

Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum and Pro Oriente Foundation (eds.), *Listening to the East: Synodality in Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Church Traditions*, Collana ut unum sint 4, Vatican: Liberia Editrice Vaticana 2023, 667 p., ISBN 978-88-266-0838-9

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Thanks to the Roman Catholic Church, there is now a compendium of the Eastern Church – Orthodox and Oriental – with a wide-ranging coverage of the contemporary understanding of synodality. It is inspired by Pope Francis' appreciation of Eastern Christianity and the wider ecumenical aspirations of the Roman Catholic Church, as expressed in the four conferences on synodality held in Rome in 2022 and 2023. Two of these focused on the Eastern churches: the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Church. The present volume brings together the extensive material resulting from these conferences. It includes the keynote addresses, other presentations, commentaries and workshop outputs from the conferences, as well as the official greetings. Almost ninety authors from various local Orthodox and Oriental Churches and from the Roman Catholic Church are represented. The authors are bishops, priests, monks, nuns and lay theologians, most of whom are from or are currently active in Europe, the United States and the Middle East.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the Orthodox Church, the second with the Oriental Church. The section on the Orthodox Church is structured around three themes that open up the perspective of synodality: communion, participation and mission. The section on the Oriental Church, on the other hand, is organised according to ecclesiastical structures, so that synodality is dealt with separately in the context of each member of the church family. The different structures of the sections reflect the differences within the church families. Orthodox local churches are, at least theoretically, more coherent than the Oriental church family, whose members do not share a common ecclesiastical structure. This division provides a natural opportunity to include the Assyrian Church of the East, whose doctrine differs from that of the other Oriental churches.

There are, however, lines that connect the church families and run through the whole. Alongside the theological-historical presentations (of which there are of course some in the book), synodality is examined

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mainly through four lenses: synodality with regard to women, youth, laity and monasticism. What makes the book interesting and relevant to the needs of churches and readers is the fact that the examination of synodality through these lenses takes place largely in the present day and in the light of the needs of the lived reality of the churches. It is therefore a work strongly anchored in the present. Naturally, these topics are discussed in conversation with canonical and patristic material on the one hand and in an assessment of developments in the twentieth century on the other.

The result is a critique, from different parts and levels of the Eastern Church, of the prevailing application of synodality in the churches. The criticism is sometimes sharper, sometimes softer. In the case of the Orthodox Churches, the problems with the implementation of synodality are related in part to the execution of local church governance and the wider inter-Orthodox context. A reader familiar with the reality of the Orthodox churches can fully agree with Metropolitan Job of Pisidia when he states that “the practice of synodality at the local level, at the level of the eparchy, is almost non-existent in most Orthodox Churches where the administration of the diocese remains the exclusive task of the local bishop and his closer collaborators.” With regard to the global connection, the Metropolitan aptly states that there are “difficulties to implement synodality at the universal level in the Orthodox Church today” (p. 33). After the divisive effect of the Russian war against Ukraine from 2022 onwards, it is no longer possible to speak of difficulties alone, but it is appropriate to honestly state that universal synodality is not currently being implemented in the Orthodox Church. Already the Pan-Orthodox Council of Crete in 2016 showed that the Orthodox Church is in practice unable to express the principled internal unity that the members of the church family proclaim and perhaps feel they share.

At several points, the work shows the contradiction between the principle of inclusion in the theory of synodality and the exclusion in practice in the life of the churches. This is manifested in the limited or non-existent opportunities for women and young people to participate in church governance and decision-making on common issues. Alongside the theological conceptualisation, the book could have taken a sociological approach. It would have been possible to reflect more deeply on why equal treatment of different groups of people does not take place in today’s Orthodox and Oriental Church. The question is justified in particular in relation to the practice of unequal opportunities for lay people to participate in the life of the Church on the basis of whether they are women or

men. At the same time, the work shows the important role that women and young people have played in the life of the Eastern churches from the twentieth century to the present day.

The question of applying synodality to full members of the Church of different ages and genders is also theological in nature. Cyrille Sollogoub, the president of the *Russian Student Christian Movement* and the teacher of theological subjects at the *Institut Saint-Jean* (Brussels), insightfully points this out when he states that “when we speak of youth movements in the Church, youth is considered as a state of mind, a way of being, a spirit, rather than a group defined by an age limitation” (p. 192). In this sense, youth is a spirit of constant renewal in the Church, expressed as freedom, courage, dynamism, the desire for dialogue, the capacity for change and innocence. The reader is left wondering whether, in accordance with its own theological self-understanding, this is not the way the Church should be among all its members and at all levels of its structure.

One can’t help but ask in what way the spirit of youthfulness could be channelled upwards from the church members to the top of the hierarchy. The question seems to be a matter of fate if the Church is to maintain its sociological-existential relevance among its members and in society in the future. One answer to this question can be found in the perspective offered by the Syrian layperson living in the Netherlands, Salaam Somi, who emphasises the need for interaction: the good development of the church requires synodality, in which the church leadership recognises and accepts the potential for change that arises from the tradition-bound life of the congregation. Somi calls for enlightened and courageous leaders (p. 383). The question (and problem) of synodality is intertwined with the question of authority. After reading the work, I was left wondering to what extent the practical problems and challenges of living out ecclesiological principles in contemporary Eastern Christianity are the result of the caution and lack of courage of church leaders. For them, to be bold in promoting synodality would mean in practice “lowering” oneself to the level of others and exposing one’s own authority to criticism.

An ecumenical dimension also occasionally appears in the book, where the question of synodality is mirrored by the themes of participation in the ecumenical movement and the common witness of Christians. This perspective takes us back to the roots of the compendium. On the occasion of the 2022 conference, Pope Francis stated the following about the ecumenical vision of the Roman Catholic Church: “The journey of synodality undertaken by the Catholic Church is and must be ecumenical, just as the ecumenical journey is synodal.” (p. 14). Applying this

idea to the Orthodox context, one may ask to what extent the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Church are in practice committed to the principle of synodality that they cherish, also ecumenically. Personally, I would see that reflection on more far-reaching ecumenical perspectives will only seem meaningful if the Eastern churches are able to overcome their present internal and mutual divisions by promoting synodality in their own structures and life realities.