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Schism, Synodality, and Communion in the Contemporary American Catholic Church

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A Senior Honors Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Bellarmine

University Honors Program

Under the Direction of Dr. Hoon Choi

Reader: Dr. Andrew Stone Porter

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Introduction

Divisions pervade the contemporary American Catholic Church. Controversial issues divide Catholic against Catholic, creating a culture of polarization that harms relationships and damages the Church. Many of the reports from the ongoing Synod on Synodality, a multi-year process to conduct listening sessions at every level of the Church, reflect this experience. In a report from the archdiocese of Louisville from June 2022, which synthesized the views of the 2,389 people who participated in listening sessions in Louisville, polarization emerged as a dominant theme. According to the document, “a significant number of groups and individuals expressed a concern about polarization,”¹ with one parish summary noting that “many expressed a desire for the Church to help our people to learn to talk to one another again.”² Central to this experience of polarization was a perceived division between “orthodox and progressive factions within [the Church].”³ As one parish summary stated, “We had some in the group who were very dogmatic and others who are very liberal with Church doctrine. Not sure how we meet in the middle.”⁴ The United States report for the synod, which approximately 700,000 American Catholics contributed to, also reflected polarization in the Church. According to the document, one “wound reflected in synodal consultations was the experience that the Church is deeply divided.”⁵ The authors of the document write that Catholics across the country feel “this division

¹ Archdiocese of Louisville, “‘Journeying Together:’ The Archdiocesan Synthesis,” June 2022, 9, <https://www.archlou.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Synod-Report-2022-Final-cumulative-version.pdf> (hereafter cited as the Archdiocesan Synthesis).

² Archdiocesan Synthesis, 9.

³ Archdiocesan Synthesis, 9.

⁴ Archdiocesan Synthesis, 9.

⁵ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “National Synthesis of the People of God in America for the Diocesan Phase of the 2021-2023 Synod,” 5, 2022, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/us-national-synthesis-2021-2023-synod>.

as a profound sense of pain and anxiety,”⁶ with differences of opinion “sometimes reach[ing] the level of animosity.”⁷

The divisions in the American Catholic Church result from disagreements about Church teaching. Controversial Church teaching, especially on issues of gender and sexuality, have become topics that divide American Catholics. While many Catholics in the United States defend Church teachings on these issues, another substantial group of American Catholics dissent. Despite Church teaching, 60% of Catholics in the United States support same-sex marriage,⁸ 43% say that abortion should be legal in most cases,⁹ and 41% support contraception as morally acceptable.¹⁰ In this context of widespread dissent from the moral teachings of the Catholic magisterium, people who defend the moral teachings of the Church on issues of gender and sexuality are often described as “orthodox”¹¹ or “traditional.”¹² Those who do not are often labeled “liberal”¹³ or “progressive.”¹⁴ As a second synod report from the Louisville archdiocese

⁶ U.S. National Synthesis, 5.

⁷ U.S. National Synthesis, 5.

⁸ Jeff Diamant, “How Catholics around the World See Same-Sex Marriage, Homosexuality.” Pew Research Center, 2020, “<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/11/02/how-catholics-around-the-world-see-same-sex-marriage-homosexuality/>.”

⁹ Gregory A Smith, “Like Americans Overall, Catholics Vary in Their Abortion Views, with Regular Mass Attenders Most Opposed.” Pew Research Center, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/05/23/like-americans-overall-catholics-vary-in-their-abortion-views-with-regular-mass-attenders-most-opposed/>.

¹⁰ Russell Heimlich, “Few Catholics See Contraceptive Use as Morally Wrong,” Pew Research Center, 2012, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2012/02/27/few-catholics-see-contraceptive-use-as-morally-wrong/#:~:text=Although%20the%20use%20of%20contraception,is%20not%20a%20moral%20issue.>

¹¹ Archdiocesan Synthesis, 9.

¹² Archdiocesan Synthesis, 9.

¹³ Archdiocesan Synthesis, 9.

¹⁴ Archdiocesan Synthesis, 9.

in April 2024 describes, there “is tension among those who cite the importance of strongly reinforcing Church teaching and those who believe Church teaching needs to change.”¹⁵

This thesis examines the issue of division in the Church through the lens of the language of “communion.” In the documents of the Catholic magisterium, the word “communion” has two central meanings. The first is Holy Communion, which is the sacramental body and blood of Christ that Catholics receive during the Eucharistic celebration. Communion in this context is believed to be “the real, true, and substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist.”¹⁶ This meaning of communion is not at issue in this thesis. It is the second meaning of communion that is critically important to understanding divisions in the Church. In this definition, communion refers to “the unity of the faithful” that “is both expressed and brought about”¹⁷ when Catholics participate in the Eucharistic celebration. In this secondary definition, communion binds the Church together in a sacramental way. It is the “unity” that brings the Church together through the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Within Catholic magisterial documents, there are disparate understandings of what this Eucharist “unity” means. This is because the word “unity” is itself inherently ambiguous. On one hand, Merriam Webster defines unity as a “condition of harmony”¹⁸ or “a continuity without

¹⁵ Archdiocese of Louisville, “‘Journeying Together:’ The Archdiocesan Synthesis II Interim Phase,” April 2024, 5, <https://www.archlou.org/synod-2022/> (hereafter cited as the Archdiocesan Synthesis II).

¹⁶ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church,” November 2021, 14, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church> (hereafter cited as the “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church”).

¹⁷ Pope John Paul II, “Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*,” Vatican, April 2003, sec. 21, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_eccl-de-euch.html (hereafter cited as *EE*).

¹⁸ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, “Unity,” Merriam Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/unity>.

deviation or change.”¹⁹ This definition implies that unity requires that all agree “in harmony” without “deviating or changing” from the whole. Similarly, in the 1913 edition of Merriam Webster, unity is defined as a “concord; harmony; conjunction; agreement; *uniformity* [italics mine].”²⁰ Under this definition, unity requires eliminating all diversity or difference to achieve a “oneness” that is sameness. Everyone must agree to be united. However, not all definitions of unity preclude diversity. According to the online HarperCollins dictionary, unity is “the state of different areas or groups being joined together.”²¹ This definition acknowledges that unity can come from people of diverse backgrounds who join around a common cause or identity group. It does not demand that people relinquish their differences to be part of the whole. In this definition, unity can persist amidst difference.

Both definitions of unity have informed what communion means to the Catholic magisterium. Depending on the magisterial document, the word “communion” can either demand uniformity or welcome diversity into the Church. This is evident in the contrasting approaches to communion taken by The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) compared to Pope Francis and the International Theological Commission (ITC). While the USCCB is an example of a group in the Church hierarchy that has used the language of communion to enforce uniformity in the Church, Pope Francis and the ITC have used the language of communion to welcome everyone to the table.

In recent years, the USCCB has claimed that Catholics who dissent from Church teaching are not “in communion” with the Church. In 2021, they released a document that instructed

¹⁹ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, “Unity.”

²⁰ Webster’s1913.com, “Unity,” <https://www.websters1913.com/words/Unity>.

²¹ Collins Online Dictionary, “Unity,” HarperCollins, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/unity>.

dissenting Catholics not to take the Eucharist at Mass. The document instructs Catholics who “repudiate” the Church’s “definitive teachings on moral issues” to “refrain”²² from the Eucharistic celebration. To defend this stance, the USCCB argues that people must be “in communion” with the Church to receive the Eucharist. To “repudiate” Church teaching is to “seriously diminish [...] communion with the Church,”²³ which means that to take the Eucharist would be a “lie—it expresses a communion that in fact has been broken.”²⁴ In this understanding of communion, communion requires that everyone in the Church concur on all doctrinal and moral issues; to dissent from Church teaching on an issue is to break communion. Communion in this context demands uniformity.

This instruction from the USCCB is so critical because to bar someone from the Eucharist is to push them to the margins of the Church. The Eucharist is the most important sacrament in the Catholic faith, the sacrament that connects Catholics to God and to the entire Church. As the USCCB writes, “when we receive Holy Communion, Christ is giving himself to us [...] here we attain God and God joins himself to us in the most perfect union.”²⁵ Holy Communion also connects us to the entire Church by “plac[ing] us in intimate communion [...] with each other.”²⁶ To exclude dissenting Catholics from the Eucharist, then, is to exclude them from the center of the Catholic faith. It is to take them out of communion with Christ and other Catholics, depriving them of God’s “gift of self” that comes through reception of the Eucharist.²⁷

²² “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church,” 28.

²³ “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church,” 28.

²⁴ “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church,” 28.

²⁵ “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church,” 15.

²⁶ “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church,” 16.

²⁷ “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church,” 15.

In contrast to this, Pope Francis offers an alternative understanding of communion that welcomes everyone to the table. Instead of silencing people who dissent from Church teaching, Francis recognizes that the Church needs to be “a Church which listens, which realizes that listening ‘is more than simply hearing.’”²⁸ In a Church that has for so long subordinated the importance of the views of the faithful, Francis wants to elevate the voices of those who have seldom had a platform in the Church. Francis has called this vision of the Church “synodality,” or the “journeying together”²⁹ of the Church through “processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every person can participate and contribute.”³⁰ No one is excluded from the conversation, even those who have left the Church or have been deeply hurt by it. Central to Francis’ vision of synodality is the word “communion.”³¹ For Francis, communion requires a radical openness to difference in which “new perspectives and points of view”³² are welcome. As the ITC writes, synodality makes it possible to “build communion amid disagreement,”³³ in which people can gather together without concurring on every issue in the Church.

²⁸ Pope Francis, “Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops: Address of His Holiness Pope Francis,” October 2015, par. 11, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

²⁹ Synod of Bishops, “Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. For A Synodal Church: Communion Participation, and Mission,” July 2021, sec. 1, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/09/07/210907a.html> (hereafter cited as the Preparatory Document).

³⁰ Preparatory Document, sec. 9.

³¹ Preparatory Document, sec. 1.

³² International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” March 2018, sec. 111, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html (hereafter cited as “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church”).

³³ “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” sec. 111.

Both Pope Francis and the USCCB offer two possible paths for the Church: an interpretation of communion that demands uniformity or an interpretation of communion that welcomes every voice to the table. Which path the Church ultimately takes has serious implications for whether the Church can adequately respond to its divisions. I argue in this thesis the Church must fully embrace an understanding of communion open to diversity to heal the wound of polarization that is poisoning the Church and turning Catholic against Catholic.

I make this case in three chapters. In the first chapter, I argue that the competing theologies found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council have contributed to the radically different understandings of Catholic identity that still persist today. In the second chapter, I contend that the American bishops have sought to enforce uniformity in the Church through the language of communion. In the third chapter, I posit that Pope Francis has provided an alternative approach to communion through synodality that welcomes every voice to the table. In the conclusion, I suggest that the Church must embrace a synodal understanding of communion if divisions are to be healed.

Literature Review

Many of the scholars writing about synodality are primarily concerned about how synodality will affect decision-making in the Church. For conservative theologians like Nicholas Healy and Micheal Hanby, synodality risks undermining the authority of the Church hierarchy. Healy writes that “what is arguably missing from the various documents on synodality or the synodal process is an adequate reflection on the source and meaning of hierarchical authority in

the Church.”³⁴ Similarly, Hanby writes that synodality risks undermining the authority of the Church for “pseudo-democratic processes” that “claim to ‘correspond as closely as possible to the will of God’ but in fact contradict it.”³⁵ On the other hand, liberal theologians like Francesco Zaccaria contend that synodality offers an opportunity to increase lay power in the Church’s decision making.³⁶ Because of the plethora of scholarship on this issue, my thesis does not address the implications of synodality for the distribution of power in the Church. Instead, I examine the implications of synodality for divisions in the Church.

Many scholars who have focused on the intersection of synodality and division have not considered the importance of the language of communion. Bradford Hinze writes that synodality provides “a way together” for a “wounded and wounding” Church, arguing that “we must be willing to create dialogical processes that promote open, courageous honesty at all levels of the church [...] if we are to name and diagnose the challenges that we are facing.”³⁷ Similarly, Elissa Roper writes that “a key element to the development of a synodal Church” is a commitment to “building bridges,” which “fosters encounter, cooperation, dialogue, and the building of community.”³⁸ Hinze suggests that the Church must intentionally create space for “seekers at the

³⁴ Nicholas Healy, “Communion, Sacramental Authority, and the Limits of Synodality,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 48, no. 4 (2021): 677, <https://www.communio-icr.com/articles/view/communion-sacramental-authority-and-the-limits-of-synodality>.

³⁵ Michael Hanby, “Synodality, Sociologism, and the Judgment of History,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2021): 722, <https://www.communio-icr.com/articles/view/synodality-sociologism-and-the-judgment-of-history>.

³⁶ Francesco Zaccaria, “Synodality and Decision-Making Processes: Towards New Bodies of Participation in the Church,” *Religions* 15 no. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010054>.

³⁷ 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), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140020926595>.

³⁸ Zaccaria, “Synodality and Decision-Making Processes.”

margins”³⁹ who dissent from Church teaching, while Roper indicates the need for more concrete opportunities for dialogue between people in the Church. While these are very helpful ideas, they do not consider the importance of communion for addressing division.

Those scholars who have connected synodality to communion never define what communion is. Lucas Briola writes that “against tendencies to spiritualize communion” in magisterial documents, synodality “promotes structures and processes of communion” in a “concrete”⁴⁰ way. Similarly, Xavier Montecel writes that “synodality is the key in which communion is realized.”⁴¹ For Montecel, “a church that understands itself as communion is required to act as communion,” which means that the “tendency to spiritualize communion” must be resisted “to make communion real in the world.”⁴² While both of these authors explain that communion should not be a vague spiritualization that has no impact on the structures and processes of the Church, neither author explicitly defines what communion is or should be.

My thesis adds to their ideas by exploring what communion is within a synodal context. This is critically important because communion in other Church contexts has become the theological basis for marginalizing Catholics who find themselves in disagreement with Church teaching. Communion within a synodal context therefore provides an alternative understanding of the word that can be used to welcome people into the Church, rather than exclude them. It is no coincidence that both Pope Francis and the ITC have situated the Synod on Synodality as the

³⁹ Elissa Roper, “Synodality: A Process Committed to Transformation,” *Australasian Catholic Record* 95 no. 4 (2018): 418.

⁴⁰ Lucas Briola, “Why Can’t We Be Friends? The Synod on Synodality and the Eucharistic Revival,” *Religions* 14 no. 7 (2023): 865, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070865>.

⁴¹ Xavier Montecel, “Eucharist, Synodality, and Ethics: Making Connections,” *Religions* 14 no. 11 (2023): 1379, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111379>.

⁴² Montecel, “Eucharist, Synodality, and Ethics.”

realization of ecclesial communion, with the word appearing in every Vatican document on synodality or the synodal process at least once. The implications of this need to be fully fleshed out.

To examine the meaning of communion within a synodal context, I draw on a plethora of Vatican documents on synodality. These include the writings of Pope Francis and the 2018 document of the ITC entitled “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church.” The latter is a key source for understanding current Vatican thinking on the theology of synodality, and it explicitly links synodality and communion. I also draw heavily on the documents that have been produced during the ongoing Synod on Synodality, which continue to develop the Church’s understanding of synodality based on the input of the Catholic laity across the globe. Using these documents, I argue that true communion in the Church requires a radical openness to people in the diversity of their beliefs. Communion cannot be a weapon wielded at those who dissent, but rather a tool in the “journeying together” of a diverse and divided Church.

Chapter One

A Divided Church:

Vatican II and the Schism in the American Catholic Church over “Authentic” Catholic Identity

In his book of essays *Contemplation in a World of Action*, published posthumously in 1980, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton says of the Roman Catholic Church, “It is quite possible that the whole Church is now facing a crisis of authority—a crisis of order.”⁴³ In the 1960s, in the midst of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council that characterized the time when Merton was writing, American Catholics faced a crisis of identity in response to complex theological changes that transformed the relationship of the laity to the Church hierarchy. This crisis of identity has continued to afflict the American Church today, leading to a divide between two types of American Catholics: a theologically conservative wing, which understands submission to the Church hierarchy as central to an authentic Catholic identity,⁴⁴ and a theologically liberal wing, who do not.⁴⁵

In this chapter, I argue that this division in the American Church over what constitutes an “authentic” Catholic identity stems from the competing systems of thought found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, which left unresolved the question of the “proper” relationship of the laity to the teaching body of the Church. On the one hand, the Second Vatican Council reframed the relationship of the laity to the hierarchy. On the other hand, the Second

⁴³ Jonathan Ciraulo, “Thomas Merton’s Creative (dis)Obedience,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2011): 189.

⁴⁴ Michael W. Cuneo, *The Smoke of Satan: Conservative and Traditional Dissent in Contemporary American Catholicism*, (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 25

⁴⁵ William V. D’Antonio, James D. Davidson, Dean R. Hoge, and Mary L. Gautier, “American Catholics and Church Authority” in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael James Lacey and Francis Oakley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 284-85.

Vatican Council continued to demand submission of the laity to the Church hierarchy. This has left American Catholics divided between these two positions, even if they cannot articulate that their competing views derive from the teachings of the Council.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic hierarchy emphasized the hierarchical component of the church as primary and described the role of the laity as passive and secondary.⁴⁶ As Pope Pius X writes in his encyclical *Vehementer Nos*, “the church is essentially an unequal society, that is, a society comprising two categories of persons, the pastors and the flock [...] the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors.”⁴⁷ Throughout the nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, this understanding of the Church resulted in a culture of submission. The clergy would preach to their congregations the correct truths to be believed and the correct moral codes to be followed, and the laity would be expected to echo the teachings delivered to them from the pulpit. Rather than seeking the truth of God through their own theological study, the laity were taught to submit to the Church authorities and accept the claims of the hierarchy as the ultimate truth.⁴⁸ This culture made it so that most American Catholic congregations identified submission to the Church hierarchy as central to Catholic identity. Because of this, many of the rituals of the laity, such as frequent confession before Eucharist, were used to prove their submission, as the culture of the Church demanded submission as a requisite for belonging.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ish Ruiz, “Synodality in the Catholic Church: Toward a Conciliar Ecclesiology of Inclusion for LGBTQ+ Persons,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 2 (2023): 57.

⁴⁷ Pius X, “Vehementer Nos, Encyclical of Pope Pius X on the French Law of Separation,” February 1906, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_11021906_vehementer-nos.html.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Stotts, “Obedience as Belonging: Catholic Guilt and Frequent Confession in America,” *Religions* 10, no. 6 (019): 370, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10060370>.

⁴⁹ Stotts, 370.

During Vatican II, this culture of submission was challenged by some Council Fathers, who, guided by theologian advisors, advocated for a different understanding of the relationship between the laity and the hierarchy. *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, framed this new relationship. The original constitution on the Church written for the Council, *De Ecclesia*, was written by a commission headed by archconservative Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani. His episcopal motto *semper idem*, or “always the same,” conveyed his sense of the purpose of the Council: to reiterate Church teaching.⁵⁰ The original document therefore reinforced the existing relationship between the laity and the hierarchy, referring to lay Catholics as “subjects.”⁵¹ It emphasized obedience to ecclesiastical, especially papal, authority as the remedy for the “crisis of authority” that was afflicting both the Church and the world.⁵² After seventy-seven speeches by the Council Fathers on the text, many of whom considered the text “inadequate,”⁵³ it became clear to Pope John XXIII that the constitution on the Church would need to undergo revisions.⁵⁴ The revised version of the document, which would become *Lumen Gentium*, referred to the laity instead as the “people of God.” This term emphasized the horizontal nature of the Church, stressing the fundamental equality of all Catholics, laity and hierarchy alike. Instead of framing the relationship between the laity and the hierarchy as “subject” and “monarch,” both the laity and hierarchy together formed the people of God.

⁵⁰ John McGreevy, *Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to the Pope*. (W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 277.

⁵¹ McGreevy, 291.

⁵² John O’Malley. *What Happened at Vatican II*. (Harvard University Press, 2008), 155

⁵³ O’Malley, 158.

⁵⁴ O’Malley, 159.

Despite this, *Lumen Gentium* continued to emphasize the submission of the laity to the hierarchy. In the chapter in the document on the hierarchical structure of the Church, the document instructs the laity to accept “in religious submission of mind and will” the teachings of the “magisterium of the Roman Pontiff.”⁵⁵ This is predicated on the idea that God orders the community of the faithful into “a hierarchy of persons” in which different groups of people have differing “ranks.”⁵⁶ The rank of some groups affords them “supreme power”⁵⁷ or “primary”⁵⁸ over others, while the rank of other groups is “lesser”⁵⁹ or of a “lower level.”⁶⁰ Under this concept of the Church, a distinct division between the laity and hierarchy is maintained. The laity are told to submit to Church hierarchy, which ostensibly includes accepting the teachings released by the magisterium.

As demonstrated through my discussion of *Lumen Gentium*, the documents of the Second left unresolved the question of the “proper” relationship of the Catholic laity to the Church hierarchy. Like *Lumen Gentium*, many documents published by the Council contained competing strains of thought that envisioned the role of the laity in different ways. On the one hand, the laity were told to continue their posture of submission to the Church. On the other hand, it was

⁵⁵ Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964,” accessed October 17, 2023, sec. 25, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, (hereafter cited as *LG*).

⁵⁶ Jeannine Hill Fletcher, “Supremacy in the Sense of the Faithful” in *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei*, ed. Bradford E. Hinze and Peter C. Phan (Eugene, Oregon: PICKWICK Publications, 2016), 55.

⁵⁷ *LG*, sec. 21.

⁵⁸ *LG*, sec. 22.

⁵⁹ *LG*, sec. 41.

⁶⁰ *LG*, sec. 29.

clear that their role in the Church had been reimagined and that there would be no turning back. These competing ideas, both affirmed by Vatican II, caused a crisis in the American Catholic Church in the mid-1960s over what constitutes an “authentic” Catholic identity. In a culture that had emphasized submission to the Church authorities as central to Catholic identity, American Catholics suddenly had to reframe their understanding of what it meant to be Catholic. Were they still required to submit to all official Church teaching? How much Church doctrine did they have to accept to call themselves authentically Catholic? Could they push for more reforms to increase lay power in the Church? Even today, around 60 years after the closing of the Second Vatican Council, many Catholics in the United States struggle to understand the answers to these questions, which Catholic scholars and Vatican officials continue to debate. This has resulted in a crisis of identity in the post-conciliar contemporary Church, with many Catholics unclear about their role in the Church and how they should relate to the Church hierarchy.

Following Vatican II, a division emerged in the American Church in response to the reforms of the Council. During the 1960s, this manifested itself in two groups of Catholic “radicals”: those who resisted the reforms of the Council, and those who found the reforms inadequate and who therefore advocated for more lay power in the Church. On the one hand, some Catholics resisted the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, claiming that the leaders of the Church had undermined their own authority in capitulating to modernity.⁶¹ These Catholics emphasized submission to the Church hierarchy as central to Catholic identity, even if many of them paradoxically denied the authority of many Church leaders. Ultimately, the beliefs of these Catholics culminated in a movement that has been dubbed “Catholic traditionalism,” which

⁶¹ Joseph A. Komonchak, “Interpreting the Council: Catholic Attitudes Towards Vatican II” in *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*, ed. Mary Joy Weaver and R. Scott Appleby (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 19-20.

today rejects the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and promotes the traditional Latin Mass as the most authentic liturgy.⁶² On the other hand, other groups of Catholics advocated for more reforms following the Council, calling especially for a democratization of church governance that would incorporate the laity more fully into the Church hierarchy. This led to the establishment of Catholic lay-power organizations that often dissented from Catholic moral teaching by promoting the rights of women and LGBTQ+ people in the Church.⁶³ These groups drew on the ideas in many Vatican II documents to defend their dissent to Catholic moral teaching, claiming that the Church hierarchy should more explicitly legitimize dissent to the institutional Church in those times when the conscience of the layperson opposes the teachings of the magisterial authorities.⁶⁴ Both responses to the reforms of Vatican II were ultimately dismissed by the Church hierarchy as overly radical responses to the Council. Due to the suppression of dissent under the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI,⁶⁵ the prominence of lay-power organizations declined in the Church throughout the late twentieth century.⁶⁶

This division in the American Catholic Church has continued into today. Today, Catholic “liberals” and Catholic “conservatives” disagree over what constitutes an authentic Catholic identity. Theologically liberal Catholics look to the individual conscience as the most authentic

⁶² Thomas Schmidinger, “Profiting from Crisis: Catholic Traditionalism during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Society* 8 (2022): 466.

⁶³ James P. McCartin, “The Waning of the ‘Catholic Other’ and Catholicism in American Life after 1965,” *French Review of American Studies* 95 (2003): 12.

⁶⁴ McCartin, “The Waning of the ‘Catholic Other,’” 11-12.

⁶⁵ Hinze, Bradford E. “Dissenting Church: New Models for Conflict and Diversity in the Roman Catholic Tradition.” *Horizons* 45, no. 1 (2018): 128–32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2018.58>.

⁶⁶ Schmidinger, “Profiting from Crisis,” 466.

source of moral authority.⁶⁷ In the times when their own conscience contradicts the teachings of the Church, they often follow their own conscience, leading many of them to dissent from Catholic moral teaching on issues such as abortion, birth control, and LGBTQ+ identity.⁶⁸ They do not see submission to the Church hierarchy as central to Catholic identity. In contrast, theologically conservative Catholics tend to measure the legitimacy of someone's Catholic identity by their acceptance and submission to the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Church. Many of them feel threatened by the tendency of Catholic liberals to dismiss the teachings of the Church on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, leading them to conceptualize laity and clergy who dissent from Catholic moral teaching as "pseudo-Catholics" who have abandoned the true faith to embrace secular evils.⁶⁹ In the face of laity and clergy who fail to oppose the "moral evils" condemned by the Church, Catholic conservatives are committed to revitalizing the Church through a campaign of moral militancy that defends its moral teachings.⁷⁰⁷¹

In the decades since Vatican II, the American clergy has overwhelmingly adopted the conservative position. According to a major study published in 2023, the number of young priests who identify as "theologically progressive" has been steadily declining since the Second

⁶⁷ D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, and Gautier, "American Catholics and Church Authority," 284-85.

⁶⁸ McCartin, "The Waning of the 'Catholic Other,'" 16.

⁶⁹ Appleby, "Epilogue," 327.

⁷⁰ Cuneo, *The Smoke of Satan*, 25.

⁷¹ Although Catholic conservatives understand submission to the hierarchy as central to Catholic identity, many conservatives paradoxically dissent from the teachings of Pope Francis. For them, however, to dissent from Francis does not undermine their submission to the Church. Rather, because they worry that Francis has advanced heretical teachings that contradict "true" Church teaching, to dissent from Francis is in fact an act of submission to what they perceive to be the true faith. (Andrew Brown, "The War Against Pope Francis," *The Guardian*, October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/oct/27/the-war-against-pope-francis>.)

Vatican Council.⁷² Of the priests ordained after 2020, 85 percent of them describe themselves as “conservative/orthodox” or “extremely conservative/orthodox.” Only 14 percent of them identify as “middle-of-the-road,” and the number who identify as “progressive” or “very progressive” is almost zero.⁷³ Although the priests ordained after 2020 most dramatically represent the conservatism of the clergy, the American clergy had steadily been becoming more theologically conservative since Vatican II.⁷⁴ Because of this, the conservative position has become the most prominent voice in the American Catholic hierarchy, intensifying divisions as Catholics who dissent are pushed to the margins of the Church.

As the divide between Catholic liberals and Catholic conservatives demonstrate, the inconsistency in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on the “proper” relationship of the laity to the Church hierarchy has contributed to the ongoing division in the American Catholic Church over what constitutes an “authentic” Catholic identity. As I will discuss in the second chapter, this division in the Church has real life implications that harm the overall body of the Church. Both Catholic liberals and Catholic conservatives levy attacks at each other for not being “authentically” Catholic, with some leaders in the Church using the sacrament of the Eucharist to exclude those who they do not consider to be true Catholics. In the next chapter, I will use this battle over the Eucharist as a lens to further investigate the division in the American Church, demonstrating how the Eucharist has been used by the USCCB to police authentic Catholic identity.

⁷² Brandon Vaidyanathan, et. al., “Polarization, Generational Dynamics, and the Ongoing Impact of the Abuse Crisis: Further Insights from the National Study of Catholic Priests,” The Catholic Project, November 2023, 4, <https://catholicproject.catholic.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Further-Insights-NSCP-Nov-2023-rev.pdf>.

⁷³ Ibid, 5.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 6.

Chapter Two

Communion as Unity in Uniformity:

Communion Ecclesiology and Opposition to Dissent in the USCCB

One of the most recent controversies in the American Catholic Church was the push by some conservative bishops to deny Eucharist to President Biden on the basis of his support of abortion rights. The controversy came to a head in June 2021 at a meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), when the bishops voted 73% to 24% to draft a guidance on the sacrament of the Eucharist.⁷⁵ The proposed outline of the document would have included “a theological foundation for the Church’s discipline concerning the reception of Holy Communion and a special call for those Catholics who are cultural, political, or parochial leaders to witness the faith.”⁷⁶ Because of this description of the proposed document, many Catholics worried that the American bishops would use the document to officially condemn President Biden and other Catholic public figures for their dissent to the teachings of the Church and to recommend that they be barred from the Eucharist. Cardinal Luis Ladaria, the top doctrinal official for Pope Francis, warned the American bishops in a letter that a policy barring politicians from Communion could “become a source of discord rather than unity.”⁷⁷ The final document released by the USCCB, entitled *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, ultimately made no explicit references to whether priests and bishops should deny Communion to public figures at odds with Catholic teachings. Nonetheless, the document instructs American

⁷⁵ Giulia Heyward, “Why Do Some Catholic Bishops Want to Deny Joe Biden Communion?,” *The New York Times*, October 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/joe-biden-communion-catholic-church.html>.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Catholics to refrain from receiving the Eucharist if they do not align with the teachings of the Church on moral issues. According to the document, those who “knowingly and obstinately [...] reject the defined doctrines of the Church, or knowingly and obstinately [...] repudiate her definitive teachings on moral issues [...] seriously diminish their communion with the Church” and should therefore “refrain” from taking the Eucharist.⁷⁸ In other words, although the bishops will not police the issue by officially barring certain people from the communion rail, the implication is that Joe Biden and other American Catholics who publicly disagree with the bishops on Catholic moral teaching should choose to abstain from the Eucharistic until they have conformed to Church teachings.⁷⁹

The USCCB uses the language of “communion” as their theological basis for recommending that dissenters bar themselves from the Eucharist. To use the word communion in this way is to indicate that to be “in communion” with the Church is to assent to all of her moral and doctrinal teachings. Anyone who dissents from Church teaching on moral or doctrinal issues, therefore, would not be in communion with the Church. Under this theological framework, communion becomes a uniformity of mind and thought in which all members of the Church concur on all issues. This pushes Catholics who dissent to the margins of the Church.

In this chapter, I argue that this language of communion as it has been used by the USCCB comes from an “ecclesiology of communion” that emerged in magisterial documents 20 years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. Two magisterial documents, one

⁷⁸ “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church,” 28.

⁷⁹ The document is intentionally vague in defining what it means to “‘knowingly and obstinately [...] repudiate [...] definite teachings [of the Church] on moral issues.’” What is the criteria for “knowingly and obstinately?” What counts as “definitive teachings” or not? This vagueness makes it possible to interpret the document in a number of different ways. Yet, the context for the document—the fact that some bishops had expressed wanting to ban President Joe Biden from the Eucharist for his public policy on abortion—demonstrates that their primary concern is related to American Catholics’ rejection of Church teaching on abortion and other controversial issues.

published in 1985 and the other published in 1992, introduce this “ecclesiology of communion” and frame it as the “the central and fundamental idea of the Council’s documents.”⁸⁰ The document published in 1985, the Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, opposes the emphasis on structural reform that dominated discourse around the Church after the Council. The 1992 document, the Letter to the Bishops on Communion, asserts the primacy of the universal Church over the local Church to oppose the push for decentralization that emerged after the Council. Both documents conceptualize the word “communion” to mean a unity that is uniformity of mind and thought. In a continuation of the precedent set by those documents, the USCCB frames communion in *The Mystery of the Eucharist* as a uniformity in thought in which all members of the Church concur on issues of morality.

Framing communion as uniformity reflects the position of American Catholic conservatives. As I argued in the first chapter, conservatives in the American Catholic Church believe that an authentic Catholic identity requires assent to the moral teachings of the Church. They imagine the Church as a uniform reality. However, the majority of American Catholics do not find themselves in agreement with the moral teachings of the Church. Despite Church teaching on sexuality, abortion, and birth control, 60% of the Catholics in the United States support same-sex marriage,⁸¹ 43% of American Catholics say that abortion should be legal in most cases,⁸² and 98% of all sexually active Catholic women of reproductive age have used a

⁸⁰ 1985 Extraordinary Synod, “The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod,” EWTN Global Catholic Television Network, 1985, sec. II.C.1. <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/final-report-of-the-1985-extraordinary-synod-2561> (hereafter referred to as the Final Report).

⁸¹ Jeff Diamant, “How Catholics around the World See Same-Sex Marriage, Homosexuality.”

⁸² Gregory A. Smith, “Like Americans Overall, Catholics Vary in Their Abortion Views, with Regular Mass Attenders Most Opposed.”

method of birth control other than natural family planning.⁸³ American Catholics who hold politically conservative views also dissent from Church teaching. In opposition to Church teachings on the death penalty, torture, and what the USCCB calls the “injustice”⁸⁴ of the US immigration system, 58% of Catholics in the United States either “strongly” or “somewhat” favor the death penalty for murder convicts,⁸⁵ 51% of white non-Hispanic Catholics think that torture against suspected terrorists is “often” or “sometimes” justified,⁸⁶ and 20% of Catholics in the United States say that there should not be a way for illegal immigrants to legally remain in the country.⁸⁷ As this demonstrates, the majority of both politically liberal and politically conservative Catholics in the United States dissent from Church teaching on a range of moral issues. It is not just politically and theologically progressive Catholics who are the locus of dissent in the American Church. Yet, the language of communion used by the USCCB conceives that all these people, both liberal and conservative, are not in communion with the Church.

The language of communion used by the USCCB comes from the “ecclesiology of communion” introduced 20 years after the Second Vatican Council. In 1985, Pope John Paul II

⁸³ “Guttmacher Statistics on Catholic Women’s Contraceptive Use.” Guttmacher Institute, February 2012, <https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2012/02/guttmacher-statistic-catholic-womens-contraceptive-use>.

⁸⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration and the Movement of Peoples,” <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/catholic-teaching-on-immigration-and-the-movement-of-peoples>.

⁸⁵ Matt Hadro, “Survey: A Majority of US Catholics Support the Death Penalty,” Catholic News Agency, February 2024, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/248450/survey-a-majority-of-us-catholics-support-the-death-penalty>.

⁸⁶ Joseph Liu, “The Religious Dimensions of the Torture Debate,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, April 2009, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2009/04/29/the-religious-dimensions-of-the-torture-debate/>.

⁸⁷ Michael Lipka, “Catholics, Other Christians Support Immigration Reform, but Say Faith Plays Small Role,” Pew Research Center, April 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2014/04/01/catholics-other-christians-support-immigration-reform-but-say-faith-plays-small-role/>.

convened an extraordinary synod to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Council and reflect on the nature of the Church. In the synod's 1985 "Final Report," the bishops introduce "an ecclesiology of communion" as the "the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents."⁸⁸ In 1992, this teaching on the centrality of communion ecclesiology to the documents of the Second Vatican Council was confirmed and further developed in a document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "A Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion." The authors of the document write that "concept of communion [...] is very suitable for expressing the core of the mystery of the Church [...] and can certainly be a key for the renewal of Catholic ecclesiology."⁸⁹ Both of these documents reinterpreted the documents of the Second Vatican Council to be primarily advancing a model of the Church as *communio* and explore the ways in which communion evinces itself in the Church.

The liberation theologian Jose Comblin argues that this "ecclesiology of communion" emerged as a way to suppress push for reforms following the Council. Immediately following Vatican II, most Vatican officials and Catholic scholars concurred that Vatican II had made the "People of God image its dominant image of the Church."⁹⁰ This dominant discourse around the Church as the people of God became the basis for reform efforts that worked to increase power

⁸⁸ The Final Report, sec. II.C.1.

⁸⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion, 1992, sec. 1, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communiois-notio_en.html (hereafter referred to as Letter to the Bishops).

⁹⁰ Edward Hahnenberg, "The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology: Historical Parallels," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (March 2005): 14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002114000507000101>.

for lay people and reduce demands for conformity by the Catholic hierarchy.⁹¹ Under the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, however, the ecclesiology of the people of God became suppressed in magisterial documents to instead advance an ecclesiology of the Church as *communio*, which was another important theme of the Council.⁹²

The *Communio* movement emerged in response to the disillusionment of a group of conservative Catholic intellectuals with the direction of the Church after the Council. In 1969, during the first meeting of the International Theological Commission, an informal summit was held by a group of theologians who opposed the push for structural reform that had dominated discourse around the Church since the Council.⁹³ They discussed ways of addressing what they saw as unwelcome developments since the Council, which for them included an overemphasis on reforming the structures of the Church, a disregard for the authority of the Church hierarchy, and an overly institutional view of the Church that focused too much on Church politics. These intellectuals contended that the model of the Church as the “People of God” had been used to reduce the image of the Church to that of a purely human society governed by human politics, while the idea of *communio*, or communion, more accurately portrayed the Church as a spiritual and theological reality governed by a Divine authority.⁹⁴ This summit culminated in the publication of a new journal, *Communio*, which promoted the theological position of these intellectuals by emphasizing the Church’s mystical reality and promoting the centrality of authority to Catholic ecclesiology. The first edition of the journal appeared in Italy and Germany

⁹¹ Anna Peterson, “People of God (Review).” *The Americas* 62, no. 2 (October 2005): 275–76. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tam.2005.0170>.

⁹² Montecel, “Eucharist, Synodality, and Ethics: Making Connections.”

⁹³ Hahnenberg, “The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology,” 20.

⁹⁴ Montecel, “Eucharist, Synodality, and Ethics: Making Connections.”

in 1972, and a dozen editions in different languages were subsequently published across Europe and North America.⁹⁵ These ideas would become disseminated internationally, ultimately culminating in the “communion of ecclesiology” introduced at the 1985 synod.

The influence of the *Communio* movement on communion ecclesiology is reflected in the Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops. The Final Report, which introduces communion ecclesiology, primarily functioned to oppose the emphasis on structural reform that had dominated discourse around the Church after the Council. In the document, the bishops lament that “because of a partial reading of the Council,”⁹⁶ too much of the discourse about the Church since the Council has presented the Church “as a purely institutional structure devoid of her Mystery.”⁹⁷ The bishops continue by contending that the post-conciliar Church has spoken “too much of the renewal of the Church’s external structures and too little of God and of Christ,”⁹⁸ which has led many Catholics, especially the young, to “consider the Church a pure institution.”⁹⁹ In response to “these and other deficiencies,”¹⁰⁰ the bishops present their “ecclesiology of communion” as a “deeper reception of the Council.”¹⁰¹ Like the proponents of the *Communio* movement, the bishops who authored the Final Report intend to subdue an emphasis on structural reform. For this end, they put forth their “ecclesiology of communion” as

⁹⁵ Hahnenberg, “The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology,” 20.

⁹⁶ The Final Report, sec. I.4.

⁹⁷ The Final Report, sec. I.4.

⁹⁸ The Final Report, sec. I.4.

⁹⁹ The Final Report, sec. I.4.

¹⁰⁰ The Final Report, sec. I.5.

¹⁰¹ The Final Report, sec. I.5.

an alternative ecclesial model, which emphasized the “mystery”¹⁰² of the Church rather than its structure. Beyond an emphasis on mystery, however, the meaning of communion is unclear in the Final Report. The word communion is never explicitly defined. It would not be until 1992, when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) released a document entitled “A Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion” (A Letter to the Bishops), that communion ecclesiology would be more fully investigated by the Catholic magisterium.

In this document, the CDF is most concerned with opposing theological arguments that advance decentralization in the Church. To do this, they identify and counter a number of perceived “errors”¹⁰³ in the way that theologians have applied the concept of communion in the Church. In particular, they seek to address “an insufficient understanding of the concept of communion”¹⁰⁴ that “weaken[s] the concept of the unity of the Church at the visible and institutional level.”¹⁰⁵ To articulate their opposition to decentralization in particular, the CDF attacks ecclesial models that imagine the Church as being formed from the ground up, rather than the top down. In a section entitled “The Universal Church and the Particular Church,” they rebuke the claim of an unnamed theologian that “the universal Church is the result of a

¹⁰² The authors never explicitly define what the “mystery” of the Church is. Yet, there is a sense that the mystery of the Church is at least partly realized in the Church as a “sacrament” (the Final Report, sec. II.A.2.), or the Church as a “sign and instrument of communion with God and also of communion and reconciliation of men with one another (sec. II.A.2). In this way, the language of communion in this document is used as a vehicle for exploring the mystical dimension of the Church that had been neglected since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. Communion becomes spiritualized, and its implications for the structure of the Church are not considered.

¹⁰³ Letter to the Bishops, sec. 11.

¹⁰⁴ Letter to the Bishops, sec 4.

¹⁰⁵ Letter to the Bishops, sec 4.

reciprocal recognition on the part of the particular Churches.”¹⁰⁶ They respond by contending that the universal Church does not come from the local churches, but rather “is a reality *ontologically and temporally* prior to every *individual* particular Church.”¹⁰⁷ Similarly, the CDF contends that the universal Church “is the mother and not the product of the particular Churches.”¹⁰⁸ When a local church works to “become self-sufficient,” therefore, it “weaken[s] its real communion with the universal Church.”¹⁰⁹ Finally, the CDF rejects the idea that the Church “arises ‘from base level.’”¹¹⁰ Instead, the CDF contends, the Eucharist “renders all self-sufficiency on the part of the particular Churches impossible.”¹¹¹ These arguments against decentralization reflect the fact that theologians had been using concepts of communion to promote structural reform that the proponents of communion ecclesiology were opposed to. Yves Congar, who John O’Malley named as Vatican II’s “most important theologian,”¹¹² used ideas about communion to push for “a horizontal de-centering”¹¹³ of the Church in which the laity, along with the Catholic hierarchy, would shape the direction of the Church. Writing between 1969 and 1985, he defined communion as a “unity without uniformity, a harmony or symphony of different voices.”¹¹⁴ He contended that the Holy Spirit “ceaselessly raises up initiatives of

¹⁰⁶ Letter to the Bishops, sec 8.

¹⁰⁷ Letter to the Bishops, sec. 9.

¹⁰⁸ Letter to the Bishops. sec. 9.

¹⁰⁹ Letter to the Bishops, sec. 8.

¹¹⁰ Letter to the Bishops, sec 11.

¹¹¹ Letter to the Bishops, sec 11.

¹¹² O’Malley.

¹¹³ Yves Congar. *Spirit of God: Short Writings on the Holy Spirit*. (Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 50.

¹¹⁴ Congar, 47.

reform and invention from the grassroots to the higher levels,”¹¹⁵ and that because of this, the Catholic hierarchy should look to the people at the local level in their discernment of Catholic teaching. The CDF, opposed to this kind of decentralization, responded by doubling down on the authority of the “universal church”—the magisterium—over the local Church.

Both the Final Report and Letter to the Bishops envision communion as demanding a uniformity of thought in which all Catholics share the same or similar ideas. For both documents, authentic communion in the Church precludes a diversity of thought. The Final Report introduces this concept. After introducing communion ecclesiology, the bishops who authored the Final Report write that “the ecclesiology of communion is the foundation for order in the Church, and especially for a correct relationship between unity and *pluriformity* in the Church [my italics].”¹¹⁶ According to Father John Hardon’s *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, “pluriformity” in a Catholic context refers to “diversity in the Catholic Church’s practice, reflected in the different rites, adapting the one, unchangeable faith to the different cultural traditions of the people.”¹¹⁷ Through their use of this word, therefore, the authors of the Final Report welcome cultural and ethnic diversity in the Church. They especially express “esteem” for the “Oriental Churches.”¹¹⁸ Yet, the authors of the document qualify their welcome of diversity by positing that “it is necessary to distinguish pluriformity from pure pluralism.”¹¹⁹ While “pluriformity is true richness and carries with it fullness, [...] the pluralism of fundamentally opposed positions

¹¹⁵ Congar, 46.

¹¹⁶ The Final Report, sec. II.C.2.

¹¹⁷ John Hardon, *Modern Catholic Dictionary*. 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=35613>.

¹¹⁸ The Final Report, sec. II.C.3.

¹¹⁹ The Final Report, sec. II.C.2.

instead leads to dissolution, destruction and the loss of identity.”¹²⁰ In this way, the authors of the document contend that diversity in the Catholic Church can only extend to different cultural expressions of the faith that do not challenge the defined teachings of the magisterium. Any diversity that leads Catholics to hold contradictory views on certain issues would undermine true communion in the Church.

A Letter to the Bishops affirms and develops this teaching on the limitations of diversity within the Church. In a section of the document entitled “Unity and Diversity in Ecclesial Communion,” the authors define communion as “unity in diversity.”¹²¹ This definition of communion initially leads readers to envision a Church that welcomes different expressions of the faith and values a diversity of viewpoints. Yet, the authors of this document qualify their definition of communion as “unity in diversity” by imposing limitations on the permitted expressions of diversity. Their primary concern seems to be that diversity in the Church could go too far and therefore obstruct unity by fermenting division. For this reason, they write that “a fundamental task of the Roman Pontiff”¹²² is to “acknowledg[e] and foster a diversification that does not obstruct unity but rather enriches it.”¹²³ The “plurality” that is permitted under this concept of communion includes “the diversity of ministries, charisms, and forms of life and apostolate within each particular Church, and to the diversity of traditions in liturgy and culture among the various particular Churches.”¹²⁴ Like the 1985 Final Report, their focus is on adapting Catholicism to the diverse cultures and languages of the world and the unique needs of each local

¹²⁰ The Final Report, sec. II.C.2

¹²¹ Letter to the Bishops, sec. 16.

¹²² Letter to the Bishops, sec. 16.

¹²³ Letter to the Bishops, sec. 15.

¹²⁴ Letter to the Bishops, sec. 15.

church. Yet, there is no mention of diversity in ideas. Based on the condemnation of “pluralism” in the Final Report that they cite from, it could be readily assumed that diversity of thought is one of the forms of diversity that they wish to suppress for the fear that it will foment divisions. Under this conception of communion, those who dissent from key moral teachings in the Church lack ecclesial communion.

In 2003, this understanding of communion was extended to Eucharistic theology in the papal encyclical of Pope John Paul II *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (EE). Drawing from communion ecclesiology, Pope John Paul II introduces the idea that one has to be “in communion” with the Church to partake of the Eucharistic celebration. To explain his rationale for this, he begins by writing that “the celebration of the Eucharist [...] cannot be the starting-point for communion; it presupposes that communion already exists, a communion which it seeks to consolidate and bring to perfection.”¹²⁵ To further defend this stance, he cites from A Letter to the Bishops on Communion to posit that communion with the Church requires communion in its “visible” dimension, and that the “visible dimension” of communion is “communion in the teaching of the Apostles, in the sacraments and in the Church’s hierarchical order.”¹²⁶ To expand on this definition, he maintains that visible communion is only realized when a communicant is “fully incorporated into the society of the Church, [...] possess[es] the Spirit of Christ, accept[s] her whole structure and all the means of salvation established within her, and within her visible framework are united to Christ, who governs her through the Supreme Pontiff and the Bishops, by the bonds of profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government and

¹²⁵ EE, sec. 35.

¹²⁶ EE, sec. 35.

communion.”¹²⁷ Nowhere in this definition does Pope John Paul II demand that the Catholic faithful agree with all the moral teachings of the Church or never dissent to take the Eucharist; they must accept only the most basic of Catholic teaching to maintain their visible dimension and be welcome to the Eucharistic table. The only Catholics whom he explicitly bars from the Eucharist are Catholics who “reject the full truth of the faith regarding the Eucharistic mystery.”¹²⁸ Most people are invited to the Eucharistic table. Yet, Pope John Paul II nonetheless sets the precedent that Catholics can be barred from the Eucharistic celebration based on whether or not they are in “communion” with the Church—a precedent that would be cited by the USCCB two decades later.

In their 2021 document *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, the USCCB draws on the precedents set by communion ecclesiology to recommend that Catholics who “repudiate” the Church’s “definitive teachings on moral issues” should refrain¹²⁹ from the Eucharistic celebration. Firstly, they draw on the legacy of the Final Report and The Letter of the Bishops on Communion to conceptualize a definition of communion that is a unity in uniformity, in which all members of the Church concur on the moral teachings of the Church. Secondly, the USCCB draws on the papal encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* to defend their teaching that Catholics not “in communion” with the Church should bar themselves from the Communion table.

This stance by the USCCB that Catholics who dissent should not take Eucharist is reflective of the broader division in the US Catholic Church about who is and who is not

¹²⁷ *EE*, sec. 38.

¹²⁸ *EE*, sec. 38.

¹²⁹ “The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church,” 28.

“authentically” Catholic. As the Catholic clergy has become increasingly more conservative since the Second Vatican Council, the USCCB has become more reflective of the American Catholics who conceptualize an authentic Catholic identity in terms of submission to the Catholic hierarchy and agreement with all moral teachings of the Church. Because of this conservative theological orientation, the USCCB drew on communion ecclesiology to construct a theological argument that bars Catholics who dissent from the Eucharistic table. As the majority of American Catholics dissent on a range of Catholic moral teaching, however, to say that dissenters cannot take Eucharist is to say that only a minority of American Catholics are welcome to the Communion rail.

As dissent has grown in the Church, alternative models of communion have been erected under the papacy of Pope Francis. Both Francis and the International Theological Commission have drawn on communion ecclesiology to advance structures and processes in the Church that bring the voices of all Catholics, especially lay people at the local level, into conversation with each other. Rather than using the concept of communion to subdue dissent and bar people from the Eucharistic celebration, Francis envisions true communion in the Church as welcoming all to the table for their voices to be heard. Under this conception of communion, communion welcomes dissenters as full members of the Church.

Chapter Three

Communion within a Synodal Context:

A Spiritual Conversion of Church Culture in Which All are Welcome to the Table

On March 7, 2020, Pope Francis announced the Synod on Synodality. The Synod on Synodality is a multi-year process that involves people of all levels in the Church in processes of mutual listening to discern the moving of the Holy Spirit in the people of God. The International Theological Commission (ITC) has situated the Synod on Synodality as an essential step in the implementation of the ecclesiology of communion introduced under the papacy of Pope John Paul II.¹³⁰ They understand synodality as promoting the structures and processes of communion.¹³¹ Yet, as I argue in this chapter, Francis, the ITC, and other Vatican proponents of synodality have a dramatically different vision of communion than the proponents of the *Communio* movement who instituted communion ecclesiology in the 1980s. Rather than spiritualizing communion ecclesiology and conceptualizing communion as the basis for uniformity in the Church, in which all members of the Church assent to the moral and doctrinal teachings of the magisterium, Francis and other Vatican proponents of synodality conceptualize communion as a true unity in diversity—one that requires a radical inclusion of people of diverse viewpoints in the Church. This concept of communion demands a radical openness to people of differing and dissenting views without demanding that they conform to all Church moral teaching. In this way, synodal communion calls for a dramatic change in Church culture in which all voices are welcome to the table and no one is pushed to the margins of the Church due to their dissent.

¹³⁰ Montecel, “Eucharist, Synodality, and Ethics.”

¹³¹ Briola, “Why Can’t We Be Friends.”

The Catholic theologian Nicholas Healy writes that the contemporary emphasis on synodality can be traced back to Pope Paul VI's decision in September of 1965 to reintroduce the practice of regular meetings of bishops in synods to increase the power of the bishops and decentralize power from the papacy. Paul VI's apostolic letter *Apostolica Sollicitudo* (AS) formally established the Synod of Bishops "with the aim of providing the bishops of the Church with an abundant means for greater and more effective participation in Our concern for the universal Church."¹³² The theological foundation for the establishment of the Synod of Bishops was the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* on collegiality, which is defined in the Final Report as "the soul of the collaboration between the bishops on the regional, national and international levels"¹³³ and "the activity of the whole college, together with its head, over the entire Church."¹³⁴ From the establishment of Synod of Bishops in 1965 through the papacies of Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the terms "synod" and "synodality" referred to this collegial exercise of episcopal authority.¹³⁵ It functioned to increase the power of the episcopate while also firmly placing the laity under the authority of the bishops. Under the papacy of Pope Francis, the term synodality has been reimagined. It is now understood to be intrinsically related to the essence of the Church and every aspect of the Church's life and mission. As Francis stated in his 2015 address celebrating the 50th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's institution of the Synod of Bishops, synodality is "a constitutive element of the Church,"¹³⁶ and "it is precisely this path of

¹³² Pope Paul VI, "Apostolica Sollicitudo: Establishing the Synod of Bishops for the Universal Church," September 1965, 2024, par. 4, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19650915_apostolica-sollicitudo.html.

¹³³ Final Report, sec. II.C.4.

¹³⁴ Final Report, sec. II.C.4.

¹³⁵ Healy, "Communion, Sacramental Authority, and the Limits of Synodality," 668-669.

¹³⁶ Pope Francis, "Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops: Address of His Holiness Pope Francis," par. 14.

synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”¹³⁷ Synodality is prominent in Francis’ ecclesial imagination, and the ongoing Synod on Synodality is his clearest attempt to implement his vision of a synodal Church.

The exact meaning of synodality under the papacy of Francis is unclear. As the ITC writes, synodality is a “linguistic novelty, which needs careful theological clarification.”¹³⁸ Sister Nathalie Becquart, appointed by Pope Francis as an undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops, likewise admits that synodality is “a rich and polymorphous notion that has no completely settled definition.”¹³⁹ Despite this, the ITC has provided a theological foundation for synodality. According to the ITC, the word synodality derives etymologically from the Greek words “with” (συν) and “path” (ὁδός). The word synodality therefore connotes the path that the Church walks together.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, in the first centuries of the Church, the word “synod” referred to the ecclesial assemblies convened at the various levels of the Church to consider the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical, and pastoral questions of the day.¹⁴¹ Because of this, synodality in a contemporary context requires erecting structures at every level of the Church so that all members of the Church can discuss the issues that pertain to the Church today. For this end, the Preparatory Document for the Synod on Synodality states that the synodality must include

¹³⁷ Ibid, sec. 6.

¹³⁸ “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” sec. 5.

¹³⁹ Briola, “Why Can’t We Be Friends.”

¹⁴⁰ “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” sec. 3.

¹⁴¹ “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” sec. 4.

“processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every person can participate and contribute.”¹⁴²

A more comprehensive definition of synodality can be found in the 2023 document produced by the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission.” Two years after the institution of the Synod on Synodality, the bishops reflect in the Synthesis Report on the way that synodality has been lived out in the Church and present their proposals for moving forward based on the input of the Catholic faithful from across the globe. In reflecting on the Synod on Synodality and the way it has been embodied in the global Church, the bishops come to define synodality in this way:

“In its broadest sense, synodality can be understood as Christians walking in communion with Christ towards the Kingdom along with the whole of humanity. Its orientation is mission, and its practice involves gathering in assembly at each level of ecclesial life. It involves reciprocal listening, dialogue, community discernment, and creation of consensus as an expression that renders Christ present in the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴³

This definition has a lot to unpack. First, there is a sense that the Church is journeying together towards the Kingdom of God. This eschatology assumes that the Church has not yet come to the fullness of the Kingdom of God but requires renewal by listening to the call of the Holy Spirit to come ever closer to the Kingdom. Secondly, this definition of synodality necessitates that structures be erected in the Church so that all Church members can gather to express where they feel the Spirit is leading them. Finally, the definition indicates that “consensus” in a synodal

¹⁴² Preparatory Document, sec. 9.

¹⁴³ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission,” October 2023, sec. Part 1 h, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf> (hereafter referred to as the Synthesis Report).

context does not emerge by imposing existing Church teaching on all members of the Church as a prerequisite for their membership. Rather, coming to a “consensus” in a synodal context requires open dialogue in which all members of the Church attempt to learn from each other in reciprocity. This definition of synodality is dramatically different from the definition of synodality that emerged during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. In a similar way, the concept of communion found in the Church documents on synodality is dramatically different from the concept of communion found in the magisterial documents that promote communion ecclesiology.

The ITC has situated synodality as the realization of communion ecclesiology. In their document “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” the ITC defends the theological credibility of synodality by arguing that synodality is deeply rooted in Scripture and Tradition. The authors of the document defend this argument in part by citing communion ecclesiology as one of the theological foundations for synodality. For this end, the ITC has a section entitled “Synodality as an expression of the ecclesiology of communion.”¹⁴⁴ Underneath this section, however, the authors do not cite from any of the magisterial documents that introduced and reinforced communion ecclesiology, which include the 1985 Final Report, the 1992 Letter to the Bishops on Communion, and the 2003 papal encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Instead, almost all of the citations come from *Lumen Gentium*. Because the magisterial documents that espouse communion ecclesiology frame it as “the central and fundamental idea of the Council’s documents,”¹⁴⁵ the ITC can cite almost exclusively from *Lumen Gentium*—the most important of the Council’s documents—to prove their commitment to communion ecclesiology. In this way,

¹⁴⁴“Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” sec. 54-57.

¹⁴⁵ The Final Report, sec. II.C.1.

the ITC roots synodality within the tradition of communion ecclesiology without addressing the fact that communion ecclesiology functioned as a conservative movement to impose uniformity and oppose decentralization in the Church—the exact opposite of what synodality is attempting to accomplish.

The proponents of synodality imagine communion in a dramatically different way from the proponents of communion ecclesiology. Unlike the proponents of the *Communio* movement, the proponents of synodality do not envision communion as the basis for a uniformity in which everyone in the Church concurs on issues of faith and morals. The Synthesis Report explicitly says that “the harmony created by the Spirit is not uniformity”¹⁴⁶ and insists that “the risk of uniformity [in the Church ...] must be overcome.”¹⁴⁷ Rather, the proponents of synodality envision communion as the coming together of people of diverse belief systems, including dissenting ones, without demanding that all conform to the teachings of the Church. Citing Pope Francis, the ITC introduces this concept by writing that a synodal Church makes it possible to “build communion amid disagreement.”¹⁴⁸ Their claim that communion can exist amid disagreement, rather than being compromised by disagreement, is the most obvious indication that the ITC does not envision communion as uniformity. In fact, the ITC posits that a diversity of viewpoints empowers the Church in its discernment of the moving of the Holy Spirit. The ITC writes that synodality “offers the opportunity to acquire new perspectives and points of view in order to shed light [...] on the matter in question,”¹⁴⁹ and the ITC frames this comment within the

¹⁴⁶ Synthesis Report, sec. 3f.

¹⁴⁷ Synthesis Report, sec. 19d.

¹⁴⁸ “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” sec. 111.

¹⁴⁹ “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” sec. 111.

context of people in the Church expressing and hearing “whatever seems to have been suggested by the Holy Spirit [... during] communal discernment.”¹⁵⁰ The Synthesis Report affirms this openness to a diversity of viewpoints by insisting that “a Church that is living synodally” must consider “different ways of thinking [...] in a sincere search for the Spirit’s guidance.”¹⁵¹ It sees “integrating a diversity of perspectives”¹⁵² through synodality as the Church’s “prophetic response to an individualism that causes people to turn in on themselves”¹⁵³ and shun those who think differently from them. The Working Document for the Continental Stage of the Synod on Synodality more explicitly equates communion with the inclusion of all people. The document states that “radical inclusion [...in which] no one is excluded” should be understood in the context of “communion with [our] sisters and brothers.”¹⁵⁴ This “radical inclusion” ostensibly extends to people in the Church who dissent from Church teaching, thereby making space for people of different and dissenting views. In this way, the proponents of synodality use the language of communion to promote their vision of a Church in which a diversity of viewpoints is welcome rather than shunned. As the U.S. National Synthesis notes, “hearing the joys and witnessing to the wounds that others have experienced, with an inclined heart, has opened a way forward for the Church in the United States to better experience and express its communion as a people united in a common faith.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” sec. 111.

¹⁵¹ Synthesis Report, part 1c.

¹⁵² Synthesis Report, part 11.

¹⁵³ Synthesis Report, part 11.

¹⁵⁴ General Secretariat for the Synod, “Working Document for the Continental Stage,” (2022), accessed March 24, 2023, sec. 11.1, <https://www.synod.va/en/highlights/workin`g-document-for-the-continental-stage.html> (hereafter referred to as the Working Document for the Continental Stage).

¹⁵⁵ U.S. National Synthesis, 12.

The most potent imagery for the call to live out communion through the Synod on Synodality is the call to “enlarge the space of your tent.”¹⁵⁶ The Working Document for the Continental Stage develops this imagery by citing from chapter 54 of the book of Isaiah, in which the prophet evokes the memory of dwelling in tents during the exodus to bring hope to the people of Israel who are in exile—just as many are in exile in the Church today. Citing directly from Isaiah, the authors of the Working Document suggest that we in the global Church should “imagine the Church as a tent, indeed as the tent of meeting, which accompanied the people on their journey through the desert.”¹⁵⁷ The Church, then, is a place of meeting that accompanies humanity on its journey towards the Kingdom of God. Just as a tent has pegs to plant it firmly in the ground, the Church has the “fundamentals of faith that do not change but can be moved and planted in ever new ground.”¹⁵⁸ At the same time, “the structure of the tent must keep in balance the different forces and tensions to which it is subjected,”¹⁵⁹ indicating the need for community discernment on a range of controversial issues in the Church that *can* change. Envisioning the Church in this way allows us to understand the Church as an “expansive, but not homogeneous dwelling, capable of sheltering all [...] Enlarging the tent requires welcoming others into it, making room for their diversity.”¹⁶⁰ In this vision of the Church, people of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints are welcome to find shade under the tent of the Church. There is no demand for

¹⁵⁶ Working Document for the Continental Stage, sec. 25.

¹⁵⁷ Working Document for the Continental Stage, sec. 25.

¹⁵⁸ Working Document for the Continental Stage, sec. 27.

¹⁵⁹ Working Document for the Continental Stage, sec. 27.

¹⁶⁰ Working Document for the Continental Stage, sec. 27-28.

uniformity, as the Church is expansive enough to accommodate all. Those in exile are welcomed back inside.

To realize this vision of the Church will require radical change in Church culture. In many parts of the world, especially in the United States, the Church is seen as exclusionary and judgmental. According to the “National Synthesis of the People of God in America,” an estimated 700,000 people participated in the diocesan phase of the Synod on Synodality in the United States.¹⁶¹ In this synthesis, the most common concern expressed by the 700,000 people who participated in the synod was a disillusionment with Church culture. In the archdiocese of Louisville, a number of parishes reported the need “to be more welcoming and less judgmental,”¹⁶² and this sentiment was shared by thousands of Catholics across the country. The authors of the U.S. National Synthesis summarize this in their report:

“The most common desire named in the synodal consultations was to be a more welcoming Church where all members of the People of God can find accompaniment on the journey [...] People noted that the Church seems to prioritize doctrine over people, rules and regulations over lived reality [...] They want the Church to meet people where they are, wherever they are, and walk with them rather than judging them.”¹⁶³

In response to the call for a more welcoming Church, the authors of the U.S National Synthesis reflect on the groups of people who have been most marginalized by the Church. They especially focus on the need to be more welcoming to LGBTQ+ persons and people who have divorced and remarried—those whose marginalization results from Church teaching itself. In response to the

¹⁶¹ U.S. National Synthesis, 4.

¹⁶² Archdiocesan Synthesis, 7.

¹⁶³ U.S. National Synthesis, 7-8.

stories told by LGBTQ+ and divorced persons, the authors of U.S. National Synthesis call for the “ongoing discernment of the whole Church on how best to accompany our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters”¹⁶⁴ and the need “for a more transparent and clear annulment process.”¹⁶⁵ It never explicitly suggests that Church teaching on these issues should be reconsidered. Despite this, the document attempts to legitimize the experiences of marginalization reported across the country. The document asserts that “we cannot assume” that “the perceptions heard and expressed [...] have no importance in lived reality.”¹⁶⁶ They continue on to say that “we must be open to new ideas and new ways of doing things ... [We must seek] an understanding of what is central to the identity of the church [...] and what changes can help us grow rather than feel threatened.”¹⁶⁷ In opening the Church to change, the U.S. National Synthesis rejects the idea present in some Catholic spaces that the Church has not and never will change. It asks that the Catholic faithful be open to change in Church culture and in Church teaching. It asks that Catholics listen to the experiences of people pushed to the margins of the Church instead of doubling down in their condemnation. As the Working Document for the Continental Stage asserts, the people in the Church cannot behave “like gatekeepers trying to exclude others from the table.”¹⁶⁸

One prominent way that Church leaders behave like gatekeepers is through their restrictions on the Eucharist for people they do not accept. As the Working Document for the Continental Stage states, the Eucharist cannot “become a reason for confrontation, ideology, rift

¹⁶⁴ U.S. National Synthesis, 7.

¹⁶⁵ U.S. National Synthesis, 7.

¹⁶⁶ U.S. National Synthesis, 12.

¹⁶⁷ U.S. National Synthesis, 12.

¹⁶⁸ Working Document for the Continental Stage, sec. 31.

or division.”¹⁶⁹ When the Catholic hierarchy uses the Eucharist to differentiate between people they deem acceptable and those they do not, it reinforces divisions in the Church instead of offering a path to healing. Many people barred from the Eucharist due to their identity, such as remarried divorcees and polygamous couples, articulated immense pain at being deprived of the sacrament.¹⁷⁰ They often experience the Eucharist as a weapon of the Church that formalizes their exclusion.

In response to these reports of exclusion, marginalization, and judgment, the Working Document for the Continental Stage and the 2023 Synthesis Report call for conversion of the global Church to a “new culture of synodality.”¹⁷¹ Although it is not entirely clear what a new culture of synodality entails, there is a sense that it must be rooted in an orientation towards dialogue. As the Working Document for the Continental Stage states, it “should become one of the ‘unwritten laws’ of the Church culture”¹⁷² that “all members of the congregation or community can openly and honestly express their opinion.”¹⁷³ Rather than imposing a uniformity of thought in which everyone must concur on issues on faith and morals, there must be space for dialogue and dissent. The Church must be open to diverse ideas not only during meetings for the Synod on Synodality, but in everyday Church life. For this “widespread synodal culture” to be realized, “structures alone are not enough.” Rather, there is “the need to provide for formation in synodality”¹⁷⁴ in Church life. The tenets of synodality must be taught to Catholics from the

¹⁶⁹ Working Document for the Continental Stage, sec. 92.

¹⁷⁰ Working Document for the Continental Stage, sec. 92.

¹⁷¹ Synthesis Report, sec. 20.c.

¹⁷² Working Document for the Continental Stage, sec. 17.

¹⁷³ Working Document for the Continental Stage, sec. 17.

¹⁷⁴ Working Document for the Continental Stage, 82.

podium and in Church programming so that they can understand what synodal theology is and its importance to Catholic life. They must be schooled in how to conduct listening and dialogue in their lives and in the Church.

A “spirituality of communion” must pervade the entire Church for this change in Church culture to occur. While structures and processes are a solid starting point, true synodality necessitates a conversion of the Catholic faithful to a spirituality that is orientated towards the other. The ITC introduces this concept by describing a “personal conversion to the spirituality of communion”¹⁷⁵ as integral to building a synodal Church. They borrow this phrase (“spirituality of communion”) from Pope John Paul II, who at the turn of the millennium described the “spirituality of communion” as a source of trust and openness in pastoral care.¹⁷⁶ For the ITC to connect this term to the movement for synodality is ostensibly meant to communicate the idea that trust and openness must characterize a synodal Church. For this trust and openness to permeate the Church through this “spirituality of communion,” the Catholic faithful shift their orientation from the self towards the other. As the ITC writes, a conversion to a spirituality of communion means shifting “from ‘I’ understood in a self-centered way to the ecclesial ‘we,’ where every ‘I,’ clothed in Christ (*cf. Galatians 3,27*), lives and journeys with his or her brothers and sisters.”¹⁷⁷ This orientation from the self to the other that empowers the Church to journey together must be lived out in a genuine openness to the lived experiences of other people. In a Church marred by division, healing can only come by *listening* to other people and building

¹⁷⁵ “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” sec. 107.

¹⁷⁶ Montecel, “Eucharist, Synodality, and Ethics.”

¹⁷⁷ “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” sec. 107.

relationships in the midst of difference. Through “conversion of heart and mind [... and] disciplined training for welcoming and listening to one another,”¹⁷⁸ the Church can become a true “home and school of communion”¹⁷⁹ in which all are truly welcome and all voices have a seat at the table.

¹⁷⁸ “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” sec. 107.

¹⁷⁹ “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” sec. 107.

A Way Forward for the Church

A music minister at a Catholic Church once told me that he refuses to play the popular Catholic hymn “All Are Welcome” at Mass. He feels that the Church had failed to live up to the hopeful promise of the hymn that “all are welcome,”¹⁸⁰ and he does not want to sing a lie. This music minister is not alone in his disillusionment with Church culture. As the U.S. National Synthesis notes, “the most common desire named in the synodal consultations was to be a more welcoming Church.”¹⁸¹ Throughout the synodal process, many people have shared stories of them or their loved ones being harmed by a Church that condemned or ignored their experiences. In the listening sessions in Louisville, one parishioner shared how the Church’s teachings on gender and sexuality have affected his son. He openly shared his pain, saying “no one has ever apologized for making my son feel suicidal...I want my fellow Catholics to understand what the hateful rhetoric does to our sons and daughters. LGBTQ kids have a much higher rate of suicide compared to straight kids.”¹⁸² I myself was greatly pained when one of my own queer Catholic friends was pushed out of the Church, causing them long-lasting spiritual trauma. It hurt to see members of our own faith community condemn and exclude them. Of course, LGBTQ+ people are by no means the only group excluded in the Church. Many other groups who dissent from Church teaching or whose identity is not accepted by the Catholic hierarchy are also pushed to the margins of the Church.

¹⁸⁰ Marty Haugen, “All Are Welcome,” YouTube, January 23, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHntPLm89z4>.

¹⁸¹ U.S National Synthesis, 7-8.

¹⁸² Archdiocesan Synthesis, 7.

The Church has two paths in response to the pain expressed by people who feel marginalized. Like the USCCB, the Church can continue to use the language of communion to police Catholic identity and marginalize those who do not conform to their understanding of what a Catholic should be. This interpretation of communion will continue to foster a culture of exclusion in which people feel increasingly wounded by the Church. It will reinforce divisions by differentiating between people who the hierarchy considers authentically Catholic and those they do not. It will exacerbate the shrinking of the Church, as those who feel wounded often leave. On the other hand, the Church can choose to reimagine communion through the lens of synodal theology. Church leaders can choose to transform the culture of the Church by adopting a model of communion that is radically open to people of different and dissenting views without demanding that everyone conform to Church teaching. They can teach people to dialogue together with the understanding that our shared humanity is greater than our disagreements. They can broaden their understanding of Catholic identity, knowing that not everyone has to be Catholic in the same way.

To reimagine our understanding of communion is part of how we heal divisions in the Church. Within a divided and diverse Church, communion within a synodal context can welcome people back into the fold. As noted by documents from the Synod on Synodality, the embodiment of this kind of communion is already working to heal the wounds that have been inflicted. The U.S. National Synthesis notes that “participants appreciated the opportunity to share their stories—including painful stories—without interruption, contradiction, or apologetics. Many expressed that the process and the experience were healing and hopeful, and desperately needed in the Church today.”¹⁸³ The authors continue on to say that “those who shared their

¹⁸³ U.S. National Synthesis, 5.

stories, especially those who participated in small group sessions, stated that they felt listened to by the Church for the first time.”¹⁸⁴ Moreover, communion within a synodal context can bring Catholics who disagree about Church teaching into dialogue with each other. It can teach us to walk with each other despite our disagreements, knowing that dialogue “is not about engaging in a debate where one speaker tries to get the better of the others,”¹⁸⁵ but about “adopting ‘a relational way of viewing the world, which then becomes a form of shared knowledge, [of] vision through the eyes of another.”¹⁸⁶ Through dialogue and processes of listening, communion can emerge in the Church to heal deep wounds and bring people into relationship with one another. It can work to bridge a divided people who for so long have looked upon each other as opponents.

Implementing synodality at the diocesan level will not be easy. To truly transform the culture of the Church, there needs to be advocacy in local churches to make synodality more prominent in Catholic life. It cannot be invisible to much of the Catholic laity around the world. Yet, the bishop of each diocese has the authority to determine how central synodality becomes to the life of the Church, and in many dioceses, synodality has not been emphasized beyond the required listening sessions for the Synod. Given the divisions in the Church, conservative bishops are not likely to soon embrace a synodal understanding of communion. However, the laity in the Church must remember that they are empowered by Vatican II to be “a witness and a living instrument of the mission of the Church.”¹⁸⁷ Through our call to participate in the mission of the Church, we can promote a culture of synodal communion that welcomes all and invites

¹⁸⁴ U.S. National Synthesis, 4.

¹⁸⁵ “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” sec. 111.

¹⁸⁶ “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” sec. 111.

¹⁸⁷ *LG*, sec. 33.

those who have been excluded back into the fold. We can embody synodal communion in our Catholic parishes, schools, and universities by holding ongoing programming on synodality and working to ensure that our Catholic communities are spaces of listening and dialogue. We can promote awareness about synodality, sharing it with the Catholics we meet. We can attempt to welcome a diversity of people into our communities, knowing that they will hold different opinions on a range of issues and that we do not all need to be the same. This is the path forward for the Church. This is how we learn to walk together on our different but converging paths towards a deeper relationship with God. Communion through synodality is how we grow in love for one another as a diverse community of faith.

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