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Glenn Morrison

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The article invites reflection on the nature of Pope Francis’ ecclesiology of synodality in relation to the transcendent truth of responsibility for the other. If synodality encourages a process of listening through mission and dialogue, then it needs to sober up the soul, as it were, and enter into the depths of the human condition, to hear the cry of the poor and afflicted. A provocative synodality that gives space to listening to the voice of the People of God will not be afraid to enter into the realm of prophetic trauma, of being ordered into a responsibility of encountering the suffering of the People of God. We live in a time of the Information Age. People are not objects to be reduced to computational sums or facts of knowledge. Accordingly good synodality embracing the virtues of faith, hope and love will seek pathways of truth via maternity (compassion), discernment and inclusion. Otherwise than exclusion, the Church invites “what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived” (1 Cor 2:9), namely to partake of communion, of the grace and blessing of the Risen Christ.

The idea of a synod speaks of an “assembly” or “meeting” of people called to journey together: “Synod is a greek word (synodos) meaning a meeting or assembly. The two Greek words that make up synod are syn meaning together and hodos meaning way or journey”.¹ Where people of faith come together, this speaks of the importance of listening as Jesus proclaims, “... Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt 18:18-20). To listen is to be assured of God’s saving presence. Jesus’ words bring

1 <https://adw.org/about-us/resources/synod/>

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out an abiding dimension of synodality, namely the awareness that listening *together* invites the hope for inclusivity and truth to unite. This is not easy for truth is difficult and demanding. Moreover, we can consider that the dialogue of listening together produces, as it were, a liturgy of inviting God's presence. Now truth has a positive relationship with faith, hope and love in the context of mystery.

A synodal Church oriented to truth will seek a provocative pathway of faith, hope and love. The pathway invites a journey and a story to tell. A journey is filled with experiences of learning and encounters to remember and find its "way" even into the depths of the heart and soul. Equally, we belong "to the Way, men or women" (Acts 2:9) on a journey towards the heart of Christianity: to encounter the word of the Risen Christ in the face of the poor one, the stranger, the People of God lost and excluded from the banquet of the Lord's table. A synodal Church will be *maternal*, *discerning* and *inclusive*. It will embrace a journey of listening, dialogue and mission. A synodal Church is commanded and anointed by the Spirit to be presence of grace in the anointing of the faithful, "to bring good news to the poor" (Lk 4:18). God's grace will serve to open the eyes and hearts of the People of God towards a path of truth (Jn 14:6). How will this be so? The French-Jewish Philosopher and Talmudic Scholar, Emmanuel Levinas remarks, "The consciousness of responsibility remains not in the "nominative", but "rather in the accusative".² This means that "subjectivity ... is commanded at the outset".³ In simpler terms, the subject "I" is "ordered" and "ordained" to be the responsible one.⁴

PROVOCATIVE SYNODALITY: ENCOUNTERING THE PROPHETIC ORDER OF RAGE AND PROTEST

What would it mean for good synodality to be "provocative", and hence provoked by outward voices? Given that, "The synodal process must take place at the heart of a hierarchically structured community,"⁵ this does not infer that "outward voices" be excluded or, so to speak, tuned out of proximity. The German word, "Fremdprophetie" can be helpful here. The term speaks of "the prophetic 'traumatizing' pro-voca-tion from outside, from elsewhere ... to change our minds, hearts, souls, bodies ... from

2 Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love" in *Entre-Nous, Thinking-of-the-Other*, edited by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 111.

3 Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," 111.

4 Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," 111.

5 International Theological Commission (ITC), *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (Vatican, 2 March 2018), no. 69.

within”.⁶ The synodal process therefore speaks of listening and dialogue by way of “trauma” (“the cry of the poor” and “afflicted” (Job 34:28; Prov 21:13)) *rather* than “thauma”⁷ (marvels and wonders animating the senses). This distinction may give perspective to Christ’s statement, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Matt 9:12-13). This suggests that synodality on a pathway towards truth is animated *more* by the “trauma” of those on the margins rather than the “thauma” of faces of excitement. We can hear the excitement of key words like “participation”, “communion” and “mission”.⁸ But before these words there is an “order [that] steals into me like a thief, despite the outstretched nets of consciousness, a trauma which surprises me absolutely, always *passed* in a past which was never present and remains un-representable”.⁹ The nature of the prophetic “order” can be discovered therefore in the word, “Fremdprophetie”, a provocation from outside be it in the form of rage, protest and tears. Walter Brueggemann points out:

In the face of the covenant-making God, it is *faithful human action to rage and protest*. The idea of primal scream was known and practiced in ancient Israel. ... Israel in her vigorous faith will take God seriously, and so there is energetic and hostile protest. Israel speaks with such confidence because she trusts herself utterly to this covenantal partner. Rage is a form of trust and an acknowledgment that finally one must come to terms with this One in whom we are grounded. ... Rage is the speech that makes other covenantal exchanges possible.¹⁰

The “Fremdprophetie” of rage and protest (animated by tears) is something external, foreign and alien, from the outside, a past that has never been present, to act as a positive trauma to be a *catalyst* for change. Rather from wonders and marvels, distractions that stir the psyche with self-interest (“thauma-interest”), there is the

6 Roger Burggraave, Email message to author to author, February 28, 2023.

7 Roger Burggraave, Email message to author to author, February 28, 2023.

8 2021-2024 Synod on Synodality, *Working Document for the Continental Stage: “Enlarge the space of your tent”* (General Secretary of the Synod: Vatican City, October 2022), no. 11, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf>

9 Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 171.

10 Walter Brueggemann, “Covenanting as Human Vocation: A Discussion of the Relation of Bible and Pastoral Care,” *Interpretation* 33: 2 (April 1979): 122-123.

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stirring trauma of the face of the Christ, the “strange attractor”,¹¹ who appears in vulnerability and contradiction, the trauma of expiation and substitution, logos-“Fremdprophetie” from the depths of understanding the abyss of human sin and lostness. We may not easily recognise Christ’s wounds due to his poverty of condition. Yet perhaps the cry of the afflicted ones may encounter the “strange attractor” of Christ whose appeal assuages their heart with an inter-ruption (rupture) of redemption and mercy. Good synodality may then need to be *provoked* by the “Fremdprophetie” of rage and protest, “outer voices” moving out of darkness (suffering) to light of tears (being heard). Let us then journey towards the synodal road towards truth, however we may stumble, through *first* opening a reflection on a response to the cry of the poor and afflicted through faith, hope and love.

APPROACHING FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE: TOWARDS MATERNITY, DISCERNMENT AND INCLUSION

The gift and affectivity of faith nurtured through time invites a spirit of hospitality, a spontaneity of being welcoming. There is something *maternal* here, and such maternity is the loving-kindness of compassion and faith. Where faith is expressed spontaneously as maternity, we learn to be like Jesus, close to the Father’s heart (Jn 1:18). Such proximity overflows with another gift, namely the discernment of hope. This is because faith invites entry into mystery and the provocation of hope and prophecy (compare the minor prophets of Amos, Hosea and Micah who spoke up against idolatry in the northern Kingdom of Israel).¹² Where faith leads to mystery, mystery leads to parables, and the parable of hope is to speak and act prophetically like Christ in the paschal mystery. What better way to take a stand against exclusions and political positions within the Church (like the liberal -Conservative/Traditionalist divide) by seeking to become a person in Christ, to take to heart what it means to bear the mysteries of faith, to enter into the provocation of the paschal mystery. This is the discernment of sacrifice and hope revealing a hidden vigilance of love.

Much that is hidden remains like a *leaven* for the world. Consider Jesus’ parable of the yeast in Matthew 13:33: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened”. We cannot easily see yeast in the making of leavened bread. It is barely visible or nearly invisible. So is the leaven of the Kingdom of God.

11 Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope* (Maryknoll: New York, 2006), 186.

12 Chaim Potok, *Wanderings: Chaim Potok’s History of the Jews* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1978), 176-177.

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We learn from St. Paul that, in “Christ himself ... are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:2-3). This is why the person of faith needs to be vigilant to proclaim Christ by way of love and inclusivity, to safeguard “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”. God’s treasure in Christ is a “hiddenness” and mystery to the world to be unveiled safely in the provocative vigilance of love and working towards an inclusive Church.

A synodal church is on a journey of *listening* to avoid exits of exclusivity or a self-interested affectivity bent on marvelling one’s achievement. Synodality will therefore learn to discover new provocative ways towards the truth of otherness: (i) to *mature* through the maternal compassion of faith; (ii) to *discern* through the hope of learning to bear God’s mysteries; and (iii) to be *inclusive* through welcoming the poor one (the stranger, the broken-hearted) through the revelation and vigilance of love. Here, we discover a pathway to encounter Christ, and come to understand him. In a broken world, there *can* be a just “pluralism” of faith, hope and love. Through the maternity of faith, the discernment of hope and the inclusion of love, Synodality may well find a way to navigate a world saturated by an information age beset by the temptation to become an image and likeness of computers.

DESERTING TRUTH: WE ARE NOT SUPER-COMPUTERS!

Let us take a moment to reflect about our world. Nearly 30 years ago, there was increasing discussion we were living in a time of postmodernity, a new metanarrative to compete with the Christian gospel. Here, we cannot just think of postmodernism, but as “postmodernisms” as there are many variations just like in theology (where one may speak of “theologies”). In a book about “De-confusing Restructuring Postmodern World,” the editor, Walter Truett Anderson, writes in his introduction that:

Postmodernity ... is a major transition in human history, a time of rebuilding all the foundations of civilization, and the world is going to be occupied with it for a long time to come. And, although it touches different people in vastly different ways, it is happening to us all. We are all emerging out of the security of our tribes, traditions, religions and worldviews into a global civilization that is dazzlingly, overwhelmingly pluralistic. Surrounded by so many truths, we can’t help but revise our concept of truth itself: our beliefs about belief. More and more people become acquainted with the idea that, as philosopher Richard Rorty puts it, truth is made rather than found.¹³

13 Walter Truett Anderson, ed., *The Truth about the Truth; De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World* (New York: 1995, Penguin Putnam Inc.), 7-8.

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In this last statement there may be an element of truth, or what I would like to describe as “sinister” or “dark” truth. Let me give an example. Computers have helped to refocus the position of modernism’s accent on knowledge towards postmodernism’s desire for information.¹⁴ The world has turned towards an abyss of hyperbolic or manic activity of preferring/preserving information by way of substituting “objective” facts for truth. Subjectivity, and even less, ethical subjectivity, has just become divorced from the human condition. Transcendent truth and mystery have encountered much desertion. This helps to explain the “success” of capitalism, of *laissez-faire* economics ending in a semi-pelagian/will-driven idolatry of the state (and individual) oriented by a seductive, enthralling consumerism of bad faith or false transcendence as it were. The nasty turn from modernism (of which the Church fought so hard against) towards postmodernism has produced a world bent on self-care, welcoming destruction of the human soul and faith in the Christian God of love and compassion. *Where* then is truth to be encountered?

One can only imagine that things could not become worse. Yet our present age or time has fallen into hyperbolic change. A new era has begun, post postmodernism. Computers have taken on greater, more powerful qualities. They seem omnipotent (in total control), omniscient (fully aware) and omnipresent (everywhere). Computers are a key catalyst for structural and societal change. If computers in a time of information technology have succeeded in transforming (or reducing) knowledge and understanding to information, computers today in a time more and more of artificial intelligence are transforming knowledge, reason and information into surveillance. The dark side of post postmodernism is a dystopian move towards ensuring the use of “omnipotent”, “omniscient” and “omnipresent” super-computers can create a new vision for the world: “omni-benevolent” surveillance. This seems absurd, yet reality does bear such a quality. The next era beyond post postmodernism may well have to deal with singularity, that is to say, self-consciousness computers that know what is good for us fragile humans.

My point here is that synodality is an *opportunity* to take a stance against the “objectivity” of the information age and AI fueled by postmodernism and post post-modernism, or simply hostile or impersonal ways of engaging with humanity. The Church does *not* need to desert truth. It does *not* need to become like a super-computer bent on surveillance and control as a means to repress

14 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/>. See “2. The Postmodern Condition,” para. 2.

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outpourings of trauma, rage, protest and tears. In the past, the Church could take on modernism and the glorification of reason without faith. Vatican II sought to give life to the Church, and began to open some windows of hope for lay participation. In the same way, Pope Francis' ecclesiology of Synodality, embracing not only bishops, but also the laity, is a movement of the Spirit to "Enlarge the space of your tent" (Is 54:2).¹⁵ There is something eucharistic here, to sit down and break the bread of dialogue, unity and mission.¹⁶ Such a eucharistic praxis means that synodality is *not* ever surveillance of the laity and nor should it be seen as a totalising system that transforms knowledge and truth (even rage, protest and tears) into information and facts (devoid of emotions and compassion) about the voice of the laity in the Church. We are not meant to become high-speed processes of information like super-computers. *Synodality*, at its heart, is prophetic, patient and hospitable, eager to welcome dialogue from the outside and develop a future world of the Kingdom of God, namely, of "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9; cf. Isa 64:4).

CONCLUSION: "WHAT NO EYE HAS SEEN, NOR EAR HEARD,"
THE ANCIENT VINTAGE OF THE RESURRECTION

It seems to me that given the process of synodality has spoken of the need to enlarge the space of the Church's tent to embrace the role of women, to have less divisive and authoritarian leadership and to welcome the excluded poor one on the margins,¹⁷ *three* themes therefore emerge, namely, maternity, discernment and inclusion. An increased participation of women will provide a sustaining maternity of compassion in the very bowels of the Church. A discerning leadership of the Church will hunger for greater participation of the laity in a spirit of openness and generativity. A more inclusive Church will make a stance against exclusive forms of political violence and positions. If we put these themes together, a uniting factor to engage these charged challenges and needs for the church is the difficult path of *confession* and *forgiveness*, an ancient and paschal vintage maturing since the days of the Resurrection.

The reductive reasoning of exclusiveness or elitism, that the other is absurd, can be exemplified in our experience of Church.

15 2021-2024 Synod on Synodality, *Working Document for the Continental Stage*.

16 2021-2024 Synod on Synodality, *Working Document for the Continental Stage*, no. 103.

17 Eamonn Conway, "Steadily slaloming our way," *The Synodal Times* (Sept 8 2022): 2.

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We have a history of a lack of participation of women (and I would add today laymen), of polarisation, distance and fragmentation between the laity and hierarchy, and of exclusive attitudes leaving many on the Church on the margins of society like divorced couples, LGBTIQ+ people and communities, people suffering from sexual abuse, and ex-priests and religious. Pope Francis, in his 2013 programmatic Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* [The Joy of the Gospel] (para no. 200), has emphasised that we need to share the spiritual friendship of Jesus with the poor, and hence the stranger and people left on the margins of society. Is it perhaps too hard to remember that we were once a stranger in a foreign land (Ex. 2:22)?

Reason and knowledge certainly need a boost as it were from “Fremdprophetie” voices pushed towards the vulnerability and trauma of rage, protest and tears. A synodality of maternity and compassion orients an ear that listens, an eye that sees and a heart that feels. In the substitution of compassion (rather than exclusion), new paths emerge: the patience of discernment and the hospitality of inclusion. Together, the affectivity of maternity, discernment and inclusion provides a pastoral way of care for the People of God to begin to have a prophetic voice and share a narrative of suffering, outrage and hurt.

Encountering the face of the People of God may well reveal a trauma, a disruption of exclusions through a hidden word and voice: “I cannot be subject to your totalising ways of behaviour, relationship and requirements that have little respect for my dignity of being an image of God, free to grow in grace and gifts of the Spirit”. The face of the poor one is not a fragmentary moment of cognition to fade out of memory and consciousness, but a past that has remained hidden from the present. A synodal Church will therefore want to embrace, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9; cf. Isa. 64:4).

In the transcendence and truth of learning to open one’s eyes, ears and heart through the maternity of faith, the discernment of hope and the inclusion of love, there remains the word of the Risen Christ. This is prayer and ethics coming together, and can begin practically through developing qualities of liturgies and adult faith formation. These examples highlight that “Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church’s ordinary way of living and working”.¹⁸ Moreover, to respond to the word of the Risen Christ is inherently Eucharistic. In other words, there is hope to enter into a banquet, to partake of the ancient, paschal vintage of the Resurrection, and savour the humility of confession (a Church that confesses) and

18 ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 3.

forgiveness (the difficult path revealing a promise, a covenant of hope).

If synodality aims to build a great tent of participation, then there is room enough for a banquet of “Fremdprophetie,” confession and forgiveness, to hear blessings of dialogue and mission, and receive the anointing of maternity, discernment and inclusion. Let us pray then that a synodal Church will possess the courage and confidence to partake of the vintage of the Resurrection, to listen to the truth of Christ appealing to the People of God, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30).

Beauty. Was Jesus beautiful? The words of Isaiah 53 are often applied to him: ‘He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.’ Certainly, his death on the cross was utterly ugly. Perhaps here we glimpse the most profound beauty, which we only slowly learn to see, for it has gathered to itself all the ugliness of the world and transfigured it.

– TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE & LUKASZ POPKO, *Questioning God*, Bloomsbury Continuum, 2023, p. 97.