

SYNODALITY AND PUBLIC OPINION

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I. INTRODUCTION

Examining the relationship between synodality and public opinion is an arduous task, especially when considering the term synodality is even most recent¹ in comparison to that of public opinion.²

In this reflection, when we refer to public opinion it is not the same as the opinions expressed by the mass media. We have used, instead, *published opinion* to refer to the latter.

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¹“In the theological, canonical and pastoral literature of recent decades, a neologism has appeared, the noun ‘synodality’, a correlate of the adjective ‘synodal’, with both of these deriving from the word ‘synod.’” *Synod*, on the other hand, is an ancient word, “in ecclesiastical Greek it expresses how the disciples of Jesus were called together as an assembly and in some cases it is a synonym for the ecclesial community.” INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, 02.03.2018, n. 3 and 5. The Church thus adapts the term *σύνδος*, in latin *synodus* or *concilium*, which in secular usage means an assembly convened by legitimate authority. Although the roots of ‘synod’ and ‘council’ are different, the meaning is convergent, as the cited Document states.

² The term public opinion also has a recent origin: it is believed that it was Necker, Minister of Finance to the French Crown, who popularised the phrase *l’opinion publique* when he made public the government’s financial accounts to reassure creditors about the health of the state’s finances: V. PRICE, *Public Opinion*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA 1992, 12.

However, this is neither the place nor the time to examine the differences in the relationship between *public* and *published opinion*.³ Therefore, it is sufficient to say, briefly, that the concept of public opinion that is most widespread, and shared in the academic community, pays more attention to the *discursive dimension* (public opinion as a communicative process or debate) and omits its *psychosocial dimension* (public opinion as a form of social control that does not manifest itself discursively, as it is in the case of fashion, social custom, pilgrimage groups, etc.). The latter dimension is closer to popular opinion. Nevertheless, both dimensions constitute a broader concept of public opinion, and that is what we are going to be exploring here.

As for the concept of synodality, we refer to the explanation given by the International Theological Commission's Document (CTI), *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church* (2018):

Synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelising mission.⁴

If “the concept of synodality refers to the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church”,⁵ it is clear that these ends, as well as the practices applied to achieve them, are not possible without communion. As a result, the success to communion, for it not to be an empty word or a mere slogan, requires communication between those participating in it. Now, where there is communication there is also ‘public opinion’, that is to say general judgements: more or less common; formed or in the process of formation;

³ Cfr. N. GONZÁLEZ GAITANO, *Evangelizzare con i mass media?* (Evangelizing through the Media?), «Studi Cattolici» 484/6 (2001) 404–412; *Public Opinion and the Catholic Church*, Edusc, Roma 2010. Apart from the famous work by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, on which this thesis is based (E. NOELLE-NEUMANN, *The Spiral of Silence. Public Opinion: Our Social Skin*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1993), other well-known authors can be cited on the same subject: B.H. SPARROW, *Uncertain Guardians. The News Media as a Political Institution*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1999; C. MONZÓN, *Opinión pública, comunicación y política. La formación del espacio público* (Public Opinion and Political Communication. The Shaping of Public Sphere), Tecnos, Madrid 1996, and especially the book, which has now become a communication classic, by W. LIPPMANN, *Public Opinion*, Free Press, Washington 1922.

⁴ CTI, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, n. 6.

⁵ *Ibidem*, n. 7. In n. 70 of the same document, the criteria for the participation of the members of the People of God are spelled out according to the ministry and role of the different members, according to the ‘geographical’ level (local, regional or universal) and specifically for the case of synodal events, where “the Church is called together by the competent authority in accordance with the specific procedures laid down by ecclesiastical discipline, involving the whole People of God in various ways on local, regional and universal levels, presided over by the Bishops in collegial communion with the Bishop of Rome.”

expressed, more or less manifested; shared, more or less shared... in any case, judgments that reflect, express, influence, in short, *conform* and shape public opinion.

As far as we are aware, Hilary Odenore was the first author to deal with the relationship between synodality and public opinion. In his writings, he stressed that the participation of all the faithful, including the laity, in pre-Constantinian synods are reflected in the historical sources he cites. He rightly notes that “a study of the procedures used in such synods, as well as their establishment, is already an important indicator of the existence of an internal public opinion”.⁶

It is legitimate, therefore, to propose the question about the relationship between synodality and public opinion, irrespective of the technical definition one might wish to give to both concepts; as their reality and relationship are almost intuitive. As a result, the first aim in this paper is to offer an ecclesial and communicative reflection on the relationship between public opinion and synodality: examining the Magisterial and theological texts that have dealt with it; as well as drawing upon my previous work on public opinion *in* the Church.⁷

Communication and its inescapable companion, public opinion, are ‘contextual’ realities, i.e. situated in a temporal, historical environment. All communication is always an action, and as a consequence is always given in a context. In other words, the *con-text* is somehow integrated into the *text*, so the meaning of *that* being communicated cannot be separated from the *environment* in which it takes place. As we all well know, most misunderstandings and misinterpretations in communication, and not only in ecclesial communication, occur due to a lack of attention to the context in which the discourse is delivered. It can even be due to the mixing of contexts without prudent consideration to ‘translate’ it to an

⁶ H.O. ODENORE, *The Faithful’s Feedback in Public Opinion in the Church in Edo State, Nigeria*. Doctoral dissertation. Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, Roma 2013. Before Odenore, Angelini had briefly touched on the subject through a broad reflection on the meaning of pluralism with some mention of its application to the ecclesial sphere: G. ANGELINI, *Opinione pubblica e discernimento cristiano. Equivoci del pluralismo e difficoltà della sinodalità ecclesiale* (Public Opinion and Christian Discernment. Misunderstandings and Difficulties of a Synodal Church), in G. ANCONA (a cura di), *Dossier Chiesa e sinodalità* (Dossier on Church and Sinodality), Associazione Teologica Italiana, Velar, Golar 2005, 1–34.

⁷ Cfr. N. GONZÁLEZ GAITANO, *Public opinion in the Church. A communicative and ecclesiological reflection*, «Church, Communication and Culture», I/1 (2016), 173–205. Agemir Bavaresco juxtaposed public opinion in the Church with the *sensus fidei*, *sensus fidelium* e *consensus fidei*. Apart from Bavaresco’s conception of ‘modern’ public opinion, i.e. that prevailing since the Enlightenment, and attributing a non-discursive character to the *sensus fidei*, he does not integrate his reflection on the *sensus fidei*, *sensus fidelium* and *consensus fidei* with public opinion. In my opinion, he should have compared the traits that distinguish, according to him, public opinion (principle of publicity, dialectic and utility) with those that distinguish the *sensus fidei*, the *sensus fidelium* and the *consensus fidei*: cfr. A. BAVARESCO, *Public Opinion and sensus fidelium*, «Daimon. Revista Internacional de Filosofía» 77 (2019) 7–19.

audience so as to avoid decontextualization. In other words, those who speak or write within a public environment—an environment that today always and inevitably includes the mass media—cannot do without taking into account the context in which the action of communication takes place if the message is to be effective: if it is to achieve the aim sought or intended.

This premise, albeit a summary of the *grammar of public discourse*, also applies to the communication of a synod, even more so if the synod is about synodality. Therefore, the second aim of this article is to study the reception of the current Synod in public opinion through the mass media. What is echoed, then, has reached, or is reaching, public opinion from the press, whether generalist or specialised in information on the Catholic Church. In this regard, it must be kept in mind that at the time of writing this report we are in the first phase of the Synod process that began in October 2021; and will end with the assembly in 2023.⁸ The results of this analysis are therefore temporally limited to the period October 2021-August 2022.

II. SYNODALITY, COMMUNION, COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC OPINION

It is not for me to decide whether the notion of synodality is a new theological concept or a mere variant of the ‘theology and spirituality of communion’ outlined in St John Paul II’s *Novo millennio ineunte* (2001); and anticipated in the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion* from the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (1992). It is a fact, however, that the Document of the International Theological Commission on Synodality (2018), which cites 18 times John Paul II’s 2000 Jubilee Apostolic Letter, and four times the text of the CDF presided over by Cardinal Ratzinger, brings the two concepts together without hesitation; and it does with a series of arguments, devoting two large sections to them: *Synodality as an expression of the ecclesiology of communion* (nn. 54–57) and *The spirituality of communion and formation for synodal life* (nn. 107–109).

On the same lines, Pope Francis expressed himself in his speech at the start of the synodal path: “Communion and mission are theological terms describing the mystery of the Church, which we do well to keep in mind. The Second Vatican Council clearly taught that *communion* expresses the very nature of the Church.”⁹

⁸ By the time we were handing this article to the Journal’s editor, the Pope has announced his decision to extend the Synod until 2024.

⁹ POPE FRANCIS, *Address for the opening of the Synod*, 09.10.2021.

We, therefore, tentatively conclude that synodality is a new declination of the much more established notion of *communio* in the Church.¹⁰ Of course, for the purposes of our reflection, it is appropriate that this should be as the connection between communion and communication is more evident.

By now it is well known, at least in principle, that communication and a well-formed public opinion are indispensable in the life of the Church:

A two-way flow of information and views between pastors and faithful, freedom of expression sensitive to the well being of the community and to the role of the Magisterium in fostering it, and responsible public opinion all are important expressions of “the fundamental right of dialogue and information within the Church.”¹¹

Nowadays we are becoming more aware of the necessity of a true Church communion and communication, as it is manifest by the establishing of new rules and protocols on questions about secrecy and communication in the Church. These procedures have been prompted by the urgency of dealing with painful events such as the sexual abuse of minors. In this regard, the works of Shaw¹² and Pujol & Montes de Oca¹³ have to be noticed. A valid summary of these protocols has been formulated by the latter authors in the following terms:

Communion in the Church can only be achieved through trusting relationships between Church members according to the principles of transparency and shared responsibility. That is, those in office must share information, accept criticism and be accountable for their mandate to serve the Church.¹⁴

¹⁰ The ecclesiology of communion asserts itself as a key reading of the *Lumen Gentium* since the 1985 Synod of Bishops, a reading that coexists simultaneously with others in the post-conciliar period. Check on this particular topic M. DE SALIS, *Una Chiesa incarnata nella storia. Elementi per una rilettura della Costituzione Lumen Gentium* (The Church Embodied in History. Elements for a Reading of *Lumen Gentium*), Edusc, Roma 2017.

¹¹ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS, *Ethics in Communications*, 02.06.2000, n. 26. On the same line, *Aetatis novae*, 22.02.1992, n. 10 and *Communio et progressio*, 23.05.1971, n. 20, documents from the same Roman dicastery. The Apostolic Letter *The Rapid Development*, by John Paul II, is even more explicit: he recalls there (n. 12) one of the most cited speech of Pius XII, when he told journalists gathered in Rome for an audience with him “something would be missing from the life of the Church were it not for public opinion.” The list of texts of the Magisterium, albeit of varying scope, and the statements of the Popes following them, is too long to cite here. As a general conclusion, it can be stated that this principle of transparency and dialogue does not respond to a need of democratic society, but to the Church as *communio* (cfr. *Lumen gentium*, n. 18).

¹² R. SHAW, *Nothing to Hide. Secrecy, Communication and Communion in the Catholic Church*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2008

¹³ J. PUJOL SOLER, R. MONTES DE OCA, *Trasparenza e segreto nella Chiesa Cattolica* (Transparency and Secrecy in the Catholic Church), Marcianum Press, Venezia 2022.

¹⁴ J. PUJOL SOLER, R. MONTES DE OCA, *Trasparenza*, 95–96

Communion places different demands on communication as well as on the formation and expression of *public opinion* in the Church,¹⁵ according to the level at which it is expressed or manifested. The participation/discussion involved in the formation and expression of public opinion depend on the different levels of faith, government and contingent. In other words, to succeed in bringing out a “collective listening to what the Holy Spirit ‘is saying to the churches’,¹⁶ the kind of exercising, participation and communication have to match the “nature” of every level.

Below we examine the criteria that, in our opinion, should guide the different actors of public discourse in the Church. We explore each level, especially in regard to the Synods: doctrine or deposit of the faith, government and contingent affairs.

1. *Synodality, public opinion and deposit of the faith*

At the level of doctrine and the deposit of the faith, public opinion does not have a discursive, debating role. Ultimately, in the field of faith, public opinion in the Church does not manifest itself in terms of debate. Either one is in communion with the faith or not. This does not mean that there is no debate or discussion within the Church on matters of faith. It simply means that the way and manner in which it takes place must not call into question the *depositum fidei*.

This principle applies especially to synod meetings. Pope Francis’ Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis communio* on the Synod of Bishops describes in detail the process of attentive listening to the *sensus fidei* (consultation of the faithful), discernment and deliberation of the members of the episcopal Assembly (“always the search for truth or the good of the Church”); and decision-making in search of the *consensus Ecclesiae*: “When it is therefore a question involving the faith itself, the *consensus ecclesiae* is not determined by the tallying of votes”.¹⁷

With a little bit of irony, Pope Francis repeated this idea when answering a question put by a brother Jesuit during an informal meeting regarding his thinking about “the synodal way of the Catholic Church in Germany”: “To the president of the German Episcopal Conference, Bishop Bätzing, I have said: ‘In Germany there is a very good Evangelical Church. We don’t need two.’”¹⁸

In a less colloquial, more formal and toned-down manner typical of an official document but identical in substance, Pope Francis had before called upon the

¹⁵ GONZÁLEZ GAITANO, *Public Opinion in the Church*, 183–189. On the same line as expressed by ODENORE, *The Faithful’s Feedback*, 36–42

¹⁶ POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis communio*, n. 8.

¹⁷ POPE FRANCIS, *Episcopalis communio*, n. 7.

¹⁸ A. SPADARO, *Pope Francis in Conversation with the Editors of European Jesuit Journals*, «La Civiltà Cattolica» 4128 (2022), 528.

members of the German Synod path not to deviate from communion with the universal Church:

This process (the synodal path), especially in these times of a strong tendency towards fragmentation and polarisation, requires us to develop and watch over so that the *Sensus Ecclesiae* also lives in every decision we make and nourishes all levels. It is about living and feeling with the Church and in the Church, which, in not a few situations, will also lead us to suffer in the Church and with the Church. The universal Church lives in and of the particular Churches (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23) just as the particular Churches live and flourish in and from the universal Church, and if they find themselves separated from the whole ecclesial body, they become debilitated, rot and die.¹⁹

The implications—the *subtext*, we would say—of this discourse are evident in the context of the tensions between Rome and the German synodal path regarding the proposals contrary to Catholic sacramental and moral doctrine discussed by the synodal assembly. These problematic proposals had been announced to public opinion and, as a result, prompted the Pope's Letter. Since then, the conflict has become louder until the latest episode, when the Vatican released a warning official Note addressed to the German bishops. A controversy followed for the Note that was unsigned. Severina Bartonitschek, a journalist from the German Catholic Press Agency (CIC), put an embarrassing question to the Pope during the press conference on the flight back from Canada to Rome.²⁰

2. *Synodality, public opinion and governance*

At the level of government, public opinion places demands on pastors and the faithful, individually as well as collectively. The former are called upon not to abuse their power. For instance, not to bind peoples' consciences in matters that have nothing to do with faith—of course they should never do—or in matters that are not strictly disciplinary. In short, pastors must not abuse the authority God has given them, such as using it for material gains, or for convenience. Pastors must be careful not to encroach on areas that do not correspond to them. The faithful, on the other hand, cannot break communion by publicly disagreeing on disciplinary

¹⁹ POPE FRANCIS, *Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany*, 29.6. 2019, n. 7.

²⁰ “Holy Father, yesterday you also spoke of the fraternity of the Church, a community that knows how to listen and enter into dialogue, that promotes a good quality of relationships. But a few days ago, the Holy See released a statement on Germany's Synodal Way, an unsigned text. Do you think this way of communication contributes, or is it an obstacle, to dialogue?” The full transcript and answer to the question posed by the journalist from the German Catholic news agency, *Severina Elisabeth Bartonitschek*, can be found through this link: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2022/july/documents/20220729-voloritorno-canada.html>.

decisions. The lives of many saints are famous for their exemplary silence when faced with questionable, if not downright wrong, governing decisions.

Interestingly, we write these lines on the feast day of Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, a martyr in the Auschwitz concentration camp and victim of Nazi anti-Semitism. In the wake of these reflections, it is very appropriate to recall that Edith Stein, who had by then converted to Catholicism and was about to enter the Carmelites, wrote a sealed Letter to Pope Pius XII²¹ to express her disappointment at the silence of the German bishops regarding the persecution of the Jews; and calling for a more decisive intervention by the hierarchy. It is not the task of this work to go into the merits of this historical issue, let alone to give a moral judgement. The reason we mention this heroic and saintly woman is to show her courage as well as respect for the hierarchy, rooted in her love for the Church together with her prudence that led her not to speak out so publicly, but only to express it privately to the Pope.

Upon reflecting on the Synods that have taken place so far, we cannot help but recall the many problems that have arisen from certain attitudes and actions of protagonists both inside and outside the synod that were not always motivated precisely by a love for ecclesial communion.

Among the countless examples that can be cited, we mention one from the first Synod on the family in the current pontificate that, in my opinion, contributed to generating a climate of intra-ecclesial division still very much present today. We are referring to the leak of a private letter personally delivered to the Pope and signed by thirteen cardinals participating in the Synod. The thirteen cardinals brought to the pope's attention their serious "concerns"—shared by other synod fathers—about the synod's procedures, that in their opinion were "made up to facilitate predetermined results on important controversial issues," and about the *Instrumentum laboris*, which they considered inadequate as a "guiding text and foundation for a final document."

3. *Synodality, public opinion and pluralism*

For sure, this is the easiest level to explain, in regard to the functioning of public opinion, and sometimes even the funniest. The level we are referring to is that of freedom, pluralism... and also of criticism. This is because, by its very nature, 'church politics' can be subject to criticism, as long as it is respectful and constructive as should be in any case.

There are many situations concerning this theme. For example, we may remember how the public atmosphere involving the Synod on the family in 2014

²¹ F. SALVARANI, *Edith Stein. La grande figlia di Israele, della Chiesa, del Carmelo* (Edith Stein. The Great Daughter of Israel, of the Church and of the Carmel), Ares, Milano 2020, 319–321.

was at that time. It was a “hot” Synod, becoming ever hotter by media pressure. Pope Francis himself felt obliged to present ‘his own chronicle of the Synod’ at a general audience a month after its conclusion, given the confusion generated in public opinion. He did so using a football metaphor:

During the Synod the media did their work — there was much expectation, much attention — and we thank them because their coverage was complete. So much news, so much! This was possible thanks to the Press Office, which held a briefing every day. But often the vision of the media was somewhat in the style of sports events, or political coverage: often two teams were spoken of, for and against, conservatives and progressives, and so on. Today I would like to recount what the Synod was.²²

It seems clear to us that the ‘football reading’ of the Synod debate reported in the press falls within the realm of what is subject to free opinion in the life of the Church. We are not just referring to the colourful metaphor of a Pope who, as we all know, loves football and prefers a concrete team from his country. One can share the metaphor or not, and one can share the interpretation that blames the press for the confusion in a humorous tone. However, other interpretations, equally legitimate, can also blame it on the protagonists of the Synod, starting with its communications office.

Although the levels of public opinion and synodality can be distinct in the analysis, it must be warned that in reality the three levels are united, intermingled. The distinction is necessary, otherwise there is a risk of provoking and fighting ‘religious wars’ where the adversaries either ignore under which ‘flag’ they are fighting; or, and this is even worse, do not ask themselves whether their ‘flag’ merits a civil war.

An appropriate example of how these three planes are intertwined in the life of the Church, and which fits very well with the specific case of the Synod, is surely Pope Francis’ most spontaneous intervention on synodality in his *Address to the faithful of the diocese of Rome*.²³ In it, the Bishop of Rome encourages the faithful of his diocese to participate in the synodal journey and indicates in what spirit they should do so. Pope Francis offers a colourful, rich and lively explanation, with abundant references to the Acts of the Apostles, which he calls the first ‘textbook of Ecclesiology’.

The Pope’s speech is very colloquial, delivered as a pastor, not as a theologian, and explaining what he means by a synodal Church. At a certain point in his speech, and in order to point out the risk of a latent clericalism underneath the formalism of instruments and structures that are supposed to foster dialogue as well as interaction with the People of God, Pope Francis says:

²² POPE FRANCIS, *General Audience*, 10.12.2014.

²³ POPE FRANCIS, *Address to the faithful of the Diocese of Rome*, 18.09.2021.

I want to emphasize this, also for the bishops and priests of the diocese. In this synodal process, they should ask: “Am I capable of walking, of moving, in front, in between and behind, or do I remain seated in my chair, with mitre and crozier?”²⁴

As a result, we finish our ecclesiological and communicative reflection on the different levels of public opinion and synodality with a guiding principle. The principle being that formulated by *Nuovo millennio ineunte*, which speaks of communion and not of synodality. It seems obvious to us that it applies to both realities:

The theology and spirituality of communion encourage a fruitful dialogue between Pastors and faithful: on the one hand uniting them a priori in all that is essential, and on the other leading them to pondered agreement in matters open to discussion.²⁵

III. THE PARTICIPATION OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES AND THE FAITHFUL IN THE SYNOD PROCESS

From the data available so far on the reception and participation of the bishops as well as the faithful in the synod process, it does not seem that it has succeeded in fully involving either of them.

As for the bishops, we examined the social media accounts of the Episcopal conferences through their official Twitter accounts to study local support: *how much and how they talked* about the Synod.

The Twitter accounts of the Episcopal conferences of the five countries with the most searches on synodality in Google Trends were selected: in Spanish (Paraguay, Peru, Venezuela, El Salvador, Nicaragua); in English (Philippines, Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, Ireland) and in French (Ivory Coast, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Canada). Additionally, the following accounts were also included, due to their historical importance: Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM), United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Spanish Bishops’ Conference (see Table 1).

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Table 1: Accounts of Catholic Church organisations on Twitter

ACCOUNTS	ORGANISATION	NUMBER OF TWEETS PUBLISHED
@CEVmedios	Episcopal Conference of Venezuela	45
@ConferenciaEpi2	Episcopal Conference of Paraguay	11
@conf_episcopal	Episcopal Conference of Peruviana	14

Continued on next page

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ POPE JOHN PAUL II, Ap. lett. *Novo millennio ineunte*, 06.01.2001, n. 45.

Table 1: Accounts of Catholic Church organisations on Twitter (Continued)

@iglesia_sv*	Episcopal Conference of El Salvador	–
@CENicaragua*	Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua	–
@CelanWeb	Episcopal Conference of Latin America	52
@prensaCEE	Episcopal Conference of Spain	30
@USCCB	U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops	35
@cbcnews	Media Office of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines	15
@KenyaCatholics*	Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops	–
@CBCN_NG*	Catholic Bishops of Nigeria	–
@CatholicBishops	Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference	38
@Eglisecatho	Episcopal Conference of France	18
@kerknet	Catholic Church in Belgium	9
@Cath_point_ch	Catholic Church in Switzerland	35

* No published tweets were identified on the Twitter profile.
 ** No Twitter profile linked to the Catholic Church in Ivory Coast has been identified.
 *** The tweets correspond to the Twitter search: from 1/10/2021 to 1/09/2022. Keywords used: "synode", "synodalité", "synod", "synodality", "sínodo", "sinodalidad", "sinodalidade".

The total number of tweets published by these communication bodies is 302 in the time span from the opening of the Synod (October 2021) to 26th August 2022, the date the diocesan phase closed. For us to determine whether they are many or few, it is necessary to compare the number of tweets from these accounts with other Church topics at different time periods, which is not the subject of our study.

Let us now turn to elaborating upon the national summaries resulting from the assemblies at diocesan level.

The parishes and dioceses were assigned to conducting listening sessions on the questions provided by the Vatican. After these sessions, each diocese was required to submit a report to its Episcopal Conference; then a group of working experts from each country would draw up a general summary of these reports.

Initially, it was intended each Episcopal Conference would submit their general reports to the Vatican by April 2022. However, shortly after the process began, and because of Covid, the Holy See announced a four-month extension: the Episcopal conferences had to submit their summaries to the Vatican by 15th August 2022.

As of 15th August, only the following Episcopal conferences had delivered their reports:²⁶ the bishops of England and Wales, Belgium, Zimbabwe and France.²⁷ In the following days up to 31st August, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Scotland, Spain,

²⁶ Cfr. *Synod on Synodality reaches a 'due date.' What's next?*, «The Pillar», 15.08.2022.

²⁷ In France, the synthesis of the dioceses' proposals was not voted on in the Assembly of the Episcopal Conference but sent directly to the Vatican, causing a division among the bishops and

Switzerland and Poland were added.²⁸ The Czech Republic and Lithuania also joined in, making their summaries available to the general public at the same time. At a later date, the United States Conference of Bishops delivered and made public the summary of their work, with a profusion of details on the local participation. Meanwhile, the press conference closing the continental phase was held on 26th August.²⁹

The Synod's official website speaks of "103 *responses* (out of 114) from the Episcopal conferences so far received by the General Secretariat of the Synod" and about a thousand contributions from other parts of the Church, including Eastern Catholic Churches, religious Congregations and the Vatican dicasteries. However, no precise data is offered to verify these correspondences.

In regard to the participation of the faithful in the diocesan phases, according to data provided by *The Pillar*, updated on 29th July,³⁰ the participation of those who have received Baptism is around 1 %. Unfortunately, there are no sources to compare the figures, other than journalistic ones, except the data provided publicly by the Episcopal Conferences. On the Synod's official webpage, there are no reports of this.

These figures on the participation of the laity should help to bring to attention about how much those heard in the preliminary stages of Synods represent the whole of the People of God. Furthermore, the collection of their views does not necessarily have to be done through the ordinary ecclesial channels—parishes, for example—but instead by competent and tested external professional organisations.³¹

also causing a controversy among French Catholics: cfr. J.M. GUENOIS, *Au cœur de l'imbroglia de la réforme proposée par les évêques de France*, «Le Figaro», 17.06.2022.

²⁸ Cfr. L. COPPEN, *Poland's synod report says Catholics want change, but not to doctrine*, «The Pillar», 25.08.2022.

²⁹ In the release of Vatican News, the Vatican's unofficial press organ, on the press conference closing the diocesan phase, no data is given on the countries that presented their Reports: cfr. S. CERNUZIO, *The Synod second phase begins with: 'No one should feel excluded or unheard in the Church'*; <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/vaticano/news/2022-08/sinodo-sinodalita-seconda-fase-sala-stampa-vaticana.html>. We have asked the Synod's Communication Office for confirmation, but have not yet received a reply.

³⁰ Cfr. L. COPPEN, *How many people took part in the synod's diocesan phase?*, «The Pillar», 29.07.2022. The Pope, addressing the faithful of his diocese (Rome) encouraged "to go beyond the 3 or 4 per cent who are closest to us, to broaden our reach and listen to others." Perhaps the Pope did not mean to interpret his reference to percentages literally, but was simply encouraging the organisers to reach out to those who do not attend church services.

³¹ In Italy, for example, there have been rigorous surveys on the religiosity of citizens with subsamples of Catholics: V. CESAREO, *La religiosità in Italia* (Religiosity in Italy), Mondadori, Milano 1995, carried out using the traditional sample survey method with standardised questions; others made use of qualitative methodologies such as focus groups: E. BIEMMI, A. CASTAGNARO, G.

At present, no systematic methodology was followed for all the dioceses, neither a general criteria followed by those who participated. There seems to have been a kind of ‘open call’, which although may have some advantages ultimately has a major drawback: over-representation of the ‘committed’ laity, who collaborate with the activities of parishes or dioceses, at the exclusion—albeit involuntary—of those Catholics who are committed to courageously witnessing to the faith within their family and professional lives, but do not have much time to provide their support in parish services.

IV. THE SYNOD IN THE MASS MEDIA

In this section we present an analysis of the news coverage of the Synod.

1. *Methodology of analysis*

The research methodology applied was content analysis, with a focus on news *framing*, based on a selection of news pieces taken from mainstream digital and print media as well as others of non-denominational Catholic association, i.e. not owned by hierarchical Church authorities.

The type of sample obtained was by ‘non-probabilistic sampling’: a ‘strategic sampling’ determined by the objectives of the research.³²

The criteria that guided the selection of digital and print media were as follows:

a) In the case of commercial media: influence in the cultural area of the respective languages (English, Spanish and French); balance among different editorial ideological orientations; number of readers/users (refer to Table 1).

b) In the case of Catholic media: number of readers/users (idem Table 2); media organizations belonging to the four languages most widely spoken in the Catholic Church (English, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian) and the selection of outlets being made in a way to represent the different ‘ecclesial sensitivities.’

DAL PIAZ, *Fuori dal recinto. Giovani, fede, chiesa: uno sguardo diverso* (Outside the Fence. Young People, Faith, Church: Another View), Franco Angeli, Roma 2013; F. GARELLI, *Gente di poca fede. Il sentimento religioso nell'Italia incerta di Dio* (People of Little Faith. Religious Sentiments in God's Uncertain Italy), Il mulino, Bologna 2020; R. CIPRIANI, *L'incerta fede. Un'indagine quanti-qualitativa in Italia* (The Uncertain Faith. A Quanti-Qualitative Survey in Italy), Franco Angeli, Milano 2020.

³² J.J. IGARTUA PEROSANZ, *Métodos cuantitativos de investigación en comunicación* (Research Quantitative Methods in Communication), Bosch Comunicación, Barcelona 2006, 217.

Table 2: Selected media and their audience/readership

MEDIA OUTLETS	AUDIENCE (monthly unique visitors)	SOURCE / DATE
SECULAR MEDIA		
	762.000 (readership)	AIMC (first wave - 2022)*
<i>El País</i>	115.4 (average in millions of visits to the website)	Similarweb (June-August 2022)
	380.000 (readership)	AIMC (first wave - 2022)*
<i>ABC</i>	66.9 (average in millions of visits to the website)	Similarweb (June-August 2022)
	786,60 (average weekday print circulation, in the thousands)	Statista (October 2020- March 2021)
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	79.7 (average in millions of visits to the website)	Similarweb (June-August 2022)
	362.76 (average weekday print circulation, in the thousands)	Statista (October 2020-March 2021)
<i>The New York Times</i>	637.8 (average in millions of visits to the website)	Similarweb (June-August 2022)
	350.000 (daily circulation)	Statista (2021)
<i>Le Figaro</i>	76.5 (average in millions of visits to the website)	Similarweb (June-August 2022)

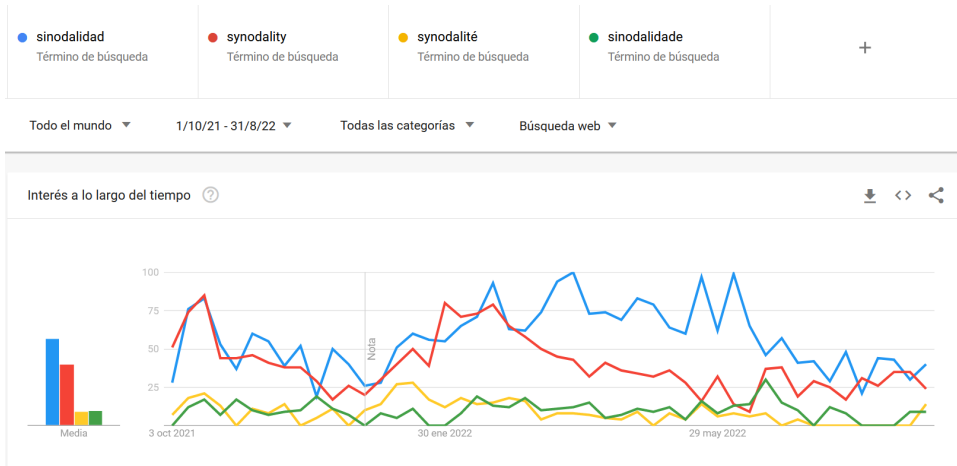
Continued on next page

Table 2: Selected media and their audience/readership (Continued)

CATHOLIC WEBSITES		
<i>The Pillar</i>	1.990.000 (monthly visitors)	Similar web (July 2022)
<i>Crux</i>	440.153 (monthly visitors)	Similar web (July 2022)
CATHOLIC NEWS AGENCIES		
	94.001 (monthly visitors)	Similar web (July 2022)
<i>Rome Reports</i>	725.000 (subscribers to the YouTube channel)	(Youtube)
<i>CNA</i>	6.773.000	Similar web
<i>Aleteia</i>	9.095.000	Similar web (July 2022)
<i>Cancaonova.com</i>	9.752.000	Similar web (July 2022)
BLOGS		
<i>Settimo cielo</i>	125.889	Similar w/eb (July 2022)
https://padrepauloricardo.org/	1.479.000	Similar web (July 2022)
www.aldomariavalli.it	362.718	Similar web (July 2022)
https://www.reasonwhy.es/actualidad/primer-egm-2022-internet-continua-creciendo-distancia-television		

The criteria for selecting the published content were as follows:

- The sample were collected from 1st October 2021 to 31st August 2022.
- The selection for the sample of search dates was taken through Google Trends, a tool to identify and analyse trends within Google search engines among its users. We entered the following search terms: ‘synodality’, ‘sinodalità’, ‘sinodalidad’, ‘sinodalité’ and ‘sinodalidade’ (see Graph 1); and found the following dates on which these terms were looked for the most: a) 17–23 October 2021; b) 20–26 February 2022; c) 20–27 March 2022. We extended the sample to include the months of October 2021, February 2022 and March 2022 in order to cover significant synodal events during that period. For example, on 9th October 2021, in the New Synod Hall, Pope Francis presided over a moment of reflection for the start of the synodal process; and the official opening of the Synod with a Holy Mass in St. Peter’s square on 10th October 2021. Additionally, in August 2022, there were two important moments in the synod process: 1) 15th August, the



Graph 1: *Comparison of Google users' interest in the term synodality.* The graph shows a comparison of the search for the word *synodality* in Spanish, English, French and Portuguese. The graph also shows the periods when users are most interested in searching for this topic in the Google search engine.

deadline for the submission of national reports to the General Secretariat of the Synod; 2) 26th August, press conference to close the diocesan phase.

a) Frames and categories of framing: Journalistic readings of synodality

The news coverage provided by the selected print and digital media offered a variety of content that was analysed using a qualitative methodology.

The first methodological phase was inductive in nature: the researchers examined the themes or topics of the texts published in the mentioned media; and identified the main as well as secondary *frames* (see Appendix 1) through which readers are guided to pay attention to *a particular dimension* of the topic and *what meaning to take away* from the topic being reported. In the second stage, the *frames* were grouped into categories (see Table 5), again in line with the topic of the articles. This inductive process required the description of the frames and sub-frames to be consistent with the messages, protagonists, context, aspects of interest, etc. *Frames* found in other previous research on Church events were avoided so as not to impose spurious or forced readings on the texts. Most importantly, it is the texts themselves and the issues they discuss that must guide the determination and adjudication of the *frame*. Furthermore, revision by researchers, individually and in groups, reduces the risks of biased interpretation. See Table 5.

Table 3: Categories identified

Synodality as an expression of true ecclesial communion
Synod as a path to structural reforms in the Church
Break in communion and/or distortion of the deposit of the faith
Ideological manipulation of the Synod
Pope Francis' synodality leads to division and doctrinal confusion
Curbing the ideological manipulation of synodality

For example, the category “Synodality as an expression of true ecclesial communion” is the integrative result of the following *frames*: “Synod as an instrument of listening to the People of God”; “Synodality involves listening to the Holy Spirit”; “Protagonist of the Synod is The Holy Spirit”; “Synodality as an expression of the *sensus fidei*”; “Co-responsibility of all the baptised in the mission of the Church”; “Prayers for the Synod”; “Diversity of visions on the Synod according to countries or cultural areas”; “Diocesan Synod: occasional consultative instrument of a pastoral nature for listening to the People of God, not binding on the bishop”; “Phases of the Synod” and “Inauguration of the Synod in Rome.”

2. *The comparison with institutional sources*

The analysis was conducted on newspaper outlets, news websites, blogs, as well as news agencies. The sample consisted of 195 texts, distributed among news agencies (49 %), Catholic media (25 %), secular newspapers (15 %) and blogs (21 %).

The predominant *frame* (refer to the *frame* category) in the texts examined was “ideological manipulation of the Synod” (29 %). The second group of framing belonged to the category “synodality as an expression of true ecclesial communion” (25 %). Although the two categories are quantitatively equal, added together they cover half of the news pieces. This figure highlights the break in the public discourse on the Synod: one reflecting the organisers’ proposal (25 %) and the other contrary (29 %). The frame related to the Synod not just being about documents and statements is also relevant: “Synod as a path of structural reforms in the Church” (24 %). The other frames were identified along the lines of change, internal conflict and ideological manipulation (see Table 4).

Table 4: Accounts of Catholic Church organisations on Twitter

	NEWSPAPER PIECES			TWITTER ACCOUNTS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES	
	fr	%		fr	%
Ideological manipulation of the Synod	56	29	Synod as a path of structural reforms in the Church	170	56
Synodality as an expression of true ecclesial communion	49	25	Synodality as an expression of true ecclesial communion	130	43
Synod as a path of structural reforms in the Church	46	24	Ideological manipulation of the Synod	2	1
Pope Francis' synodality leads to division and doctrinal confusion	34	17	—		
Break in communion and/or distortion of the deposit of the faith	6	3	—		
Curbing the ideological manipulation of synodality	4	2	—		
Total	195	100	Total	302	100

Note: a distinction needs to be made between the Episcopal conferences' tweets and journalistic texts. They are not texts of the same nature and are therefore not comparable, neither in terms of purpose (journalistic/institutional communication) nor in terms of style. In fact, the data speak for themselves, and it cannot be otherwise: the first two frames in the tweets (56 % and 43 %) have an institutional intentionality.

In our research, we also encountered the frequent phenomenon of *induced framing*, well known in framing research.³³

For example, one news story from *The Pillar*, a Catholic news agency, on 20th May 2021, thus a few months before the opening ceremony of the Synod, has as its subject the letter from Cardinal Grech, Secretary General of the Synod, addressed to the bishops informing them about the synod process and its stages. The main frame of the news is "Synod as an instrument for listening to the People of God". Already appearing, however, as a secondary *frame* is the "German synodal path as an unwieldy shadow."³⁴

³³ N. GONZÁLEZ GAITANO, *L'agenda-setting 25 anni dopo* (Agenda-setting twenty five years later), «Sociologia della Comunicazione», 14/27 (1999) 183–205.

³⁴ *Vatican Synod on synodality will be multi-year global process*, in «The Pillar», 20.05.2021. <https://www.pillaratholic.com/vatican-synod-on-synodality-will/>. The main frame (Synod as an

There are some events that produce a *by-product frame*: a *frame* that will act as an automatic repetition for all events or social groups in relation to the former. Sometimes the *by-product frame* gets in the way of other information and makes it difficult to deviate away from.

3. Themes in news reporting

As far as the topics of news and editorial commentary are concerned, the highest percentage of the journalistic texts published refers to listening: the Synod as a way of consulting with the wider people (10 %). The next most frequent topics show where the journalistic interest of the media was concentrated: “Holy See and German Synod conflict (8 %)” and “Role of women in the Church (8 %)”.

Table 5: Most frequent themes in journalistic texts

	fr	%
Listening to all lay people (women and men)	20	10
Holy See and German Synod Conflict	15	8
Role of women in the Church	14	7
Synod as an instrument for listening to the People of God	14	7
Synod causes de facto division among bishops	13	7
Ideological pressures on the Synod	12	6
Doctrinal ambiguity on the guidelines' proposed for listening to the faithful	12	6
Lack of interest and/or participation in the Synod. Does the Synod not motivate the faithful?	7	4
Synodality as an expression of the <i>sensus fidei</i>	7	4
German 'synod' infects other national 'synods'	6	3
Stages of the Synod	6	3

Note: the themes presented here correspond to 65 % of the sample (n=195). The remaining percentage consists of 30 different themes (see annex).

instrument for listening to the People of God) is clear through affirmations like this one: “The objective of this phase is to consult the People of God so that the synodal process is carried out through listening to all of the baptised, who are the subject of the *sensus fidei – infallible – in credendo*.” The alluded secondary frame is well manifested in this author’s comment: “The synod schedule was sent to bishops amid ongoing tension between the Holy See and the Catholic bishops in Germany, where a multi-year ‘synodal process’ of lay Catholics and bishops has proposed changes to Catholic doctrine, particularly in the areas of sexual morality, the ordination of women, and the relationship of the Church to non-Catholics.”

A second level of the analysis provides other interesting data to assess the impact of the Synod on the media.

News agencies favoured frames related to the “ideological manipulation of the Synod” (35 %) and “Synodality as an expression of true ecclesial communion” (29 %). On the websites, frames on the “ideological manipulation of the Synod” (20 %) were also found. If we focus on the blogs, these were even more critical: “Pope Francis’ synodality leads to division and doctrinal confusion” (48 %), “Ideological manipulation of the Synod” (24 %) and “Break in communion and/or distortion of the deposit of the faith” (19 %). The secular media gave pluralistic coverage: on the one hand they emphasized the novelty of the synodal process as a lever of structural change in the Church (“Synod as a path of structural reform in the Church” was 52 % of the frames), on the other hand they noted the fact of an internal division in the Church: “Ideological manipulation of the Synod” (24 %) and “Synodality as an expression of true ecclesial communion” (14 %).

V. CONCLUSION

Overall, when examining the actual participation of the Episcopal Conferences and the faithful in the synod process as well as the press coverage, a negative impression of the entire synod process could be drawn, at least from a communication perspective.

For the Western mainstream news, with the exceptions of two newspapers (*The Wall Street Journal* and *Le Figaro*), the Synod on synodality appears not to be a newsworthy topic.

Research clearly shows how the difficulties within the ‘German Synodal path’ have cast a shadow of suspicion over the universal Synod. Indeed, it has aroused mistrust among the Catholic press: not a few fear ecclesial ideological manipulation by sectors that proclaim themselves to be the voice of the majority of the faithful, but whose representation is at least doubtful and certainly not verifiable. It should be added, however, that the suspicion is present in *published opinion*, and presumably in *public opinion* because the latter it is influenced by the former.

It is even more difficult to determine whether the contagion of *frames* and news narratives is only due to the ‘German Synodal path’, with its looming shadow over the universal Church, or whether they are the ever enduring echoes of the internal conflicts and divisions that emerged from the previous Synods; especially those on the family at the beginning of the Pontificate (2014 and 2015). Answering this question would require a new investigation, which we believe would be of enormous interest.

Our analysis does not show if the communication managers of the universal synod were aware of all of this; and whether they tried to remedy it. Nevertheless, there is an apparent failure to act on this problem and it does not help to dispel suspicion.

Undoubtedly, there are structural problems emerging from an unprecedented ecclesial experiment; and which had no previous experience as other ecclesial events, such as the World Youth Days which through time became more efficient in organizing pastoral events with young people. Nevertheless, it should be noted the positive testimonies published in some of the Reports that speak of a transforming experience among those who participated in the local meetings. For example, here is a testimony taken from the United States Report: the synod consultations “opened a way for the Church in the United States to better experience and express its communion as a people united in a common faith.”

The synodal process concludes the ‘diocesan phase’ and begins the ‘continental phase.’ However, this does not imply a new consultation with the ‘people of God’, but instead deepens the evaluation of the information gathered in the ‘diocesan phase’ by persons entrusted with the responsibility of carrying out this task. It is to be expected, as a hypothesis, that if the same frames in the media are maintained, the impact on public opinion in the new synod phase will be similar. Therefore, it will be important in the period that follows, in our opinion, the role that the institutional communication of the Synod will play. Additionally, what communication strategy it will undertake in a phase in which institutional information will be more directed by the ‘Document for the Continental Phase’? Especially with an important stage such as the Continental Assembly.

Annex

CATEGORIES	FRAMES
Break in communion and/or distortion of the deposit of the faith	1. Protestantisation of the Church in Germany
	2. Heterodox proposals of the German synod
	3. Protestantisation of the priesthood
	4. Synod as an instrument of Protestantisation of the Church
Ideological manipulation of the Synod	5. Progressive fringes ‘seize’ the Synod
	6. Radical progressive demands
	7. Ideological pressures on Synod
	8. Holy See and German Synod conflict
	9. De facto schism in the Church in Germany
	10. Synod as cause of de facto division among the bishops
	11. German Synod infects other national Synods
	12. Lack of transparency in German Synod finances
	13. German Synod silences dissenters from the official line
	14. Holy See and Church conflict in EEUU

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(Continued)

Pope Francis' synodality leads to division and doctrinal confusion	15. Doctrinal ambiguity for the proposed guidelines to listening to the faithful 16. Scepticism among American Catholics about the synodal path 17. "Synodality" is being used to subvert the Church 18. Manipulation of the Synod to delegitimise "opponents" of Pope Francis 19. Accusations to the Pope of distorting the institution of the Synod 20. A "synodal" logic that confirms the marginalisation of diocesan bishops 21. Synod according to Pope Francis 22. Scepticism among Catholics on the synodal path 23. Low interest and/or participation in the Synod (Doesn't the Synod motivate the faithful?)
Synod as a path to structural reforms in the Church	24. Changing power exercise in the Church: decentralisation 25. The role of women in the Church 26. Novelties of this Synod 27. The disempowerment of bishops' governance 28. Listening to all (laity, women, lapsed) 29. Against intellectualism, proximity 30. Restoring justice
Synodality as an expression of true ecclesial communion	31. Synod as an instrument for listening to the People of God 32. Synodality is listening to the Holy Spirit 33. Protagonist of the Synod: Holy Spirit 34. Synodality as an expression of the <i>sensus fidei</i> 35. Co-responsibility of all the baptised in the mission of the Church 36. Prayers for the Synod 37. Diversity of views on the Synod according to countries or cultural areas 38. Diocesan Synod: occasional consultative instrument of a pastoral nature for listening to the People of God, not binding on the bishop 39. Stages of the synod 40. Inauguration of Synod in Rome
Curbing the ideological manipulation of synodality	41. Synod continuity 42. Synod cannot change deposit of the faith 43. Restore the theological and magisterial significance of the Synod

ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the Synod on synodality, the article offers an ecclesiological and communicative reflection regarding how the judgement of the faithful in the Church should be shaped and expressed according to the nature of the topics

on which they are called upon to deal with: deposit of faith, Church governance and the realm of the debatable.

The second part studies the participation of bishops' conferences and the faithful in the synod process and the reception of the Synod in public opinion through the mass media. The three main conclusions of the empirical study are: 1) the participation has been scant, 2) for the Western mainstream press, this Synod is not newsworthy, 2) the analysis of the Catholic press coverage clearly shows that the difficult German Synod path has cast a shadow of suspicion on the universal Synod.

There is no doubt that structural problems, also in terms of communication, are there, and they certainly stem from the novelty of an unprecedented ecclesial experiment.