

COMMENT

# Breathing with two lungs – the metaphor revisited, refreshed, renewed

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## Introduction

Often attributed to Pope John Paul II who,<sup>1</sup> it is said, found it in the work of Yves Congar,<sup>2</sup> it seems that the first to use two lungs as a metaphor for the Christian East and West was Russian scholar and poet Vjačeslav Ivanovič Ivanov (1866–1949). Ivanov twice exhorted the Christian Church ‘again to breathe fully from two lungs’ in a letter written to Charles du Bos, explaining the joy he derived from his confession of the Catholic faith during a visit to Rome in 1926, at the time of the 16th centenary of the Council of Nicaea (325).<sup>3</sup> Since Ivanov wrote, another century has been added to the life of Nicaea, the earliest formal source of Christian ecclesial unity;<sup>4</sup> and yet, notwithstanding that source, and the writings of Ivanov, Congar, and Pope John Paul II, little progress seems to have been made towards reunion of East and West.<sup>5</sup>

The XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Catholic Bishops (the ‘Synod on Synodality’), which concluded on 26 October 2024, provided another opportunity for East and West again to breathe as one; the Synod’s *Final Document – For a Synodal*

<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Ut unum sint* (25 May 1995), *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. 87 (1995) 752–753; John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, no. 48 (Citta del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Rome (2001); John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter, Orientale Lumen* (Citta del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Rome (1995).

<sup>2</sup> A O’Mahony, ‘... again to breathe fully from two lungs’: Eastern Catholic Encounters with History and Ecclesiology’ (2016) 134 *The Downside Review* 107–165; J A Berry, ‘Ecumenical Formation: Yves Congar’s Personal Testimony’ (2008) 59 *Melita Theologica* 3.

<sup>3</sup> O’Mahony (note 2), 107–108.

<sup>4</sup> ‘The Nicene Creed: An Expression of Christian Identity’, *Vatican News* (4 April 2025), reporting on the release of International Theological Commission, *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior: 1700th Anniversary of the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea 325–2025* (2025).

<sup>5</sup> See T Lim, ‘Towards a Pneumatological-Ecclesiology: Outside the “Two Lungs of the Church”’ (2015) 7:2 *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 211.

*Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* offers a prognosis.<sup>6</sup> In an accompanying note, in which he declares the *Final Document* a part of the Magisterium, Pope Francis wrote that ‘the synodal path of the Catholic Church, also animated by the desire to continue the journey towards the full and visible unity of Christians, “needs shared words to be accompanied by actions”’.<sup>7</sup> In July 2021, taking up this call for words and actions, and as an ecumenical contribution to the Synod’s work, the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity proposed to the General Secretariat of the Synod four international conferences on synodality in the different Christian traditions.<sup>8</sup> Because ‘a synodal Church is a Church that listens’, Catholic theologians invited to these conferences from different countries and faculties were ‘entrusted with the task of summarising and identifying possible Catholic learnings’ from the four conferences, two dedicated to Eastern and two to Western ecclesial traditions.<sup>9</sup>

The results of the listening during the two conferences are contained in two books, published in 2023 and 2024: *Listening to the East: Synodality in Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Church Traditions*<sup>10</sup> and *Listening to the West: Synodality in Western Ecclesial Traditions*.<sup>11</sup> *Listening to the East* contains two parts – Synodality in the Eastern Orthodox Church and Synodality in the Ancient Oriental Churches. The chapters, rather than being sole authored, encompass the sessions of the four conferences. The former part contains three chapters: ‘Communion: Walking Together in the Holy Spirit’, ‘Participation: Walking Together With the Whole People of God’, and ‘Mission: Walking Together in the Contemporary World’. The latter part includes seven chapters: ‘Synodality in the Antiochian Syriac Orthodox Church’, ‘Synodality in the Armenian Apostolic Church’, ‘Synodality in the Assyrian Tradition’, ‘Synodality in the Coptic Orthodox Church’, ‘Synodality in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church’, ‘Synodality in the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church’, and ‘Synodality in Regional Ecumenical Networks’. *Listening to the West* consists of eight principal chapters: ‘Synodality According to the Anglican Tradition’, ‘Synodality According to the Lutheran Tradition’, ‘Synodality According to the Reformed Tradition’, ‘Synodality According to the Methodist Tradition’, ‘Synodality According to the Old Catholic Tradition’, ‘Synodality According to Baptists’, ‘Synodality According to Disciples of Christ’, and ‘Synodality According to Pentecostals’.

The books contain comprehensive single-source coverage of the nature of synodality according to the main Christian denominations. Together, they total almost 1000 pages. Given the volume of material, this comment attempts no more

<sup>6</sup> XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission – Final Document* (2025).

<sup>7</sup> Francis, ‘Accompanying note’, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission – Final Document* (2025) 3–4, citing Final Greeting (26 October 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum (ed), *Listening to the West: Synodality in Western Ecclesial Traditions* (Collana Ut unum sint n. 5) (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024) 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum, Pro Oriente Foundation (ed), *Listening to the East: Synodality in Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Church Traditions* (Collana Ut unum sint n. 4) (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum (ed), *Listening to the West* (note 8).

than to set out the principal ‘learnings’ offered by those Catholics designated to ‘listen’ to their Christian colleagues. The organising theme which animates this exercise, however, is straightforward: to present the guidance contained in the Catholic ‘listeenings’ for the ecumenical task of allowing the Christian Church yet again to breathe with both lungs. It contains three parts. The first and second examine the understanding of synodality in the West and East, respectively, while the third offers brief concluding reflections on the implications of synodality for ecumenism. The reflections offered here, it is hoped, can tell us something about synodality in the East and the West and about those points of convergence between the two traditions. Offered on the 17th centenary of Nicaea, it is hoped that these reflections may, as the books themselves, demonstrate the potential for synodality to form the heart of a Church which breathes with both of its lungs.

### Synodality in the West

The concluding remarks of Hervé Legrand, Martin Browne and Juan Usma Gómez, divided into ‘listeenings’ gleaned from the mainline churches and from Baptists, Disciples of Christ, and Pentecostals,<sup>12</sup> reveal the depth of Catholic understanding that a strict hierarchical emphasis on the division of clergy and laity stands in serious need of a process of self-correction brought about through ‘better listening to the Holy Spirit and to our brothers and sisters’.<sup>13</sup> What the listeners found in the offerings of those brothers and sisters was that ‘the vanishing clergy, the laity’s search for better governance, as well as the inclusion of women, have made people aware of the urgency and depth of the reforms needed and led – in a process without historical precedent – to seek the testimony of the parishes themselves’.<sup>14</sup> The Catholic participants in the conference, the listeners concluded, emphasised that the process of reform necessitates a ‘regime of mutual listening [as] a basic requirement of synodality’.<sup>15</sup>

Five primary lessons guide this mutual listening. First, the theology of baptism and the gift of the Spirit must be revalorized. Because the gifts and charges of the Spirit to each baptised member of the church are unique, each Christian bears a personal responsibility to engage in an ‘internal’ synodality within the church with other members of the Church.<sup>16</sup> Second, the baptismal responsibility of synodality carries with it a corresponding mutual accountability in all registers of the life of the Church – accountability of the parish pastors, bishops, and even the Pope to the entirety of the Church, and not merely to an immediate hierarchical superior.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> ‘Conclusive Remarks’ in Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum (ed), *Listening to the West: Synodality in Western Ecclesial Traditions* (Collana Ut unum sint n. 5) (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024) 335–340.

<sup>13</sup> H Legrand and M Browne, ‘Mainline Churches’ in Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum (ed), *Listening to the West: Synodality in Western Ecclesial Traditions* (Collana Ut unum sint n. 5) (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024) 335–338.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 335 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 336.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 337.

Third, the responsibilities of synodality and accountability must occur within a matrix of inclusiveness.<sup>18</sup> Fourth, the priesthood of all believers must be properly understood so as to make clear that there is no ontological difference between priests and laity.<sup>19</sup> Finally, each of the first four lessons necessitate a fundamental revision of the present Code of Canon law so as to understand the juridical nature of ecclesial life through faith and the sacraments, facilitating, rather than impeding, synodality among the faithful.<sup>20</sup>

Baptists, Disciples of Christ, and Pentecostals brought their own perspectives.<sup>21</sup> Juan Usma Gómez notes that while the term 'synodality' is unknown to these Christian denominations, this does not mean that these groups lack synodal vision; whereas the Catholic understanding of this concept emerges from an understanding of Christ and the Spirit, Baptists find the ecclesial nature of the concept in 'supreme Scripture', the Disciples in 'covenant reality', and the Pentecostals in 'the power of the Spirit'.<sup>22</sup> These differing views carry with them divergent implications for ecclesiology; thus the Baptists define 'congregational ecclesiology' as essential authority residing in the local congregation that 'discerns the mind of Christ'; the Disciples of Christ, being a 'covenantal church', seek Christian unity; Pentecostals focus on the 'charismatic and ministerial elements' of the many ecclesial structures found in the New Testament.<sup>23</sup> Juan Usma Gómez concludes that the converging understanding of synodality found among these other Christian groups suggests the urgent need 'to develop an ecumenical theology and praxis of synodality that mutually broadens each other's ecclesial approaches'.<sup>24</sup>

## Synodality in the East

It is clear that 'ecclesiology [and so synodality] in the understanding of Western systematic theology is something foreign in the East'.<sup>25</sup> To reveal the riches of the East, the Conference on Synodality in the East brought together the two great traditions of the East: Eastern Orthodoxy and Oriental Orthodoxy. Each contributed their own gifts of synodality for Catholic listeners, and to the general assembly of the synod in Rome.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 337–338.

<sup>21</sup> J U Gómez, 'Baptists, Disciples of Christ and Pentecostals' in Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum (ed), *Listening to the West: Synodality in Western Ecclesial Traditions* (Collana Ut unum sint n. 5) (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024) 339–340.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 339–340.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 340.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> D Winkler, S Bechealany, F Bouwen, J Jakob, M Kuhn and A Wimmer, 'Synthesis Paper by Catholic Listeners [on the Ancient Oriental Churches]' in Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum, Pro Oriente Foundation (ed), *Listening to the East: Synodality in Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Church Traditions* (Collana Ut unum sint n. 4) (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023) 635–640.

## Eastern Orthodoxy

Summarising the teaching of the Eastern Orthodox Church,<sup>26</sup> Astrid Kaptijn, William Henn, Péter Szabó and Nathalie Becquart write that ‘synodality has a theological, and more precisely, ecclesiological importance for our Churches; it is not just an instrument for organizing assemblies and making decisions’.<sup>27</sup> Still, while ecclesologically important, synodality does not always function well, even in those churches which hold it as central to their governance.<sup>28</sup> Even were churches to agree on the necessity of synodality ‘we should not be naïve about its potentiality and the difficulties to put it into practice’;<sup>29</sup> thus greater education is warranted to bring about the ‘cultural mindset and spiritual attitudes’ necessary for it to flourish.<sup>30</sup> Those difficulties notwithstanding, the Eastern Orthodox Churches offer three important lessons about synodality: communion, participation, and mission.

## Communion

Despite divergent views about the theological content of synodality among the Eastern Orthodox Churches, consensus emerges around the importance of communion, walking together in the Holy Spirit. Here, synodality is an organic expression of *koinonia*, in which the faithful walk alongside God and others on the journey to salvation.<sup>31</sup> It is not therefore static, which means that participants must be open to new things: ‘There is a synodal ontology: like the Church and the Eucharist, synodality is at once an event and an institution’.<sup>32</sup> This manifests itself in two main accents in modern theology: eucharistic ecclesiology and sobornost ecclesiology.<sup>33</sup> The former refers to the fact that the bishop of each local church presides over the ‘gathering to celebrate the Eucharist [that] is the primary event of the expression of synodality in the Church’. This occurs at the local level, in which ‘each local Church realizes the fullness of Christ and His presence’, and at the universal level, with each local Church in communion with others, because the bishop in synod embodies or represents the local church,<sup>34</sup> and as such, ‘the

<sup>26</sup> Eastern Orthodoxy, or Eastern Orthodox Christianity, or Byzantine Christianity, comprises those Christian churches which, along with Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, is one of the three main branches of Chalcedonian Christianity, which itself encompasses the majority of Christian denominations that accept the theological resolutions of the Council of Chalcedon, the fourth ecumenical council, held in 451 AD.

<sup>27</sup> A Kaptijn, W Henn, P Szabó and N Becquart, ‘Synthesis Paper by Catholic Listeners [on the Eastern Orthodox Church]’ in Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum, Pro Oriente Foundation (ed), *Listening to the East: Synodality in Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Church Traditions* (Collana Ut unum sint n. 4) (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023) 303–314.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 310–314, identifying these difficulties, both as to ecclesiology as the faithful living the Trinitarian life here and now, and ecclesiology as a matter of governance and governmental structures, in attempting to apply Eastern experience to Western Christianity, and specifically the Roman Catholic Church. There are important questions which emerge here, but are beyond the scope of this review essay.

<sup>30</sup> Kaptijn *et al* (note 27), 310.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 303–304.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 304–305.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

local Church is closely linked to the catholicity of the Church expressing unity in diversity'.<sup>35</sup>

Sobornost ecclesiology is related to, but distinct from, eucharistic ecclesiology: 'the Church that gathers, unites and reconciles is the Church that is called synodal/conciliar'.<sup>36</sup> Sobornicity allows each member of the faithful to be enriched by others, and renders to the church that by which each is enriched. 'In this sense, the Church itself is a great and perpetual synod in which all Christians participate.'<sup>37</sup> The episcopate is therefore central to both the eucharistic and the sobornost ecclesiology – for the latter constitutes 'a baptismal ecclesiology accentuating the People of God, [while the former] emphasiz[es] the episcopal ministry in the local Church'.<sup>38</sup>

### Participation

Communion, the walking together in the Holy Spirit, allows the faithful, who are baptised and incorporated to the Body of Christ, in which they are connected to Christ and to each other, to walk together as the whole People of God.<sup>39</sup> These synodal processes of participation are found in three fields of church life: liturgy, where, of course, the faithful participate in the eucharist; sobornost, the principal site of Church governance, a spiritual harmony based on freedom and unity in love; and ministry, in which all the baptised are endowed with the Gifts of the Holy Spirit for the common good. Participation in each of these fields rests upon the right, found in the ancient Roman law, to participate in decision-making through the right of each to speak and to vote (although this does not extend to doctrinal matters, where the bishop represents the people).<sup>40</sup>

### Mission

Mission consists of walking together in the contemporary world; the 'liturgy after the liturgy', contextualising the message of the Gospel to reflect the catholicity of the church. The church issues synodal statements, but it must also put those statements into practice, and that involves the solidarity of the whole church, found in four important concepts: first, walking together involves all the faithful who, second, respect the pace of others, which means, third, that every member must pay attention to the others with whom we journey, and, fourth, doing so with dynamism – the church is always on the move, on the way to the Kingdom of God, that both is and is to come.<sup>41</sup>

Paying attention to those at the margins, then, forms a central element of the concept of mission in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Mission therefore requires the

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 305–306.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 305.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 305.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 306.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 306–307.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 308, citing Kateřina Kočandrl Bauer, 'Journeying Together' in Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum, Pro Oriente Foundation (ed), *Listening to the East: Synodality in Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Church Traditions* (Collana Ut unum sint n. 4) (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023) 247–252.

creation of an open space for true dialogue, recognising the connection between the mystical, sacramental and eucharistic nature, and the historical conditioning of the Church, allowing it to respond with love, wisdom, and discernment to the challenges of the contemporary world.<sup>42</sup>

### **Ancient Oriental Christianity**

Dietmar Winkler, Souraya Bechealany, Frans Bouwen, Joachim Jakob, Manuel Kuhn and Astrid Wimmer draw together the teachings on synodality of Oriental Christianity.<sup>43</sup> As with Eastern Orthodoxy, the Syriac and Oriental Orthodox traditions experience synodality as more than governance – it is a lived experience, most profoundly in the liturgy, the greatest expression of which is found in the eucharistic celebration.<sup>44</sup> For that reason, there is a great deal of commonality between the experience of synodality among the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox.

For Oriental Orthodoxy, the theological understanding of synodality in liturgy consists of five dimensions: (i) the ecclesiological, in which the church is understood as a living mystery nourished by communal life, especially the eucharist, transcending time and space; (ii) the Christological and pneumatological, which captures the mysterious presence of Christ in the world, the church as the Body of Christ, with Christ as its Head, to whom the Holy Spirit is promised; (iii) the sacramental, which captures the idea that synodality reveals itself in the eucharist, in which all the faithful participate, gathered around the bishop and clergy; (iv) in the eschatological dimension, the synod mirrors the communion between the earthly and the heavenly church, offering a glimpse of the coming Kingdom; and (v), finally, in the pastoral dimension, the faithful experience synodality in the everyday life of the church, encouraging trust and active participation.<sup>45</sup>

Building upon these dimensions, Winkler *et al.* derive seven main insights on the practice of synodality in the Syriac and Oriental Orthodox traditions. First, contextuality, both geographic and cultural – the faithful are spread out across the globe, and form parts of diverse cultural groupings, and this plays a role in the way in which synodality is experienced by groups of the faithful.<sup>46</sup>

Second, the historical circumstances of those diverse groupings in different geographic and cultural settings means that there is diversity in the unity of

<sup>42</sup> Kaptijn *et al.* (note 27), 308–309.

<sup>43</sup> Ancient Oriental Christianity, or Oriental Orthodoxy, consists of those Eastern Christian Churches that accept only the first three ecumenical councils (Nicaea, Constantinople, and Ephesus) and reject the Council of Chalcedon; the largest of these are the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church. Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum, Pro Oriente Foundation (ed), *Listening to the East* (n 10) contains chapters on each of those three churches, as well as on the Assyrian Church of the East and Ancient Church of the East, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, and other regional ecumenical networks.

<sup>44</sup> D Winkler, S Bechealany, F Bouwen, J Jakob, M Kuhn and A Wimmer, 'Synthesis Paper by Catholic Listeners [on the Ancient Oriental Churches]' in Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum, Pro Oriente Foundation (ed), *Listening to the East: Synodality in Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Church Traditions* (Collana Ut unum sint n. 4) (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023) 635–640.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 637.

synodality, as well as mutual exchange both within and between churches, East and West, even when there is not full formal communion between them. Sadly, this flow has been largely in the direction of the East.<sup>47</sup>

Third, all of this constitutes a challenge for pluralistic societies, with the need to adapt a tradition to the circumstances in which the faithful live. To take one example, 'the demands for a greater participation of women and youth in Church life are often coming with stronger emphasis from the communities living in Western countries'.<sup>48</sup> This is closely related to the fourth insight: the place of lay participation in the life of the church, and particularly the roles of women and of youth.<sup>49</sup> This, too, relates to the fifth insight – that the faithful have an active participation in the decision-making processes of the church.<sup>50</sup>

Yet participation of all members of the church was not as full as some might hope. Thus, the sixth and seventh insights, which involve synodal self-image<sup>51</sup> and synodality and primacy,<sup>52</sup> revealed that while an important part of the life of the church in relation to some matters of decision-making, that did not go so far as to include matters of theology. In relation to primacy, while the patriarch of a church is its visible expression, synodality constitutes an effective way of allowing all members of the Body of Christ to participate in its life. Thus 'synodality serves as empowerment of subaltern voices; it allows them to become active participants within their respective Church'.<sup>53</sup>

### Breathing with both lungs

Placing these two books together allows important insights into not only synodality, but also ecclesiology, which is where this comment began. The key point of convergence, on which all churches present at the conferences on synodality tend to agree, is that synodality itself bears ecclesiological significance – for synodality is the very essence of what it means to be 'church'. The faithful are constitutive of church and, as such, personal relations between the faithful – what we might call an interpersonal synodality – constitute each individual church.

When we look at the lessons derived from each of the traditions of East and West, we find that this interpersonal dimension, while it may manifest itself differently depending on a specific particular church, is central to the understanding of synodality. Listening, communion, participation, mission; in one form or another, we find each of these gifts present in every Christian denomination. The internal interpersonal connectedness provides the model for similar relationships to develop at the ecclesial level, between the different Christian denominations, allowing for the ecumenical dialogue necessary for reunification.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 637–638.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 638.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 638–639.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 639.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 639–640.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 640.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



Synodality, then, as it is understood by any of the churches considered in these two books, provides the foundation upon which ecumenical dialogue can stand. It is the necessary precursor for ecumenism, of allowing the East and West to breathe with both lungs. Synodality, the very heart of ecclesiology, found in communities of East and West, is the key to restoring the unity of East and West. Indeed, the conferences which produced these two books, convened within the wider setting and as a contribution to the work of the Synod on Synodality, serve as a model of the way in which synodality itself is the air breathed by East and West. Recognising that fact allows both lungs to breathe that same air.