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Synodality and Decision-Making Processes: Towards New Bodies of Participation in the Church

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Abstract: The church's synodal conversion requires a reform of its decision-making processes. Facing the challenge of keeping in balance the common dignity of all the baptized and the value of the hierarchical structure of the church, the participation of all the faithful in decision-making processes is grounded in biblical and theological arguments and defined as a co-responsibility in taking joint decisions. The analysis of two synodal bodies recently established within the Catholic Church in the Amazon and Germany delineates new directions for the renewal of decision-making structures in the church. These directions entail reforming the existing participatory structures and creating new deliberative bodies in the church. Looking at church reality and the practice of consultation and decision-making, synodal conversion ultimately requires the reform of training for church leaders with a view to changing church mindsets and culture.

Keywords: church; councils; decision-making; leadership; synod

1. Introduction

Decision-making processes within the church are one of the topics put forward by the 2021–2024 Synod for discussion in the global Catholic Church. In order to grow in synodality, the church needs to address the following questions: “By what procedures and methods do we discern together and make decisions? How can they be improved? How do we promote participation in decision-making within hierarchically structured communities (Synod of Bishops 2021, § 30)?”¹ In this paper, we will address the participation of all the people of God in decision-making as one fundamental expression of synodality. We will start by reviewing the foundational elements of the participation of all the baptized in decision-making and how the church needs to move towards joint decision-making procedures involving both clergy and laity. Next, we will highlight how fostering the participation of the whole people of God in decision-making calls for ongoing renewal and reform of the participatory bodies; we will then look at the extent to which examples of new decision-making structures in the Catholic Church can inspire and shape these reforms. Finally, we will present some possible directions toward new bodies of participation. The term “new” will be understood to have a twofold meaning: on the one hand, the reform of the existing participatory bodies of the church, and on the other hand, the establishment of new structures of participation. In order to be effective, these processes of structural reform need to be combined with an improvement of the education and training programs for the leaders of these synodal structures.

2. Lay Participation in the Church's Decision-Making

In this first section, we will briefly refer to some essential theological and historical concepts that underpin and justify the participation of the whole people of God in decision-making². Afterward, we will set out how this lay participation needs to be expressed not only at the consultation level but also in the form of joint decisions involving pastors and laity.



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2.1. Foundational Elements

From a theological point of view, the participation of all church members in decision-making processes is founded on the equal dignity of all the baptized. This fundamental equality is enshrined in the Second Vatican Council's constitution *Lumen Gentium*, where the chapter about the people of God precedes the chapter on the hierarchy of the church. The most important gift from God to the whole church is the grace of baptism, which all church members share: "These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ"³. No pre-Vatican II separation between active members and passive members of the church is justified by this ecclesiology, no separation between the clergy taking decisions and the laity accepting them. Differentiations and hierarchies between functions and ministries within the people of God still persist in this Vatican II church model, but they are subordinate to the fundamental equality of all the priestly, prophetic, and kingly people of God.

This call for the common dignity and responsibility of the laity made by the Second Vatican Council has biblical and historical roots. The New Testament affirms that the gift of the Spirit to all is the source of all ministries and responsibilities in the church (1 Cor 12:11). The Acts of the Apostles present many instances in which the early church gave all the disciples responsibility for common decisions, like the choice of the twelfth apostle (Acts 1:15–26), of the deacons (Acts 6:1–7), and of the messengers to Antioch (Acts 15:22–29) (See [Sonnberger 1996](#), p. 147). In the course of history, medieval church laws and papal statements affirmed the participation of the people in the selection of ministers such as bishops and in common decisions (see [Greinacher 1990](#)).

Scripture and church history show that the equal dignity of all church members is a foundational concept of the Christian faith and tradition. This concept does not jeopardize the hierarchical constitution of the church, i.e., the differences of functions and ministries within the church and the authority of the leaders, but it requires that the authority be exercised in agreement with the community, in a synodal way, which means following the method of communal discernment and with the laity participating in decision-making processes. "It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium" ([Francis 2015](#)). This path proposed by Pope Francis is not a new one; it is rather the traditional path of the church from the first millennium but needs to be rediscovered today because it has not yet been fully implemented and has been hampered by the "the weight of a culture imbued with clericalism"⁴. That is why it is necessary to find new ways to enable the laity to be fully active in and jointly responsible for church decision-making, with a particular focus on women's participation⁵.

2.2. Towards Responsible Participation of the Laity

Vatican II describes relations between priests and laity as designed to allow the exchange of opinions, two-way listening and advice, and mutual respect for each party's spaces of freedom and autonomy⁶. All members can participate in decision-making: everybody is invited to join the conversation, discuss current issues, express their opinions, and offer their advice about the life of the church.

Existing participatory bodies (like pastoral councils) show the limitations of the laity's participation in church decision-making. Here, leaders and laity can listen to each other and enter into a dialogue about church life and issues; here, pastors are required to take into account what the faithful think and all are free to express their opinions. The limits of the laity's participation are defined by church law: "a pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only"⁷. In consultative bodies, members are expected to advise their leaders, but they do not have a deliberative vote, i.e., they cannot take decisions together with their pastors.

Can this type of advisory participation be considered responsible participation by the laity? Are they really jointly responsible for the life and mission of the parish or diocese together with their leaders? In order to answer this question, we can use the "ladder of participation in parish leadership", which is borrowed from the political sciences

and defines citizens' participation in political decision-making. Participation in church leadership can be illustrated using an incremental scale: a ladder in which each higher rung expresses a more active level of participation. These levels are information, consultation, dialogue and joint decision-taking⁸. This ladder helps to highlight the fact that only at the last and highest level of participation (joint decision-taking) can we talk about full and responsible participation of the laity in church decision-making processes.

At the information level, parishioners are informed about activities and decisions in the community. Not only are they informed about the content of the decisions, but also about the reasons for these decisions. This level entails a transparent decision-making process and can be considered only the first necessary step towards full lay participation in parish leadership (see [Klostermann 1974](#), p. 103). The consultation level allows church members to advise their leaders in the form of ideas, requests, and proposals: for their part, pastors are expected to listen to the members.⁹ This level of participation still constitutes one-way communication: in this case, from the faithful to their leaders. At the dialogue level, the third level, parishioners and pastors can engage in reciprocal communication regarding church matters: this constitutes the "advisory participation" stipulated by the Catholic Church for pastoral councils. Nevertheless, many voices have remarked that this level of dialogic participation is still not completely implemented in the lives of many parishes. This issue has also been pointed out by Pope Francis: "Is pastoral discernment a habitual criterion, through the use of Diocesan Councils? Do such Councils and Parish Councils, whether pastoral or financial, provide real opportunities for lay people to participate in pastoral consultation, organization and planning? The good functioning of these Councils is critical. I believe that on this score, we are far behind" ([Francis 2013a](#)). The observation that many parish councils are unable to engage in multi-directional communication between clergy and laity is not a valid argument against trying to move to a higher rung in the ladder of lay participation. Conversely, one can argue that a stronger level of participation would enhance communication between pastors and the faithful and that a fully responsible role in church leadership should be given to the laity, namely through joint decision-making.

At the fourth and highest level of participation, decisions in the church are taken together by the leaders and the members of the community. At this level of the participation ladder, all those baptized have full and shared responsibility because only by taking decisions together with their pastors do the believers clearly take personal responsibility. They are not only informed by and listened to by the leadership, but they take an active role in building church consensus and making decisions, as the equal dignity of their baptism requires.

This kind of joint responsibility in participation by the laity seems to embody effectively the call for a synodal conversion of the decision-making processes within the church. Furthermore, this is the level of participation that the faithful wish to see more frequently, as shown by various empirical findings (See [Sonnberger 1996](#), p. 150; [Zaccaria 2010](#), pp. 203–7). This invitation to shared responsibility and joint decision-making can be expressed both by a reform of the existing advisory bodies within the church and by the establishment of new bodies with deliberative powers.

3. New Decision-Making Structures in the Catholic Church

In order to picture potential reforms of the existing bodies and the establishment of new participation bodies that could effectively include the laity in the decision-making process, we will highlight two participatory structures established in recent years in the Catholic Church which rise to the challenge of shared decision-making and responsibility within church communities: the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon Region and the Synodal Path in Germany.

3.1. The Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon Region

The final document of the Amazon Synod proposed a new ecclesial body for the Amazon region in order to develop a church with an Amazonian heart and face, namely

a church that is able to proclaim the one faith in Jesus Christ in various forms, rooted in the cultures and in the traditions of the indigenous people (see [Synod of Bishops 2019](#), § 42, 115). This wish is mirrored in the “ecclesial dream” of Pope Francis for the Amazon, the dream that the church may acquire an “Amazonian face” and grow in a “culture of encounter” so that the missionary proclamation of the Gospel can continue to resound in these territories¹⁰. To this end, Pope Francis called on the region to “establish a collaborative ministry among the local churches of the various South American countries in the Amazon basin”¹¹, in order to better meet the common challenges of this area.

A few months later, in June 2020, the local churches of the Amazon held an assembly to institute the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon Region (CEAMA). The bishops who were members of this assembly (i.e., those with the right to vote) approved the statutes of the newborn conference and elected the executive committee, which was composed of three bishops. The goals of this synodal body are to “promote common pastoral programs in the Amazon dioceses and foster a better inculturation of the faith in these territories”¹² and “draw the Amazon face of the church in this region through joint pastoral action”¹³. to work in a spirit of subsidiarity at the service of the dioceses and of the episcopal conferences following a true synodal path¹⁴. On 9 October 2021, Pope Francis granted this new ecclesial body canonical recognition and approved its statutes *ad experimentum* on 1 October 2022.

Under the statutes, CEAMA has two categories of members: those who have “*voz y voto*” [a voice and a vote], i.e., bishops representing the episcopal conferences, and those who have “*voz*” [a voice], that is lay or religious people representing other important entities in these territories (Caritas, Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network [REPAM], indigenous people, etc.), experts and one member nominated by the pope.

Using the Spanish terms, as the canonist Borrás points out, allows us to focus on what these members have in common, i.e., a “voice”, or the opportunity to speak and participate in the conversation. This highlights the shared responsibility for the whole decision-making process rather than the different roles in the final phase of the decision-making. The term “voice” better expresses the laity’s responsibilities in this process than the terms used by the canon law: “*votum tantum consultivum*” [consultative vote only]. These words diminish the contribution of the laity to the decision-making process through the emphasis on the term “only” (see [Borrás 2021](#), p. 266). Even though the pastors are those who take the final decision, it is the right and the duty of the laity to participate in synodal bodies that discuss, build, and formulate decisions. The shared responsibility of leaders and lay people is even more evident in the work of the CEAMA executive committee, where the number of bishops and non-bishop members is equal¹⁵. In the assembly, decisions are taken by a two-thirds majority of the members with a deliberative vote (i.e., the bishops) after listening to the members who have consultative vote¹⁶. The requirement for a qualified majority expresses the intention of achieving the broadest possible consensus, mirroring the ecclesial communion that such bodies of participation should pursue: church consensus is not only achieved through unanimity but is not jeopardized by voting procedures.

What is the most important takeaway from this experience in our search for new participatory bodies in the Catholic Church? Existing church structures of participation already provide for conversation between leaders and lay people at the diocesan level (e.g., diocesan synods or pastoral councils) or inter-diocesan level (like particular councils). Nevertheless, for the first time, CEAMA makes lay people members of an ecclesial body which is, on the one hand, inter-diocesan (therefore different from pastoral councils) and international, and on the other hand, a permanent and ordinary structure, i.e., not an extraordinary event, like diocesan synods or particular councils. These characteristics may serve as inspiration and encouragement for other regions of the world to establish and implement similar bodies at the national or continental level in order to develop a face of the church that is more recognizable within the culture and among the people of that region. These bodies, like CEAMA, could be composed of leaders and the faithful who, working together and in common discernment, could find constructive ways forward for their communities.

3.2. The German Synodal Path

Another example of structured lay participation in decision-making in the Catholic Church is the recent Synodal Path in Germany (*der Synodale Weg*). This path was initiated by the German Episcopal Conference, i.e., the Catholic bishops, and by the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK), a national organization recognized by the bishops which comprises representatives of lay Catholic associations and diocesan councils, together with public figures and theologians. The path was launched in response to the scandal surrounding sexual abuse in the church and the subsequent need to begin a process of renewal and reform in conversation with the whole people of God. The path started officially in 2019, and its first step was to hold a plenary assembly in January 2020 to approve the statutes and the rules of procedure. The path ended in March 2023, but the method of decision-making will continue through the work of the newly established Synodal Committee (*Synodaler Ausschuss*) in the coming years¹⁷.

The Synodal Path comprised four *Forums*: these were working groups reflecting on issues and drafting documents, which were then submitted for discussion and approval by the assembly, the deliberative body¹⁸. This assembly, composed of more than 200 members, is a clear attempt to represent in a formal structure the different segments of the people of God, which will allow them to participate in dialogue and deliberations about the future directions for conversion and renewal of the church in order to be more credible witnesses of the Gospel in the German society of today, as set out in the preamble of the statutes.

The approval of the final documents and resolutions requires a qualified majority of two-thirds of the assembly. The bishops' governing function is preserved because final approval of the documents requires a two-thirds majority of the bishops voting in the assembly¹⁹. Furthermore, the statutes affirm that "resolutions passed by the Synodal Assembly have no legal effect of their own accord. The authority of the Bishops' Conference and of the individual diocesan Bishops to issue legal norms and exercise their magisterium within their respective spheres of competence remains unaffected by the resolutions"²⁰; and also that "[r]esolutions whose topics are reserved for an all-church regulation are transmitted to the Apostolic See as a vote of the Synodal Path"²¹.

What is the most important innovation in this experience that can inspire our search for new bodies where the laity can be responsibly involved in the decision-making process? The main innovation here is the introduction of a deliberative vote for the representatives of all the components of the people of God (bishops, laity, clergy, religious orders, etc.). This innovation does not jeopardize the teaching and governing authority of the bishops, not only because of the requirement for a two-thirds majority of their votes in order to pass resolutions but also because of the explicit protections in the statutes of the rights of the pope and of the bishops in their dioceses. Nonetheless, the fact that resolutions adopted by the assembly do not have immediate legal force does not nullify the moral force they express for the leaders who have to take decisions. The German path allows for structured participation by the laity (but also by priests, nuns, deacons, etc.) in the decision-making process of the church, which is closely related to the decision-taking phase. The leader who is in charge of the decision-taking phase cannot ignore a document that is the result of qualified study and reflection, of prayerful dialogue and discernment (decision-making process), and that has involved representatives of the people of God culminating in a qualifying majority vote of the whole assembly (institutionalized by the bishops) and of the bishops themselves.

4. Towards New Decision-Making Processes in the Church

In this last section, we highlight potential routes for decision-making processes in the church in light of the aforementioned experiences. Firstly, we will look at the structural and canonical prospects for reforming the participatory bodies; secondly, we will consider the educational side of this reform. Keeping these two perspectives together is critical, on the one hand, because any structural reform that does not engage with pastoral agents' attitudes runs the risk of becoming merely a theoretical project; on the other hand, because individual

change among the pastoral agents without support from broader projects and bodies that can structurally change church procedures, could potentially fade away, becoming a personal and unattainable dream.

4.1. Reforming Existing Bodies of Participation and Establishing New Ones

“There are ecclesial structures which can hamper efforts at evangelization” (Francis 2013b, § 26). Reform of ecclesial structures and bodies is required by the very missionary nature of the church. This nature encourages the church to strive for new forms of ecclesial participation, enabling all the baptized to be protagonists in the mission of the church in today’s society and to share responsibility for church decision-making.

One first step is acknowledging the dignity of the entire decision-making process: decision-taking is important, but so too are all the preceding steps: the phases in which decisions are reached through consultation and dialogue. Very often, the efficacy of each decision depends on the quality of the initial decision-making process. Improving this process is a challenge for the existing participatory bodies of the church (e.g., pastoral or presbyteral councils). Changing the mindset that discredits and diminishes these consultative bodies is paramount—a mindset that can be bolstered by canon law itself. For example, there is a need to reform the optional character of some of these bodies, such as the diocesan or the parish pastoral councils²², and to give them a mandatory role, similar to the finance councils²³ or the pastoral councils within the Ordinariate for Anglicans who entered full communion with the Roman Catholic Church (see Benedict XVI 2009, X § 4; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2019, Art. 14 § 1). This would encourage those who lead these bodies to give greater value to the decision-making process and to all phases that precede decision-taking. Correcting the canonical language of *votum tantum consultivum* (consultative vote “only”) would also acknowledge the value of the consultative tasks of these bodies and the role of their members. This would also more accurately reflect the ecclesiological shift of Vatican II, which emphasized the fundamental equality and dignity of all the baptized (see Borrás 2015).

It is not only renewing existing consultative bodies that are needed but also the creation of new consultative structures, i.e., bodies where church leaders and members can engage in dialogue and lay the ground together for decisions to be taken. These bodies should enjoy a permanent and structured character rather than being a temporary and exceptional event, following the example of the CEAMA. The bodies should refer to a larger context and territory than the local instance (e.g., diocesan or parish pastoral council) in order to include the laity (and the clergy) in decision-making processes at the national level, as in the case of the German Synodal Path, or at continental level, like the CEAMA. The bold challenges that contemporary times present to church mission need bodies with a larger scope than the diocese, where laity and pastors can work together to reach decisions, thereby presenting the face of a church that is more embedded in plural and democratic societies, as found in Europe, and hence more effective in accompanying men and women of our time on their life journey.

Another step is to establish new deliberative bodies within the church. Voting procedures are often seen as suspect in church quarters, perceived as jeopardizing communion by encouraging parliamentary-style polarization. Nevertheless, we need to stress that voting does not inevitably mean simple majority procedures like in a parliament (i.e., 50% + 1 of the votes for approval). What is more, a deliberative body can be a place where spiritual discernment can be practiced, mutual listening is valued, and minority opinions enjoy respect, especially through small working groups that can prepare proposals for the assembly. Voting, furthermore, can require a qualified majority, which could prevent both the risk of immobilism and balkanization when consensus cannot be reached. In this case, it is useful to recall the qualifying majority requested for deliberations in the Synodal Path (two-thirds majority).

Deliberative bodies face a further objection: they allegedly undermine the governing and teaching authority of the bishops. One experience that we have explored here offers

some examples of how this authority can be preserved: the German Synodal Path requires a two-thirds majority of bishops to pass a resolution; it also maintains the legal authority of the bishops in their own dioceses. It is certainly true that the church cannot function exactly like democracy because the content of faith is received and transmitted (1Cor 15:3; 11:23) and not the outcome of a decision-making process (see [Legrand and Camdessus 2021](#), p. 97), but even more certain is that the community of the disciples of Christ, nourished by the Gospel and animated by the Holy Spirit, cannot resemble an absolute monarchy, where persisting power structures and authority models, more in tune with a pre-modern culture than with today's world, strongly reduces the church's missionary efficacy. Bishops' authority in Catholic doctrine cannot be understood as a monarchic authority, detached both from the collegial communion with the pope and with other bishops and from the synodal communion with the whole people of God. Bishops need to decide how the faithful can participate in their teaching and governance functions and how this lay participation should be structured. The examples of the Amazon region and Germany show how this implementation can take new and original forms and how bishops can be protagonists in the reform process. As a matter of fact, the Code of Canon Law already stipulates the ordinary's obligation to ask for the consent of the finance council or of the college of consultors in specific cases, such as acts of extraordinary administration and alienation of goods²⁴, but also in some non-financial matters.

The need for structuring and implementing lay participation in consultation and deliberation in the church is reinforced if we consider the example of the church in Italy. During the consultation of the people of God before the Synod on the Family (2014 and 2015) and on Youth (2018), local churches in Italy were not notable for the breadth, inclusivity, and transparency of the listening process. During the current Synod, consultation is being carried out in a more effective way, not only as a result of more detailed guidance from the Secretary of the Synod but also because the Italian bishops decided to embark on a four-year-long national synodal journey (2021–2025). Nevertheless, much of the process is still entrusted to the goodwill of the bishops and those who lead the synodal process at the local level; national procedures, especially during the narrative phase (2021–2023), are quite loose and, although this vagueness seeks to retain the autonomy and freedom of each diocese, it runs the risk of hindering genuine and transparent consultation with and discernment by the people of God.

Structural reform projects, albeit necessary, are not enough to overcome the slowness in implementing lay participation in decision-making. At the same time, investing in education and training for pastoral agents on the ground is paramount, especially for those leading the decision-making processes. The purpose of this training is to shift attitudes to become “an ecclesial mentality shaped by synodal thinking” ([International Theological Commission 2018](#), § 104). Structural transformation and a change in attitudes will either stand together or fall together.

4.2. Training for Synodal Leadership in the Church

Training and education are vital for leaders of decision-making processes. Many times, Pope Francis has called for an improvement in education and training in order to cultivate the practice of discernment. In the following speech, Pope Francis points out the characteristics that leaders of communal discernment need to develop—not only the bishops to whom he was specifically speaking but all leaders of church communities:

“Discernment is the grace [given] to the holy faithful People of God by the Spirit, who constitutes it a prophetic People, endowed with the sense of faith and that spiritual instinct that makes it able to feel *cum Ecclesia*. [...] Therefore, although vested with ineluctable personal responsibility, the Bishop is called to experience his own discernment as a Pastor, as a member of the People of God, or in an ever ecclesial dynamic, at the service of the *koinonia*. The Bishop is not a self-sufficient ‘father and master’, nor is he a fearful and isolated ‘solitary pastor’. [...] The mission that awaits you is not to bring your own ideas and projects,

nor solutions that are abstractly designed by those who consider the Church their own home garden, but humbly, without attention-seeking or narcissism, to offer your concrete witness of union with God, serving the Gospel that should be cultivated and helped to grow in that specific situation". ([Francis 2017](#))

Here, the pope stresses that the leaders of discernment processes are not isolated authorities. They always have to exercise their leadership through a synodal attitude; they need to be able to listen and engage in dialogue, overcome egocentric and narcissistic temptations, and obey the Gospel, the church, and the reality in which people live.

These skills (spiritual, psychological, pastoral, relational, etc.) can be acquired through a greater emphasis by the church on training its leaders. First of all, what is the actual situation of these training programs? Empirical findings show some gaps and challenges in priests' training: a significant portion of priests show a relapse into what we can call new clericalism; this tendency is more pronounced among younger priests. This refers to a model of priesthood focused on the sacred, i.e., a ministry detached from the rest of the people of God. This kind of priest is not primarily concerned with learning how to lead a bottom-up process of dialogue, communal discernment, and decision-making but rather focuses on how to transmit certain truths to the people from above, i.e., in top-down (see [Zulehner and Hennersperger 2001](#)). By contrast, discernment requires an attitude of openness in the search for truth; it does not identify the will of God with rigid answers that will be good for all people in all contexts. Leaders of discernment need to be attentive to the different situations and contexts in which decisions are taken and answers given; they need to know that these answers may be only temporary, and they have to learn to live with temporary solutions.

Intellectual education is certainly needed in order to anchor these attitudes in priests' behavior so as to have a solid theological basis for the participation of all those baptized in the mission of the church. This is not sufficient, though: priests also need training that involves all personal dimensions that need to be integrated into their lives and in their pastoral leadership—emotional, relational, cognitive, spiritual factors, etc. (see [Crea 2014](#)). Fostering a model of training that is oriented towards this approach is vital because it can provide the fundamental conditions and human resources for structural and canonical reforms to be effectively accepted, to put down roots in the church, and to reach maturity. Leading participatory decision-making processes requires leaders who are aware of their internal world, needs, and fears and can reflect on how they interpret and exercise their authority and leadership.

This is in order to understand why this integrated training for church leaders is of paramount importance, as demonstrated in the case of conflict management in decision-making processes. Leaders of church communities and participatory bodies will inevitably face misunderstandings and tensions. Within the church sphere, these conflicts are perhaps less accepted than in other contexts because conflict can be perceived as a symptom of poor spiritual health within the community. On the contrary, disagreement is part of church life because it is part of life (see [Tronick and Gold 2020](#)). Here, the issue is not the fact that conflict exists but how we learn to confront and resolve conflict and grow in communion in the process. Questions about power and authority often are central in conflict: Who is right and who is wrong? Who takes the decisions? Leaders who are able to manage conflict are those who understand that their ministry cannot be exercised in an authoritarian way by imposing their point of view but through a shared and synodal decision-making process, which means a process that seeks the broadest possible consensus through listening and dialogue.

Church communities can resolve conflict when they are allowed to design the future together when shared decision-making processes are implemented. True dialogue can lead people to uncover and understand the real causes of conflict. Maybe forgiveness can be asked, and forgiveness for the mistakes of the past may be granted, but a good leader should especially help the community to focus on its present and its future. If leaders have learned to look inside themselves at their needs, desires, fears, etc., and have learned to

avoid an emotional or impulsive response to a hostile environment, then they can support the community as it defines new rules for the future and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. This happens when possible options for the steps to take emerge from the debate, from a conversation where all can participate freely and frankly and design a common project, choose together a direction for the community in order to attain reparation toward a “reconciled diversity”²⁵. It must be said that this path is not easy: the targets achieved are always temporary, decisions need continuous testing, and new processes of discernment will always be necessary. Most importantly, it is critical to accept that some portion of noise, disagreement, and conflict will emerge over and over again. Learning to make room for this uncertainty and to come to terms with temporary solutions will allow the community to walk together with hope and trust in the decision-making processes.

5. Conclusions

Synodal conversion of the church requires reform of the decision-making processes. In this paper, we started from the theological foundation of the participation of all the baptized in decision-making. Then, we pointed out that the laity should share responsibility for decision-making with the clergy while preserving the equal dignity of all the people of God and the hierarchical structure of the church at the same time. We proceeded to present two new experiences of participation of all the baptized in deliberations within the Catholic Church: these experiences served as inspiration for the necessary reform of participatory church bodies. We sketched out some possible approaches for this reform: on the one hand, reforming existing bodies of participation. On the other hand, establishing new structures in the church for this purpose. Together with these structural reforms, it is vital to foster a transition to a synodal approach among church leaders and, therefore, a reformed training program: without a change in mindset, it will never be possible to achieve the participation of all members in the decision-making process of the church.

“Deliberation is not a secondary and optional action of the church, but an essential spiritual exercise and a fundamental hallmark of the Christian tradition [...] here the church obedience to the Spirit is at stake. [...] Only a regular exercise allows to learn the art of deliberation” (see Theobald 2019, p. 311). The Synod we are experiencing is a *kairòs* to live in this spirit: an opportunity given by God to the church in order to start an exercise that, if continued in the future, will bear fruits of conversion, renewal, and reform for the whole church.

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Abbreviations

CEAMA	Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon Region (<i>Conferencia Ecclesial de la Amazonía</i>)
LG	Second Vatican Council, <i>Lumen Gentium</i> [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church] (21 November 1964), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed on 1 December 2023)
PO	Second Vatican Council. <i>Presbyterorum Ordinis</i> [Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests], (7 December 1965), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_presbyterorum-ordinis_en.html (accessed on 1 December 2023)
QA	Francis, <i>Querida Amazonia</i> [Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation] (2 February 2020), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html (accessed on 1 December 2023)
ZdK	Central Committee of German Catholics (<i>Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken</i>)

Notes

- ¹ All translations of the Bible and documents of Popes, the Second Vatican Council, and Vatican Institutions have been taken from the Vatican website www.vatican.va (accessed on 1 December 2023). Unless otherwise noted, all other translations are those of the author.
- ² For a more detailed development of these foundational elements (see Zaccaria 2010, pp. 190–96).
- ³ LG § 31.
- ⁴ Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church*, § 6. The tradition of synodality appears to have been more significantly preserved in the Catholic Church by monastic and religious congregations, where numerous examples of structural synodality can be found, such as the participation of the members of a religious community to decision-making and to the election of its leaders (see Mary Melone 2016).
- ⁵ “In a synodal Church, those women (...) should have access to positions, including ecclesial services, that do not entail Holy Orders and that can better signify the role that is theirs. (...). This would also allow women to have a real and effective impact on the organization, the most important decisions and the direction of communities, while continuing to do so in a way that reflects their womanhood” (QA § 103).
- ⁶ See LG § 37.
- ⁷ *Code of Canon Law*, c. 515; c. 536 § 2, https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib2-cann460-572_en.html#TITLE_III (accessed on 1 December 2023).
- ⁸ (see Arnstein 1969); for a more detailed presentation of this ladder of participation in parish leadership (see Zaccaria 2010, pp. 198–201).
- ⁹ See PO § 9.
- ¹⁰ See QA § 61.
- ¹¹ QA § 97.
- ¹² CEAMA, *Statutes*, Art. 1. The texts of the CEAMA statutes are taken from (Borras 2021).
- ¹³ CEAMA, *Statutes*, Art. 2 § 1.
- ¹⁴ CEAMA, *Statutes*, Art. 2 § 5.
- ¹⁵ See CEAMA, *Statutes*, Art. 8.
- ¹⁶ See CEAMA, *Statutes*, Art. 10.
- ¹⁷ History, statutes and documents of the German Synodal Path can be found in <https://www.synodalerweg.de/english> (accessed on 1 December 2023).
- ¹⁸ The assembly comprises all members of the Episcopal Conference, representatives of the ZdK, representatives of religious congregations, representatives of presbyteral councils and of permanent deacons, representatives of theological faculties and of church employees’ professional associations, the assembly includes also representatives of ecclesial movements which are not part of the ZdK and Catholics who do not belong to any groups or associations (half of them nominated by the bishops, half by the ZdK).
- ¹⁹ Synodal Path, *Statutes*, Art. 11 § 2.
- ²⁰ Synodal Path, *Statutes*, Art. 11 § 5.
- ²¹ Synodal Path, *Statutes*, Art. 12 § 2.
- ²² See *Code of Canon Law*, c. 511, c. 536.
- ²³ See *Code of Canon Law*, c. 492, c. 537.
- ²⁴ See *Code of Canon Law*, c. 1277, c. 1292.
- ²⁵ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, § 230.

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