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# Ecumenical Ecclesiology in its New Contexts: Considering the Transformed Relationship between Roman Catholic Ecclesiology and Ecumenism

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**Abstract:** The quest for Christian unity is entering a new phase amidst the movement's many voices, perspectives and tensions. Christians are witnessing the advent of an emerging ecumenical paradigm, which, because it is not fully realized, is still realizing its full definition. The paradigm operates in a global context rather than a Eurocentric one, and even as it is more global, it is simultaneously more local. It cultivates shared praxis while being less concerned with the comparison of dogmas. Ecclesiology is also entering a new paradigm which shares many features with its ecumenical counterpart, particularly its global perspective and interest in shared praxis ahead of dogmatic questions. Even though ecumenism and ecclesiology share common trajectories, their journeys are unfolding in largely parallel rather than cooperative and mutually-enriching ways. This raises the question: What opportunities might arise from examining the shifts in ecumenism and ecclesiology together? This article examines how new methodological and practical developments in these two fields can form and inform one another. It studies the shift to synodality in the Catholic Church and the turn towards discernment in the ecumenical sphere as manifestations of similar theological commitments and a common interest in cultivating participatory processes. The seismic changes reshaping the religious landscape are transforming the relationship between ecumenism and ecclesiology; yet a strong connection between them endures and illumines paths forward for the church in the third millennium.

**Keywords:** ecclesiology; ecumenism; synodality; discernment; authority

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## 1. Shifting Contexts and the Enduring Relationship between Ecclesiology and Ecumenism

Amidst ecumenism's many voices, perspectives and tensions the quest for Christian unity is entering a new phase. Christians are witnessing the advent of an emerging ecumenical paradigm, which, because it is not fully realized, is still finding its full definition.<sup>1</sup> The paradigm operates in a global context rather than a Eurocentric one, and even as it is more global, it is simultaneously more local. It cultivates shared praxis while being less concerned with the comparison of dogmas. At the same time, ecclesiology is also entering a new paradigm. The emerging ecclesiological paradigm shares many features with its ecumenical counterpart, particularly its interest in shared praxis ahead of dogmatic questions. It seeks a greater global perspective by attending to the church's local instantiations which, in turn, listens to a wider range of voices and needs. It is ecumenical in its orientation prioritizing ways of being church that have the potential to bring Christians together.

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<sup>1</sup> For an early discussion of features associated with this emerging paradigm see (Bosch 1991), especially pp. 349–62. An excellent summary of Bosch's treatment is found in (Ormerod 2014, p. 19).

Even as ecumenism and ecclesiology share certain trajectories, their journeys are unfolding in largely parallel rather than cooperative and mutually-enriching ways. This raises the question: What opportunities might arise from examining the shifts in ecumenism and ecclesiology together?

Examining the common changes unfolding within ecumenism and ecclesiology makes sense given the natural links between the two even as the former provides some of the most difficult questions for the latter. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen of Fuller Theological Seminary argues that “any talk about the unity of church entities presupposes some tentative understanding of what the church is. One cannot unite entities without knowing what kind of organisms one is trying to put together.”<sup>2</sup> The connection between ecclesiology and ecumenism is expressed in a useful way by John Gibaut, former Director of the Commission on Faith and Order who provides an analogy drawn from the world of technology. Gibaut observes that while not everyone who owns a smartphone is technologically adept, most know enough to understand that if computers or smartphones utilize incompatible operating systems, their users cannot communicate, work together, or even recognize one another. Gibaut asserts the same truism of Christian communities using different ecclesiologies to engage in dialogue because “that is what ecclesiology is—the operating systems of Christian communities” (Gibaut 2015, p. 222). In the divided church, Christian communities have developed distinct ways of being church—different “operating systems”—that hinder their ability to effectively communicate, even on matters on which they largely agree. Gibaut asserts that a timely question for ecumenical dialogue is whether Christian communities “have compatible ecclesiastical operating systems and can recognize ‘church’ in one another and can receive from one another and, indeed, receive one another as Christ has received us” (Gibaut 2015, p. 222).

Though he never owned a smartphone, Yves Congar, O.P. also stressed the imperative of “syncing” ecclesiologies for ecumenical progress. During his career-long pursuit of Christian unity, Congar enjoyed close relationships with many Protestant theologians, particularly observers from Vatican II. In his diary of the council, Congar recorded that the Protestant observers expressed considerably greater interest in the development of the schema on the church—what would eventually become *Lumen gentium*—than in the development of the schema on ecumenism.<sup>3</sup> Their interest sprung from an awareness that the council’s teaching on the church would determine what it could meaningfully say about ecumenism. They knew that no statement on ecumenism—no matter how beautifully written or theologically interesting—would be valuable or useful to the cause of Christian unity if the council’s ecclesiology could not support a dynamic ecumenical vision.

Failures to consider the emerging ecumenical and ecclesiological paradigms in light of one another stem, in part, from a perception that the shifts transpiring within these fields diminish the importance of their relationship. Indeed, some see the close connection between ecclesiology and ecumenism as part of older and fading paradigms. The idea of “syncing” ecclesiologies and the importance of ecclesiology for ecumenism can seem to rely on a static view of churches, or groups of churches, as monolithic entities that communicate only through official channels. Ecumenical and ecclesiological focuses towards more local expressions, less centralized modes of authority and shared praxis can create the impression, among some, that there is less need for syncing, less clear ways to sync and that communication between churches has migrated onto other platforms. While the shifts taking place in ecumenism and ecclesiology are significant and do pose critical questions about their relationship, a close examination of the changes within these fields makes it clear that their connection remains critically important. In this time of liminality, ecclesiology and ecumenism need each other, perhaps, more than ever.

Both ecclesiology and ecumenism are developing meaningful responses to the demands of the church’s new context. Despite the striking similarities in their questions, modes of response

<sup>2</sup> (Kärkkäinen 2002, p. 8).

<sup>3</sup> For an example see (Congar 2012, p. 330).

and theological commitments insufficient attention has been directed at considering how these developments can form and inform each other. More can be done so that these advances might contribute to the type of ecumenical gift exchange that was advocated by Margaret O’Gara and the task of Receptive Ecumenism championed by Paul Murray.<sup>4</sup> Considering recent advances in ecclesiology and ecumenism in light of one another leads to a deeper understanding of the Christian identity and provides resources for the church’s efforts to speak meaningfully today. To demonstrate the on-going importance of the relationship between ecumenism and ecclesiology and mine it for insights relevant for today’s needs, this article proceeds in three parts. The first two sections explore developments within ecclesiology and ecumenism demonstrating how these fields have drawn from their emerging paradigms to develop concrete responses to the shifting context. The focus will first be on the movement towards synodality in Roman Catholic ecclesiology and then will shift to the movement towards common discernment in the ecumenical realm. The third section will consider the deep connections between these developments highlighting how the move to synodal structures and to common processes of discernment reflect a shared understanding of the church’s nature. This last section will also identify some of the ways that advances in one discipline have the potential to promote advances in the other. Ultimately what will be shown is that the enduring relationship between ecumenism and ecclesiology illumines critical paths forward for the church in the third millennium.

## 2. An Ecclesiological Response to Shifting Contexts: A Move towards Greater Synodality in Catholic Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology today faces seismic shifts that require it to rethink its methods, areas of focus and dialogue partners. Its context is thoroughly globalized and highly technological, and it is shaped by demographic changes as well as changing attitudes about religion and institutions. It is formed by a heightened awareness of the way that the church’s mission interacts with a variety of social, historical and political forces. At the heart of all of ecclesiology’s efforts to respond to these changes is a desire to reconsider ecclesial structures. It seeks to understand how the church can operate in ways that are more efficient, more reflective of the world’s population and more inclusive of a wider range of voices while remaining consistent with theological commitments and the witness of tradition. A central question for ecclesiology today is: What structures would best promote the church’s ability to speak meaningfully in this new context?

In the Catholic Church, many of the sweeping changes ushering in a new context have coincided with and gained urgency in the election of the first pope from the global South. From the beginning of his papacy, Francis has made clear that updating the church and rethinking its structures would be a hallmark of his pontificate. In his first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis laid out a vision for ecclesial renewal calling for a “pastoral and missionary conversion.”<sup>5</sup> He argues that, given the church’s missionary identity, it is a community that is meant to be constantly moving forward and in motion. In a recent homily, he likened the church to a bicycle that “stays upright as long as it keeps moving” noting that “the equilibrium of the church. is found precisely in its mobility.”<sup>6</sup> A church focused solely on itself and its own self-preservation, according to Francis, develops a false sense of its identity and generates structures inimical to proclaiming the gospel. In a critical passage the pope writes:

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<sup>4</sup> Murray and O’Gara serve as striking exceptions to the lack of attention paid to the way that developments within churches can be a source of insight and renewal for one another. Their work explores how renewal within churches is critical for both internal growth and vibrancy as well as for ecumenical sharing and ecumenical advance. Murray’s volume *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Murray 2010) and O’Gara’s work in *No Turning Back: The Future of Ecumenism* (O’Gara 2014) illumine the critical point that the future of ecumenism depends on internal renewal within the churches and the reception of advances realized in other communities as a source for one’s own on-going reform.

<sup>5</sup> (Francis 2013, n. 25).

<sup>6</sup> (Francis 2018).

I dream of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire to pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with him.<sup>6</sup>

This missionary option envisioned by Francis does not view movement in the church as one-directional; rather it sees the church as constituted by both “centrifugal” forces—as a community of disciples focused on outreach—and “centripetal” forces—which draw God’s people into communion” (Bevans 2015, p. 14). The church’s mission is therefore not merely one of “going forth”; it is also one of listening, receiving and openness to the presence of the Spirit.

Renewing ecclesial structures so that they might support this “missionary option” is central to Francis’ broader project of pastoral conversion, and his call for a synodal church is a central stratagem. The word “synod” comes from the Greek, *synodos*, which can literally be rendered as “travelling on a journey together” (*syn* = same and *hodos* = way or road). In essence, the pope is calling for a renewal in the way that the universal church is governed such that the local church—in particular, dioceses and episcopal conferences—play a more dynamic role in pastoral work of the universal church. True to his style, Francis does not rely on technical formulations for describing his vision of ecclesial structures; instead, he uses accessible language, emphasizing a “listening church”—a church that listens, learns and shares mission. In a now famous address in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of synods, Francis said that a synodal church is “a church which listens, which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: All listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth,’ in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7).<sup>8</sup>

Francis deliberately asserts that becoming a listening church does not mean that the church as currently constituted just “starts listening.” Adopting a listening disposition requires decreasing the distance between center and periphery in ecclesial structures so that the church gains greater access to a wider variety of voices as well as a deepened appreciation of the context necessary for appreciating what is heard. Francis understands that to move effectively into the future the church has to bring these diverse voices into its decision-making. He knows this, in part, from his own rich experiences of collegiality as a participant in, and leader of, several important episcopal bodies. He is unique from his predecessors in that he is the first pope to be ordained after the Second Vatican Council and thus to live in the wake of its commitment to collegiality. In light of these experiences, Francis recognizes the need for a strong center yet he is also aware that “excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach.”<sup>9</sup> To that end, he calls for “a greater appreciation of local and regional elements” stating that “central bureaucracy is not sufficient; there is also a need for increased collegiality and solidarity. What is needed is not unanimity, but true unity in the richness of diversity.”<sup>10</sup> Francis wants this understanding that unity is not necessarily uniformity reflected in the church’s structures and modes of governance.

Becoming a listening church means that the center does not do all the talking. Francis has been reticent to speak on issues such as the shortage of priests and certain moral matters, not because he has

<sup>6</sup> (Francis 2018).

<sup>8</sup> (Francis 2015).

<sup>9</sup> (Francis 2013, p. 32).

<sup>10</sup> (Francis 2013, p. 32).

little interest in these concerns, but out of a sense that it is the local churches that should raise these issues and suggest a path forward. Francis expands this point in *Evangelii gaudium* stating:

Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which effects the church and the world. It is not advisable for the pope to take the place of local bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound ‘decentralization’ (EG 16).

As part of this “sound decentralization” Francis seeks to restore the responsibility of teaching, and the authority to teach, to the local bishops. He recognizes the tremendous value of the resources presented by the centrifugal forces in the church and seeks to take advantage of them. Francis illustrates the importance of such resources by example; his writings are full of references to documents authored by regional episcopal bodies including The Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), and the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa (SECAM).

At the heart of the Catholic Church’s efforts to respond to its new context has been the effort to create ecclesial structures that are responsive to a wider range of voices. The movement towards greater synodality is not, according to Francis, a form of modernizing but constitutes a “rebalancing act” which leads the church to a more authentic expression of its own nature. Executing these shifts involves significant challenges; yet, despite the difficulties involved, Francis argues, “we must continue along this path. The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church in the third millennium.”<sup>11</sup>

### 3. An Ecumenical Response to the New Context: Attending to the Issue of Discernment

Progress towards ecumenical goals in recent decades has been marked by both lean times and growth spurts. This pattern means that the trajectory of ecumenical advance has been spurred by moments—often unanticipated—of great creativity, inspiration, and innovation. Advances have been catalyzed by efforts to create new pathways or “holes in the roof” for ecumenical understanding.<sup>12</sup> In the second chapter of Mark’s gospel, a group of men bring Jesus a paralyzed man for healing. However, when they arrive at the place where Jesus is, they cannot reach him because the crowds are already too great, and their way is blocked. Mark’s gospel notes that “Being unable to get to him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet where the paralytic was lying” (Mk 2:4). When these disciples encountered an obstacle to gaining access to Jesus, they created an alternate ingress. As in Mark’s story, the ways to shared understandings of the Christian faith can often seem blocked by the presence of fixed opinions, teachings and ways of understanding. At times, those engaged in dialogue can imagine only one way forward and when that path appears impassible they assume that there are no other options. Often, however, the answer is not to keep trying to push through blocked doors, but to create another way in.

The history of the ecumenical movement over the last several decades could be narrated as a story of creating “holes in the roof.” One key discovery was the way that agreements about ministry can serve as fruitful points of entry. After years of halting progress over traditional issues related to faith and order, some ecumenical groups have looked to the exercise of ministry in one another’s communions as a means of seeking mutual understanding. In sharing experiences

<sup>11</sup> (Francis 2015).

<sup>12</sup> I am indebted to Wes Granberg-Michaelson, former General Secretary of the reformed Church in America, my colleague on the U.S. Roman Catholic-Reformed dialogue for this analogy. His use of the story of the paralyzed man as a way of understanding ecumenical advance is one of the many gifts he gave me during our years working together.



of theological practice, groups came to recognize the presence of authentic ministry in each another's communions. A concomitant set of questions surfaced: If we can recognize vibrant ministry in each other's communities can we also acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit there empowering this ministry? If this is the case, can we think in new ways about the ministers that lead this ministry and about the structures of their communions?<sup>13</sup> In addition to promoting mutual understanding regarding approaches to ministry, this focus also provided a new way into discussing difficult doctrinal questions and structural issues.

In recent years, another hole in the roof has emerged—and, perhaps, even a new type of hole given that the means of entry is not merely a new topic but a new method. Historically, the express goal of the ecumenical movement has been visible unity. Visible unity is generally seen as constituted by unity in “apostolic faith, sacramental life, ministry and mission.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, it has become increasingly clear that common responses to moral issues serve as another essential characteristic of visible unity given that the way that Christian communities respond to moral challenges affects the unity we already share as well as the unity we seek. Gibaut observes that questions of faith and order which had long been understood as dividing the churches were “supplanted in the early twenty-first century by the newer church-dividing issues on ethical questions” (Gibaut 2013, p. 388).<sup>15</sup> He adds: “As I know from my own Anglican context, there is today much more anxiety about the dividing positions on human sexuality than about the ecumenical issues of a generation ago, such as eucharistic sacrifice, the historic episcopate, or universal primacy. That there has been a shift in the ecumenical priorities for some churches—but not all—is undeniable; these churches today experience acutely the divisive consequences of moral disagreement, both within Christian communities and between them (Ibid, p. 388).” Appreciating the urgency and delicacy of these complicated and often emotionally-charged issues, some ecumenists recognized that continuing to compare divergent positions on moral questions represented a “blocked door.” They sought to create a new path towards mutual understanding by exploring their communities' respective processes for formulating moral positions. Thus, rather than remaining trapped behind the impasse of seemingly incompatible moral conclusions, might it be possible for communities to come together by exploring the discernment processes that led to these positions? Moreover, might it even be possible, to discern together what fidelity to Christ looks like in relation to particular moral issues?

The necessity of coming to deeper mutual understanding, and perhaps even common methods of discernment, emanates not only from the urgency connected to debates over moral issues, but also from their importance for facilitating ecumenical exchange at a more basic level. Questions about how decisions are reached within various Christian communities have far-reaching implications. To illumine this reality, I offer an example from the work of the United States Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue, of which I serve as a member. At several points throughout the years, the dialogue has stumbled over questions about diversity and the relationship between unity and diversity in the church. To be clear, the dialogue team agrees on several fundamental aspects of these issues: That unity is a gift of the Spirit; that diversity is also a gift from God such that it is not accidental to the church but central to its identity; and that there are limits to diversity because inauthentic diversity is destructive to the Church's oneness. While these shared affirmations are important and provide significant common ground, the move to discussing diversity in the church, even generally,

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<sup>13</sup> Using ministry as an entry point for ecclesiological understanding was a foundation of the eighth round of the Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue. The document produced by this round entitled “The One Body of Christ: Ministry in Service to the Church and the World” is set to be published in early 2019.

<sup>14</sup> (World Council of Churches 2013, p. 43).

<sup>15</sup> It is important to note here that while Gibaut observes the perception that there is a movement *from* issues of faith and order *to* issues of morality, he rejects efforts to polarize the two arguing that moral issues have ecclesiological implications and vice versa such that it cannot be said that one has supplanted the other as if they were distinct and separable concerns. Further he critiques the sense that the focus on moral issues represents a “new” development noting that “Church-dividing questions around moral issues are as old as doctrinal disagreements,” (p. 389).

raises particular challenges. These difficulties emerge because behind talk of “diversity” always lies notions of “legitimate diversity” and “illegitimate diversity.” The inevitable presence of this language behind all talk of diversity raises questions about who determines what diversity is acceptable and what criteria are used to make this determination. Anxiety about the term “diversity” and what lies beneath it was sometimes so strong that we found it difficult to talk about and affirm diversity at all—even when we agreed about specific examples or manifestations of it. Thus, *the process for deciding what constitutes legitimate diversity* became an obstacle to saying things that we all wished to express as common beliefs. Trying to move past this impasse is difficult inasmuch as providing satisfying answers to questions about what constitutes legitimate diversity, who makes such decisions, and what criteria are employed can seem complex, “uncategorizable” and specific to one’s own faith commitments. Indeed answers to such questions sometimes appear “too big to explain” or something that only “insiders” can accept or find convincing. Thus, progress in mutual understanding about decision-making, and perhaps even shared criteria for discernment, is crucial not just in the sphere of moral issues, but for ecumenical dialogue as a whole.

Recognizing the importance of questions related to discernment, the World Council of Churches’ convergence text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* emphasizes the need for churches seeking to move toward a “common vision” to create common means of discernment.<sup>16</sup> The text, however, does not explicitly define what constitutes “common discernment.” Rather, it identifies the need for greater clarity about this term as a key goal in the next phase of the ecumenical journey. Theologian and ecumenist, Edward Hahnenberg of John Carroll University helpfully sketches out two counter examples to common discernment in order to better understand its actual purpose. Common discernment is *not* separate discernment which is characterized by “two completely separated church bodies or ecclesial communities, each with its own distinct processes, criteria and structures of ecclesial discernment, working their way through issues independent of one another” (Hahnenberg 2017, p. 229). It is also *not* “one discernment” where “there are no longer two separated churches, but a single unified church body that engages in ecclesial discernment through a single set of processes, criteria and structures” (Ibid, p. 230). The ecumenical process here resists both a wholly distinct and entirely amalgamated approach to respective traditions and practices. Hahnenberg then explores what common discernment might include by sketching out three levels.

*Level 1* of ‘common discernment’ would involve two church bodies engaged in their separate processes of ecclesial discernment around a particular issue, who at the same time engage in dialogue with one another, seeking to learn more about that particular issue, so as to inform their own discernment, and thus grow toward a more closely shared understanding of the issue.

*Level 2* would involve two church bodies who step back from the particular issue at hand, reflect on their own processes of discernment in light of the differing processes of the other, in order for each to renew or reform their individual processes, and thus grow toward a more closely shared understanding and similar practice of ecclesial discernment.

*Level 3* would involve two church bodies who share one process of ecclesial discernment and actually discern together (Ibid, p. 230).

In looking at TCTCV’s discussion of ecclesial discernment in light of Hahnenberg’s criteria, the text is appealing to churches to move from Level 1 to Level 2. We see this in the document’s call for “(a) common criteria, or means of discernment, and (b) such mutually recognized structures as are needed to use these effectively.”<sup>17</sup> Thus a critical question for the ecumenical movement today is: “what positive steps can be taken to make common discernment possible?”

<sup>16</sup> (World Council of Churches 2013).

<sup>17</sup> (Hahnenberg 2017, n. 30, italics in original).

There is tremendous interest among churches on the international, national and local levels to create forms of common discernment. Rather than remaining behind blocked doors or paralyzed by issues which they have no authority to change, groups are eager to move forward on areas where collaboration and common work are possible. At a retreat that I recently helped facilitate for leaders within Roman Catholic and Lutheran communities, the most common and enthusiastic question I heard was “What can we do together?” There was a respectful acknowledgement among the group that real and significant issues remain obstacles to full, visible unity; nevertheless, rather than rehearsing those matters—about which this local dialogue group could not effect change on its own—participants sought to identify pastoral needs and areas of concern where collaboration and shared praxis is already possible. One suggestion was to coordinate opportunities to respond to local needs within the community—on topics such as migration or public health—through common statements and coordinated practices. Such an approach seemed preferable to the standard practice of each community responding separately and trying to compare their responses after the fact. The interest in common discernment and shared praxis demonstrated by these leaders is replicated in ecumenical groups across the country and globe. Local exchanges are advancing ecumenical understanding and progress in ways that differ from large bilateral exchanges, and they have the potential to serve as a powerful centrifugal force in the pursuit of Christian unity.

#### **4. Collaborating in a New Context: The Renewing Power of the Relationship between Ecclesiology and Ecumenism**

In order to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing context, new developments—reflecting new paradigms—are emerging in both ecumenism and ecclesiology. Their trajectories share profound similarities; yet, the deep connection between them, and their ability to inform one another, remain insufficiently examined. These developments in the Catholic Church and within ecumenism represent demonstrate the presence of Spirit-led vitality within these communities which, as Murary’s Receptive Ecumenism points out, has the potential to not only lead them to more authentic expressions of themselves, but also to greater unity with one another. Tremendous insight can be achieved by comparing synodal structures and processes of discernment given that, within the church, structures of decision-making are inherently related to structures of communion. In other words, talk about processes of decision-making is always also talk about structures of authority and vice versa.

Ecclesial structures and processes of discernment are not just administrative mechanisms for facilitating choices or conveying information, but attempts to discover God’s will and communicate it effectively. At the heart of the move towards synodality and the move towards common discernment are questions about listening and a commitment to participatory processes. Who gets listened to on which issues? How is unity maintained while allowing for a diversity of voices? What does fidelity to Christ look like? The shifts towards synodality and common discernment have been embraced not on the basis of efficiency or democratic principles, but in light of fundamental understandings about the church’s nature. There is a growing awareness that the whole church must be listened to because the Spirit is given to the whole church, yet insufficient attention has to be directed at determining what this looks like and what implications it has for ecclesial structures and processes. The moves towards synodality in the Roman Catholic Church and processes of common discernment in the ecumenical sphere represent efforts to develop concrete reflections of this reality. Given the strong connection between these fields and the overlapping nature of their developments it is difficult to neatly enumerate the benefits that one offers the other. Mindful of this limitation, some examples illumine the kinds of insights that can be reaped from a cross-pollination of these advances.

#### **5. Cross Pollination: Ecclesiology to Ecumenism**

In the shifting context in which the church finds itself today, ecclesiology remains vital to ecumenical discussion. The movement towards synodality has helped the Catholic Church develop a deeper understanding of its own identity which, in turn, has informed its ability to engage in



fruitful ecumenical exchange. Recent efforts towards creating synodal structures are rooted in a renewed understanding that the church exists as a communion of churches, a development which, in many ways, represents a retrieval of the earliest Christian tradition. Synodality gives expression to the belief that the entire church, made up of local communities, is the subject of the proclamation of the gospel. It recognizes that the Gospel is not a timeless discourse, but that there is a need to discern what the Spirit is saying to the church in a particular time and place. Also important is that synodality sees the union of the churches as primarily constituted by their inherent oneness as the locus of God's saving work and not primarily through external bonds such as the bonds of jurisdiction. Synodality's communion ecclesiology with its strong view of local churches and emphasis on the internal, not external, union of churches provides new opportunities for ecumenical "syncing".

As an expression of an ecclesiology of communion, synodality requires an affirmation of and openness to a diverse range of voices within the church. Attuning oneself to the diversity within one's own community creates greater possibilities for recognizing the presence of the Holy Spirit working in other communities. Simply put, *how* we listen and *who* we listen to within our own ecclesial community impacts *who* we listen to and *what* we hear outside of it. This reality was well understood by the Protestant observers at Vatican II. These leaders were eager to see how *Lumen gentium* would deal with issues of diversity within the Catholic Church. If unity within the Catholic Church could only be understood as uniformity, then there was little hope that Catholics would embrace the diversity manifest in Protestant communities. On the other hand, if Catholic doctrine could tolerate significant expressions of diversity within itself and recognize diversity as a source of vibrancy rather than a threat, then perhaps there was a chance for real ecumenical advance. Francis has promoted this sense of greater diversity within the church in many ways including his *motu proprio*, *Magnum Principium*, on liturgical translations which allows for greater diversity and more local expressions within the liturgy.<sup>18</sup> The way that synodality honors the particularity of local churches and includes more voices in ecclesial governance creates space for increased diversity within the church and the possibility that greater union with other Christians does not have to require complete uniformity.

Related to its dynamic theology of local churches, synodality also relies on a powerful appreciation of the *sensus fidelium* and the significance of attending to the experience of all the faithful. In many ways, the move to greater synodality is motivated by a desire to hear more from the voices of the faithful who, Francis has said, have an "instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church."<sup>19</sup> As such, synodality is not only about becoming a "listening church" which cultivates a posture of listening to its members, but also about becoming a "consulting church" which actively seeks the input of faithful regarding its teaching and modes of governance. Moreover, as Hahnenberg points out, a commitment to consulting the *sensus fidelium* is not limited to hearing only from Catholics, but extends to all the baptized (Hahnenberg 2017, p. 225). A synodal church therefore has an intrinsic and extrinsic orientation so that consultation moves in both directions and facilitates a fruitful exchange among all the faithful. In recent years, multiple official Catholic documents have affirmed the presence of both the *sensus fidei* and the *sensus fidelium* beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church. The text of the International Theological Commission affirms that the Catholic Church "needs to be attentive to what the Spirit may be saying to her by means of believers in the churches and ecclesial communities not fully in communion with her."<sup>20</sup> The growing awareness of the importance of local churches and

<sup>18</sup> (Francis 2017).

<sup>19</sup> (Francis 2015).

<sup>20</sup> (International Theological Commission 2014, n. 56). Also important is the 1999 statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Gift of Authority*, which states that "In every Christian who is seeking to be faithful to Christ and is fully incorporated into the life of the Church there is a *sensus fidei*. Together Anglicans and Roman Catholics affirm that "The exercise of the *sensus fidei* by each member of the Church contributes to the formation of the *sensus fidelium* through which the Church as a whole remains faithful to Christ." (Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission 1999, n. 29).

the *sensus fidelium* that has provided the impetus for the development of synodal structures in the Catholic Church also provides incredible avenues for ecumenical listening and exchange.

## 6. Cross-Pollination: Ecumenism to Ecclesiology

The insight gained through attention to the issue of discernment sheds light on ecclesiology's efforts to move towards synodality. In recent decades, Christian churches have experienced the way that achieving an appreciation of one another's decision-making processes yields multiple benefits. On one level, this point of entry has helped communities gain a deeper respect for positions distinct from their own. On another level, such an appreciation has allowed communities to critique and enhance aspects of their own discernment. As a result, studying questions related to discernment has led to important learning not only *ad extra*, but also *ad intra*. In light of the fundamental connection between processes of discernment and the ordering of authority, the potential for learning is even greater. Given the inherent relation between these loci, appreciating the means of decision-making operative in other communions has the potential to inform not only one's own decision-making, but also thinking about one's own structures.

Ecumenical efforts towards what Hahnenberg has described as Level 2 of common discernment illumine critical aspects of what a synodal church looks like. Moving towards synodality—becoming a listening church—is largely about establishing processes of decision-making. It is rooted in questions such as: Whose voices are heard on which questions? How are disagreements resolved? On what issues can we have diversity and where must we have uniformity? How much tension is the community willing to sustain on a particular issue? These questions have been at the heart of ecumenical efforts to grasp how moral issues are discerned in Christian communities. Ecclesiologists must consider the responses that have been offered to these questions and, significantly, the structures that have developed to manifest the kind of listening and decision-making that communities want to engage in. Looking at how these questions have been handled in the ecumenical context has tremendous potential to inform our understanding of them in the context of ecclesial governance.

Another key ecumenical development that ecclesiology can learn from is the cultivation of ecumenical exchange and common discernment at local and regional levels. As with the example of the Roman Catholic and Lutheran leaders, ecumenical groups are often eager to identify and move forward with things that they can do together. The growth within ecumenism of local and regional collaborations across the globe are powerful centrifugal forces bringing new perspectives and rich insight to the work being done on the bilateral and multilateral levels. The many-centered dialogue taking place in ecumenism can inform the Catholic Church's efforts to achieve a "sound decentralization" of its structures. Similarly, ecumenism's work of finding a creative balance between the centripetal force of local exchanges and the centrifugal force of multilateral exchange can illumine how the church might navigate these same tensions as it seeks to renew its structures.

## 7. Conclusions

The breakdown of old paradigms and the emergence of new ones in the ecumenical and ecclesiological realms does not represent a failure. In his classic text, *Models of the Church*, Avery Dulles observes that models give way to new ones over time (Dulles 1978, p. 26). Given the nature of models, they do not speak meaningfully forever; instead they are born out of the experience of a community and can, with little warning, suffer a natural death. Oftentimes, Dulles goes on, there is a lag between the death of a model and the emergence of a new one. The problem of the absence of models cannot be solved by simply manufacturing new models to replace old ones because this is not the nature of models which grow organically out of the experience of inexhaustible realities. Thus, the process of moving between paradigms can be slow and frustrating and the church must endure the hard times in between. Today the church is adapting to a new context, one that demands time for exploration and discernment. Both ecumenism and ecclesiology are engaging in the creative work of self-transformation in order to meet the needs of the new era. In their transformations, we see that the close relationship

between them not only endures but is a key for coming to a deeper understanding of the Christian identity and speaking meaningfully in the current environment.

By rooting synodality and common discernment in a larger view of the church's nature we can distance ourselves from purely functional or administrative approaches to ecclesial government and decision-making that can serve as a "blocked door" to speaking meaningfully in today's context. Recognizing a shared theological grounding for these structures, specifically, seeing them as a means of living out the church's life as a communion—provides a hole in the roof for achieving progress in both fields and, ultimately, for advancing the church's mission of proclaiming the good news in every age.

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