

Article

A Spiritual Theology of Synodality: Towards a Thinking Heart in Catholic Education

Glenn Morrison 

School of Philosophy and Theology, The University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle, WA 6160, Australia; glenn.morrison@nd.edu.au

Abstract: Spiritual theology inspires a life of faith towards wisdom and discernment as much as inviting a developing pastoral sense of God's mysteries into a life of service, holiness and humility. Akin to practical theology, spiritual theology is fragmented and interconnects with all areas of theology. The article sets out to put spiritual theology into service to present Pope Francis' ecclesial turn towards synodality within a spiritual and ethical metaphysical domain. To this end, the article also employs the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to help bring out the effect and contribution of spiritual theology upon synodality. The aim here is to develop Pope Francis' hope and vision of synodality of journeying together through mission and dialogue by way of conversion and reform, hospitality, gentleness and listening. The article, in conclusion, moves forward to look at how synodal spirituality may also orient a thinking heart in Catholic Education.

Keywords: catholic education; Levinas; spiritual theology; Pope Francis; synodality; thinking heart

1. Introduction

Imagining “a spirituality of listening and proclamation,” the Synod of Bishops Special Assembly for the Pan-Amazonian Region affirmed, “Pastoral action is based on a spirituality founded on listening to the word of God and the cry of his people, in order then to be able to announce the Good News with a prophetic spirit” ([Synod of Bishops Special Assembly for the Pan-Amazonian Region 2019](#), no. 38). Referring to Ch. 4 of *Christus Vivit* ([Pope Francis 2019](#)) in *Querida Amazonia*, Pope Francis provides a clarification, stating, “Without that impassioned proclamation, every ecclesial structure would become just another NGO and we would not follow the command given us by Christ: ‘Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation’ (Mk 16:15)” (*Querida Amazonia*, [Pope Francis 2020b](#), no. 64). Pope Francis' aim here is to encourage the formation and conversion of the faithful, and especially the youth, to enter “more deeply into the kerygma” (*Querida Amazonia*, [Pope Francis 2020b](#), no. 65). Catholic Education bears then a relation to synodality. It becomes a way of forming openness towards the Church in terms of its mission and identity. Catholic Education can be seen in this light of inviting participation in the kerygma and life of faith, and hence for the youth to possess a “thinking heart” ([Hillesum 1996](#), p. 199) open to participating in the Church today through listening, mission and dialogue.

Listening and proclamation signify an affectivity of the truth of faith affirming that God is love (1 Jn 4:16). This invites a theological drama of revelation unfolding through the shock of the cross and the surprise of the resurrection. Here, one encounters Christ's face of salvation, healing and forgiveness, unconcealing the heart of compassion and substitution for us. In the epiphany of Christ's face, there is a community of revelation. Through his ministry colliding towards the cross and resurrection, Christ builds a community of hope so that people of faith may encounter the Tri-Personal God. In other words, Christ witnesses to the Father's Kingdom and appeals to us through his Spirit. Hence, the Holy Spirit helps the person of faith to listen, discern and proclaim these truths revealing, “God loves you; Christ is your Saviour; he is alive” (*Christus Vivit*, [Pope Francis 2019](#), no. 130).



Citation: Morrison, Glenn. 2023. A Spiritual Theology of Synodality: Towards a Thinking Heart in Catholic Education. *Religions* 14: 201. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020201>

Academic Editors: Eamonn Conway and Renée Köhler-Ryan

Received: 13 January 2023

Revised: 31 January 2023

Accepted: 31 January 2023

Published: 2 February 2023



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Altogether, these truths are a Trinitarian encounter, that in and through the Holy Spirit, “we see God the Father and Jesus” (*Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis 2019, no. 130). In terms of spiritual practice, this means possessing “fraternal charity” (*Querida Amazonia*, Pope Francis 2020b, no. 65) to which Pope Francis developed a whole encyclical, namely, *Fratelli Tutti*, to consider the “universal scope” of “fraternal love” (*Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis 2020a, no. 6). In the language of ecclesiology, this evidences “involvement and participation”, “renewal”, “communion”, “collegiality”, and “understanding and experiencing the Church” in terms of unity in diversity (International Theological Commission (ITC) 2018, no.’s 7–9, 22). In a word, then, “synodality”.

By imbuing the life, identity and mission of the Church, synodality calls for a listening-inspired Church. Here, Pope Francis remarks, “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” (Pope Francis 2015, p. 3). Mutual listening evokes a Trinitarian praxis of humility, relationality and hospitality overflowing with human fraternity as much as divine love. In this sense, synodality is also a function of the following: (i) confessing the need for conversion and reform; (ii) developing an affectivity of hospitality; and (iii) embracing the gentleness of listening. Looking at these three points together, there is room here to consider the development of a spiritual theology of synodality to animate the development of mutual listening and dialogue and, in particular, to encourage the process of synodality to overflow into the mission and charism of Catholic Universities—to encourage the formation of a thinking heart through Catholic University Education. We will now explore these areas looking first at synodality and confession as a way forward toward appreciating hospitality and the mutuality of listening in a synodal Church.

2. Synodality and Confession: Embracing Conversion and Reform

The Working Document for the Continental Stage (WDCS) on synodality employs a metaphor for its title (and hence charism and mission as it were): “Enlarge the space of your tent” (Is 54:2) (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022). This is complemented by an epigraph at the beginning of the document from Phil 2:5–7: “Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness”. In this Working Document, the “next steps” in the journey of synodality places emphasis on “conversion and reform” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no.’s 99–103).

What one sees emerging here is a spirit of confession: “. . . we are learning to walk together, and sit together to break the one bread, in such a way that each is able to find their place” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 103). Implicitly, this acknowledges a movement toward the need to listen to the People of God, to alert them to their baptismal calling and gifts. The Church feels ready today to listen even though there will not necessarily be “uniformity” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 102). There is hence a desire to embrace diversity and difference. What this means especially is a “conversion and reform” of an ecclesial mindset that the future of the Church must also embrace listening to the laity to “Enlarge the space of your tent,” so to speak. Eamonn Conway uses the metaphor of “eavesdropping” (Conway 2022). This does not denote hostility but rather a desire to “walk together” with “joy” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no.’s 21, 26).

In terms of spiritual theology, “joy” is more a by-product of listening/walking together through “mission and dialogue” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 100). In this perspective, Pope Francis asserts, “The Lord asks everything of us, and in return he offers us true life, the happiness for which we were created. He wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence. The call to holiness is present in various ways from the very first pages of the Bible. We see it expressed in the Lord’s words to Abraham: ‘Walk before me, and be blameless’ (Gen 17:1)” (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis 2018, no. 1). Developing the affectivity of confession as a movement toward joy is essential for

the success of good synodality, a journey of walking before God together. This is because confession, in essence, witnesses the truth that “God loves you; Christ is your Saviour; he is alive” (*Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis 2019, no. 130). This speaks further of Dostoyevsky’s asymmetrical formula of “intersubjectivity”, “the essence of the human conscience: [we] are responsible for one another, and ‘I more than anyone else” (Levinas 1998, pp. 105, 107).

Confession is also a form of humility, a necessary ingredient of truth in the face of persecution and humiliation. Here, the Talmudic and French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, relates: “The idea of a truth whose manifestation is not glorious or bursting with light, the idea of a truth that manifests itself in humility, like the still small voice in the biblical expression—the idea of a persecuted truth—is that not henceforth the only possible modality of transcendence?” (Levinas 1995, p. 55) What this means essentially for synodality is that where the Church hierarchy begins to embrace consultation with the laity from the heart, this may attract resistance in the form of persecution and humiliation. Humility is then required as a means of practical wisdom (towards being a person-in-Christ) to confront and even “disturb” (Levinas 1995, p. 55) “fear and hostility” that is more borne out of the ego-“battlefield” rather than prayer and the “poverty of heart” (Nouwen 1996, pp. 46–47).

Levinas considers that the transcendence of truth must pass through even ambiguity, “the alternation of the soul moving from atheism to belief and from belief to atheism” (Levinas 1995, p. 56) as a means to communicate faith and encounter God’s presence. This could make practical sense where one encounters the wounding atheism of unbelief in regard to the need for synodality in the Church today as much as the experience of the energies of doubt concerning the Church’s progress towards a synodal church. Hence, what is required here is to encounter the face of the laity, its “nakedness” (Levinas 1995, p. 57), that is to say, its hopes, fears and voice about synodality. In terms of the otherness of conversion and reform, there is a desire to listen “today” and hence approach the “day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2).

In the spirit of mission and the confession of faith, Pope Francis will, therefore, proclaim:

Our gaze also extends to humanity as a whole. A synodal Church is like a standard lifted up among the nations (cf. Is 11:12) in a world which—while calling for participation, solidarity and transparency in public administration—often consigns the fate of entire peoples to the grasp of small but powerful groups. As a Church which “journeys together” with men and women, sharing the travails of history, let us cherish the dream that a rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and of the function of authority as service will also be able to help civil society to be built up in justice and fraternity, and thus bring about a more beautiful and humane world for coming generations. Thank you. (Pope Francis 2015, p. 5)

The effect then of confession in terms of reform and conversion is to move towards the goodness of being “humane” (in which “fearing God primarily means fearing for the other” (Levinas 1995, p. 117)). Such otherness of confession signifies a form of the God–man who “though in the form of God . . . emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness” (Phil 2:6–7). Reform has been much a part of Ecumenical Councils. Ongoing reform and conversion bring out a trajectory of “rediscovery” and further form in the whole person “a space that responds to divine content” such as “the beautiful [that] requires the reaction of the whole” person (von Balthasar 1989, p. 220). Hence, to be “humane” is to develop a sense to listen and respond to the sound of the beauty of faith in the passivity and openness to God. Balthasar gives the metaphor here of becoming like a violin attuned by faith. He reflects, “Faith attunes man to this sound; it confers on man the ability to react precisely to this divine experiment, preparing him to be a violin that receives just this touch of the bow, to serve as material for just this house to be built, to provide the rhyme for just this verse being composed” (von Balthasar 1989, p. 220).

Our senses then need to be opened through the spirit of God (1 Cor 2:9–10) to the beauty of faith, forming a thinking heart. The symphonic resonance of good synodality

proceeds to form and mature in nurturing the gift and charism of hospitality, to learn to welcome the other, the stranger and poor one, and even to graciously bless and acknowledge the other's dignity and gifts as much as hurt, outrage and suffering. Here, one may notice that the stirrings of a thinking heart are enriched and formed by a note of melancholy. Illustrating this, the Dutch Jew, Ety Hillesum (who perished in Auschwitz) writes, "Why did you not make me a poet, oh God? However, perhaps You did, and so I shall wait patiently until the words have grown inside me, the words that proclaim how good and beautiful it is to live in Your world, oh God, despite everything we humans do to one another" (Hillesum 1996, p. 199).

3. Synodality, Inclusion and Shared Belonging: Towards an Affectivity of Hospitality

At the centre of the affectivity of hospitality is the humility of appreciating the spiritual insight that God is "greater than our heart" (Nouwen 1996, p. 78). This means awakening to the danger and temptation of possessing an "inflated heart" rather than a "thinking heart". In other words, in "the temptation of adapting God to our small concepts," we also proceed to adapt God "to our small feelings" (Nouwen 1996, p. 78). In terms of otherness (responsibility for the other) and diachrony (coming to responsibility through time), awakening in awareness of possessing an inflated heart and mind (driven by ego self-interest) signifies having been affected by the gaze of the other's (the poor one's) face. Here, within the encounter "prior to the intentionality of the *I*-subject in its being-in-the-word" (Levinas 1998, p. 166), the self is disturbed by the other's face, by an anarchic (without origin) and immemorial (from the very beginning) hidden voice in the depth of the heart and soul. This is the voice of the infinite God (God's word colliding with the finite world) forming an accusation, a "commandment" (Levinas 1998, p. 166) and a plea to be hospitable and responsible.

Synodality speaks of a new beginning to reach out to the laity, to listen through mission and dialogue, and hence to awaken to the face of the other with a sense of hope and boldness/decision to embrace hospitality. Nouwen remarks that "Someone who is filled with ideas, concepts, opinions and convictions cannot be a good host. There is no inner space to listen, no openness to discover the gift of the other" (Nouwen 1996, p. 75). New beginnings of synodality also need to overcome forms of tension and fatigue and move towards the essentiality of dialogue. Reflecting on the "infinity of existence", Levinas points out, "In the tension and fatigue of beginning one feels the cold sweat of the irremissibility of existence" (Levinas 1995, p. 78). However, where existence is touched by a melancholy of wisdom (of Ecclesiastes, e.g., 2:11 "all was vanity"), "Christian grace" and the "mysticism of love" (von Balthasar 1991, pp. 266, 268) merge to create spaces for hope. In essence, the melancholy of hope becomes a way to nurture the affectivity of hospitality. This means inviting a "veritable place of decision" (von Balthasar 1991, p. 267). If synodality today in the Church invites a new beginning of "Journeying together—laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome" (Pope Francis 2015, p. 2) along a path of mission and dialogue, there arises a Christological dimension of decision-making, namely one that works within the parameter of Jn 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (International Theological Commission (ITC) 2018, no. 3).

In terms of the paschal mystery, the movement from Gethsemane to the Cross forges a path of decision. Such a path is oriented by the affectivity of hospitality to encourage listening and decision-making to help the People of God to stay awake. Encountering a state of grief and agitation at Gethsemane, Jesus says to Peter, James and John, the ones he had called to be with him during his own time of decision-making, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me" (Matt 26: 38). It may not be so easy to "stay awake" and promote good consultation within the dialogue. There remains the temptation of "tension and fatigue", and hence to walk away and "sleep", namely to retreat (being away too long) from journeying together. This suggests that the affectivity of hospitality is borne through a thinking heart of boldness: a disposition of kenotic self-giving

wherein the “decision of faith” arrives at “the point of martyrdom” (von Balthasar 1991, p. 266).

A good sign that synodality is working well in terms of the light of the paschal mystery and providing a Christological lens is that such work is stirred by “a stubborn and difficult freedom” (Levinas 1990, p. 272). It is “stubborn and difficult” because of a “strange germination” of “Difference” evoking an “irremissable responsibility” (Levinas 1990, p. 272) of devoting one’s time, generosity and hospitality for the other (Levinas 1998, p. 172). Synodality as a form of journeying together is thus a demanding liturgy of responsibility of understanding that “the Other’s hunger—be it of the flesh, or of bread—is sacred” (Levinas 1990, p. xiv). The “difference” of the Other (whether laity, pastors or the Pope) is specifically a “non-in-difference of responsibility for the other by the word *relationship*” (Levinas 1998, p. 174). Such a “relationship” means “Responsibility for the other to the point of dying for the other!” (Levinas 1998, p. 173) Here, then, we can begin to see the Christological nature of the affectivity of hospitality through Christ’s experience of Gethsemane: “In the terrible fear of not being able to perform what is demanded, he must be convinced of a Yes. It is a struggle with himself; he has to wring his ‘your will be done’” (von Balthasar 1982, p. 147).

Synodality, if it must awake to good listening through mission and dialogue, through journeying together with a thinking heart, must therefore pass through a paschal phase of journeying with Christ as “the way, and the truth, and the life”. Hospitality faces “refusal” and “hopeless confusion” due to the temptation of falling into fatigue and even “sadness” (von Balthasar 1982, p. 148). The three disciples whom Jesus called to accompany him in prayer at Gethsemane fell upon their refusal through grief and sadness. They could not remain awake, leaving room for fatigue-induced indolence to dry out the vision of faith and sacrifice. Balthasar explains that “This faith is not awake and prayerful enough. . . . The disciples do not live up to their vocation; they leave the Lord alone” (von Balthasar 1982, p. 148). Evaluating the disciples’ lack of faith, Balthasar provides a startling revelation for the Church today: “This is the church in its average condition” (von Balthasar 1982, p. 148).

The affectivity of hospitality identifies the depths of suffering—even where “our concepts fail us” (von Balthasar 1982, p. 148). This signifies that a synodal Church is challenged to welcome Christ first in the face of the poor and marginalised ones. Where Christ is welcomed through faith and prayer, the art of listening opens towards mutuality “in which everyone has something to learn” (Pope Francis 2015, p. 3). This means learning “to speak the yes of faith unto the end” (von Balthasar 1982, p. 148) and embracing the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Pope Francis 2015, p. 3). Such guidance opens up a pathway towards truth (for the Holy Spirit is truth—Jn 14:17) and unveils a Trinitarian dimension of hospitality: by welcoming Christ, we come close to the Father’s heart of compassion and mercy (Jn 1:18), opening the presence of the Holy Spirit’s grace to discern what the Spirit through synodality “says to the Churches” (Rev 2:7) (Pope Francis 2015, p. 3).

A future of inclusion and shared belonging reveals the nature of bodiliness: a mutuality of bearing one another’s “joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” (Second Vatican Council 1965, no. 1). Such mutuality demands good fraternity as much as rejoicing and being glad. It is not a coincidence then, as pointed out, that Pope Francis has written an encyclical on fraternity, *Fratelli Tutti*, and also an apostolic exhortation on the pathway towards holiness (to rejoice and be glad), namely, *Gaudete et Exsultate*. The affectivity of hospitality is an evocative coming together of sacrifice, kenosis and spirituality of martyrdom (suffering for others) with the fraternity and joy of a thinking heart. Altogether this signifies what may be termed an “ethical melancholy” (a kenotic disposition or radical otherness towards sacrifice and even martyrdom) as the basis of hope that serves to produce a by-product of fraternity and joy. Pope Francis himself confesses in a spirit of ethical melancholy the desire to build up the “function of authority of service” by stating:

Our gaze also extends to humanity as a whole. A synodal Church is like a standard lifted up among the nations (cf. Is 11:12) in a world which—while calling for participation, solidarity and transparency in public administration—

often consigns the fate of entire peoples to the grasp of small but powerful groups. As a Church which “journeys together” with men and women, sharing the travails of history, let us cherish the dream that a rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples . . . ”. (Pope Francis 2015, p. 5)

In the depths of the ethical melancholy of confession lies a key for good synodality: understanding the temptation for the Church hierarchy not to be consultative with the laity. Fatigue and indolence animated by bitterness can produce divisive inertia in response to difference and inclusivity. On the other hand, the temptations of the laity are just as commanding as they betray the human soul—acedia, apathy, segregation and a loss of hope. Let us consider then the opposite of synodality as desolation stemming from a lack of participation and barriers of exclusion.

Desolation itself is deepened by the process of segregation where “having” is more important than “being” (Nouwen et al. 1974, p. 166). Here, Nouwen, Naus and McNeill point out, “Perhaps this explains why those few powerful people who are trying to escape the destiny of segregation can do so only by clinging desperately to their property, power and influence and so choosing the role of oppressor instead of the oppressed” (Nouwen et al. 1974, p. 166). Such segregation can often be subtle. Where for example, communications between the Church hierarchy and the laity are limited, and without personal encounters of faith, hope and love, “Arguments are prevented, the truth hidden, and much of the human reality kept out of vision” (Nouwen et al. 1974, p. 166).

Pope Francis provides an example of segregation in his programmatic apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*:

Since this Exhortation is addressed to members of the Catholic Church, I want to say, with regret, that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care. (Pope Francis 2013, no. 200)

The “destructive dynamics” (Nouwen et al. 1974, p. 167) of segregation can at happen all levels within the Church, and they lead to the nulling effect of desolation. In the context of aging, Nouwen, Naus and McNeill write, “Desolation is the crippling experience of the shrinking of the circle of your friends with the devastating awareness that the few years left to live will not allow you to widen the circle again” (Nouwen et al. 1974, p. 167). Desolation as the opposite of Pope Francis’ vision of synodality would see, for example, the laity “tempted” into “danger and threats”, being “crippled” (Pope Francis 2018, no. 133) by a Church that has abandoned them, or, in contrast, a hierarchy damaged and impaired by growing numbers of abandoned laity leaving the Church. Desolation can further be seen as being “paralyzed by fear and excessive caution”, a rejection of the “Spirit’s prompting” to speak “‘the word of God with boldness’ (Acts 4:31)” (Pope Francis 2018, no. 133).

Nouwen, Naus and McNeill further describe that, “Desolation is the gnawing feeling of being left behind by those who have been close and dear to you during the many years of life. It is the knowledge of the heart saying that nobody else will be able to be as close to you as the friend you have lost because a friend is like wine: ‘When it grows old, you drink it with pleasure’ (Ecclesiasticus 9:10)” (Nouwen et al. 1974, p. 167). Pope Francis’ ecclesiology of synodality speaks then of facing a possible tragedy within the Church before it is too late. Here, to lose even one person of the faithful is a great loss. A synodal Church must seek not to count or measure its successes but to rejoice and be glad that even one person can find reconciliation and hope within the Church (c.f. Lk 15:7).

The affectivity of hospitality for a synodal Church aimed at inclusion and shared belonging seeks then to bear a maternal quality of compassion (a necessary quality of a thinking heart): “Being torn from oneself for another in giving to the other the bread from one’s mouth . . . being able to give up one’s soul for another” (Levinas [1998] 1999, p. 79). Through Pope Francis’ mission of synodality, if the Church can guard against the

dangers of falling into segregation and desolation, then it will possess the vision, hope and even humour to help protect the faithful from losing faith and experiencing a loss of self (Nouwen et al. 1974, pp. 168, 172). Synodality is, therefore, a stance against alienation and the death of hope.

4. Embracing the Gentleness of Listening: Finding Hope, Humour and Vision

In terms of Christian theology, the “parable of hope” is the paschal mystery (Kelly 2006, p. 73), the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Specifically, for a synodal Church, this mystery opens the challenge to develop a “paschal sense of time” to imagine the world in new ways, to encounter the light of the ascension and the newness of Pentecost (Kelly 2006, p. 73). This is the time following Easter, “after the resurrection,” which signifies “Eternal life has already begun” (Kelly 2006, p. 74). St. Paul reflects that “However, in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Cor 15:20). Hope that embraces eternal life has then a way of encountering the present with a sense of “dis-inter-estedness of goodness” (Levinas 1998, p. 157). What this means in terms of a synodality of “walking together” is understanding the hopes of the People of God in the form of a “demand which is an order” (Levinas 1998, p. 157). The light of the ascension and coming of the Holy Spirit invites “the possibility of sacrifice”, the condition of being humane, to “burst forth” (Levinas 1998, p. 157) upon how a Church listens through the lens of hope. Listening, therefore, is a step of openness to be present to the demands for inclusion, change and awareness. The synodality of a listening Church can help to give a voice to the People of God to have a role in building up and share the work of reforming the Church with its pressing concerns.

There are many diverse areas needing reform. For example, there is “sacramental deprivation” causing discrimination due to “living in very remote areas” or “charging fees for access to celebrations” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 94). There is the call for a “widespread development of synodal culture”, “an integral formation that includes personal, spiritual, theological, social and practical dimensions” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 82). There is also, for example, the demand “to hear the cry of the poor and the earth” in the light of many African and pacific nations facing the danger of rising Ocean levels (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 45).

Perhaps a litmus test in synodality remains the absolute surprise of encountering the unknown and voiceless other’s face “who ‘regards me’ even when he does not have anything to do with me, the other as fellow man and always stranger” (Levinas 1998, pp. 157–58). Here, we find the significance of hope as the Risen Christ breaks into the life of the other, the stranger, to heal the “deadly world of shattered hopes” (Kelly 2006, p. 76). The challenge of listening via hope with a thinking heart, of walking together through ongoing mission and dialogue, speaks of acknowledging with those on the margins of the Church that the Risen Christ is “the living One” whose face demands that the People of God “commit themselves to him as the source and way of true life” (Kelly 2006, p. 76). This suggests that synodality is the transcendence of mission, a hospitable time of paschal hope unveiling the word and face of the Risen Christ: to meet and listen together through “dialogue, reflection and discernment” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 99). Here, the Church may discover the eschatological Kingdom of God, “the already [now] and not yet’ dimension” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 100) as expressed in *Lumen Gentium*: “Before all things, however, the Kingdom is clearly visible in the very Person of Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man, who came ‘to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.’ . . . While it slowly grows, the Church strains toward the completed Kingdom and, with all its strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with its King” (Second Vatican Council 1964, no. 5; Dollard 1982, p. 367).

In pursuing an eschatological vision of the Church through the Kingdom of God, realised and to come (hope for Parousia), a synodal Church can see that hope is nurtured by humour. Pope Francis reflects in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, “Far from being timid, morose, acerbic or melancholy, or putting on a dreary face, the saints are joyful and full of good

humour. Though completely realistic, they radiate a positive and hopeful spirit" (Pope Francis 2018, no. 122). Humour further is a by-product of hope. Sometimes however, suffering makes it very difficult to develop mild humour. How then might Christ the Redeemer be of help"? This is a difficult question. From tears (and smiles), humour (as well as irony and cynicism) acts as a breakthrough of institutional systems, putting into question the seriousness of consistent ideas that wears down hope with cold rationality. In Levinasian terms, then, humour acts as the "otherwise than being", namely the invincible little goodness (Levinas 1997, p. 107) that breaks and ruptures the totality of self-interest objectified through traditions, buildings and structures of power. Humour, therefore, serves to disrupt collective organisations of socio-political-economic totalities revealed as "darkness", "horror", and the anonymity of depersonalised existence (Levinas 1995, pp. 58–59). Levinas reveals such an impersonal form of existence as the "there is" [il y a] (Levinas 1995, p. 59). The fragile, vulnerable and hurt victims of depersonalising systems are treated as if they do not bear a face because they have been "invaded" by way of "exclusion" (Levinas 1995, p. 58), prohibited from the light of "listening to one another" (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 100).

By embracing humour, a synodal Church can listen to the tears of the other, the poor one and stranger, and thus encounter their words of irony and cynicism. Ironically, the fragility of brokenness becomes a way for transcendent truth, for Christ, dying on the Cross and rising to new life, to offer an immemorial gift of a "joyful" and "hopeful spirit" (Pope Francis 2018, no. 122). This means taking time to not to speak too fast about the outcomes of a synodal Church: "Just as the experience of the disciples at Emmaus was only the beginning of their new mission, our synodal process is only a first step" (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 104). Hence, in listening to the laity, the Church can give room to listen to the suffering of the People of God and their tears. Here, paschal hope learns to walk with care and patience, for if the cross is not part of the Resurrection, then the Resurrection—as beyond the cross—risks destroying the memory of the cross and becoming a totalising principle cleaning up and wiping out all tears. If a synodal Church then can listen to the gospel passage of the innocent victims in Matthew 2:16–18, particularly the weeping of the mothers, then it will embrace a movement and opportunity towards dialogue, reflection and discernment with the People of God, the very hope of the Resurrection that all tears will be remembered and dried (Rev 21:4). To hear "the voice heard from Ramah" (Mt 2:18; Jer 31:15) in the face of the poor one and stranger is to remember that the weeping God remains present in the Resurrection of Christ, keeping all the tears of the Cross.

Saint Thomas More prays, "Grant me, O Lord, good digestion, and also something to digest. Grant me a healthy body, and the necessary good humour to maintain it" (Pope Francis 2018, endnote no. 101). Hence, for the health of a synodal Church, "the necessary good humour" will promote the healthy mystical body of the Church to "digest" the sufferings and tears of the faithful. Nouwen, Naus and McNeill point out, "Humor is a great virtue because it makes you take yourself and your world seriously but never too seriously. It brings death into every moment of life, not as a morbid intruder, but as a gentle reminder of the contingency of things" (Nouwen et al. 1974, p. 173). As a suggestion then to developing a positive and healing environment for synodality within the Church in terms of using humour as a "way of light", it may help to develop activities in synodality that brings out joy, freedom, connection and "knowledge with a soft smile" (Nouwen et al. 1974, pp. 172–73).

In terms of developing the vision of the synodal Church, Isaiah's words are a guiding reminder to "Enlarge the space of your tent" (Isa 54:2). A tent is a mobile meeting place for people on a journey. In the centre is the tabernacle holding God's presence. Pegs of faith help to hold down the tent whilst a structure of discernment keeps it in balance (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 27). The tent of the Church is signified as "an expansive, but not homogeneous dwelling, capable of sheltering all, but open, letting in and out (cf. Jn. 10:9), and moving toward embracing the Father and all of humanity" (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 27). In other words, synodality speaks of a welcoming

diversity in the Church that is conditioned by a kenotic humility (Phil 2:5–7). This speaks of a paschal and relational anthropology of love (purified eros and agape coming together) given and received.

Levinas writes, “Voluptuousity, as the coinciding of the lover and the beloved . . . transfigures the subject himself, who henceforth owes his identity not to his initiative of power, but to the passivity of the love received” (Levinas 1996, p. 270). Relating this to the vision of synodality, this presupposes that the mutuality of listening is not a self-interested act of the subject but an act of the subject as a gift given to the subject, not only making possible that act but also transforming the subject radically into the world and life of the other. The inter-human, bodily and incarnated event of love produces the transcendence and visibility that we are exposed to one another’s hopes, needs and fears, in touch with one another, or better touchable because of the proximity of welcoming, dialoguing and discerning with one another face to face. Therefore, the flesh becomes word—word not as self-expression but as the sensibility of dialogue (invocation, answer, responding, reconciling, healing and forgiving). Such sensibility means the passivity of being vulnerable, exposed and touchable that makes good synodality and mutual listening possible. A thinking heart of synodality invites such reflection of being inspired and oriented despite, through and beyond ourselves towards the realm of otherness, transcendence, bodiliness and the Kingdom of God.

5. Conclusions: Synodality and the Thinking Heart of Catholic Education

Up to now, the focus has been on developing a spiritual theology of synodality to reflect on the Church’s journey of listening. Now, in terms of finding further dimensions for which the charism of good synodality can be employed and applied, Pope Francis’ practical, spiritual and ecclesial vision of synodality will be employed to aid the formation of a thinking heart in Catholic Universities.

In the Church’s journey towards enlarging “the space of your tent”, an incarnational sensibility comes to mind. To pronounce, “Additionally, the Word became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1: 14) signifies the biblical phrase and “secret of sociality” (“love of my neighbour”), “Here, I am!” (Levinas 1998, p. 131) This is, in essence, the condition of possibility for synodality, offering the encounter of the Word of God in us. A thinking heart of Catholic Education is inherently incarnational, and Pope Francis’ vision of synodality articulates “the dynamics of the incarnation of the Gospel” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 73). Synodality then invites Catholic Universities to “witness to the Gospel of charity in the face of communitarianism and ‘identity withdrawal’ which are more and more visible and aggressive” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 89). In other words, Catholic Universities are called to encourage and safeguard the development of an individual’s identity (via inclusion and intimacy with God as much as care for others guided by faith and reason in the search for truth) rather than leave it to the distilling of the totality of society (“Ideologies striking at the heart of the Gospel” (Pope Francis 2018, no.’s 100–103)).

The nature of “a Catholic University” is to be “Born from the heart of the Church” (Pope John Paul II 1990, no. 1). For Catholic Universities to develop a charism of living in the Church’s heart, an appropriate metaphor would be developing a “thinking heart” given “how faith and reason bear harmonious witness to the unity of all truth” (Pope John Paul II 1990, no. 17). An affectivity of a “thinking heart” can help to nurture a Catholic University towards a pastoral and spiritual direction of embracing the Church’s mission and inviting a synodal-inspired response. If Catholic Universities today wish to remain relevant and seek “a greater love for truth itself” (Pope John Paul II 1990, no. 17), a first step in terms of learning from Pope Francis’ ecclesiology of synodality is confession and hospitality. The question remains: what does a Catholic University need to “confess”? In terms of mission and Catholic identity, there is the aspect of faith to proclaim that Jesus is the Christ, and of reason, to understand what this means in terms of Catholic Education, namely to be a place of compassion and care just as much as excellence in teaching, scholarship and research.

In essence, a synodal spirituality can form Catholic Universities to think seriously about the need to challenge students and staff alike towards “interiority and conscience” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 84). The question then is what “adequate formation” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 84) is required? Every Catholic University will need to adapt to its own culture and milieu and seek to develop a relationship with the message of the Church’s heart: “the joy of the risen Christ” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 84).

In effect, there remains the work of Catholic Universities to be places of joy and hope for students and staff alike. In other words, if a spirituality of confession of Christ is to take place within Catholic Universities, there lies the freedom to receive “the beautiful gift of God’s word” (Pope Francis 2018, no. 122). Confessing “God’s word” of charity and truth, patience and humility, provides formation to discover that God’s word is “joy”, a by-product of the Spirit’s inspiration-in-us (Pope Francis 2018, no. 122). In this way, a Catholic University discovers that it possesses a future, namely “the time of pro-phesy, which is also an imperative, a moral order, herald of an inspiration” (Levinas 1998, p. 115). This is the time of God’s infinity, of the Word becoming flesh (Jn 1:14), the very movement towards encountering God’s word as joy in the face of the other.

In the midst of Catholic University education, a “thinking heart” can disturb the “scandal” and “sickness” of “inertia” (Levinas 1998, p. 115) to realise that afflictions and crises open a time towards dialogue and hospitality as much as hope, humour and vision. A “thinking heart” also signifies a “prior vulnerability” of compassion, namely the “substitution” (being for the other) of “passivity”, “passion”, and “patience” (Levinas 1998, p. 59). In other words, a “thinking (and compassionate) heart” speaks to Catholic Universities about “the principle of identity” (Levinas 1998, p. 58), “The dream is of a Church that more fully lives a Christological paradox: boldly proclaiming its authentic teaching while at the same time offering a witness of radical inclusion and acceptance through its pastoral and discerning accompaniment” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 30).

If catholicity can speak of “radical inclusion and acceptance”, there exists the synodal light to illumine that the Catholic University, too, is like a “tent”, “a space of *communion*, a place of *participation*, and a foundation for *mission*” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 11). This speaks of a radical openness to embrace humanity and to think of exclusion as a form of the antithesis of the nature of a Catholic University. Hence, such openness nurtures a charism and mission of hospitality and the courage to bear witness to the incarnational presence of Christ: to listen to the Lord (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 11). Mission, therefore, unveils as dialogue:

This is a mission that Catholics recognize as needing to be carried out with brothers and sisters of other confessions and in dialogue with believers of other religions, transforming human actions of care into authentically spiritual experiences that proclaim the face of a God who cares to the point of giving his own life so that we may have it in abundance. (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 11)

A “thinking heart” will recognise that Catholic Universities are places of dialogue oriented by “deep hospitality”, listening and a “shared belonging” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 31). A Catholic University that “listens” to its students and staff may well provoke a crisis towards “a broader and deeper conversion of attitudes and structures”, yet the gain will be “new approaches to pastoral accompaniment” and governance (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 32). In this sense, the boundaries of dialogue can venture towards the “peripheries” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 32). Catholic Universities, learning from Pope Francis’ ecclesiology of synodality and forming a synodal spirituality, may well encounter its future and vocation by listening and learning from God’s imperative (Isa 54:2), “Enlarge the space of your tent!” (2021–2024 Synod on Synodality 2022, no. 10).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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