

TIBOR REIMER*

ŠTEFAN KAVECKÝ**

A Missionary-Synodal Church in the Perspective of the Second Vatican Council

Abstract: This study examines the current concept of the missionary-synodal Church as one of the key challenges of our time. Drawing on the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and their reception in the post-conciliar magisterium, it analyzes the three fundamental pillars of synodality: communion, co-responsibility, and mission. It highlights their internal interconnectedness and continuity in the teaching of the popes from the Second Vatican Council to the present. The aim is to show that the synodal conversion of the Church is not a discontinuity, but an organic development of the Council's ecclesiology.

Keywords: synodality, mission, Second Vatican Council, laity, community, evangelization.

Introduction

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) represents a fundamental turning point in the understanding of the identity and mission of the Catholic Church. Its ecclesiology, especially in the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium*, emphasizes the Church as the People of God journeying through history, in which all the baptized participate in Christ's mission (cf. LG 33). This shift laid the foundation for today's understanding of synodality as "walking together". As J. Komonchak notes, the Second Vatican Council marked a transition from a predominantly juridical understanding of the Church to an ecclesiology of communion, which laid the groundwork for the contemporary understanding of synodality¹.

* Tibor Reimer – Comenius University Bratislava, Slovakia
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5005-3942>; e-mail: Tibor.Reimer@frth.uniba.sk

** Štefan Kavecký – Comenius University Bratislava, Slovakia
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3589-0214>; e-mail: kavecky6@uniba.sk

¹ J.A. Komonchak, *Foundations in Ecclesiology*, Boston 1995, p. 97-110.



The call for the involvement of all the baptized in the common mission of the Church was further concretized in Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* and in *Christifideles laici*, where John Paul II stressed that "every member of the faithful is called to labor in the vineyard of the Lord, that is, to participate in the mission of the Church in the world"². In 2010, Pope Benedict established the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization. Pope Francis made this call one of the central themes of his pontificate, whether through the programmatic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, or the apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, by which he designated the Dicastery for Evangelization as the most important dicastery, thus expressing a hierarchy of priorities also reflected in the structures of the Church, and finally through the convocation of the Synod on reforms in the Church.

Contemporary magisterial teaching therefore repeatedly affirms the need for a missionary-synodal conversion as a response to the challenges of secularization, individualism, and cultural fragmentation. W. Kasper points out that synodality is not merely an organizational principle, but rather a mode of existence of the Church as "communio", rooted in the Trinitarian life of God³. This call has been present since the Council and finds concrete expression in the teaching of the popes, who have gradually developed it further.

This study adopts a theological and hermeneutical methodology based on the critical analysis of conciliar and post-conciliar magisterial texts, as well as relevant theological literature. Rather than employing an empirical approach, the study seeks to interpret the theological foundations of synodality and their development within the Church's self-understanding. Its specific contribution lies in examining communion, co-responsibility, and mission not as isolated dimensions but as three interconnected pillars of synodality rooted in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council and progressively elaborated in subsequent magisterial teaching. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to analyze these three pillars of synodality within the framework of conciliar and post-conciliar ecclesiology and to demonstrate their significance for the Church's contemporary missionary identity.

1. Communion as the Ontological Foundation of the Church

The Second Vatican Council brought a fundamental shift in the understanding of the Church by ceasing to perceive it primarily as an institutional structure and presenting it more as a mystery of communion ("communio"). This understanding has deep ontological roots: the Church is not merely an assembly of believers, but participation in the very life of the Triune God. The conciliar documents thus offer a synthesis of biblical, patristic, and theological tradition that

² John Paul II, *Christifideles laici: Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World*, Trnava 1989, § 3.

³ W. Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission*, London 2015, p. 123-125.

enables the Church to be understood as the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. This section therefore develops the idea of communion as the fundamental ontological category of ecclesiology in the light of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

1.1. The Trinitarian Foundation of Communion

The fundamental starting point of conciliar ecclesiology is the understanding of the Church as “communio”. This understanding has its origin in God Himself, who revealed Himself as a communion of three divine Persons. The human person, created in the image of God, is essentially relational and realizes himself or herself in communion. The dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* already in its introduction presents the Church as “a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (cf. LG 4). This statement shows that the unity of the Church is not merely the result of human agreement but has its origin in the inner life of God Himself. The Church is therefore not only an image of the Trinity but truly participates in it.

As theological reflection points out, the Trinitarian mystery represents the archetype of all relationships: the human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships⁴. This anthropological dimension also finds support in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*, which emphasizes that man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself (cf. GS 24). Communion is therefore not merely an addition to human existence, but its fulfillment.

It follows that communion is not merely a sociological category, but a theological reality rooted in being itself. The International Theological Commission points out that synodality has its origin in the ecclesiology of “communio” of the Second Vatican Council and expresses the way in which the Church lives and fulfills her mission in history⁵. In this way, the Second Vatican Council overcomes reductionist understandings of the Church and reveals its deepest foundation: the Church is like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race (cf. LG 1). Similarly, J. Ratzinger notes that the Church as “communio” has its origin in the Eucharistic and Trinitarian foundation of Christian existence⁶.

1.2. A Sacramental Sources of Unity

The unity of the Church becomes concrete in the sacraments, especially in Baptism and the Eucharist. Baptism incorporates believers into the one Body of

⁴ Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis on Care for our Common Home*, Trnava 2015, § 240.

⁵ Medzinárodná teologická komisia, *Synodalita v živote a poslaní Cirkvi*, <https://www.kbs.sk/obsah/sekcia/h/dokumenty-a-vyhlasenia/p/dokumenty-vatikanskych-uradov/c/synodalita-v-zivote-a-v-misii-cirkvi> (accessed: June 1, 2026).

⁶ J. Ratzinger, *Called to Communion. Understanding the Church Today*, San Francisco 1996, p. 44-53.

Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:13) and creates an ontological bond among them. The Council explicitly develops this reality in *Lumen gentium*, where it states that through Baptism believers are reborn as children of God and made sharers in the divine nature (cf. LG 40). This incorporation is not merely symbolic, but ontological – it creates a real communion in Christ.

The Eucharist, as the source and summit of the whole Christian life, both builds and expresses this unity (cf. LG 11). *Lumen gentium* draws here from the constitution on the sacred liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which affirms that the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time, it is the source from which all her power flows (cf. SC 10).

The Eucharist is not merely an individual act of devotion, but an event of communion. In it, the Church is continually born as unity in Christ. As the Council reminds us, the participation of the faithful in the liturgy should be full, conscious and active (cf. SC 14), which points to the communal character of celebration.

An important dimension of sacramental unity is also emphasized in the decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, which points out that Baptism is the foundation of the unity of all Christians (cf. UR 22). The sacramental basis of communion therefore transcends the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church and opens the horizon of universal brotherhood.

1.3. A Spirituality of Communion

John Paul II, in his apostolic letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, noted the need for a spirituality of communion as an indispensable prerequisite for the life of the Church⁷. This spirituality, however, directly follows conciliar teaching, which calls for interior conversion and the renewal of relationships. The pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* reminds us that interpersonal relationships should be formed by justice and love (cf. GS 26), while the Church should be the “leaven” and, as it were, the soul of human society (cf. GS 40). The spirituality of communion is therefore not merely an intra-ecclesial matter but also has a social dimension.

The decree on the apostolate of the laity *Apostolicam actuositatem* affirms that all believers are called to actively participate in building communion (cf. AA 2-3). Such participation presupposes a spiritual attitude of openness, cooperation, and mutual respect.

The spirituality of communion therefore includes the ability to see the other as a gift, to bear one another’s burdens (cf. Gal 6:2), and to overcome egoism and individualism⁸. Without this spirituality, synodality is reduced to a formal process without real spiritual content. The spirituality of communion is an indispensable condition for authentic synodality because it enables discernment guided by the Holy Spirit and the overcoming of the individualism of

⁷ John Paul II, *Apostolic letter Novo millennio ineunte*, Trnava 2002, § 42.

⁸ Ibidem, § 43.

contemporary culture⁹. In this way, the Second Vatican Council indirectly prepared the ground for today's understanding of synodality by emphasizing the inner interconnectedness of all members of the People of God and their shared dignity and responsibility.

The Second Vatican Council provides a solid theological foundation for understanding the Church as communion. The Trinitarian origin, sacramental realization, and spiritual dimension of communion form a unified whole that defines the ontological nature of the Church. This understanding simultaneously opens the way toward a synodal mode of life, which is not a novelty but an organic development of conciliar ecclesiology.

2. Co-Responsibility as an Ecclesiological Principle

Co-responsibility in the Church cannot be understood merely as a practical need for more effective functioning, but above all as a theological category rooted in the very nature of the Church. In this respect, the Second Vatican Council represents a decisive moment, as it systematically developed the understanding of the Church as the People of God journeying through history, in which all the baptized share in its life and mission. This new awareness did not arise in discontinuity with tradition, but as its deepening and actualization in the context of the “signs of the times”, which the Church discerns under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

2.1. The Discovery of the Laity in the Second Vatican Council

One of the most significant contributions of the Council is the systematic elaboration of the identity of the laity. The key document is the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium*, especially its fourth chapter (cf. LG 30-38), which represents the first comprehensive magisterial treatment of the theology of the laity. The Council begins from a fundamental ecclesiological thesis: the Church is above all the “People of God” (cf. LG 9), in which there exists a fundamental equality of all the baptized in dignity, though not in functions. On this basis, the position of the laity is understood – not as “non-clergy”, but as full participants in the life of the Church.

Lumen gentium affirms their participation in Christ's threefold office (priestly, prophetic, and kingly) and their specific vocation in the world. The laity are called to seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God (cf. LG 31). This emphasis represents a fundamental shift compared to previous periods, in which reflection on the laity appeared more implicitly than systematically.

An important complement is the decree *Apostolicam actuositatem*, which develops the concrete form of the apostolate of the laity. It notes that their

⁹ Commissione di Spiritualità, *Per una spiritualità della sinodalità*, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/spirituality/Spirituality-of-Synodality-A4-Orizzontale-IT.pdf> (accessed: June 1, 2026).

engagement is not delegated by the hierarchy but arises directly from the sacramental foundation of Baptism and Confirmation. The apostolate of the laity is therefore an integral part of the Church's mission, not merely an addition to it (cf. AA 1).

The Council also reflects on the concrete historical conditions of the modern world – the growing autonomy of social structures and the complexity of cultural and social life – and shows that precisely in these areas the laity have an irreplaceable role. K. Rahner interpreted the Council as the beginning of a “world Church” in which the laity assume a new responsibility for evangelization in a pluralistic world. It is therefore a theological recognition of their mission, not merely a pragmatic response to the needs of the time¹⁰.

Among the significant conciliar texts in this area is also the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*, which opens the Church to the world and highlights its solidarity with the joys and hopes of humanity. It is precisely here that the laity appear as privileged bearers of this dialogue, since they live in the midst of the world and its structures (cf. GS 1).

2.2. An Ecclesiology of Gift and Complementarity

Post-conciliar magisterial teaching develops the understanding of the Church as a communion of gifts, whose basis is already present in conciliar ecclesiology. *Lumen gentium* speaks about the diversity of charisms distributed by the Holy Spirit to the whole People of God for the common good (cf. LG 12). This perspective leads to the so-called “ecclesiology of gift”, in which the different states of life – laity, clergy, consecrated persons – are understood not in opposition, but in a complementary relationship. Diversity of functions does not imply inequality of dignity, but diversity of services within the one Body of Christ.

As John Paul II affirms, the different states of life are so related among themselves that they are ordered one to another¹¹. The hierarchy ensures unity and continuity of apostolic tradition, while the laity bring the Gospel into the world as “leaven”. This complementary relationship already has its basis in the Council's vision: pastors are to recognize the dignity and responsibility of the laity, make use of their advice and experience, and at the same time leave them freedom for initiative (cf. LG 37). In this way, a dynamic of mutual cooperation is created that transcends a model of one-sided dependence and moves toward a model of walking together – that is, toward synodality. Even before the Council, Y. Congar pointed out that the renewal of the Church requires the rehabilitation of the laity as active subjects of the life and mission of the Church¹².

2.3. The Practical Dimension of Co-Responsibility

Co-responsibility, as outlined by the Second Vatican Council and further developed by post-conciliar magisterial teaching, is concretely manifested in the

¹⁰ K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations XX*, New York 1981, p. 77-79.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, op. cit., § 20.

¹² Y. Congar, *Jalons pour une théologie du laïcat*, Paris 1953, p. 8.

life of the Church: in common discernment (“sensus fidei” and dialogue between pastors and the faithful), in active participation in the life of the Church (liturgy, pastoral ministry, mission), in the initiative of the laity in various areas of society, and in cooperation among different states of life.

These elements already have their roots in the conciliar documents. For example, *Apostolicam actuositatem* emphasizes the need for organized forms of cooperation (cf. AA 20), while *Ad gentes* points to the irreplaceable role of the laity in missionary territories (cf. AG 21).

Co-responsibility is therefore not limited to intra-ecclesial structures but also has a distinctly missionary dimension: the laity are called to transform the world from within, in areas such as politics, economics, culture, and family life. It is therefore not merely a functional division of tasks, but a profound theological reality arising from Baptism. Baptism establishes not only a personal relationship with Christ, but also mutual responsibility within His Body – the Church. As post-conciliar teaching notes, the entire People of God is the subject of mission, and therefore co-responsibility is a common vocation of all the baptized¹³.

The Second Vatican Council brought about a fundamental shift in the understanding of the laity: from an implicit presence to an explicit theological reflection on their identity and mission. Thanks to documents such as *Lumen gentium*, *Apostolicam actuositatem*, and *Gaudium et spes*, the way was opened toward understanding the Church as a communion of gifts in which all bear differentiated, yet real, co-responsibility for its life and mission. This foundation became the starting point for the further development of the Church’s synodal consciousness today.

3. Mission as the Essence of the Church

Reflection on the missionary character of the Church after the Second Vatican Council demonstrates a clear continuity: mission is not merely one of the Church’s activities but expresses its very identity. The Council brought about a fundamental shift in understanding the Church as the “People of God”, who as a whole are called to participate in Christ’s mission. This awareness was subsequently developed in the teaching of the popes and became the basis for today’s understanding of the synodal and missionary Church, in which all the baptized share co-responsibility for evangelization.

3.1. Evangelization as the Identity of the Church

In his exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Paul VI emphasizes that the Church exists in order to evangelize¹⁴. Mission is therefore not a secondary activity, but the very essence of the Church. However, this statement already has deep roots in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. The dogmatic constitution *Lumen*

¹³ John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, op. cit., § 32.

¹⁴ Paul VI, *Apostolic exhortation Evangelii nuntiandi*, Trnava 1976, § 14.

gentium presents the Church as the sacrament of salvation, that is, the instrument through which God communicates His grace to the world (cf. LG 1). The missionary dimension thus belongs to the Church's inner nature. The decree *Ad gentes* explicitly states that the Church is missionary by her very nature because she originates from the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the history of salvation (cf. AG 2).

Evangelization therefore includes a comprehensive process: proclamation – acceptance of faith – sacramental incorporation – apostolic activity. The Council simultaneously affirms that this process does not concern only individuals, but the entire People of God. Every baptized person shares in Christ's prophetic mission and is therefore called to proclaim the Gospel not only by word, but also by the witness of life. A. Dulles notes that the missionary identity of the Church cannot be separated from her sacramental character: the Church is simultaneously both a sign and an instrument of God's action in the world¹⁵.

3.2. The New Evangelization

John Paul II develops the concept of the new evangelization, which is addressed especially to secularized societies. It involves new ardor, new methods, and new expressions¹⁶. This emphasis also has its roots in the conciliar vision of the relationship between the Church and the world. The pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* points out the solidarity of the Church with humanity and her vocation to read the "signs of the times" (cf. GS 4). Evangelization therefore cannot take place in isolation, but must enter into concrete historical, cultural, and social conditions.

The exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* points to the need for the inculturation of the Gospel – that is, its rooting in various cultures without losing its essence¹⁷. The new evangelization is therefore not a new content, but a new way of communicating the same Gospel in a changing world. T. Halík points out that the new evangelization in a secularized environment must above all engage in dialogue with the searching person and his or her existential questions¹⁸.

3.3. The Mission of the Laity in the World

The laity are called to evangelize the world from within, in areas such as politics, economics, culture, and family life. This emphasis again directly follows the Second Vatican Council. *Lumen gentium* and the decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* systematically developed the identity of the laity and their proper mission in the world (cf. LG 31). The laity possess a "secular character" – their specific vocation is to order temporal realities according to God and to act as leaven in the midst of the world (cf. AA 13).

¹⁵ A. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, New York 2002, p. 66-68.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Encyclical Redemptoris missio*, Trnava 1997, § 3.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ T. Halík, *Odpoledne křesťanství*, Praha 2021, p. 28.

The Council affirms that this mission arises from the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, which give the laity participation in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly office (cf. LG 34-36). It is therefore not a task delegated by the hierarchy, but a proper vocation that belongs to their identity. In this way, their specific calling to be "the salt of the earth and the light of the world" (cf. Mt 5:13-14) is fulfilled. At the same time, it becomes evident that the mission of the Church is realized above all through the everyday lives of believers who bring the Gospel into the concrete structures of society.

The Second Vatican Council represents a key source for understanding mission as the essence of the Church. Its documents (*Lumen gentium*, *Ad gentes*, *Gaudium et spes*, *Apostolicam actuositatem*) create the theological foundation upon which all post-conciliar teaching on evangelization, the new evangelization, and the role of the laity is built. Mission thus emerges as the common vocation of the entire People of God, realized in communion and co-responsibility among all the baptized.

4. Continuity of the Post-Conciliar Magisterium

The Second Vatican Council represents a key hermeneutical point for understanding the contemporary teaching of the Church on synodality, communion, and mission. Its documents do not signify a rupture in tradition, but rather its deepening and reformulation within the context of the modern world. The post-conciliar magisterium of the popes systematically builds upon and develops these impulses while preserving the inner continuity of Church teaching. In this perspective, synodality may be understood as the organic maturation of the Church's ecclesiological consciousness, the foundations of which were laid precisely at the Council, and which are gradually being concretized in the life of the People of God.

4.1. Hermeneutics of Continuity

Benedict XVI affirmed that the correct interpretation of the Council must proceed from a hermeneutic of continuity rather than discontinuity. Synodality is therefore not a novelty, but a development of the conciliar vision¹⁹. This hermeneutic is grounded in the fundamental conciliar documents, which represent key sources for understanding the present magisterium:

- The dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* brings a fundamental shift in ecclesiology by understanding the Church primarily as the "People of God". It emphasizes the common dignity of all the baptized and their participation in Christ's threefold office. It is precisely here that we find the foundation for the later development of synodality as the common journey of all believers.

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, *Christmas greetings to the Members of the Roman Curia and Prelature*, December 22, 2005, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman- (accessed: June 1, 2026).

- The pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* opens the Church to the world and highlights her solidarity with humanity. This emphasis on dialogue and presence in the world is later manifested in the missionary and synodal orientation of the Church.
- The decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* systematically develops the apostolate of the laity and their co-responsibility for the mission of the Church. It confirms that the layperson is not merely a recipient of pastoral care, but an active subject of evangelization.
- The decree *Ad gentes* on missionary activity shows that mission belongs to the very essence of the Church. This emphasis later became one of the principal lines of post-conciliar magisterial teaching, especially in Paul VI and John Paul II.
- The constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* points out the active participation of all the faithful in the liturgy, thereby fostering awareness of co-responsibility and participation in the life of the Church.

These documents create a unified theological foundation that the post-conciliar magisterium continually develops. As the analyzed texts demonstrate, the emphasis on the involvement of all the baptized in the mission of the Church repeatedly returns and deepens after the Council in various historical contexts. The hermeneutic of continuity therefore means understanding the Council not as the beginning of a “new Church”, but as a renewed awareness of her identity. Benedict XVI further points out that authentic reform of the Church takes place in the continuous growth of the one subject-Church, which remains identical throughout history²⁰. In this light, synodality appears as a concrete way of realizing this identity: the Church as a communion of gifts, where the diversity of ministries and charisms is united within the one People of God.

4.2. Pope Francis and Synodality

Pope Francis presents synodality as a constitutive element of the Church. His emphasis on a “Church which goes forth” highlights the missionary character of communion. This approach is deeply rooted in the conciliar sources. Francis builds particularly upon the vision of the Church as the People of God (*Lumen gentium*), on the universal vocation to mission (*Ad gentes*), and on openness to the world (*Gaudium et spes*).

In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, he develops the conciliar idea of the missionary Church into a concrete pastoral paradigm: the Church must not remain closed in upon herself but should “go forth” to the peripheries²¹. This focus directly continues the post-conciliar teaching on evangelization, which has continually deepened from Paul VI up to the present day.

For Francis, synodality also means the practical realization of the co-responsibility of all the baptized. It represents a concrete fulfillment of the conciliar

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Francis, *Apostolic exhortation Evangelii gaudium*, Trnava 2014, § 20.

vision of the laity as active participants in the life and mission of the Church, not merely passive recipients. His emphasis on listening, discernment, and walking together demonstrates that synodality is not merely an organizational principle, but a spiritual process. In it, the tradition of the Church encounters the contemporary challenges of the world while remaining faithful to its origins. In this context, D. Vitali points out that the synodal Church is not merely a structural model, but above all a spiritual and ecclesiological way of life of the People of God²².

The continuity of the post-conciliar magisterium demonstrates that the Second Vatican Council remains a permanent point of reference for understanding the identity and mission of the Church. Its documents provide the theological foundation that the popes after the Council have gradually developed. Within this horizon, synodality appears as an organic fruit of the conciliar renewal – as the manner in which the Church today lives out her communion, co-responsibility, and mission.

5. Challenges of the Present Time

The contemporary Church is entering a period of profound cultural and social transformations that fundamentally influence both the experience of faith and its transmission. These challenges are not merely external difficulties but also represent a call to a deeper internal renewal of the Church's identity. In this context, the teaching of the Second Vatican Council acquires particular significance, as it offers theological foundations for the renewal of the Church's life as a community that is simultaneously missionary and synodal.

The conciliar documents – especially *Lumen gentium*, *Gaudium et spes*, and *Apostolicam actuositatem* – point out that the Church is the People of God journeying through history, called to read the “signs of the times” and respond to them in the light of the Gospel. It is precisely within this perspective that contemporary challenges can be understood as an opportunity for renewing the Church's missionary mission and deepening the co-responsibility of all believers.

The contemporary Church faces numerous challenges: secularization, individualism, the loss of a sense of community and especially religious indifference. These phenomena affect the very understanding of the human person and his or her relationship with God and with others. The pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* already pointed to the tension between the rapid development of the world and the spiritual maturation of the human person, warning that without God humanity closes in upon itself and loses orientation (cf. GS 5). In this sense, contemporary secularization may be understood as a deepening of this crisis, leading to the weakening of religious consciousness and the relegation of faith to the private sphere.

²² D. Vitali, *La Chiesa particolare soggetto del processo sinodale*, “Theologica Leoniana” 11 (2022), p. 50.

Individualism, one of the dominant features of contemporary culture, stands in tension with the conciliar understanding of the Church as “communio” – a community. J. Casanova has previously pointed out that secularization in Central Europe leads to a weakening of the communal practice of faith and to the privatization of religion²³. The dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* emphasizes that God does not save human beings in isolation, but as part of a people whom He gathers into unity (cf. LG 9). The loss of a sense of community therefore represents not only a social problem, but also a theological challenge, because it weakens the very experience of the Church as the sacrament of unity. According to J. Löffeld, religious indifference is a central characteristic of late modern societies: many people today not only lack a connection to the Church, but often no longer have any real interest in the question of God at all. Löffeld describes this phenomenon as “apatheism”. By this he does not simply mean classical atheism, but rather an attitude in which religion has become irrelevant to one’s own life. People do not experience an existential sense of loss when God or the Church are absent. He therefore speaks of a form of “religious indifference” or “religious apathy”²⁴.

The decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* simultaneously points out that the response to these challenges cannot be entrusted solely to the hierarchy but requires the active participation of all the baptized (cf. AA 1). The laity are called to bring the Gospel into the concrete areas of worldly life and thereby contribute to its transformation from within.

Missionary-synodal conversion represents a response to these challenges because it renews the communal dimension of faith, the active participation of all believers, and the missionary orientation of the Church. This conversion builds upon the conciliar understanding of the Church as the pilgrim People of God, in which all believers participate in Christ’s mission. The synodal dimension points out walking together, discernment, and co-responsibility, while the missionary dimension reminds us that the Church exists for the proclamation of the Gospel to the world.

Within this horizon, it can be said that the challenges of the present time are not merely a crisis, but also a “kairos” – a time of grace in which the Church is invited to rediscover her conciliar heritage and to realize it within new historical conditions.

Conclusion

The missionary-synodal Church is not a new model, but an authentic development of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Its fundamental documents – above all the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium*, the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*, and the decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* – laid the

²³ J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago 1994, p. 35-39.

²⁴ J. Löffeld, *Wenn nichts fehlt, wo Gott fehlt*, Freiburg 2024, p. 34-38.

foundations for understanding the Church as the People of God journeying through history in the unity of diverse gifts, ministries, and charisms.

The constitution *Lumen gentium* represents a key source for contemporary synodal ecclesiology. It develops the image of the Church as communion (“communio”), in which all the baptized participate in Christ’s priestly, prophetic, and kingly office. This emphasis on the shared dignity of believers forms the theological foundation of co-responsibility, which later became one of the pillars of synodality.

The decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* further concretizes this vision by systematically elaborating the apostolate of the laity. It affirms that the mission of the Church is not exclusively the task of the hierarchy, but of the entire People of God. The laity are called to act as “leaven” in the world, transforming temporal realities according to the Gospel, thereby extending the mission of the Church into all areas of human life.

Equally important is the decree *Ad gentes*, which offers a theological deepening of the missionary identity of the Church. It emphasizes that the Church is missionary by her very nature because she originates from the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit. This Trinitarian foundation of mission demonstrates that evangelization is not merely an activity, but an ontological dimension of the Church. The entire post-conciliar magisterium builds upon this line of thought, repeatedly reminding all the baptized of their universal vocation to participate in mission. At the same time, the liturgical constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* highlights the active participation of all the faithful in the liturgy, thereby fostering awareness of co-responsibility for the life of the Church. Liturgy thus becomes not only a place of celebration, but also of formation for the synodal People of God.

Finally, the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* opens the Church to the world and emphasizes her solidarity with all humanity. This document demonstrates that the mission of the Church takes place within concrete historical conditions and includes dialogue with the world, service to humanity, and the search for the common good.

These conciliar sources create a unified theological framework in which communion, co-responsibility, and mission mutually condition and complement one another. It is precisely from this synthesis that the present call for missionary-synodal conversion emerges, continually deepened in the teaching of the post-conciliar popes. The future of the Church therefore depends on the ability to realize this vision in the concrete lives of believers. Synodality thus represents not merely a theological category, but a concrete mode of the Church’s existence, enabling the conciliar vision of the People of God to become a living reality in the twenty-first century.

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