecclesial living, marked “by praying and opening our eyes to everything around us; by practicing a life of fidelity to the Gospel; by seeking answers in God’s revelation.”⁷³ It is “an exciting and engaging effort that can forge a style of communion and participation directed to mission.”⁷⁴

As an adjective or adverb, synodal qualifies the church or ecclesial activities as welcoming, accommodating, hearing in “sincere, open and fraternal discussion”⁷⁵; “avoiding artificial, shallow and pre-packaged responses”;⁷⁶ accepting and involving diverse people; and oriented not just to more talk but to active service of others. A “synodal process” is one whereby the whole church, under the impetus of the Holy Spirit, moves from one place or way of thinking or acting to another and is united rather than fractured in the process.

WHAT SYNODALITY IS NOT

Earlier I suggested that collegiality, while having concrete expression in ecclesiastical structures, such as synods and episcopal conferences, might best be understood as an ecclesial sensibility: so, too, I would suggest that synodality is not ultimately a fifth mark of the church but a sensibility, reflecting the *communio* ecclesiology that emerged from Vatican II as the master-narrative for the church. Rather than a flattening of ecclesial hierarchy or secularizing of governance structures, it is above all an affirmation of the gifts and potential contributions of all Christians to the church’s mission.⁷⁷

Pope Francis has in fact repeatedly critiqued liberal democratic or secular political readings of synodality. “The Synod is not a par-

liament or an opinion poll,⁷⁸ “neither a convention, nor a parlor ... nor a senate, where people make deals and reach a consensus,”⁷⁹ nor a slogan to be bandied about at meetings so some group can get its way, nor a reduction of God’s will to the flavor of the day.⁸⁰ No, a synod is an ecclesial reality, an expression of the church’s nature and mission,⁸¹ a journey by which the church seeks “to understand reality with the eyes of faith and the heart of God,” with the deposit of faith as “a living spring from which the Church drinks.”⁸² Rather than achieving consensus and making deals, a synodal church seeks to proclaim the truth and save souls.⁸³

Another misconception of synodality into which we can easily slip is a bureaucratic one. Here synodality is a tick-a-box exercise of conducting the asked-for consultations, writing up the reports, submitting them on time to the national collators or the international synod office, or parallel behavior in other consultations. Years ago, Hans Urs von Balthasar called for a theology formulated on our knees in worship rather than a theology formulated on our asses at the desk;⁸⁴ and Joseph Ratzinger warned us about a paper-dominated episcopacy, inundated with administrivia and distracted from spreading of the Gospel, bishops who produce more committee minutes than pastoral fruits.⁸⁵

In the great 1980s political satire *Yes Minister* (1980–84) and *Yes Prime Minister* (1986–88), the Rt Hon. Jim Hacker, MP (played by Paul Eddington) is the bumbling politician desperately trying to save his political career while formulating and enacting a policy or two. Sir Humphrey Appleby (played by Nigel Hawthorne) is the permanent secretary of that department and the consummate bureaucrat, devoting himself to ensuring that the minister does as little as possible and always supports departmental policy. The parallels with episcopal life are too many to list here: I can only recommend that church leaders see the series for themselves. One common tactic of Sir Humphrey when Hacker is proposing to do something is to say, “That will be courageous, Minister”—in other words, it will cost you votes; and that is usually enough to get the minister to change course! Well, Pope Francis says that synodality requires “apostolic courage,” that bishops “be courageous, Minister.” There will be times when we need to face up to those who seek to

supplant the light of truth with the threats or seductions of the world. As shepherds we must be prepared to point toward him who is the Way (the *ὁδὸς* of the *σύνοδος*), the Truth that enlightens that way, and the Life that enables us to walk it (Jn 14:16).⁸⁶ Unit- ing our leading, teaching, and sacraments like the Lord on the road to Emmaus,⁸⁷ we can shepherd, preach, and sanctify authori- tatively, as truly sacred service rather than the (un)civil service of Sir Humphrey.

Unlike politicized, bureaucratic, or corporate conceptions of the church, Pope Francis insists that the Holy Spirit is the great protag- onist in the church's life. Without the Spirit, the pope says, we can hold an ecclesial UN meeting or diocesan parliament, "examining this or that question," but it will not be a true synod, which is "the faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all lis- tening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth' (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he 'says to the Churches' (Rv 2:7)."⁸⁸ Prayerful discernment must therefore guide the synod, "preventing it from becoming a Church convention, a study group or a political assembly, but rather a grace-filled event, a process of healing and renewal guided by the Spirit."⁸⁹

This emphasis on synodality as a form of prayer⁹⁰ is perhaps unique to Pope Francis's teaching. "The Synod is a process of spiri- tual discernment, of ecclesial discernment, that unfolds in adora- tion, in prayer, and in dialogue with the word of God."⁹¹ Synods will only be a space for the action of the Holy Spirit if participants engage in "*trusting prayer* ... that is the action of the heart when it opens to the divine, when our humors are silenced in order to listen to the still quiet voice of God."⁹² Otherwise, Francis says, our words will be empty and our decisions merely decorative. In his reflections Cardinal Michael Czerny suggests that to make sense of synodality and avoid parliamentary or bureaucratized misconcep- tions, we must recover Vatican II's teaching on the church as sac- rament and as communion sanctified by the Holy Spirit and led collegially by the bishops.⁹³ If the story of the road to Emmaus is the ultimate example of *σύνοδος*, we must acknowledge that amidst the listening and talking the two climactic moments were Christ breaking open the Word and then Breaking the Bread. As

word-and-bread-breakers, the bishops are essential to any genuinely synodal sensibility, process, or church.

That said, some of what Pope Francis says about or around synodality is undoubtedly intended as a provocation to his brother bishops. Speaking in that great city of monuments, Rome, the pope said:

Journeying together tends to be more horizontal than vertical; a synodal Church clears the horizon where Christ, our sun, rises, while erecting monuments to hierarchy covers it. Shepherds walk with their people. . . . In this synodal process, [bishops] should ask: “Am I capable of moving, in front, in between, and behind, or do I remain seated in my chair, with miter and crozier?” [We must be] Shepherds in the midst of the flock—remaining shepherds, not becoming sheep . . . the flock knows the difference—in front to show the way, in the middle to sense how people feel, behind to help the stragglers, letting the people sniff out where the best pastures are found.⁹⁴

And speaking to the Roman curia for Christmas 2021, the Holy Father said:

Synodality is a “style” to which we must be converted, especially those of us here present and all those who serve the universal Church by their work. . . . [We must] embrace in the first person the challenges of synodal conversion. . . . We must be converted to a different style of work, of cooperation and communion . . . in humility.⁹⁵

None of which is to deny that the synod is composed of bishops and “in some manner the image of an ecumenical council and reflects its spirit and method.”⁹⁶ “It is essentially configured as an episcopal body,⁹⁷ for it is the unique role of the bishops, having listened to the laity and clergy, to discern on behalf of the whole church:

Through the Synod Fathers, the bishops act as authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church, which they need to discern carefully from the changing currents of public opinion.⁹⁸

The synod process culminates in listening to the bishop of Rome:

Who is called to speak as “pastor and teacher of all Christians,” not on the basis of his personal convictions but as the supreme witness to the *fides totius Ecclesiae*, “the guarantor of the obedience and the conformity of the Church to the will of God, to the Gospel of Christ, and to the Tradition of the Church.”⁹⁹

In doing this the pope needs his brother bishops—their guidance, prudence, and experience—and needs like them to be converted by the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁰ Pope Francis has sought to expand the idea of synodality, beyond Synods of Bishops as understood in the traditions of the Eastern and Western churches, to being a model of hierarchical communion in the local church, in bodies such as the presbyteral council, college of consultors, and diocesan pastoral council, in ecclesiastical provinces and national and regional bishops’ conferences, in international gatherings, and in many other ways.¹⁰¹

CONCLUSION

So, to sum up: the church at the Second Vatican Council and since has described itself as a sacrament, a sign and instrument of union with God and humanity, and as a communion between God and humanity and between human persons. It has reflected upon the bishops as a stable college and their particular relationship when gathered in synod. The idea of synodality has in recent years been a rich source of reflection on ecclesial identity and mission. What it means to qualify an institution or activity as “synodal” is sometimes unclear because the concept is still crystallizing. But for those charged with the office of bishop it means they:

- exercise their sanctifying, teaching, and especially governing offices in hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college
- balance in genuinely Catholic ways the universal and the particular, and the hierarchical priesthood and the priesthood of all the faithful

- mediate communion in all their governing, teaching, and sanctifying, encouraging the faithful in their union with the Blessed Trinity, the communion of saints, and fellow believers
- participate with open minds and willing hearts in ecclesial gatherings such as ecumenical councils, synods, and national and regional episcopal conferences
- cultivate amongst themselves an ecclesial sensibility that is fraternal and collegial with respect to their brother bishops, clergy, and lay faithful, stopping, listening, encountering, discussing, praying, discerning, deciding with all and for all, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit
- be conduits of the apostolic tradition, gather the local faithful into Eucharistic communities, preside at the Eucharistic sacrifice, promote devotion, unite and encourage the clergy, and engage in processes of prayerful, spiritual discernment
- be open to new voices, views, pastoral strategies, ways of service, while eschewing politicized or bureaucratized misconceptions of the Church and her mission.

In this chapter I have attempted to trace the fruits of thinking about the church and the bishops as sacrament, communion, college, and synod, in the teachings of the Vatican Council and since, especially in the magisterium of Pope Francis. In subsequent chapters I will try to unpack what all this might mean in practical terms for various dimensions of our lives as bishops. I began this talk with reference to the centrality of Christ in our mission, as exemplified in the *Pantocrator* in St. Paul's in Rome. With Pope Paul and Pope Honorius before him, we lie prostrate at the feet of Jesus and ask that he, with Peter and Paul, Andrew and Luke, make of our bishops a collegium, an ordo, a brotherhood at his service and the service of the Gospel.