

**“IT IS THE COUNCIL’S DECISION”:
SYNODALITY, CLERICAL AUTHORITY,
AND THE TERMINATION OF LAY MISSION
PARTNERS IN A CLERGY-LED RELIGIOUS
CONGREGATION**

NOEL G. JUDITH JR.

This paper offers a contextual theological reflection on synodality and ecclesial decision-making through a case study involving the closure of a pastoral office and the termination of lay missionaries by a clergy-led religious congregation in the Philippines. Drawing on narratives, documents, and focus group discussions provided by the affected lay mission partners, the study examines how hierarchical authority was exercised in ways that bypassed dialogue, participation, and communal discernment. Using the synodal framework of communion, participation, and mission articulated in the recent Synod on Synodality, the paper analyzes the tension between canonical authority and baptismal co-responsibility. The recurring justification—“It is the council’s decision”—is interpreted as indicative of a clericalist paradigm that marginalizes lay co-responsibility and undermines synodal praxis. The study argues that while decisions may be canonically and legally valid, they can remain pastorally and theologically deficient. It concludes by calling for structural, formational, and spiritual reforms toward synodal governance and genuine partnership with lay mission collaborators.

Keywords: Clericalism; Ecclesial Decision-Making; Labor Case; Lay Missionaries; Religious Congregation; Synodality

INTRODUCTION

SYNODALITY AND ECCLESIAL DECISION-MAKING

The synodal movement in the Church embodies both the beauty and the necessity of becoming genuinely responsive to the voices and experiences of the faithful.¹ By listening even to dissenting voices, the Church allows the many facets of the People of God to surface—facets that thrive in a rich diversity of gifts, contexts, and experiences.² This diversity, as the Second Vatican Council affirms, is not a threat to unity but a gift that each local Church offers to the others;³ this diversity is further discussed within the Asian ecclesial context.⁴ The synodal dynamic enables the Church to value and deepen this diversity without reducing it to uniformity, fostering a communion that respects differences while seeking shared discernment.⁵

Synodality is likewise necessary because it provides a concrete space for co-responsibility in the life and mission of the Church. By encouraging broad participation, synodality revitalizes ecclesial mission and affirms that all the baptized have a role to play in discerning the movement of the Spirit.⁶ However, tensions

1. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (March 2, 2018), paragraph 68, [vatican.va](https://www.vatican.va).

2. Synod of Bishops, General Secretariat, "How to Be a Synodal Church in Mission?" *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Session (October 2024) (Vatican City: Holy See, July 9, 2024), part I, paragraphs 4, 8, 23, [vatican.va](https://www.vatican.va).

3. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church], November 21, 1964, paragraph 13, [vatican.va](https://www.vatican.va).

4. Jonathan Y. Tan, "From 'Ad Gentes' to 'Active Integral Evangelization': The Reception of Vatican II's Mission Theology in Asia," *Asia Pacific Mission Studies* 1, no. 1 (2019): 35–68.

5. XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission – Final Document* (Vatican City: Holy See, October 26, 2024), paragraphs 38–39, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG~Documento-finale.pdf.

6. Synod of Bishops, General Secretariat, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission – Vademecum* for the Synod on

inevitably arise when synodal aspirations encounter established patterns of hierarchical authority. This tension becomes particularly evident in ecclesial decision-making, where authority, participation, and accountability intersect.⁷ Decisions affecting communities, ministries, and persons reveal whether synodality is genuinely operative or merely rhetorical. Pope Francis underscores this point in his address to the Roman Curia, where he warns against closed, self-referential exercises of authority.⁸

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study examines a concrete instance where synodal decision-making appears to have been compromised: the closure of a pastoral office and the subsequent termination of lay missionaries by a clergy-led religious congregation in the Philippines. The pastoral office, which had been operating for more than two decades, served as a lay pastoral arm of the congregation and was deeply involved in developing local churches. Its sudden closure, carried out without prior dialogue or extensive consultation, resulted in the termination of lay mission partners who were both legally employed under Philippine labor law,⁹ and pastorally engaged in the congregation's mission.

The scarcity of official narratives from the religious congregation constrains this study to the accounts and documents

Synodality (Vatican City: Holy See, September 2021), 9–11, 13, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/vademecum/en_vade.pdf.

7. Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum Laboris* 2024, part I, pars. 4, 8, 23.

8. Pope Francis, “Address to the Roman Curia for the Exchange of Christmas Greetings,” December 21, 2017, The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/december/documents/papa-francesco_20171221_curia-romana.html.

9. Presidential Decree No. 442, As Amended [Labor Code of the Philippines], Article 298, officialgazette.gov.ph.

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provided by the affected lay missionaries. Nevertheless, their narratives consistently point to the absence of communal discernment and participatory processes prior to the decision. This absence is strikingly captured in the repeated response given by a member of the provincial council when questioned about the rationale behind the decision: "*It is the council's decision.*" This phrase, invoked as a definitive justification, signals a mode of authority that forecloses dialogue and resists accountability.¹⁰

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine how clerical authority operates vis-à-vis synodality in ecclesial decision-making, particularly in contexts involving lay mission partners. Using this case as a point of departure, the study analyzes the tension between canonical authority and baptismal co-responsibility,¹¹ and interrogates how decisions that may be legally or canonically valid can nonetheless fall short of synodal, pastoral, and theological integrity.¹²

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study contributes to the growing field of contextual theology on synodality by grounding theological reflection in a lived ecclesial experience marked by conflict, exclusion, and wounded relationships.¹³ Rather than treating synodality as an abstract ideal, the paper examines its practical implications within the governance

10. XVI Ordinary General Assembly, Final Document 2024, pars. 38–39.

11. Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* [Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World], December 30, 1988, paragraphs 25, 27, vatican.va.

12. XVI Ordinary General Assembly, Final Document 2024, pars. 38–39.

13. General Secretariat of the Synod, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission – Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality: Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches (Vatican City: Holy See, September 7, 2021), 8, 28–29, 39–41, synod.va.

structures of a religious congregation, thereby testing synodal principles against concrete institutional practice.

Moreover, the study has significant implications for the governance of religious congregations, particularly those that collaborate closely with lay missionaries and pastoral workers. It raises critical questions about authority, transparency, participation, and accountability in ecclesial leadership, especially when decisions have profound pastoral, emotional, and economic consequences for lay collaborators.

Finally, the paper is relevant to ongoing discussions on lay-clerical partnership and ecclesial labor ethics. By highlighting the intersection of mission, employment, and ecclesial belonging, the study challenges purely transactional approaches to lay employment in Church institutions and calls for more genuinely synodal forms of partnership rooted in shared baptism, mission, and discernment.¹⁴

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, contextual theological case study design.¹⁵ It is qualitative in that it seeks to understand meanings, interpretations, and experiences as narrated by

14. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005), part III (“Workplace Administration”)

15. Helen Cameron, “Theological Action Research,” in *Messy Methods in Researching Religion*, ed. Linda Woodhead, Louisa Cadman, and Nicole Graham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), 44–54, <https://doi.org/10.1093/9780191790355.003.0005>.

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participants rather than to measure variables or test hypotheses.¹⁶ It is contextual because theological reflection emerges from a concrete ecclesial situation situated within a particular socio-pastoral and institutional setting.¹⁷ As a theological case study, the research engages a specific ecclesial event in order to generate insights that may illuminate broader questions concerning synodality, authority, and ecclesial governance.

The study is grounded in theological reflection informed by lived experience, particularly the experiences of lay missionaries directly affected by ecclesial decision-making. These experiences are treated as *loci theologici*—sites where faith, power, and ecclesial practice intersect and invite critical theological interpretation.¹⁸ Analytically, the study employs a synodal framework of communion, participation, and mission as articulated in *Lumen Gentium* and the *Instrumentum Laboris*. This framework serves as the primary theological lens for examining how authority is exercised, how participation is enabled or restricted, and how ecclesial mission is understood and enacted within the decision-making processes under study.

Case Description

The case under investigation involves a clergy-led religious congregation operating in the Philippines, which established a pastoral office that functioned as its lay pastoral arm. For over two decades, this pastoral office engaged in various forms of church-building ministries, working closely with local communities and diocesan structures. Its mission was oriented toward pastoral

16. John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009), 4.

17. Cameron, "Theological Action Research," 44.

18. *Ibid.*, 47-51.

accompaniment, formation, and service, in alignment with the congregation's charism and ecclesial commitments.

The pastoral office was staffed primarily by lay missionaries who were legally employed by the congregation. These lay mission partners held formal employment contracts and were integrated into the congregation's pastoral mission, occupying a hybrid position that combined professional labor with ecclesial vocation. Their work was not peripheral but central to the congregation's pastoral presence and outreach.

The case centers on the closure of this pastoral office and the subsequent termination of the lay missionaries, a decision carried out by the congregation's provincial council. The closure was implemented without prior communal discernment involving the lay mission partners, thereby raising critical questions about synodality, authority, and participation in ecclesial decision-making.¹⁹

Sources of Data

Given the absence of access to official internal deliberations of the religious congregation, this study relies on confidential materials and narratives provided by the affected lay missionaries. The primary sources of data include:

- Termination letters, which formally communicated the decision to end the employment of the lay missionaries.

19. The data regarding the history of the lay pastoral arm, the permanent employment status of its staff, and the decision-making process of the council were gathered through research fieldwork conducted from March to June 2024. Primary data consists of semi-structured interviews conducted by the author with six former lay missionaries belonging to the affected group. Contextual data regarding the administrative perspectives of the provincial council were gathered indirectly through a friendly colloquy with two council representatives. To maintain institutional and personal confidentiality, all participants have been anonymized.

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These documents were anonymized to protect identities and sensitive information.

- Subsequent position letters and email narratives, wherein lay missionaries articulated their responses, reflections, and appeals following their termination.
- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted among the lay missionaries, which provided collective narratives, shared interpretations, and dialogical reflections on the experience.
- Conversations with members of the provincial council, insofar as these were accessible through informal exchanges recounted by participants.
- Official newsletters released by the congregation, which offered public-facing narratives and contextual background relevant to the case.
- Letters from higher superiors and bishops, which contextualized the decision within broader ecclesial structures and lines of authority.

Together, these sources provide a multilayered perspective on the event, combining formal documents, personal narratives, and communal reflection.

Data Gathering Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Data were gathered through document collection, narrative sharing, and focus group discussions, all conducted with careful attention to ethical considerations. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the use of their narratives and documents for research purposes. Participation was strictly voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

To protect participants from potential harm, all identifying information was removed through anonymization, and confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the research process. Pseudonyms were used where necessary, and references to specific individuals or offices were generalized to prevent indirect identification.

All documents and transcripts were securely stored, with access limited to the researcher. Given the sensitive nature of the case and the power asymmetries involved, particular care was taken to ensure that participation did not expose the lay missionaries to further institutional or relational risk. The study was guided by the ethical principle of non-maleficence, seeking to honor the dignity, vulnerability, and agency of the participants.

Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations. Most significantly, it lacks an official narrative from the religious congregation, as access to internal deliberations, formal statements, or institutional records was unavailable. As a result, the analysis is based primarily on the perspectives and documents provided by the lay missionaries.

While this reliance necessarily reflects a partial viewpoint, it does not diminish the theological value of the study. Rather, it highlights the voices that are often marginalized or excluded from official ecclesial discourse. Nevertheless, the absence of the congregation's formal account limits the study's ability to present a fully dialogical reconstruction of the event, and should be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

RESULTS (FINDINGS)

In qualitative theological research, the results section presents the empirical and narrative findings that emerge from the data prior to theological interpretation or normative evaluation¹¹. The findings reported here are drawn from documentary evidence, focus group discussions, and participant narratives provided by the affected lay missionaries.

Description of the Events Leading to Termination

The data reveal a consistent sequence of events surrounding the closure of the pastoral office and the termination of the lay missionaries. Participants uniformly described the closure as sudden and unanticipated, with no prior consultation, communal discernment, or advance notice beyond what was legally required.²⁰

Termination letters were issued to the lay missionaries with only the minimum notice period mandated by labor law. These letters communicated the decision as final and non-negotiable. Participants reported that no substantive explanation for the closure of the pastoral office was provided in advance, nor were reasons clearly articulated in the termination documents themselves.

The findings further indicate the absence of any formal evaluation of the pastoral office's work prior to its closure. No performance review, pastoral assessment, or institutional audit was shared with the lay missionaries. Additionally, participants noted the lack of a transition plan, exit program, or pastoral

20. Labor Code of the Philippines, Presidential Decree No. 442, as amended, art. 298.

accompaniment process to assist them in responding to the loss of both employment and ministry.²¹

Dialogue between the lay missionaries and representatives of the religious congregation occurred only after the affected workers collectively protested the decision and sought assistance from the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). Even then, conversations were described as limited in scope and primarily procedural rather than deliberative.

Institutional Responses and Justifications

The institutional responses documented in letters, conversations, and public communications were characterized by a narrow set of recurring justifications. The most frequently cited reason for the closure was a “change of pastoral priority”, although this phrase was not accompanied by a detailed explanation of how such priorities were discerned or implemented.

Another prominent finding is the consistent assertion of council authority as the primary basis for the decision. When questioned by lay missionaries regarding the rationale for the closure or the process by which it was reached, representatives of the congregation repeatedly referred to the matter as “the council’s decision,” presenting it as definitive and beyond further discussion.

Some institutional communications included expressions of regret or apology regarding the process, particularly acknowledging the emotional impact of the decision on the lay missionaries. However, these apologies were limited to the manner of implementation and did not extend to the substance of the decision itself. There was no indication of willingness to reconsider, suspend, or rescind the closure of the pastoral office.

21. USCCB, 59-68.

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Finally, the data show a refusal to provide a more detailed or participatory explanation of the decision, despite repeated requests from the lay missionaries. The closure remained in effect, and no alternative arrangements or avenues for continued dialogue were formally established.

DISCUSSION

This section offers a theological discussion of the findings in light of synodality, authority, and ecclesial responsibility.²² While the previous section presented the events and institutional responses descriptively, this discussion critically evaluates how authority was exercised and how synodality was either enacted or undermined in the case under study.

Dual Identity of the Religious Congregation

A central theological tension emerging from this case is the dual identity of the religious congregation as both a civil entity and an ecclesial body. This duality complicates questions of responsibility, accountability, and discernment, particularly when decisions affect lay mission partners who inhabit both juridical and ecclesial spaces.²³

22. General Secretariat of the Synod, *Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session (October 2023): For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission (Vatican City: The Holy See, 2023), B 3, nos. 51–56, synod.va.

23. Sharon A. Euart, "The Relationship of Religious Institutes and Healthcare Ministries: Canonical and Juridical Challenges," *Health Progress* 87, no. 1 (2006): 14–19.

The Congregation as Civil Entity

As a civil entity, the religious congregation functions as an employer bound by labor laws and contractual obligations.²⁴ The lay missionaries were legally employed, with formal contracts and defined labor rights. The Labor law in the Philippines affirms that the termination of employment can only be effected if there is either a just cause or an authorized cause,²⁵ which in this case was contested by the lay missionaries. From this perspective of dual identity, even if legally executed, termination raised significant ethical and procedural questions. Compliance with the minimum requirements of labor law does not exhaust the moral obligations of an employer, especially when the employer is a faith-based institution whose mission explicitly includes justice, accompaniment, and care for persons.

The recourse to the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) underscores the legal ambiguity faced by lay missionaries who are simultaneously pastoral collaborators and employees. That dialogue only occurred after DOLE involvement suggests a reactive rather than proactive approach to justice. While the congregation maintained legal defensibility, the absence of transparent explanation, evaluation, or transitional support reflects a minimalist understanding of responsibility—one that prioritizes legal sufficiency over ethical and relational accountability.

24. Bishop Shinji Amari of Abiko Baptist Church v. Villafior, G.R. No. 224521, February 17, 2020 (Phil.), Lawphil Project, lawphil.net.

25. Labor Code, art. 294.

The Congregation as Ecclesial Entity

As an ecclesial entity, the religious congregation exercises canonical authority grounded in Church law and tradition.²⁶ Provincial councils possess legitimate authority to make decisions concerning governance and mission. However, canon law also distinguishes between consultative and deliberative processes, and it presumes that authority is exercised in the service of communion and discernment rather than unilateral control.²⁷

This prompts us to consider the impact of the Second Vatican Council and synodality on the congregation's interaction with the laity. The popes, especially Pius XI and XII, highlighted the importance of involving lay people in carrying out the Church's mission and ministry, expanding their roles to include the internal workings of the Church.²⁸

Initially, the bishops adopted a new self-understanding of the Church as the People of God. This marked a significant transition in the Church's perception, shifting from a strictly hierarchical model to one that highlights the role of all the faithful.

Furthermore, the Council emphasized that the entire people of God are responsible for fostering the unity of the Church and fulfilling its mission. It affirmed that the baptized "share a true equality

26. General Secretariat of the Synod, "Instrumentum laboris" for the Second Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 2024) (Vatican City: Holy See Press Office, 2024), nos. 8, 69–70.

27. Francis G. Morrissey, "Canon Law - Working with a Council," *Health Progress* 96, no. 4 (July–August 2015): 84–86, chausa.org.

28. Michael A. Fahey, "The Theology of the Laity," in *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook on Ecclesiology*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 74–77.

with regard to the dignity and the activity common to all in the building up of the body of Christ”²⁹

The Council also taught that Christ is the sole foundation for the common mission. According to the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, baptism into Christ Jesus enables all Christians to participate in Christ’s ministry and mission as prophets, priests, and kings, reflecting a theological development from a hierarchical model.³⁰

The Council acknowledged the valuable contributions of the laity to the whole Church. In the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*), the Decree encouraged the laity to exercise their freedom to speak the truth, always guided by justice and charity.³¹ The Council also advised pastors to “listen to the laity willingly, to consider their wishes in a fraternal spirit, and to recognize their experience and competence in the different areas of human activity, so that together with them they will be able to read the signs of the times.”³²

The findings suggest that while the decision of the provincial council may have been canonically valid, it lacked the characteristics of authentic ecclesial discernment. Validity alone does not guarantee fidelity to the Church’s synodal vision. Discernment requires listening, prayerful dialogue, and attentiveness to the lived realities of those affected.³³ In this case, authority functioned procedurally rather than communally, privileging decisional finality over shared searching for God’s will.

29. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church], November 21, 1964, Vatican Website, no. 32, vatican.va.

30. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 10-13, 31-36.

31. Second Vatican Council, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* [Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity], November 18, 1965, Vatican Website, no. 3, vatican.va.

32. Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* [Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests], December 7, 1965, Vatican Website, no. 9, vatican.va.

33. General Secretariat of the Synod, *Instrumentum laboris* (2023), nos. 5, 37.

Clericalism and the Exercise of Authority

The repeated invocation of the phrase "It is the council's decision" functions as what may be described as clericalist shorthand—a rhetorical closure that halts dialogue rather than inviting deeper understanding. This formulation positions authority as self-justifying and opaque, immune from questioning by those deemed outside clerical governance structures. Therukattil in his paper "Clericalism in the Church" utilizes Yves Congar's "hierarchology" to describe a situation where the clerical class appropriates to itself a monopoly of understanding the mind and will of God.³⁴

Such an exercise of authority reflects deeper dynamics of power, insecurity, and knowledge control. The refusal to explain or deliberate may signal not strength but fragility—an anxiety that transparency could undermine authority.³⁵ While clericalism operates as both an attitude and a structural habit, it prioritizes hierarchical entitlement over relational accountability.³⁶

Canon law's legitimate provisions for confidentiality and internal deliberation can, when misapplied, become instruments of exclusion. Pope Francis has repeatedly critiqued clericalism as a distortion of ecclesial authority, describing it as a mindset that "forgets the grace of baptism" and reduces the laity to passive recipients rather than active co-responsible agents.³⁷ In this case,

34. George Therukattil, "Clericalism in the Church," *Asian Horizons* 15, no. 1 (2021): 91–103, <https://dvkjournals.in/index.php/ah/article/view/3776>.

35. Omer Iqbal et al., "Exploring the Underlying Mechanism Between Fear of Losing Power and Knowledge Hiding," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022): 2–3, [doi.org](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.844444).

36. Therukattil, "Clericalism in the Church," 92–95.

37. Pope Francis, "Letter to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America," March 19, 2016, Vatican Website, [vatican.va](https://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/letters/2016/03/20160319-letter-to-cardinal-marc-ouellet_en.html).

clericalism manifests in the elevation of office over encounter and procedure over pastoral care.

Vox Dei, Providence, and Moral Responsibility

A particularly theologically troubling dimension of the case is the implicit appeal to divine providence as a means of justifying harm.³⁸ Participants reported being encouraged to interpret their termination as part of God's will or salvific plan. While Christian faith affirms God's presence even in suffering, such appeals risk conflating human decision-making with divine intention.³⁹

Invoking *vox Dei* to sanctify institutional decisions forecloses moral accountability and obscures human responsibility. Christian theology carefully distinguishes between God's mercy, which accompanies human brokenness, and human error, which remains subject to ethical evaluation.⁴⁰ To suggest that unjust or harmful processes are divinely ordained risks spiritualizing injustice and silencing legitimate lament.⁴¹

Prudence, a key virtue in ecclesial governance, requires attentiveness to consequences, persons, and relationships.⁴² Authentic trust in providence does not negate the need for transparency, accountability, and reparative action. On the contrary, it intensifies moral responsibility by insisting that authority be exercised humbly and in truth.

38. John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 31–33.

39. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* [On the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World], March 25, 1996, Vatican Website, nos. 43, 44, 56, 89, vatican.va.

40. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* [The Splendor of Truth], August 6, 1993, Vatican Website, nos. 102–105, vatican.va.

41. Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 31–33.

42. Jean Porter, "Thomas Aquinas on Prudence and Political Governance," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39, no. 1 (2011): 42–48, doi.org.

Synodality as an Evaluative Framework

Synodality provides a comprehensive framework for evaluating the theological adequacy of the decision-making process in this case. When examined through the interrelated dimensions of communion, mission, and participation, the findings reveal significant gaps between synodal ideals and institutional practice.

Communion

The journey towards a synodal church that was started in 2021 highlights the importance of walking together towards the Kingdom of God. This involves reciprocal listening, dialogue, community discernment, and the creation of consensus to surface the presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit.⁴³ This was exemplified by the far-reaching consultation that started down from the level of communities up to the universal church. There was an honest confrontation of reality, not hiding resistance, problems, and difficulties, but dealt with in the context of authentic dialogue where it was possible to express oneself with freedom and sincerity.

True ecclesial communion is built upon active listening, meaningful encounter, and mutual recognition. This is beautifully captured in Estela Padilla's description of communion through the lens of Filipino spirituality as *salu-salo*. Beyond the act of sharing a meal, *salu-salo* serves as a sacred space for the exchange of ideas and deep personal encounter, where the 'table' becomes a venue for listening to one another's lived realities.⁴⁴

43. General Secretariat of the Synod, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission – Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality: Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches* (Vatican City: Holy See, September 7, 2021), 8, 28–29, 39–41, synod.va.

44. Estela P. Padilla, "BEC Spirituality," in *BECs in the Philippines: Dream or Reality: A Multi-Disciplinary Reflection*, ed. Josemarie Delgado et al. (Taytay, Rizal: Bukal ng Tipan by Lexicon Press, 2004), 277–78.

In the case of the terminated, communion was weakened by the failure to engage in genuine listening prior to the decision to terminate the lay missionaries. The absence of shared discernment fractured trust and reduced relationships to functional roles rather than ecclesial bonds. Communion cannot be sustained where voices are unheard and experiences are dismissed. Failure to listen to the *sensus fidelium* wounds the body of Christ and breaks communion.⁴⁵

Mission

If we were to think about the synodal Church, we can only think of a church in mission, for it is in her very nature. The Pentecost event signified the Church embracing the mission. It was when the apostles, animated by the Holy Spirit, gained the courage to proclaim the crucified and risen Christ to all.⁴⁶ A religious congregation is likewise a community in mission, having a particular charism that animates its engagements and missionary endeavors.

In the case in focus, the mission of the pastoral office to develop local churches is indeed aligned with that of the religious congregation to which it was attached. It was a beautiful sharing of mission between a clerical congregation and its lay partner, which was referred to in one of their past general assemblies as its lay pastoral arm. It was in itself already a manifestation of synodality years before the Synod on Synodality was convoked. However, due to unexplained reasons aside from those articulated in their termination letter, this partnership and sharing of the mission was ended by the congregation.

45. General Secretariat of the Synod, *Instrumentum laboris* (2023), nos. 22–23.

46. Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes* [Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church], December 7, 1965, Vatican Website, nos. 2, 4, vatican.va

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If the mission was the animating factor of that relationship, and if, towards the later part, the congregation, in practicality, deemed it burdensome to maintain a lay pastoral office, an exit plan could have been put in place so that the mission is continued even outside of the congregation. At the same time, the security of the lay missionaries would have been assured.

There is a beautiful example of a transition program that a protestant church, Disciples Home Mission Christian Church, practiced for its missionaries and pastors. For them, transitions were considered potential opportunities to witness God's continuing kindness and love. They believe that a healthy departure needs to be facilitated. This program is not only limited to the evaluation of the ministry but includes the celebration of the mission that was done, grief work for the fact of separation, forgiveness for hurts incurred, and preparation for the continuation of the mission.⁴⁷

This particular example shows that communion is truly interwoven with mission. Communion of people gives the impetus to do the mission. Mission likewise is not just happening ad extra but it starts from the very community where it is launched. St. John Paul II would say: "Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion"⁴⁸

The closure of the pastoral office disrupted not only the employment of lay missionaries but also the shared mission. Lay-clerical partnership, developed over decades, was abruptly severed

47. General Commission on the Order of Ministry, Closing a Pastoral Ministry: A Document of the General Commission on Ministry (Indianapolis, IN: Disciples Home Missions, Christian Church [Disciples of Christ], 2003), 2-4.

48. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* [On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World], December 30, 1988, Vatican Website, no. 32, vatican.va.

without a transition plan or continuity strategy. This represents a missed opportunity to discern new forms of mission collaboratively. Rather than reimagining ministry together, the decision effectively sidelined lay missionaries as expendable instruments rather than co-bearers of mission.

Participation

Participation lies at the heart of synodality and flows from baptismal dignity. Participation can well be understood through the relationship between communion and mission. By themselves, communion and mission, to some extent may remain abstract. Hence, there is a need to foster church practices that express the concreteness of synodality which encourages the involvement of everyone.⁴⁹ The exclusion of lay missionaries from discernment processes reflects a pyramidal model of governance that contradicts contemporary ecclesial teaching on co-responsibility. Participation was reduced to post-decision notification, reinforcing a hierarchical divide that synodality seeks to overcome.⁵⁰

Participation challenges us towards a vision of ordained ministry that moves away from a pyramidal model of exercising authority towards a more synodal way that affirms and promotes baptismal charism and ministries. When responsibilities in the church are well distributed, decision-making and taking will favor a more synodal style.⁵¹

In sum, while the decision may have satisfied legal and canonical norms, it fell short of synodal integrity. This case

49. General Secretariat of the Synod, *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality, 11-12, 28-29, 39-41.

50. Pope Francis, "Address during the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops," October 17, 2015, Vatican Website, vatican.va.

51. General Secretariat of the Synod, *Instrumentum laboris* (2023), B 3, nos. 51-56: 51-52.

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illustrates how synodality is not merely about structures but about conversion in the exercise of authority—from control to accompaniment, from secrecy to trust, and from unilateral decision-making to shared discernment.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined a concrete ecclesial decision through the lens of synodality, authority, and lived experience. The findings and discussion demonstrate that, in the case under study, synodality was largely absent both structurally and practically. While synodality is frequently affirmed at the level of discourse, it failed to shape the actual processes of discernment, dialogue, and decision-making that led to the closure of the pastoral office and the termination of lay mission partners.

The exercise of authority in this case consistently prevailed over communion and participation. Decision-making was centralized within clerical structures, and authority functioned as finality rather than as service. The repeated invocation of council authority effectively foreclosed dialogue and marginalized the voices of those most directly affected by the decision. As a result, ecclesial relationships were reduced to hierarchical roles rather than sustained as bonds of shared mission.

The study further highlights a critical distinction between canonical validity and pastoral integrity. While the decision may have conformed to legal and canonical norms, it was pastorally deficient in its failure to embody discernment, transparency, and accompaniment. This disjunction reveals a persistent risk within ecclesial governance: that legality can be mistaken for legitimacy, and procedural correctness for faithfulness to the Spirit's movement among the People of God.

Finally, the experience of the lay missionaries underscores a deeper ecclesiological concern. Despite their long-standing

commitment, professional competence, and baptismal co-responsibility, they were treated as subordinates rather than mission partners. This contradicts the Church's contemporary teaching on the dignity and vocation of the laity and exposes the fragility of lay-clerical partnership when synodality is not intentionally practiced.

In sum, this case serves as a cautionary illustration of how synodality can be affirmed in principle yet negated in practice. It calls the Church—particularly religious congregations and ecclesial leaders—to ongoing conversion in the exercise of authority, so that decisions affecting lives and ministries may truly reflect communion, participation, and mission in fidelity to the Gospel.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings and theological discussion of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to foster more genuinely synodal practices in ecclesial governance, particularly within religious congregations that collaborate closely with lay mission partners. These recommendations are not prescriptive blueprints but constructive pathways rooted in the Church's call to communion, participation, and mission.

Formation for Synodal Leadership

A change of mind and a change of heart are needed for synodality to find its mark in the life and practices of a religious congregation, in particular, the religious congregation mentioned in this study. Because of their profession, which is considered a special and fruitful deepening of the consecration received in

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Baptism,⁵² a mentality of entitlement may influence the way of thinking and doing of some religious. This entitlement may dictate the way some religious would relate to the other baptized and reject any form of synodality.

Understandably, synodality, although it has been there from the beginning, its articulation and being highlighted in the life and mission of the church is just recent. Hence, formation towards its deeper understanding is a necessity for all the faithful to effect a paradigm shift toward synodality. Number 59 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* of 2023 expresses this need for formation, which should start from those in the hierarchy who exercise authority and decision-making. I quote:

Formation is the indispensable means to make the synodal way of proceeding a pastoral model for the Church's life and action. We need integral formation, initial and ongoing, for all members of the People of God. No baptized person can feel extraneous to this commitment, and it is therefore necessary to structure adequate proposals for formation in a synodal way addressed to all the Faithful. In particular, then, the more one is called to serve the Church, the more one must feel the urgency of formation: Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Consecrated men and women, and all those who exercise a ministry need formation to renew the ways of exercising authority and decision-making processes in a synodal key, and to learn how to accompany community discernment and conversation in the Spirit. Candidates for ordained Ministry must be trained in a synodal style and mentality. The promotion of a culture of synodality implies the renewal of the current seminary curriculum and the formation of teachers and professors of theology so that there is a clearer and more decisive orientation

52. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* [On the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World], March 25, 1996, Vatican Website, no. 30, vatican.va.

*toward formation for a life of communion, mission, and participation. Formation for a more genuinely synodal spirituality is at the heart of the renewal of the Church.*⁵³

There is a pressing need for intentional formation in synodal leadership, especially for those exercising clerical authority. Such formation should move beyond managerial competence and canonical literacy to include skills in listening, communal discernment, conflict engagement, and accountability. Leaders must be formed to understand authority not as control or insulation from critique but as a ministry exercised with and for the People of God. Ongoing formation programs should explicitly address clericalism and cultivate habits of transparency, humility, and shared responsibility.

Practice of Conversation in the Spirit

Ecclesial decision-making processes would benefit from the regular and disciplined practice of Conversation in the Spirit, as proposed in the synodal process of the universal Church.⁵⁴ This practice creates space for prayerful listening, mutual recognition, and discernment of the Spirit's movement across diverse experiences. Institutionalizing such practices—especially in moments of significant transition or conflict—can prevent decisions from being reduced to procedural acts and instead ground them in communal faith and dialogue.

Reform of Governance and Decision-Making Structures

Synodal decision-making cannot be materialized unless there is an underlying structure that supports it. In the case at hand,

53. General Secretariat of the Synod, *Instrumentum laboris* (2023), no. 59.

54. *Ibid.*, nos. 34, 42.

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the decision made was not synodal since the provincial council was operating on an old paradigm that gives priority and credence to authority rather than synodal discernment.

In light of synodality, religious congregations should revisit and re-examine their structure and decision-making process to accommodate synodal elements. This means that participatory decision-making structures need to be institutionalized where formal mechanism for consultation and dialogue in decisions that directly affect lay collaborators has to be present. The shift from a clericalist model of governance towards one that is rooted in co-responsibility, where lay missionaries are recognized as partners, has to be embraced.

Transparent processes for major transitions have to be developed. This may include early and open communication, phased implementation of timelines, justification and criteria for decisions, and a venue for feedback and proposals from stakeholders.

Pastoral and human impact assessments of the results of major decisions need to be implemented. Accompaniment and transition support have to be available, which could be in the form of personal accompaniment, job transition support, and spiritual-emotional support.

These changes may be fully embraced if ongoing synodality formation that emphasizes listening, discernment, subsidiarity, and humility in exercising authority is provided for religious leaders.

It may also be beneficial to revisit the structure and process of decision-making enshrined in canon law since this is where the congregations and local churches would base the actions they will take.

All of these highlight the need to reform governance and decision-making structures so that they meaningfully integrate synodal principles. While respecting canonical authority, councils and leadership bodies should establish clear mechanisms for

consultation, participation, and feedback, particularly when decisions directly affect persons, livelihoods, and ministries. Governance structures must be evaluated not only for efficiency and legality but for their capacity to foster discernment, trust, and shared mission.

Empowerment and Formation of Lay Missionaries

Lay missionaries need to articulate and assert co-responsibility. They must continue to affirm their right and duty to participate in the life and mission of the Church. This includes respectfully requesting dialogue and presenting their insights as co-disciples, not just employees.

They, too, must seek empowerment through formation. They need to engage in ongoing formation on the theology of mission, synodality, and ecclesial structures. Greater theological grounding empowers laypeople to speak credibly and confidently within ecclesial contexts.

Lay collaborators also need to document their contributions and propose ways of collaboration. They need to maintain clear records of ministry outcomes and present these as evidence of their mission impact. They may propose models of collaboration that align with the congregation's charism but also incorporate lay agency.

However, despite the negative experience with the religious congregation, lay missionaries instead need to practice constructive engagement. While naming unjust structures is necessary, it's also vital to pursue reconciliation and healing through constructive dialogue. Lay missionaries should continue to offer insights and recommendations with pastoral charity, even in the face of difficult decisions.

There is strength in numbers. Lay missionaries should network with other lay missionaries and movements, and build

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solidarity with those promoting synodal church practices. A collective voice often amplifies effectiveness in advocating change.

In summary, Lay missionaries require ongoing formation and empowerment that affirms both their baptismal dignity and their professional competence. This includes theological formation on synodality, ecclesiology, and co-responsibility, as well as practical training on rights, responsibilities, and ethical engagement within ecclesial institutions. Empowered lay missionaries are better positioned to participate constructively in discernment processes and to sustain healthy partnerships with clergy and religious leaders.⁵⁵

Development of a Synodal Covenant

Finally, the development of a synodal covenant between religious congregations and lay mission partners is recommended. Such a covenant would articulate shared commitments regarding mission, discernment, accountability, conflict resolution, and transitions. More than a contractual instrument, a synodal covenant would function as a theological and relational framework that honors both legal obligations and ecclesial communion, helping to prevent future conflicts and fostering mutual trust.

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55. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, nos. 57–60.