



Laypeople in Discernment and Governance of the Catholic Church: Current Situation and Prospects

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Abstract: This article explores lay participation in discernment and governance across various aspects of the Church's life, considering the prospects for development and the theological limits of the proposed solutions. First, the current situation is established by outlining the roles of the pope, bishops, parish priests, lay faithful, and consecrated persons. Subsequently, the paper examines the foundations of the theology of the laity. The next part of the paper presents a discussion of the theological boundaries of lay co-responsibility: the distinction between ordained and non-ordained ministries, the need for discernment rooted in the Holy Spirit, and adherence to the Magisterium of the Church. The final section offers a preliminary outline of potential structural reforms to enhance lay participation in the Church. These include the introduction of synodality at every level of ecclesial life, lay involvement in the selection of candidates for Church offices (bishops and parish priests), and accountability of all ministers, including the clergy, before the community. The study involved an analysis of documents, as well as a synthesis and comparison of data relating to theological and pastoral approaches. The paper concludes with a call for collaboration between clergy and laity (including consecrated persons) in discernment and governance within the Church, while maintaining the hierarchical-communal and sacramental-charismatic structure of the Church.

Keywords: clergy, laity, synodality, discernment, governance, ecclesiology

The Church has been diligently striving to empower the laity under Pope Francis's leadership as part of the efforts to implement the objectives established by the Second Vatican Council and the postconciliar Magisterium. Although presently it is no longer surprising to see lay and consecrated faithful involved in various ministries or spiritual communities, as well as in the task of proclamation (e.g., as evangelizers and pastoral leaders), the question of lay participation in the Church's decision-making structures and governance remains a subject of debate and, at times, controversy. In this context, conflicts frequently arise within the Church between groups that identify as progressive and those that hold firmly conservative positions.

Pope Francis emphasized that the role of the laity and their relationship with the hierarchy must be viewed from the perspective of missionary dynamism. Considering his pontificate, one can observe that evangelization in all its dimensions lies at the heart of the Church's true life. In his programmatic Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis stated, "There are ecclesial structures which can hamper

efforts at evangelization, yet even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them. Without new life and an authentic evangelical spirit, without the Church's 'fidelity to her own calling,' any new structure will soon prove ineffective." (Francis 2013, no. 26) This insight from Francis has inspired theologians to reflect on the current state of the Church and the reforms needed, including those in discernment, shared responsibility, and governance. A careful analysis is needed of both the current legal and pastoral situation, along with thoughtful consideration of necessary changes—always within the bounds of sound ecclesiology. The expectations of the faithful and the proposals put forward by various Catholic groups must be considered, along with the challenges facing the Church, so that her evangelical vitality and credibility remain intact.

This article outlines the existing mechanisms and structures of unity and governance in the Church, as well as the available avenues for lay involvement and shared responsibility, especially in light of the latest developments stemming from the Synod on Synodality. It then grounds the discussion theologically by identifying the ecclesiological boundaries of lay participation in Church governance. Finally, it explores contemporary challenges and the prospects for structural change or reform.

1. Hierarchical Forms of Service and Governance in the Church

The Catholic Church employs various methods to achieve unity and exercise governance. These include the ordained ministry—particularly bishops and their helpers, the priests, who are part of the Church's hierarchical structure. However, laypeople and members of consecrated life also have their rightful place in this framework.

1.1. The Pope and Bishops

The "supreme, full, immediate, and universal ordinary power" in the Catholic Church is exercised by the Roman Pontiff, the Supreme Pontiff, i.e., the pope, who is not subject to any higher earthly authority or judgment (*CCL* can. 331). Consequently, papal authority is universal and encompasses particular Churches (such as dioceses) without supplanting or erasing the authority of local bishops. It is imperative to underscore that the pope's authority extends to every aspect of Church life, including doctrinal, liturgical, sacramental, evangelizing, pastoral, and disciplinary aspects.

1.2. Bishops

The structure of the Catholic Church is both sacramental and hierarchical, placing a significant emphasis on the ministry of the ordained, especially bishops.

This ministry encompasses both an individual and a communal (collegial) aspect. In a specific ecclesiastical structure, the individual aspect pertains to the role of a diocesan bishop or a member of the clergy with equivalent authority (e.g., an apostolic vicar, apostolic prefect, or territorial abbot). The collegial aspect refers to the bishops' collective role within the Church. Both aspects require unity with the pope. The *Code of Canon Law* (can. 336) stipulates that the college of bishops, in union with the Supreme Pontiff as its head, exercises authority over the universal Church.

The collegial ministry of bishops finds its most solemn expression in an ecumenical council. In daily life, it is demonstrated through service in various areas of the Church's life and in communion between the bishops and the Roman Pontiff (*CCL* can. 337). The (ordinary and extraordinary) synod of bishops, which was established by Pope Paul VI and reformed by Pope Francis, is a vital external manifestation of episcopal collegiality and shared responsibility. A synod of bishops is a gathering of bishops from various episcopal conferences who convene to offer the pope advice on matters of faith, morality, and the functioning of the Church (*CCL* can. 342). The lawmakers stated that the synod of bishops has no decision-making authority of its own; it serves as a consultative body to the pope in discerning matters affecting the Church (*CCL* can. 343–47). An important organ of the synod is the general secretariat, led by a general secretary appointed by the pope and supported by members either appointed by him or elected by the synod (*CCL* can. 348 § 1). It must be noted that Pope Francis expanded the synodal format. In addition to bishops, he included representatives of the Roman Curia, members of episcopal conferences, bishops selected by the pope, and priests, deacons, consecrated persons, and laypeople to ensure the broadest possible range of entities to consult. He also established a working methodology for the synodal process: local level in parishes, communities, and dioceses; national (or equivalent) level within each episcopal conference; continental level; universal level culminating in Roman assemblies representing the universal Church. In addition, working groups have been established to continue supporting the Roman Pontiff by addressing major questions facing the universal Church after the conclusion of the synodal assembly.¹

¹ The following working groups have been formed: Some aspects of the relations between the Eastern Catholic Churches and the Latin Church; Listening to the Cry of the Poor; The Mission in the Digital Environment; The revision of the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* in a missionary synodal perspective; Some Theological and Canonical Matters Regarding Specific Ministerial Forms; The revision, in a synodal missionary perspective, of the documents touching on the relationship between Bishops, consecrated life, and ecclesial associations; Some aspects of the person and ministry of the Bishop (criteria for selecting candidates to Episcopacy, judicial function of the Bishops, nature and course of *ad limina Apostolorum* visits) from a missionary synodal perspective; The Role of Papal Representatives in a Missionary Synodal Perspective; Synodal theological and methodological criteria for shared discernment of controversial doctrinal, pastoral and ethical issues; The Reception of the Fruits of the Ecumenical Journey in Ecclesial Practices. Additionally, the Canonical Commission and the Polygamy Commission too. See General Secretariat of the Synod 2024; Allen 2024.

The synodality and collegiality among bishops are also expressed through synods, councils, and continental assemblies (such as the Latin American Bishops' Council, the Council of Bishops' Conferences of Europe, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, and the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar), national synods, bishops' conferences, provincial synods, and diocesan synods.

The Roman Curia supports both the Roman Pontiff and the local Churches, assisting bishops and other ecclesiastical structures. In his reform of the Curia, Pope Francis clearly outlined this dual service: serving the pope as the foundation and symbol of the unity of the Church and assisting bishops (conferences and individual bishops). Therefore, the task of the Curia is to promote unity (Francis 2022, I, 8).

Collegiality and shared responsibility are also exercised by the cardinals, both collegially and individually (*CCL* can. 349). The cardinals specifically execute their mission when summoned by the pope (*CCL* can. 356), during ordinary and extraordinary consistories (*CCL* can. 353), or while serving in various capacities on his behalf (*CCL* can. 358). The responsibilities of the College of Cardinals during the *sede vacante* are specified in other laws (*CCL* can. 359; John Paul II 1996; *Benedictus XVI* 2007; *Benedict XVI* 2013).

The Council of Cardinals is another body established by Pope Francis to support the hierarchical papal ministry. Composed of 8–9 cardinals, this body assists the Roman Pontiff in making crucial decisions. One of Francis's priorities during his pontificate was the reform of the Roman Curia.

1.3. Particular Churches

Any discussion of the Catholic Church's structure must include particular Churches, i.e., dioceses and equivalent structures (*CCL* can. 368, 370–371). The diocesan bishop or an equivalent cleric (such as a prelate or territorial abbot), an apostolic vicar, an apostolic prefect, or an apostolic administrator holds the highest authority in each of these particular Churches. These positions are filled by papal appointment, in accordance with the rights of the Eastern Catholic Churches regarding the election of bishops. In this hierarchical service, various bodies assist the bishop, such as presbyteral councils, colleges of consultors, pastoral councils (which include lay and consecrated members), finance councils, chapters of canons, and diocesan synods. The diocesan curia and regional vicars (or deans) also support the daily governance of the diocese (see *CCL* can. 460–513, 553–55).

Another significant manifestation of episcopal collegiality within defined territories is episcopal conferences, which may encompass a country, an entire nation, or a group of nations. However, the episcopal conference does not hold authority over bishops; rather, it is a body that is responsible for the organization of pastoral care forms and programs in a specific region (*CCL* can. 447). Episcopal conferences do not diminish the authority of individual diocesan bishops but provide a platform

for mutual support in pastoral work. As such, they are a manifestation of the unity among bishops and, by extension, of the unity among the particular Churches.

1.4. Parishes and Parish Priests

Parishes form a vital part of the structure of particular Churches (*CCL* can. 515 § 1). Ordinarily, parishes are territorial, though canon law permits the creation of personal parishes when justified by particular pastoral needs (*CCL* can. 518). In some cases, particular Churches—based on rite or other considerations—may exist within the same territory (*CCL* can. 372 § 2), which may result in parallel parishes or similar structures. Nevertheless, a parish cannot be considered merely a legal entity. John Paul II (1988, no. 26) viewed the parish theologically as a community of believers centered on the celebration of the Eucharist.

Pope Francis (2013, no. 28) expanded on this idea, emphasizing that the parish should be a place where people can hear the Word of God, develop spiritually, engage in dialogue, proclaim the gospel, worship the Lord, celebrate, and practice mutual love. These aspects of Christian life and missionary commitment were central to his pontificate. This perspective also reframes the understanding of authority: It should be exercised for the spiritual benefit of the faithful and in service of their baptismal call to evangelize.

The hierarchical structure is primarily illustrated at the parish level by the ministry of the parish priest, who is responsible for the pastoral care of the community that has been entrusted to him by the diocesan bishop (*CCL* can. 519). Proclaiming the Word of God—particularly through Sunday and feast day homilies and catechesis—fostering Catholic education for children and youth, reaching out to those who no longer practice the faith or do not yet believe, celebrating the Eucharist and other sacraments, leading prayer, and personally engaging with the faithful are all responsibilities of the parish priest. Additionally, he is obligated to provide assistance to married couples and parents, as well as to care for the poor, the suffering, the lonely, the displaced, and those who are struggling. He should encourage the active participation of laypeople in the Church's mission, particularly through their involvement in religious associations and movements (*CCL* can. 529). At the same time, the parish priest is expected to execute his duties in consultation with the lay faithful. This can be accomplished through the pastoral council and the finance council or through alternative methods of discernment and cooperation.

2. The Shared Responsibility of the Laity Today

The Church is a community of the baptized. This implies a responsibility that is shared among all members, despite the fact that not all members have the same level of obligations and authority. As previously mentioned, the ministry of bishops in collaboration with priests is, of course, essential. The role of the laity begins with participation in the Church's spiritual life, mission, and witness. However, their responsibility does not end there. Laypeople are indispensable for discernment, organization, and even governance of the Church.

2.1. Theological Foundations

The Church is a community of baptized people that is both hierarchical and communal, with both sacramental and charismatic aspects. This diversity of tasks and responsibilities is not emphasized at the expense of others; rather, it is based on the sacraments received and the offices entrusted. The ontological foundation is baptism, by which God grants each person the dignity of being his child and a participant in his life. Baptism is the source of the diversity of ministries and charisms. On this basis, authentic communion among the baptized becomes possible. For this reason, at the opening of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis (2021) said that all baptized persons are called to participate in the life and mission of the Church. This message has important practical implications: Laypeople and consecrated persons are not merely recipients of pastoral care provided by the ordained but active participants in the Church's life. As a result, they participate in the mission of evangelization and accept shared responsibility both for their local communities and for the whole Church. However, concrete synodality is essential to prevent it from being reduced to abstract theory (Francis 2021).

This active participation takes many forms. It involves living a spiritual life, active participation in the liturgy, prayer, stewardship of parish, diocesan, and universal Church resources, and daily witness to the faith. Shared responsibility is also manifested through service (charitable, evangelizing, educational, or formational). It is important to emphasize that these activities are not undertaken on behalf of the clergy, nor are they a substitute for ordained ministry. The Second Vatican Council unequivocally stated that "the success of the lay apostolate depends upon the laity's living union with Christ." (AA 4)

2.2. Responsibility for the Faith

The shared responsibility of the baptized in matters of faith is expressed through the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*), which reveals the Church's communal nature. This gift enables the faithful to adhere to the truths of faith and morals and to

perceive the reality of divine revelation correctly. It must not be confused with democratic decision-making, majority opinion, or compromise. Rather, the *sensus fidei* is linked to the truth and its discernment within the unity of the Church, under the guidance of the Roman Pontiff and the bishops. Therefore, persevering life within the Church in union with Christ is essential (International Theological Commission 2014, nos. 3–5; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1990, no. 35). For this reason, personal sensitivity must be measured against divine revelation, the ordinary and solemn Magisterium of the Church, and the experience of the universal Church. Discerning truth and carrying responsibility for the faith, therefore, are not a parliamentary process. The broadly understood synodality cannot be viewed as a political model but is inseparable from faith, truth, and the entire life of the Church—the foundation is divine revelation and the preservation of the deposit of faith.

The reality of the *sensus fidei* calls for patience. Discernment is a process that unfolds over time. The history of the doctrine demonstrates this clearly. The experience of the early councils shows that it is not enough merely to adopt decisions; one must also wait for those teachings to be genuinely received and integrated into the life of the Church. Orthodox theology, too, emphasizes that a council does not end with the conciliar decision but that its reception is an integral part of the council. On the other hand, the very process of discerning the truth requires time.²

Therefore, discernment within the Church cannot disregard the hierarchical dimension of the Catholic Church. This was strongly underscored in response to the German Synodal Way's demands and procedures. The Holy See's intervention made it clear that no local body, including the Synodal Way—whose actual representativeness is open to debate—has the theological or canonical authority to compel bishops to accept doctrinal or structural changes (see Holy See Press Office 2022). Ignoring this principle risks deviating from Church teaching and undermining ecclesial unity. In matters of faith and morals, it is therefore necessary to be in communion with the whole Church.

Therefore, the faithful's participation in the *sensus fidei* is only possible if they are open to the action of the Holy Spirit, who continually works to build unity, even

² A clear example is the development of certain Western dogmas. The truth of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, though deeply rooted in the early Christian understanding of her holiness, was explored and articulated through the Middle Ages and subsequent centuries. It culminated in the dogmatic definition by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854. Notably, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception was celebrated in the Eastern Church as early as the 7th or 8th century. A similar pattern can be observed with the dogma of the Assumption of Mary. The Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God was recognized in the East as early as the 5th century and gradually spread throughout the Church. In the West, it came to be known as the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Yet it was only on November 1, 1950, that Pope Pius XII formally defined the Assumption as a dogma of the Catholic faith. In both cases, the discernment of the faith of the People of God was essential.

amid legitimate diversity.³ Openness to the Paraclete presumes that the baptized live in a state of grace, nourished by the Word of God and the sacraments, and seek to live according to the gospel. Only then can the tools of discernment, particularly dialogue, be properly used. Drawing attention to this methodology, Pope Francis proposed during the 2021–2024 Synod of the Bishops the method of conversation in the Spirit (General Secretariat of the Synod, n.d.). Thanks to that, “the consensus ecclesiae is not determined by the tallying of votes, but is the outcome of the working of the Spirit.” (Francis 2018, no. 7; see John Paul II 2003, no. 58) This submission to the Holy Spirit requires that believers be open to the new but, at the same time, refrain from acting contrary to revealed truth.

2.3. Cooperation of Spiritual Gifts

The shared responsibility of all members of the Church is lived out through the collaboration of each person’s spiritual gifts in service of a common goal: evangelization, deepening the spiritual life, and building up the reign of God. The Second Vatican Council emphasized the importance of this dynamic for the people of God: The Holy Spirit guides the Church through ministries, sacraments, and various gifts among the faithful (*LG* 12). This is not merely a theoretical principle. The Holy Spirit enriches the Church with ordinary and extraordinary charisms. These gifts empower the faithful to serve fruitfully in building up the body of Christ and proclaiming the gospel—both individually (through everyday witness and helping others) and collectively (through organized efforts such as prayer groups, ecclesial movements, and Catholic communities). According to Catholic understanding, such engagement cannot go against the Church’s teaching and discipline.

Moreover, submission to the Holy Spirit is necessary for the effective functioning of the legal institutions designed to ensure co-responsibility (e.g., diocesan and parish pastoral councils, finance councils, synods, and other advisory or consultative bodies). Their mere existence does not ensure their effectiveness or the authentic participation of the faithful in discerning and collaborating in the mission of the Church.

2.4. The Limits of Lay Co-Responsibility and Co-Governance

When discussing the role of laypeople in exercising co-responsibility and co-governance in various areas of the Church’s life, one cannot focus solely on practical

³ “*The universality of the Church involves, on the one hand, a most solid unity, and on the other, a plurality and a diversification, which do not obstruct unity, but rather confer upon it the character of ‘communion.’* [emphasis original–P.S.] This plurality refers both to the diversity of ministries, charisms, and forms of life and apostolate within each particular Church, and to the diversity of traditions in liturgy and culture.” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1992, no. 15)

matters. These efforts must be firmly grounded in Catholic ecclesiology. A fundamental point is recognition of the Church's hierarchical and charismatic structure. This indispensable component of her Catholic identity—the key role of bishops—is unalterable and irrevocable. This foundational truth has concrete implications.

First, Catholic doctrine unequivocally affirms the apostolic nature of the Church, which is inextricably linked to the ordained ministry, particularly bishops and, through them, priests. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992, no. 857) teaches, “The Church is apostolic because ... she continues to be taught, sanctified, and guided by the apostles until Christ's return, through their successors in pastoral office: the college of bishops, ‘assisted by priests, in union with the successor of Peter.’” The Second Vatican Council (*LG 20*), a foundational source for the new Catechism, likewise taught that bishops are successors of the apostles and shepherds of the Church. This apostolic role involves not only presiding over the liturgy but also administering the sacraments, teaching the faith, safeguarding the deposit of faith, and governing the Church. Thus, the mission of bishops is to teach, sanctify, and govern. This does not imply an authoritarian model or the reduction of the role of the laity to passive recipients of pastoral care. However, the shared responsibility of all the baptized must not diminish or deny the ministry of bishops. It appears that in order to protect against such extremes, the Church must further develop and adhere to the following threefold structure: communal (where all members of the Church share responsibility for the Church), collegial (where bishops and priests share responsibility), and episcopal (where the bishop is responsible for the leadership of the particular Church). There is no conflict in such a structure. For the proper functioning of the Church in accordance with the message of the New Testament and the Tradition, this tripartite structure should be observed. This structural balance also holds ecumenical importance, offering common ground for dialogue with other Christian communities. It can contribute to the revitalization and deepening of the co-responsibility of the baptized in the Catholic Church and other Christian Churches or communities.⁴

It is important to distinguish between the ministry of the ordained and the involvement of the laity and consecrated persons. Ordained ministry is rooted in the sacrament of Holy Orders, while the mission of laypeople stems from their baptism and their membership in the body of Christ, i.e., the Church. Recognizing both forms of service is essential for an integrated vision of co-responsibility for the Church's life and mission. Accordingly, the laity's involvement should never be seen merely as compensation for a shortage of the ordained (Benedict XVI 2009), nor should clergy take over tasks of the lay vocation simply because of low lay

⁴ The evangelical *Lausanne Declaration* (1927) emphasizes the importance of bishops, presbyters, and the assembly of believers in the functioning of the Church throughout the centuries (World Conference on Faith and Order 1927, 469).

participation. To ensure that proper relationships between clergy and non-ordained persons are established and respected, a deeper theology of the laity is needed—one that honors their baptismal identity and spirituality. In this light, lay involvement, including in various areas of governance, must never become politicized or resemble secular power struggles over roles or titles. The Church is not a secular organization but a community rooted in the ministry of the ordained (hierarchical aspect) and charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit (*LG* 4; see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2016).

Given this structure, Pope Francis, while highlighting the importance of synodality, warned against adopting a parliamentary mindset, i.e., reducing discernment to majority rule, without considering the transcendent dimension. True discernment requires submission to the Holy Spirit.⁵ This is crucial in matters of doctrine and discipline. The Church continues to face the risk of a Pelagian mindset in dealing with reality and addressing major challenges. For this reason, Pope Francis (Franziskus 2019, nos. 3, 5–7) reminded Catholics in Germany that Church renewal cannot be achieved solely through structural and organizational reforms, without reference to the spiritual dimension and the primacy of evangelization. Reform may be necessary, particularly when existing structures impede the living proclamation of the gospel. However, any changes must be theologically grounded and carried out with respect for the Church's unity.

The participation of all the baptized—regardless of their vocation or role—must remain anchored in the faith. The insights, sensibility, and discernment of the baptized are indeed important; nonetheless, they must be integrated with the views of others, the Tradition, and the discernment of the *Magisterium Ecclesiae*. The apostolic vocation, which continues in the episcopal office, is of fundamental importance in this process. For this reason, the Second Vatican Council affirmed that the mission of bishops is to interpret the Word of God authentically, yet they do not stand above it; rather, they have to guard the deposit they have received (*DV* 10).

3. Challenges and Prospects

In light of Catholic ecclesiology—particularly the theology of ministry—and with an awareness of identified abuses in areas such as governance and dependencies, as well as in the search for ways for the Church's renewal that restores her missionary vitality, several key issues can be examined that invite doctrinal, legal, and pastoral reflection.

⁵ “The Synod is not a parliament or an opinion poll; the Synod is an ecclesial event and its protagonist is the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit is not present, there will be no Synod.” (Francis 2021) Cf. John Paul II 2003, no. 58.

3.1. Implementing Synodality

The practice of synodality is a critical manifestation of the co-responsibility of the baptized. At its heart, synodality involves genuine *journeying together* (σύν ὁδός). This involves listening to one another, discernment in communion, and collaboration in the pursuit of solutions. Still, the final decision is the responsibility of those with sacramental authority (pope, bishop, parish priest) within their respective spheres of influence (universal Church, diocese, parish, respectively). A useful distinction in understanding Catholic synodality is the distinction between decision-making (the process of discernment) and decision-taking (the act of making and enacting a decision). Therefore, a synod functions as a forum for discernment and the preparation of a final decision, rather than as a legislative body in its own right. The decision of the legitimate spiritual authority is the proper decision that is binding on the community, regardless of its level. As explained in the *Code of Canon Law*, a diocesan synod is a gathering of clergy and laypeople to assist the bishop in discernment. However, the only legislator is the diocesan bishop (CCL can. 460, 466). These canons specify that, while synodal members make essential contributions through discernment and discussion, legislative authority resides solely with the diocesan bishop (in hierarchical ministry). Free and open discussion is for the synodal process. This inevitably prompts the question of the boundaries of such discussion. It is important to emphasize that the synod is not superior to the diocesan bishop; however, it should not be reduced to a purely advisory body. The synod discerns and formulates proposals, and the diocesan bishop either promulgates or rejects them. Ultimately, the decision rests with the bishop. The bishop has the authority to establish law within the confines of his competence in the Catholic structure. However, this is referred to as episcopal law rather than synodal law.

The synod does not have unlimited authority. Decisions made by a synod and promulgated by the bishop must align with the universal Magisterium of the Church and canonical discipline. The Instruction on Diocesan Synods highlights the key role of the bishop: discerning whether to convene a synod, officially announcing it, determining how consultation in the diocese will take place, remaining alert to the influence of pressure groups, managing unrealistic expectations, selecting the topics to be addressed, and dissolving the synod if discussions stray from Church Tradition (Congregation for Bishops, Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples 1997, I, 3; III; IV, 7).

It must be noted that the synod may not address matters reserved for the Holy See. It is noteworthy that synod members are not even permitted to submit to the Vatican proposals that exceed the scope of the Church's universal teaching and discipline (Congregation for Bishops, Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples 1997, IV, 4). Understandably, the problems of doctrine should not be debated; however, it is surprising that the synod is prohibited from formulating new doctrinal

insights for submission to the Holy See. The prohibition on formulating conclusions regarding disciplinary matters is even more perplexing, as they are not inherently unalterable. This Instruction has significant pastoral implications: It hinders local Churches' ability to express and transmit the genuine concerns and experiences of the faithful at the grassroots level. Therefore, this area warrants further scholarly examination. The reforms to the synod of bishops proposed by Pope Francis are a positive development. Nevertheless, the present framework cannot be deemed adequate without undermining the importance of the ministry of bishops.

Synodality represents one of the most critical challenges facing the Catholic Church today. It reflects the organic relationship between unity and diversity. Unity is not synonymous with uniformity,⁶ and Catholic unity is a unity in diversity, or reconciled diversity, that applies not only to the Church but also to her ecumenical mission.⁷ This understanding of unity cultivates a synodal mindset and practice that is rooted in spiritual life and communal listening to the Holy Spirit.⁸

3.2. Participation of the Faithful in Governance

The German Synodal Way's concerns cannot be disregarded, despite the controversies that have arisen and the risk of schism that the Holy See has highlighted. For it is not a matter of a specifically German solution, but rather of the universal Church reconsidering the co-responsibility of the laity in governance, with a particular emphasis on transparency.⁹ The Church is currently facing numerous challenges, including clerical sexual abuse scandals, repeated cases of power abuse, and mobbing, which necessitate serious reflection on the systems of accountability and safeguards in place. The German Synodal Way has highlighted that the governing authority in the Church has been closely tied to ordination. At the same time, the charisms, rights, and competence of the lay faithful have often been undervalued. This imbalance, according to the authors, hinders the Church's development and limits the potential of Church members.¹⁰

6 "Unity in diversity ... involves the joyful recognition and acceptance of the various gifts which the Holy Spirit gives to each one and the placing of these gifts at the service of all members of the Church." (Francis 2014)

7 Francis pointed out that unity is not uniformity. Therefore, a sphere (every point equidistant from the center) or a polyhedron (a connection of elements that retain their originality) can serve as a model (Francis 2015).

8 Francis emphasized that ideology in the Church closes it off to the work of the Holy Spirit (Winfield and D'Emilio 2013; Cernuzio 2023).

9 The German Synodal Way emphasizes the importance of responsibility, cooperation, participation, and transparency in Church authority (Der Synodale Weg 2022, no. 4).

10 Despite criticism of the German Synodal Way, it is worth considering the insights that could initiate a Church-wide discourse. Regarding authority, it was emphasized that in the Catholic Church, authority is closely linked to ordination. The problem is the inadequate tools for supervising the ordained, including bishops, and, on the other hand, the underestimation of the competence and charisms of all the baptized. See Der Synodale Weg 2022, no. 7.

It appears that the Church's renewal, as well as the prevention of future abuses and the improvement of pastoral ministry, is significantly influenced by the participation of bishops, clergy, and laypeople in governance. However, such participation must not stem from a spirit of opposition or competition between the missions of bishops, priests, and laity.

Pope Francis acknowledged the necessity of non-ordained members of the Church having genuine co-responsibility, including in governance, but he distanced himself from the German Way. A concrete example of this approach is his appointment of Paolo Ruffini as Prefect of the Dicastery for Communication or Sister Simona Brambilla as Prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. These appointments could become models for diocesan structures, where laypersons and consecrated persons play active roles in managing curial departments and other governing bodies.

3.3. The Opportunity for Faithful Participation in the Selection of Church Officeholders

The process of appointing individuals to ecclesiastical office—particularly diocesan bishops and parish priests—remains a significant challenge. In the case of bishops, the procedure typically involves confidential consultations with clergy, consecrated persons, and laypeople chosen at the discretion of the pontifical legate (*CCL can. 377 § 3*). For parish priests, the appointment rests solely with the diocesan bishop. Nevertheless, questions have emerged about the potential for broader involvement of the faithful in the selection. Such participation would not conflict with Catholic ecclesiology. There are already precedents: For instance, certain cathedral chapters—such as those in St. Gallen and Basel—retain the right to recommend candidates for the episcopate to the pope. Likewise, in the Eastern Catholic Churches, bishops are selected by the synod of bishops, albeit without direct lay involvement. Expanding participation in episcopal selection, particularly in the proposal of candidates, would not raise theological concerns or limit the authority of the pope and the bishops. Members of the clergy, religious, and laity could participate through a consultative body akin to synods in non-Catholic Churches. Such reforms, however, should always respect the unique role of the Roman Pontiff and in no way undermine his authority.

A similar discussion can be initiated regarding the appointment of parish priests. It is not theologically unacceptable for parishioners (or their legal representatives) to have an active role in the selection process, supporting the bishop without infringing on his prerogative. Provision of the right to the presentation of candidates, or at the very least, consultation, may be feasible. Such a solution could allow the voice of the faithful to be heard while preserving the Church's hierarchical structure.

In fact, community members' involvement in decisions about leadership is not unknown in Catholic Tradition. This principle has already been implemented in

various forms of consecrated life. General chapters elect superiors general; the superior general appoints provincial superiors in conjunction with the general council or provincial chapters. Despite the fact that the right to consultation or presentation of candidates is not always binding, numerous congregations and institutes maintain it.

3.4. Prospects for Accountability of Ministers to the Faithful

Accountability is an issue that is even more intricate than the selection of bishops or parish priests. Specifically, it pertains to the extent to which individuals in ecclesiastical office may be held accountable to the faithful. Instead of establishing a body with authority over a bishop or parish priest, the objective would be to establish a meaningful connection between ministers and the people they serve. A useful example comes from non-Catholic traditions, such as the Evangelical Church, in which bishops are accountable to a synod.¹¹ While acknowledging the differences in how Church ministry and evangelical ordination are understood, the mechanism used to prevent the abuse of authority by bishops (or superintendents) warrants theological reflection. Sacramental order and administrative responsibilities can be unequivocally distinguished (without conflict).¹² Allowing clergy, consecrated people, and laypeople to participate in oversight of bishops' ministry would not undermine the bishops' episcopal authority or their subordination to the Roman Pontiff. A relevant diocesan body, operating under the bishop's leadership, could share in the responsibility for the local Church. Such a body might also have the capacity to provide the Holy See with its evaluation of the bishop's ministry. This would offer a meaningful means to empower the faithful, while upholding the integrity of the episcopal office.

In this context, the decision of the German Synodal Way to establish a synodal council, a joint body of bishops and laypeople with governance authority over the conference of bishops, cannot be justified within Catholic ecclesiology. In response to such proposals, the Holy See explained that the German Synodal Way does not have the authority to introduce new forms of governance or to decide on matters of doctrine and morality (Holy See Press Office 2022). It is evident from this statement that theological investigation of structural reforms is permissible; however, any modifications must be deliberated and implemented at the universal, rather than local, level of the Church.

¹¹ "The diocesan Synod may provide scope for the exercise of accountability and evaluation whereby the Bishop gives an account of pastoral activity in various areas: the implementation of a diocesan pastoral plan, reception of the synodal processes of the entire Church, initiatives in safeguarding, and the administration of finances and temporal goods." (Synod 2024, no. 108)

¹² Similarly, retired or titular bishops who perform various services in ecclesiastical offices (e.g., in the Roman Curia, papal legates, etc.) fulfill the mission of teaching and sanctifying (administering the sacraments), although they do not have the governing function that diocesan bishops do.

3.5. Guidance from the Synod on Synodality

The Catholic Church is exploring structural reforms that respect the hierarchy while responding to contemporary social concerns and expectations regarding the community's transparency. The Synod of Bishops on Synodality, held from 2021 to 2024, advanced this process. Following a period of wide-ranging and multidimensional discernment, the Synod produced a final document, which Pope Francis formally endorsed during the General Congregation of the Synod on October 26, 2024. Francis also chose not to issue the customary post-synodal apostolic exhortation because, as he stated, he fully concurred with the Synod's conclusions. As a result, the final document represents papal teaching.

The document emphasizes the necessity of communal discernment, which must be implemented at every level, in relation to shared responsibility among the faithful. This stems from the principle of participation. The Synod noted that achieving authentic participation requires both institutional structures and clear procedures for how relationships between Church leaders and the wider community of the faithful are to function (Synod 2024, nos. 81–91). The document strongly emphasizes that the decision-making authority of bishops, the college of bishops, or the pope is not unconditional. Therefore, "it may not ignore a direction which emerges through proper discernment within a consultative process." (Synod 2024, no. 92) Accordingly, the document stresses the need to revise canonical norms through a synodal lens to properly define the relationships between those involved in the decision-making processes.

In response to the calls for oversight of those entrusted with ministerial roles, the position of the Synod on Synodality must be considered earnestly. Accountability and evaluation of service are required in a spirit of transparency and in accordance with evangelical criteria (Synod 2024, no. 95). The document justifies these conclusions with Scripture: Peter's explanation of his encounter with Cornelius (Acts 11:2–3), the necessity of being blameless (Matt 10:16), and the avoidance of scandal and revealing of truth (2 Cor 4:2). Transparency fosters credibility and trust and increases the effectiveness of the mission of the Church. It cannot be separated from accountability. It must extend to all who exercise authority and ministry. It is imperative to establish evaluation methodologies for the ministry that consider both its strengths and weaknesses (Synod 2024, nos. 99–108).

The position articulated by Pope Francis and the synodal assembly is binding. Pope Leo XIV (2025) reinforced the current necessity of enhancing synodality and collegiality in his inaugural address to the College of Cardinals, reflecting this momentum. The faithful's involvement in discernment and governance requires further theological elaboration, as well as mechanisms to render the Church's structure more effective.

Conclusions

In summary, the following conclusions can be drawn.

Catholic ecclesiology asserts that the Church's hierarchical structure and the distinctive responsibilities of ordained ministers, particularly bishops, are irrevocable. However, the role of the lay faithful must not be undermined. By virtue of baptism, all members of the Church share in her life and mission, each according to their vocation, charisms, and role within the community. The hierarchical, sacramental, charismatic, and communal aspects of the Church are therefore inextricably linked.

Every member of the faithful is called to uphold and transmit the faith and to contribute to the Church's life through their spiritual gifts. At the same time, they have a rightful place in the community's processes of discernment and decision-making. In addition, they can also participate in governance, always in communion with their legitimate pastors.

Nonetheless, the co-responsibility of all the faithful and their participation in discernment and governance must involve maintaining the distinction between ordained and non-ordained ministries, grounding discernment in the Holy Spirit rather than democracy, and compliance with the Magisterium of the Church.

Presently, the Church is confronted with significant obstacles in terms of lay involvement in governance and discernment. The following are priority areas: improving the practice of synodality, ensuring the accountability of those in ministry (bishops, parish priests, other clergy, as well as consecrated and lay leaders), and increasing transparency in the selection of candidates for Church offices. The proposed solutions could enhance the transparency and credibility of the Church and thus improve the effectiveness of evangelization.

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