

PASTORAL MINISTRY AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF LIFE FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH IN ASIA

ABSTRACT

Introduction

The synodal journey of the Church has highlighted the importance of rediscovering cultural and anthropological resources within Asia's Indigenous traditions for building a genuinely synodal Church. Reports emerging from diocesan and episcopal consultations during the synodal process have repeatedly emphasized that Indigenous worldviews, marked by interconnectedness, communal discernment, and harmony with creation, offer valuable insights for recovering relationality within ecclesial life. Such perspectives challenge individualistic and hierarchical tendencies, encouraging pastoral practices rooted in listening, accompaniment, and mutual accountability.

Within this framework, pastoral ministry becomes a space of encounter where service, dialogue, social fraternity, and proclamation converge. Drawing from Asian ecclesial reflections—particularly the vision articulated in the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), including its reflections on new pathways for mission and synodality¹—this article revisits pastoral ministry from an Asian and synodal perspective. It seeks to explore theological foundations and pastoral orientations that enable the Church to engage cultures, religions, the poor, and creation in a spirit of communion, participation, and mission, thus fostering a more relational and transformative presence in contemporary society.

Pastoral Ministry as Process

The concepts that “time is greater than space” and “realities are more important than ideas” have become a defining pastoral reference in the contemporary Church. These Bergoglian principles invite the Church, in her

1. Federation of Asian Bishops Conference, *Journeying Together As Peoples of Asia: Bangkok Document*, March 15, 2023, last accessed April 9, 2026, <https://fabc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/FABC-Bangkok-Document-web.pdf>.

journey through history, to sow seeds and initiate processes that unfold over time, generating new life rather than seeking to occupy spaces of power or institutional self-assertion.² Pastoral ministry, therefore, is best understood not as the management of structures but as participation in a living process guided by the Spirit.

This vision resonates deeply with Yves Congar’s insight that reform in the Church must be a process—one that is built on charity and remains faithful to Tradition while attentive to the Spirit’s call in the present. Genuine renewal is neither rupture nor mere preservation; it is a patient, Spirit-led movement that holds continuity and change in creative tension.³ Congar’s theological contribution helped shape the Second Vatican Council’s historical consciousness and its understanding of ecclesial renewal.

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2. Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, last accessed April 9, 2026, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

Pope Francis introduces four principles that he suggests are derived from the Catholic Social Teaching: time is greater than space (EG, §222–25); unity prevails over conflict (EG, §222–25); realities are more important than ideas (EG, §231–33); and the whole is greater than the part (EG, §234–37). *Unity prevails over conflict* - Francis describes three ways of responding to conflict: looking away, embracing it to the point of self-destruction, and “the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process . . . In this way it becomes possible to build communion amid disagreement, but this can only be achieved by those great persons who are willing to go beyond the surface of the conflict and to see others in their deepest dignity” (EG, §227–28). We have to look for “a new and promising synthesis” or “reconciled diversity” that can be a point of entry and with the Spirit’s help take us forward (EG, §230). *Realities are more important than ideas* - We have to begin with the reality and people’s lives. “Ideas disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action. What calls us to action are realities illuminated by reason” (EG, §232). It “has to do with incarnation of the word and its being put into practice,” with works of justice and charity (EG, §233). *The Whole is Greater Than the Part* – we are asked to keep open the horizons and not give in to a quick or easy foreclosure, to “see the greater good which will benefit us all.” Francis offers the image of the polyhedron, “which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness. Pastoral and political activity alike seek to gather in this polyhedron the best of each” (EG, §236).

3. Yves Congar, “Chapter 1 – The Problem of Reform,” in *True and False Reform in the Church*, transl. Paul Philibert, O.P., (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2011), 37–39.

The Council articulated this orientation succinctly: the Church must “scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel” (*Gaudium et Spes* §4). In this perspective, the Church’s institutions, ministries, and structures are not ends in themselves but serve a dynamic mission. The Church reveals her deepest nature precisely in her mission—as a pilgrim people attentive to human experience, to the cry of the poor, and to the groaning of creation.

Following Christ, the Church cannot remain static or self-referential. She is the Body of Christ, the Bride, and the sacrament of salvation, entrusted with a mission that unfolds within history. This orientation acquires particular significance in the Asian context. The Asian Churches, especially through the vision articulated by the FABC, have consistently emphasized pastoral ministry as a journey of dialogue with cultures, religions, and the poor. Here, ministry emerges less as a series of events or performative implementation and more as relational presence, listening, accompaniment, and shared discernment within complex social, religious, and cultural realities.

In this perspective, the Church’s vulnerability becomes a theological resource rather than a limitation. As a pilgrim community walking with people marked by diversity, poverty, ecological fragility, and deep religious traditions, the Church participates in God’s mission through humble and visceral presence and attentive engagement. In this sense, every authentic step of renewal is a return to the source and a movement forward in mission (cf. FD 1), expressed through ecclesial discernment, transparent structures of participation, accountability, and a synodal culture of accompaniment (cf. FD 11).

Consequently, pastoral ministry may be understood as participation in the Church’s *ongoing conversion*—a movement that continually returns to the source while moving outward in mission. This movement is expressed through mutual listening and reciprocal exchange of gifts that fosters encounter and co-responsibility. Within the Asian ecclesial imagination, such a pastoral approach

embodies a Church that journeys with humanity, collaborates with the Spirit already at work in diverse contexts, and contributes to the gradual emergence of God's Kingdom in history.

A New Synthesis

If pastoral ministry prioritizes processes over structures, the post-Vatican II period in Asia witnessed the emergence of formative institutes dedicated to ecclesial renewal and social transformation. Among these, the East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI) in Manila stands out as a pioneering space where a distinctly Asian vision of the Church began to take shape. While not the only such initiative, EAPI became an important *living process* from which the narrative for the renewal of Asian Churches was forged—in the hearts of men and women of faith across Asia—through whom pastoral renewal was imagined, internalized, and carried back by participants to their local Churches.

For more than six decades, through the leadership of successive teams of pastoral theologians and formators, EAPI has fostered a vision of the Church characterized by intercultural encounter, missionary discipleship, and contextual theology. Its formation model—initially bringing together clergy and religious from diverse cultural and ecclesial contexts and engaging them in processes of group work, reflexivity, and inner growth and conversion—anticipated what is now widely described as synodality. The institute's residential and participatory pedagogy embodied a Church rooted in a style of fraternity, listening, freedom to discern, and pastoral adaptation.

The formative influence of institutes such as the NBCLC (National Biblical, Catechetical, and Liturgical Centre) in Bengaluru, India, and the EAPI in Quezon City, Philippines, soon became evident across Asia. Seen in a wider Asian perspective, these developments reflect the exchange of gifts among local Churches (FD 69–74)—a dynamic long emphasized by the local churches and the FABC. Institutions and other regional formation centers

functioned as catalysts for shared learning, nurturing a pastoral imagination attentive to culture, dialogue, community, and mission.

In Malaysia, early engagement with EAPI programs played a pivotal role in post-conciliar renewal. By the mid-1970s, the bishops of Peninsula Malaysia invited a small group of church personnel who had participated in EAPI formation to spearhead a process of ecclesial renewal. This initiative culminated in the landmark 1976 *Aggiornamento* for the Church in Peninsula-Malaysia.

This month-long gathering of one hundred twenty-three clergy and three bishops from the dioceses for prayer, study, and reflection represented a significant pastoral risk: a *priestless month* as the priests withdrew from parish life and administration, entrusting the day-to-day sustenance of ecclesial life to lay leaders and religious sisters. It was a courageous decision by the bishops to require this withdrawal, inviting their priests into a collective process of renewal while allowing the local Church to continue to fulfil its responsibilities and leadership within the wider community.

Rather than weakening the local Church, this experience awakened lay participation and reshaped pastoral imagination. The initiative demonstrated that renewal emerges when responsibility is shared and when structures allow the gifts of the People of God to surface. In this way, the Malaysian experience anticipated later synodal emphases on co-responsibility and participation.

The *Aggiornamento*⁴ of 1976 identified the formation of Basic Christian Communities as central to the Church's renewal, envisioning the

4. "In August 1975, seven church leaders (clergy and religious)-attended a course at the "East Asian Pastoral Institute" in Manila. They met together and formed a team with the idea of contributing to the renewal of the Local Church in Malaysia. They published a leaflet called *Five Loaves and Two Fishes*, with the aim of disseminating the teachings of the Vatican Council II." Fr. Soter Fernandez, later to become Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur, and the first Cardinal from Malaysia, together with six members of the *Five Loaves and Two Fishes* team, formed the Facilitating Team and were tasked by the Bishops' Conference to coordinate the process of renewal for the Church in Peninsula Malaysia.

The Force Behind the Aggiornamento 1976, last modified November 4 2020.

[https://www.heraldmalaysia.com/news/the-force-behind-the-aggiornamento-1976/56379/5.](https://www.heraldmalaysia.com/news/the-force-behind-the-aggiornamento-1976/56379/5)

parish as a communion of communities gathered around the Word of God for mission. This orientation was accompanied by related needs that would become characteristic of Asian pastoral thrusts: unity in diversity, ongoing formation, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, and integral human development. Over subsequent decades, these priorities were deepened, expanded, and implemented through regular pastoral planning and review. The processes moving from parishes to the diocese culminated every decade in the Peninsula Malaysia Pastoral Convention (PMPC) that integrated evaluation, assembly, and collaboration.

Today, ongoing processes, such as for the forthcoming Malaysian Pastoral Convention (MPC) in September 2026, illustrate how seeds of renewal planted in the immediate post-conciliar period continue to bear fruit. The three regions of Malaysia have followed distinct historical trajectories, yet the gradual maturation of these processes reveals a consistent movement toward a synodal-missionary Church. Time, indeed, proves greater than space: patient formation, journeying together, and pastoral experimentation continue to shape the Church's evolving life in Malaysia.

A Personal Reminiscence

My pastoral formation was shaped indirectly by this same stream of renewal. Through the influence of members of the “*Five Loaves and Two Fishes*” team—particularly Fr. Peter Bretaudeau MEP and Cardinal Soter Fernandez—I was initiated into a style of pastoral ministry grounded in mission, accompaniment, and collaboration.⁵ Their witness, and my lived

The Second Archbishop: Most Rev Anthony Soter Fernandez, last modified October 6, 2014, <https://www.heraldmalaysia.com/news/the-second-archbishop-most-rev-anthony-soter-fernandez/21081/5>.

5. It is well documented how the late Archbishop Soter Fernandez stood up to the intimidation tactics of the regime of the day, including the crackdown on activists, volunteers, church workers, and opposition members in *Operasi Lallang*, 1987. *Fernandez, Anthony S.*, last accessed April 9, 2026, <https://dcbasia.org/biography/fernandez-anthony-s>.

formation later in a lay movement, formed my engagement in parish life, youth ministry, integral human development, ecclesial administration, and wider regional mission.

What I inherited from them was both spirit and method—a pastoral identity marked by humility, closeness to people, attentiveness to suffering, and commitment to the common good. Their ministry reflected a relational understanding of pastoral leadership in which listening, shared responsibility, and presence among ordinary people were central. Pastoral ministry was exercised not through distance or control but through proximity and relations of trust.

The meetings and exchange (encounters) with such mentors revealed that accompaniment is formative. The moments of listening, vulnerability, and struggle became spaces of pastoral learning, shaping an understanding of ministry rooted in service and fidelity rather than success. Such experiences demonstrate that pastoral leaders generate life not primarily through activities but through relationships that make God's presence tangible.

This missionary style was equally evident in ordinary pastoral practice: travelling to remote communities, sharing daily life with the poor, and recognizing the dignity of those often overlooked. Academic formation, institutional roles, or ecclesial status were secondary to presence, listening, and sustained commitment. In this way, pastoral ministry became an embodied expression of the Gospel—bringing hope and the closeness of Jesus to those burdened with heavy loads (cf. Mt 11: 28-30).

The relationships forged through this style of accompaniment encouraged new forms of mission engagement, which the synodal journey would later describe as a key aspect of a generative pastoral relationship. A synodal Church requires such “fathers and mothers” who nurture life freely for others, prioritizing processes of growth over the occupation of spaces of power. Significantly, many of these pastoral pioneers were formed in an earlier

theological paradigm, yet they were able to create a new synthesis through intercultural collaboration, shared mission, and openness to the Spirit.

Their witness illustrates that synodality is fundamentally a process of reconciling diversity—cultural, ecclesial, and personal—within a shared journey of faith.⁶ Pastoral planning, therefore, is not merely strategic organization but an ongoing practice of discernment, reconciliation, and celebration of diversity in the Spirit. Over time, such processes bear fruit in ways that exceed individual intention, reminding ministers that they are servants of a future that is not theirs to hold.

Indigenous Resources for Synodality

Pastoral fieldwork and studies reveal that many Indigenous communities already embody practices that resonate deeply with synodality. During a conversation with a priest from the Murut community⁷ in Sabah, he described decision-making in simple yet profound terms: discussions begin not with debate but with hospitality, “Come, let us have coffee first.” As part of the Murut “*adat*” or custom,⁸ time is intentionally given for relationship,

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6. The term “reconciliation” comes from the Latin word *reconciliare*, which means to mend or restore. This verb is made up of “*re*,” meaning again, and “*conciliare*,” which refers to bringing together or uniting. The Greek words found in the New Testament that pertain to reconciliation are *katallassein* (the verb) and *katallagē* (the noun). These words suggest a transformation, often shifting from a situation of conflict or antagonism to one of peace and unity. In Romans 5:10–11, St. Paul explains that we have been reconciled to God through Christ’s death and will be saved. In 2 Corinthians 5:18–20, Paul states that through Christ, God has reconciled the world to Himself and has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation.
 7. This is part of the fieldwork that I carried out in 2025 to study the understanding and practice of synodality within the Malaysian Church, particularly cultural integration and governance. The Murut are the third-largest indigenous community in Sabah, mainly found in the interior regions. Currently, the majority of the Murut identify as Christians, while a smaller percentage practices Islam.
 8. Valerie Mashman writes that *adat* had its own mechanisms for social control, which embraces both the natural and supernatural worlds and is a fitting counterpart to Western notions of “civilization.” This definition makes for a much wider understanding of *adat* beyond its usual translation as custom, or customary law. The *adat* is the system of justice that regulates life in the Longhouse and is at the basis of all relationships. The emphasis is

listening, and presence before deliberation begins. Decisions are allowed to mature gradually, often requiring multiple encounters shaped by consensus, patience, and communal responsibility.

These practices demonstrate that synodality is not simply an ecclesial innovation but finds anthropological resonance in the relational and communitarian worldviews long embedded in Asian cultures. Indigenous customs emphasize hospitality, listening, communal discernment, and reconciliation—elements that closely mirror contemporary synodal language. These traditions, therefore, constitute *living resources* for building a synodal Church.

At the same time, these insights expose a tension frequently experienced in Asian ecclesial life: the gap between inherited institutional models and practices shaped by Roman canonical frameworks and the lived cultural practices of local and Indigenous communities. Pastoral experience in Asia often navigates between these worlds. Indigenous traditions invite the Church not only to adapt celebrations but to reconsider decision-making processes, leadership styles, and structures of participation in ways that reflect local patterns of relational life. Inculturation, therefore, extends beyond liturgy and celebrations to rethink ecclesial processes and governance.

As the Church “lives in concrete places, cultures and peoples” and expresses the Gospel within them (FD 115), she must engage the shared anthropology expressed in Indigenous cultures and recognize within them *seeds of the Word*. Such engagement resonates with Catholic Social Teaching—particularly subsidiarity, human dignity, the right of association, and common good—and helps shape an ecclesial identity experienced as locally grounded. In this sense, synodality in Asia involves healing historical tensions, fostering reconciliation, and rediscovering the Church as a community that belongs to

always on consensus, because it is essential to contain disputes and create alliances to prevent the longhouse and the wider community from fragmenting.

Valerie Mashman, “Peace-Making, Adat and Tama Bulan Wang,” in *Journal of Borneo-Kalimantan* 6, no.1 Institute of Borneo Studies, UNIMAS, (2020), 76.

the land and its peoples as it “shares the life and destiny of the peoples” (FABC 1, 1974, 12).

These insights have practical implications. Many, if not most, parishes and dioceses in Asia lack clear processes for inclusive decision-making or conflict resolution, leaving important issues to simmer or remain confined within closed circles. Indigenous communal practices suggest alternative models: dedicated spaces for extended listening, mandated groups of elders to facilitate, and processes that prioritize restoration and consensus. Such approaches offer an opportunity to the Church to be closer to the people, relational in style, and capable of shared discernment.

Here, a simple analytical framework may be proposed to assist pastoral reflection. Cultural practices can be examined through a pastoral matrix that considers: the *practice* itself, the *place* where it occurs, the *platform* (or structures) that support it, the *persons* involved, the *processes* followed, the values *promoted*, and the *pastoral learning* that emerges. This framework enables local communities to discern which elements resonate with Gospel values and how they might inform ecclesial life.

Seen in this light, cultures become not obstacles but theological resources. Indigenous traditions offer concrete insights into relationality, communal responsibility, and reconciliation—dimensions central to synodality. The “textbook” for synodal life is therefore not found only in ecclesial documents but also in the lived millennial wisdom of communities whose practices already embody walking together—and can be a *living resource* for building a synodal church.

Reciprocity – The Old Man and the Pineapples

The *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod session highlights reciprocity as fundamental to relationships and ministry. The Final Document⁹ deepens

9. *Final Document: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*, October 2024, last accessed April 9, 2026, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.

this insight by presenting reciprocity not merely as an idea, but as a core principle of synodal life. The logic of the exchange of gifts (FD 69–74)¹⁰ among Churches, vocations, and states of life—clergy, religious, and laity—rests on reciprocal love and mutual respect, recognizing that all possess gifts and charisms to share. Reciprocity is therefore not a transaction, but an investment in a relationship. As the Final Document states, “Reciprocal love is the place and form of encounter with God” (FD 44)¹¹.

A story, shared by a missionary living among Indigenous communities in the hills of the Philippines, illustrates this vividly. In the vicinity lived an elderly Indigenous man, about eighty years of age and partially blind, who survived alone, cultivating a small plot of pineapples. Thinking of his situation, the missionary decided to pay him a visit and bring him some food. Of course, the old man was delighted.

Later that day, the missionary saw the old man slowly making his way down through the forest carrying a pineapple—the only produce he had—as a gesture of gratitude. After delivering it, the man returned uphill. That same afternoon, he came again with another pineapple, and later yet a third time. Three journeys up and down the hill, to bring three pineapples—because he could carry only one at a time while balancing himself with his failing eyesight!

What animated the soul of this old, frail, half-blind man to such great effort? It was surely more than an emotion of gratitude—rather an act of reciprocity.

The episode reflects a wisdom deeply embedded in Indigenous and Asian cultures: relationships are sustained through mutual giving and receiving. Receiving calls forth giving and giving generates communion. Such relational logic is often practiced intuitively within communities before it is articulated theologically.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

Similar insight appears in the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, expressed in the phrase “I am because we are.” Identity is relational. In synodal ecclesiology, it is through baptism into the People of God that we are born into new life in Jesus Christ and receive our deepest identity as sons and daughters of God—and all vocations and ministries flow *from* the People of God. But when such reciprocal existence is forgotten, relationships risk shifting from communion to domination.

The Final Document recalls that “relationships and bonds are the means by which God the Father has revealed Himself in Jesus and the Spirit” (FD 50)¹². Reciprocal love mirrors the life of the Trinity. The Christian tradition describes this through *perichoresis*¹³, the mutual indwelling of the divine Persons—often portrayed as a “dance” of giving and receiving. Asian theologians would suggest that reciprocity in pastoral ministry becomes participation in this divine “dance of God,” where communion is lived through concrete acts of mutual love and support.

Sacramentality of the World

The virtue of reciprocity invites a deeper appreciation of the sacramentality that permeates human life. Sacramentality grounds our existence as creatures made in the image and likeness of God, with relationality as its key hermeneutical principle. Through the eyes of faith, ordinary events become sites of grace: the reciprocal love of the elderly, impaired Indigenous

12. Ibid.

13. The term *perichoresis* was developed by the early Church fathers especially Gregory of Nazianzus (4th Century), and John of Damascus (8th century). They used it to explain the divine and human nature of Christ. Perichoresis emphasizes the perfect unity, love, and communion within the Trinity (John 10: 30, John 14: 10-11, John 14:23). The Father, Son and Spirit sharing in the one essence of Godhead (John 1: 1-2, 1 John 4:8), each distinct in identity but existing in eternal self-giving, working in harmony (I John 4:8, John 5:19). It becomes our model of unity (John 17:21), a basis for our relational (people-of-God) identity, and for worship (Ephesians 2:18). For further reading, Slobodan Stamatović, “The Meaning of *Perichoresis*” *Open Theology* 2, no. 1 (2016).

man, or the final catechesis of Cardinal Soter from his bed, reveal moments when the divine becomes perceptible within lived experience. Synodality, therefore, does not begin with organizational reform alone; it presupposes grace already present in creation and in relationships.

Catholic theology affirms that the world itself is sacramental—a visible sign of God’s invisible presence. This vision highlights the interconnectedness of humanity, God, and creation, or what Indigenous mysticism would name as union and harmony. Such mysticism lends to an intuitive awareness of the suffering and cry of the land, animals, rivers, peoples, and engagement to uplift these, and does not stand aloof. It touches all existence.¹⁴ The Synod Final Document notes that where such a web of relationships is formed, “the Church is called to express its sacramentality and carry out her mission.”¹⁵ (FD 114; cf.

14. The Indigenous worldview is marked by the divine-human-nature continuum, as these realities are mystically connected, and all rites and festivities are based on this holistic vision. Indigenous mysticism, thus, is *relational* and *unitive* as it emphasizes the interconnectedness of all realities and binds them into one holistic communion. Contemporary theologians, like Raimundo Panikkar, would term the harmonious union of these three forms of consciousness as a *cosmotheandric* experience.

See Rodinmawia Ralte, *Indigenous Mystical Theology: A Viable Contextual Theology for Indigenous Peoples*, *Asia Journal of Theology*, 33, no. 2, (October 2019):76-92.

15. Mircea Eliade’s concept of the sacred and the profane offers an insightful framework for understanding sacramentality, as it reveals how religious rituals and symbols disclose the divine or transcendent experience. His work suggests that the sacred is not limited to special times or places—it can appear within the profane world, transforming the ordinary and everyday into a potential space for spiritual connection. A key element in Eliade’s philosophy is *hierophany*, which describes the manifestation of the sacred within the profane or ordinary. This can occur through various means, including rituals, myths, symbols, or interactions with objects such as stones or trees. Christian sacraments are understood as visible signs of invisible grace—outward actions that signify an internal spiritual truth. Eliade’s perspective helps in understanding the sacramental view by showing how the ordinary elements of a sacrament (such as water, bread, and wine) can act as channels for the sacred. “[Hu]man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane... something sacred shows itself to us... something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural “profane” world.”

Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion: The Significance of Religious Myth, Symbolism, and Ritual within Life and Culture*, trans. By William R Trask, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1961).

Lumen Gentium 1). Synodality thus animates an already existing sacramentality, enabling the Church to live its identity as communion and mission.

Theology seeks to show how history, cultures, peoples, and the cosmos are permeated by God's presence as signs and instruments of the Kingdom. While human lives are rooted in specific lands and cultures, 'place' is more than location—it is the historical context in which human experiences and meaning take shape. In this perspective, the poor and marginalized—central to Pope Francis' pastoral vision and to the FABC's theology of walking with the poor—become a privileged locus of revelation. Grounded in the Incarnation of the Word, the sacramentality of creation reveals that vulnerable lives and situations mediate God's mystery and call the Church to conversion of relationships.¹⁶

Joseph Ratzinger's reflections on the sacramental foundation of Christian existence highlight that created realities possess a depth beyond scientific explanation.¹⁷ Every created reality has a sacramental dimension, as it bears a "transparency" toward the creative power of God, opening a dimension of the eternal within the temporal. "Things are more than things," he writes. This insight strengthens a synodal imagination that perceives everyday life and relations as a theological space where God's presence can be discerned.

16. St. Thomas Aquinas writes, "God did not so bind his power to the sacraments that he cannot bestow the effect of the sacraments without the sacraments." This does not negate the power of sacraments, but God, as the principal agent, is free to work beyond the sphere of the Church. (ST 3, q.67, a.7).

"Article 7, Paragraph. 6" in *Question 64. The Causes of the Sacraments*, last accessed April 9, 2026, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/4064.htm>.

17. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence" [1965], in *Theology of the Liturgy*, vol. 11 of Joseph Ratzinger: Collected Works, ed. Michael J. Miller, trans. John Saward et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014) 153–68, at 161–62.

He writes, "Things are more than things. They are not known exhaustively when one has understood their chemical and physical properties, because then another whole dimension of their reality still eludes one: their transparency toward the creative power of the God from which they come and toward which they try to lead." Creation participates in divine meaning when perceived sacramentally.

Similarly, Pope Paul VI's address to rural workers in Bogotá described the poor as a sacramental sign of Christ's presence, inviting believers to recognize one another as tangible mediations of grace.¹⁸ Vatican II's vision of the People of God (*Lumen Gentium* 9) reinforces this communal sacramentality: the Church becomes a living sign when relationships embody communion, dignity, and participation.

Synodality—often described as “enlarging the tent”—expands freedom and participation within ecclesial and social life. Echoing Karl Rahner, such expansion creates conditions for the fuller realization of personal and communal vocation.¹⁹ Without this deeper freedom, believers risk remaining passive recipients rather than missionary disciples. A synodal Church must therefore listen attentively and nurture the sacramental quality of every person and relation as part of walking together toward new horizons, becoming a “welcoming home, a sacrament of encounter and salvation” (FD 115).

The witness of the early Christian community (Acts 2:42–47) illustrates the attractiveness of lived sacramentality: prayer, fellowship, Eucharistic sharing, and care for the vulnerable generated a community that filled a social “compassion gap.” The FABC has consistently identified Small Christian Communities as contemporary expressions of this relational ecclesiology in Asia. In contexts marked by inequality, conflict, ecological vulnerability, and social fragmentation, pastoral formation in Asia is called to animate relationality and the exchange of gifts so that communities may offer credible witness and bring the voices of the vulnerable into regional and global conversations.

18. Pope Paul VI's homily at Mass with the Colombian rural workers (*campesinos*) in Bogotá, on 23 August 1968, during the 39th International Eucharistic Congress, just before the Medellín bishops' conference. Homily published by the Vatican and later included in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, No. 60 (1968).

19. Karl Rahner, *Grace in Freedom*. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969).
Karl Rahner, *The Theology of Freedom*, 203–247.
Karl Rahner, *Mission and Grace*, Vol III, 134.

Part II—Pathways for the Future

The Final Document of the Synod proposes concrete pathways for pastoral renewal, with particular attention to the poor, youth, women, and other vulnerable groups within the People of God. It calls all the baptized to respond to the Spirit through an ongoing process of conversion articulated in three interrelated dimensions: conversion of relationships, conversion of processes, and conversion of bonds (FD Parts II–IV). In this vision, synodality moves beyond consultation toward ecclesial transformation.

Pope Francis repeatedly stresses that synodality must translate listening into mission. The Final Document highlights key priorities that shape this pastoral shift: co-responsibility (FD 77), ecclesial discernment (FD 84), participatory decision-making (FD 94), accountability and transparency (FD 95–102), and formation as a foundational pastoral priority (Part V).

At this critical historical moment—marked by social fragmentation, economic inequality, ecological vulnerability, and rapid cultural change across Asia—pastoral leadership requires prophetic courage. The FABC has long emphasized that the Church in Asia must develop creative and contextually grounded pastoral responses shaped by dialogue with cultures, religions, and the poor. Synodal pathways, therefore, emerge not primarily from abstract planning but from attentive engagement with lived realities and local pastoral experimentation.

(In this second part, the focus shifts to selected examples of innovative pastoral responses across Asian contexts. These examples are not presented here, nor are they exhaustive or normative models, but illustrative of best practices drawn from pastoral experience, observation, and collaboration. Their significance lies in demonstrating how synodal principles—listening, accompaniment, shared responsibility, and mission—can be embodied within concrete pastoral settings.)

Such initiatives can foster hope and encourage pastoral agents to take prudent risks alongside the communities they serve, especially among vulnerable groups. By learning from diverse local experiences, the Church in Asia can cultivate a pastoral imagination capable of responding faithfully to emerging challenges while strengthening networks of communion, participation, and mission.

Part III — Discerning the Spirit

To discern the Spirit by listening to the People of God requires attention to lived realities where pastoral structures meet human vulnerability. The Synod's Final Document emphasizes that discernment is ecclesial, grounded in listening, and oriented toward conversion of relationships and processes (FD 84; FD 94). In the Asian context, the FABC has consistently described discernment as pastoral attentiveness to the concrete experiences of people, especially the poor and those at the margins. Two pastoral situations illustrate this call:

Challenge for Indigenous Couples

The first concerns Indigenous couples in some Southeast Asian countries who desire to marry within the church but encounter complex procedures and prolonged administrative delays. Ministers accompanying them often struggle with bureaucratic requirements that unintentionally become barriers to grace. The situation raises a central synodal question: how can ecclesial processes embody mercy while safeguarding responsibility? In the Asian pastoral vision shaped by the FABC, institutions must serve life, relationships, and community rather than burden them. Discernment here implies reviewing procedures, simplifying access to the sacraments, and enabling local pastoral accompaniment rooted in trust.

Need for Pastoral Accountability

A tragic incident in a Malaysian parish raises profound questions about pastoral accountability and communal responsibility. A married couple in their late fifties and early sixties, and their thirty-year-old son with autism, were found dead in their home. The case was reported in local newspapers and widely circulated on social media. The family had left a note asking whoever discovered the bodies to contact the parish church and provide the parish phone number.

The family was well known to the parish. They met the parish priest several times. They were regular churchgoers, and both the mother and son were baptized Catholics. In recent months, they showed signs of emotional distress and were facing financial difficulties. After their last meeting, the priest instructed the parish ministry office to investigate their situation. But the intervention came too late. Meanwhile, the local Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) was apparently unaware of the family's presence or of the struggles they were facing.

In the weeks following the tragedy, banners promoting the importance of BECs were placed in front of the altar and later removed. Yet there was little visible pastoral reflection from the pulpit or among parish leadership regarding the deeper implications of this incident. The death of three members of a faith community—people who worshipped regularly in the parish—raises difficult but necessary questions for pastoral discernment.

Without assigning blame, the Church must ask how its pastoral systems function. How was it that a serious pastoral concern was not communicated to those closest to the family or to the local BEC? Why is so much responsibility and decision-making centered on one person, the priest? Does this structure enable the wider community to exercise its charisms, or does it unintentionally limit shared pastoral responsibility?

During these past years, the visible parish priority has been a series of renovation projects, with ministries and BECs mobilized to raise substantial funds. At the same time, there have been increasing cases of families in financial distress and individuals struggling with mental health challenges. Such realities invite deeper reflection on pastoral priorities. How are these priorities discerned? Do they truly correspond to the “joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” of the people? (*Gaudium et Spes* 1)

In such situations, the immediate reaction is to organize additional formation programs or spiritual retreats. While valuable, such initiatives may not address the underlying pastoral issue. Synodality invites all to move beyond reactive solutions toward sustained communal discernment. Are parish leaders adequately empowered to build networks of care within emerging social realities? Is there sufficient pastoral attentiveness to the concrete struggles of families? When and where does genuine pastoral reflection take place within the life of the parish?

Significantly, some parishioners and leaders privately expressed sadness, shock, and frustration at the suicides, yet hesitated to raise these concerns openly with the parish priest. This raises further questions. What prevents members of the community from speaking honestly? Are there fears—real or perceived—that inhibit dialogue and shared responsibility?

Such incidents call for a humble and contrite spirit. Synodality requires the courage to reflect, to learn, and, where necessary, to reform pastoral structures and attitudes. The Church in Asia, shaped by the FABC’s vision of communion and participation through Small Christian Communities, is called to cultivate communities where no family remains unseen and where vulnerability is recognized early through networks of care.

Ultimately, our faith reminds us that God is already present in every human despair and suffering. The Gospel invites the Church to recognize and

touch the wounded flesh of Christ in the lives of those who suffer.²⁰ Listening to these painful realities may become a privileged moment of discerning the Spirit within the People of God.

Enabling Conditions for Institutions and Communities

To discern the Spirit by listening to the People of God requires recognizing, as the Synod's Final Document affirms, that the Holy Spirit speaks not only through ordained ministers but through all the baptized (FD 22–23). This insight echoes *Lumen Gentium* 12 and highlights the *sensus fidei*—the instinct of faith present within the People of God.

What does this imply?

- Discernment is not simply decision-making, but a spiritual practice grounded in prayer, attentive listening, dialogue, and humility. In this regard, Indigenous cultures offer valuable practices that the Church can learn from through mutual exchange.
- The People of God—including the marginalized, youth, women, and those on the peripheries—must be recognized as active co-discerners rather than passive recipients of ministry. Responsibility for the Church's life and decision-making, therefore, needs to be increasingly shared with the faithful; a purely teaching Church risks losing its people.
- The Synod also notes a weakening of pastoral-theological reflection among the faithful and even among consecrated women (cf. FD 65), a reality evident in fieldwork. Clergy voices often dominate as proclaimers, interpreters, and decision-makers. Healthy ecclesial discernment instead requires a relational triptych: “nothing without

20. Pope Francis, “An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others.” (*Evangelii Gaudium* #24).

the bishop, nothing without the presbyterium, nothing without the people” (FD 88).

This vision resonates with the classic triptych of Scripture–Tradition–Magisterium, within which genuine listening to people and context forms part of the Church’s living Tradition.²¹ In the Asian context, voices such as Aloysius Pieris further remind us of the “magisterium of the poor,” echoing Matthew 25. Consequently, a renewed ecclesiological imagination is needed—one that moves beyond patriarchal and control-oriented models toward participatory discernment.

The Emerging Landscape

Without attempting an exhaustive survey, we note growing polarization within societies and between nations, persistent conflicts, and the spread of a culture of indifference that leaves many living precariously. Fundamentalism and identity politics threaten fraternity and peace, while pressures toward ecclesial exclusivism coexist with widespread fragmentation in faith and life. These realities raise critical questions: What trends are shaping ministry? What might pastoral leadership look like in thirty years? How can pastoral institutes form future-ready ministers?

Some key trajectories and implications emerge for consideration:

Decentralized and Participatory Church. With *Praedicate Evangelium* (2022), Pope Francis has placed the Church on a path toward decentralization, co-responsibility, and stronger local leadership. Ministry will require collaborative, missionary, and less clerical leadership. Greater sub-regional cooperation in Asia; assemblies and stronger coordination could foster shared priorities, networking, and wider participation of the People of God.

21. Pope St Paul VI used to say that all the poor of the world belong to the Church by “evangelical right” Pope Paul VI, *Address at the Opening of the Second Session of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council*, September 29, 1963, last accessed April 9, 2026, <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=3233>.

Bridging the Margins. Building a synodal Church requires leadership willing to move from text to context through policies, structures, and practice. Formation institutes must remain grounded in lived realities through immersion, partnerships with migrants, Indigenous peoples, the poor, and interfaith communities. A sustained culture of encounter is essential.

Accompaniment over Administration. Synodal leadership shifts the center of gravity from institutional management toward spiritual accompaniment, listening, and facilitation of discernment (FD 16–18). This renewal moves the Church from control to accompaniment (FD 67–72), from administration to shared responsibility (FD 77), from structures to relationships, strengthening trust and credibility.

Digital and Hybrid Ministry. Digital culture has become a major missionary field. Three priorities emerge: formation for discernment and responsible engagement online; missionary presence through networks and relational outreach; and structural adaptation, including policies and safeguarding frameworks.

Youth-Led Initiatives. Young people must be recognized as protagonists of the mission. Ministries with the young must prioritize listening, leadership opportunities, and network-based approaches that engage real concerns such as AI, misinformation, ecology, and mental health. The Synod notes young people's rejection of paternalism (FD 62), highlighting the need for new leadership pathways for ecclesial sustenance.

Ecological and Justice-Centered Mission. Pastoral ministry must integrate *Laudato Si'*, justice, and care for creation. Ecological commitment rooted in the Kingdom vision prevents it from being reduced to technical environmentalism (FD 65-70). Standing with Indigenous communities, learning from their wisdom, and addressing exploitation are essential dimensions of mission in Asia (FD 81–85).

Interfaith and Intercultural Formation. Future ministers require strong intercultural and interfaith competencies, including cultural sensitivity, skills for dialogue, spiritual listening, and conflict transformation (FD 112–118).

Through dialogue and witness of life, Asia can offer significant contributions to the universal Church by fostering social fraternity and addressing divisions. As Pope Francis reminds us, differences are not to be feared but engaged by walking together.

Prophetic Leadership

What do these emerging realities reveal in this “change of era”? What do they require of the Church? The Synod’s Final Document presents synodality itself as prophetic in today’s world (FD 47–48).

Prophecy needs a home – Prophetic voices emerge through the dynamic interplay of the Spirit, the People of God, and the *sensus fidei*. When this instinct of faith is allowed to mature in local communities—through immersion in life realities and lived discipleship—prophecy becomes possible. Yet prophetic leaders often unsettle conscience and disturb the status quo, and so they are easily stifled. When the *sensus fidei* is muted, the Church struggles to speak prophetically to contemporary crises or in critical Asian spaces. Authentic synodal practice, therefore, enables Christians to become critical and prophetic voices within their cultures (FD 47).

Prophets are called and sent – Scripture repeatedly links vocation with movement and trust: Abraham is told to go (Gen 12:1); Moses is sent to confront Pharaoh; Nathan is sent to David. Jesus himself is sent, and He sends us too: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21). From Pentecost onward, the Church lives this dynamic of going forth—especially toward the peripheries. The Synod therefore affirms that the Church does not merely have a mission; the Church is mission (FD 43).

Synodality places the Church on a paschal journey – a continuous crossing over into a new way of being Church. Like Moses with the people of Israel, prophetic leadership mobilizes imagination and courage for the transition. The Church is invited to set out in faith, echoing Abraham who “went out, not knowing where he was to go” (Heb 11:8), walking by faith rather than by sight

(2 Cor 5:7). Discernment unfolds through ‘sensory perception’, attentiveness to signs along the way—voices from the margins, lived realities, and the subtle movements of the Spirit—best safeguarded through communal discernment where collective wisdom can emerge.²²

Prophets live as insider-outsiders – In the Bible, prophets remained rooted among the people yet preserved interior freedom from institutional absorption: a space of prophecy at the margins. Their capacity to withdraw into silence—the inner wilderness where Jesus Himself prayed—enabled them to hear the Word and speak it out courageously. Prophecy, therefore, requires detachment, inner freedom, and willingness to bear its cost. Within this tradition, the Church is called to enable the *tria munera*—priest, prophet, and servant-king—of all its faithful.

An ecclesio-genesis is underway – Renewal toward a synodal Church will occur primarily at the grassroots: families, small Christian communities, neighborhoods, and parish ministries. God often acts through the little ones—the *anawim of Yahweh*—calling communities to listen, accompany, and discern together. The Church in Asia especially needs communities of prophets.

Kenosis as Risk-Taking – Synodality invites the Church to move from certainty to deeper trust in the Spirit’s guidance. From what we already know, we are called to step into the unknown so that we may learn anew. From habits of control, we are invited to let go and rediscover the life of the Church as a gift and grace. In this sense, the synodal journey carries a profound paschal character. It involves a form of *kenosis*—an emptying of attitudes of control, self-sufficiency, and clerical dominance—so that new life may emerge through the Spirit’s action within the People of God. The words of Pope Francis resonate powerfully in this context: “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church

22. “Every manifestation of the sacred takes place in some historical situation.”

Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. by Rosemary Sheed. (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Co., 1963), 2.

which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 27). A synodal Church must be willing to take such risks. Only by venturing beyond familiar structures and securities can the Church discover new pathways for mission in the twenty-first century.²³

Power and Wisdom – Much of leadership in the contemporary world is shaped by notions of power, efficiency, and control. The Gospel proposes a radically different logic. As St. Paul reminds us, “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom” (1 Cor 1:25). The Cross itself appeared as folly in the eyes of the world, yet it revealed the deepest wisdom of God. Synodal leadership, therefore, requires the courage to embrace this evangelical paradox: to create space for others, to trust the gifts of the community, and to allow the Spirit to work through processes of listening and shared discernment.

The question before us as Church today is profoundly spiritual: *Where are we being invited to let go, to trust others more deeply, and to make space for the gifts of others?*

EAPI & NIFSA Collaboration

Jesus’ invitation to “cast the net” (Jn 21:5–6) can be read, in today’s Asian ecclesial context, as a call to cast—and even weave—the net together. Ministry has often operated in silos, but rapidly changing contexts require a more collaborative and synodal approach to formation and mission.

23. Gerald Arbuckle, in his book *Refounding the Church. Dissent for Leadership*, closely aligns with the vision of a synodal Church. His advocacy for organic, participative leadership that encourages imaginative voices mirrors the synodal commitment to collaborative structures at both local and global levels, moving away from rigid hierarchies toward co-responsibility. Likewise, his emphasis on creatively reappropriating the Church’s founding narrative resonates with the synodal invitation to reinterpret the Gospel’s call in light of today’s realities through communal discernment and shared storytelling. In this way, he offers a compelling framework for deep transformation—grounded in creative dissent, collaborative governance, and renewed narrative imagination—that harmonizes with the synodal vision of a Church that listens, journeys together, and responds faithfully to the signs of the times.

Gerald Arbuckle, *Refounding the Church. Dissent for Leadership*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1993).

The East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI) has long been a pioneer in shaping pastoral leaders for the Asian Church and carries a significant legacy of contextual formation. Alongside this, the Network of Institutes for Formation and Studies-Asia (NIFSA)—based in Metropolitan Manila—brings together eight formation institutions, EAPI, ICLA, IFFAsia, ISA, IFRS, Cenacle, SVST, and ALC. This network reflects a growing recognition that formation for mission must be collaborative rather than isolated to respond effectively to the Asian and ecclesial challenges.²⁴

NIFSA’s mission is to “form servant leaders for the Church and society and to contribute to a transformative Church marked by inclusivity, inculturation, justice, peace, and care for creation.” Such a vision requires shared leadership, stronger coordination, and a willingness among institutions to move beyond individual institutes’ needs or fears toward the shared mission. Synodality needs to be embodied among the heads and within the institutions. No single institute can generate the systemic change envisioned – but it requires collective leadership to bring about collaboration and synodality.

Within this landscape, EAPI is strategically positioned to serve as a laboratory for implementing the Synod’s insights. With its Asian ecclesial perspective and tradition of innovative pastoral formation, EAPI—together with NIFSA—can become a catalyst for future-ready leadership, forming ministers capable of serving a synodal, just, and Spirit-led Church. This formation must always remain grounded in Catholic social teaching—human dignity, the common good, subsidiarity, solidarity, and ecological responsibility.

Future formation must also be accessible and responsive: designed for young people and laity, adaptable in duration, offered through digital and

24. The members of NIFSA are the East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI), Institute for Consecrated Life Asia (ICLA), Institute of Formation, Fondacio Asia (IFFAsia), Institute of Spirituality in Asia (ISA), Institute of Formation & Religious Studies (IFRS), Cenacle Sisters, St Vincent School of Theology (SVST), and the Assumption Language College (ALC). Network of Institutes for Formation and Studies in Asia, last accessed April 9, 2026, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61558785320039#>

hybrid modes, available in vernacular languages, integrated with lived realities, and financially inclusive.

A further priority is the accompaniment of alumni within their local churches so that they experience themselves as sent and sustained in mission (FD 59). Given Asia-Pacific's geographic and cultural diversity, this accompaniment cannot be carried by a single institute; coordinated networks are essential. Bishops, clergy, and local communities likewise play a crucial role in recognizing and supporting emerging charisms and ministries (FD 57–71).

An Emerging Framework

“The whole is greater than the parts.” This Bergoglian insight invites a systems perspective in which each reality is understood in relation to the wider whole. No pastoral issue stands alone; each is embedded within interrelated structures and relationships. In living systems—including the Church—transformation arises not from isolated efforts but from interconnectedness of gifts, mutual support, and shared purpose. This reflects Paul's ecclesiology of the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12), where interdependence lies at the heart of synodality (FD 13).

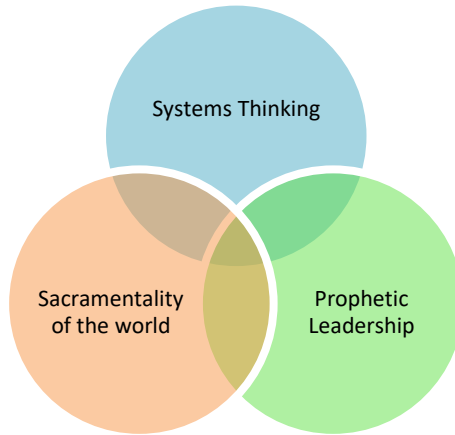
Unlike a purely mathematical sum, ecclesial vitality emerges from communion. The Church's life does not depend solely on individual holiness but on walking together, listening, and discerning as one Body (cf. LG 9). A parish, therefore, is not merely a collection of ministries and structures but a living organism whose mission unfolds when its elements act in harmony with the Gospel. Synodality gradually transforms the individual “I” into a communal “we,” generating what the Synod calls an evangelical quality of relationships (FD 50).

Such vitality rests on reciprocity and shared purpose and reflects a sacramental worldview in which the ecclesial community becomes transparent to God's presence. The Church is not simply an organization but a “sign and

instrument” of communion with God and unity among peoples (LG 1). Walking together strengthens this sacramental identity.

In Asia—marked by pluralism, cultural diversity, and structural poverty—prophetic leadership is called to discern the signs of the times, speak truth to power, and walk with all peoples while recognizing the seeds of the Word (FD 17). Prophetic leaders are not solitary figures but catalysts within communities and systems. Their task includes fostering transitions, guiding ecclesial “Passovers,” and deepening sacramental identity through intercultural and interfaith encounter.

This emerging framework highlights three mutually reinforcing dimensions:



- Systems thinking emphasizes wholeness and interconnectedness within creation and ecclesial life.
- Prophetic leadership embodies incarnation—the Word active in history—encouraging creative risk, discernment, and courageous engagement.
- Sacramentality highlights relationality and the Spirit’s presence permeating all reality and sustaining ecclesial communion.

Together, these dimensions call the Church to coherence between vision, policy, and practice, while grounding pastoral action in discernment of

God's ongoing revelation. When internalized as discipleship and spirituality, synodality becomes a form of social prophecy (FD 153). Such a framework enables the Church in Asia to integrate diversity without fragmentation and sustain unity without uniformity, recognizing that harmony created by the Spirit does not erase difference (FD 26) but animates creative responses to contemporary socio-pastoral challenges.

Conclusion

Discerning the Spirit, by listening to the People of God, calls for deep ecclesial transformation—a spirituality shaped by humility, attentive listening, and communal discernment; structural renewal that enables participation and shared responsibility; and relationships rooted in trust, reciprocity, and co-responsibility. Synodality is therefore not an additional pastoral strategy but a conversion of ecclesial culture, practice, and imagination.

Looking toward the future, the Church requires pastoral leaders who are spiritually grounded, relational in leadership style, interculturally competent, and firmly committed to the poor, the vulnerable, and care for creation. Such leadership must be missionary in orientation, capable of navigating complexity, engaging plural contexts, and accompanying communities through change. Formation for ministry will need to cultivate discernment, emotional and spiritual maturity, collaborative leadership, and the capacity to work across networks and systems. In this sense, synodal conversion is simultaneously personal, institutional, and pastoral.

Within this horizon, EAPI, NIFSA, and other formation institutes in Asia have a significant role. Through intentional networking, shared programs, research collaboration, and coordinated accompaniment of alumni, these institutes can help form communities of prophetic leaders. They can serve as laboratories for synodal practice—spaces where new models of formation, intercultural encounter, digital learning, grassroots immersion, and collaborative leadership are tested and refined. Such collaboration also

strengthens the Church's capacity to respond to contemporary socio-pastoral challenges and nurture synodal processes at local and regional levels.

The emerging framework proposed in this study—integrating systems thinking, prophetic leadership, and sacramentality—offers one way of holding together vision and practice. It highlights the importance of coherence between theology and formation, pastoral structures, and lived realities. Synodality invites the Church to move from isolated initiatives to interconnected processes, from maintenance to mission, and from control toward discernment, shaped by the Spirit speaking through the people.

Several priorities follow: sustained formation in spiritual conversation and communal discernment; strengthening grassroots ecclesial spaces such as families, small communities, and parish ministries; investing in youth and lay leadership; deepening interfaith and intercultural competencies; expanding digital and hybrid formation pathways; and building structures that enable collaboration across institutes, dioceses, and regions. Particular attention must be given to accompaniment—ensuring that ministers and pastoral leaders experience themselves as sent, supported, and accountable within a wider ecclesial community.

Ultimately, synodality situates the Church in an ongoing paschal journey—a movement that requires letting go of familiar patterns to receive new possibilities as a gift. Prophetic leadership will be essential in guiding this transition, helping communities read the signs of the times, take creative risks, and remain rooted in the Gospel. The Church in Asia, with its traditions of dialogue, plurality, and lived faith among ordinary people, is uniquely positioned to contribute to this unfolding ecclesial renewal.

Finally, these reflections do not close the discussion but invite further discernment. The path ahead will be shaped not only by plans and frameworks but by the Spirit's action within communities that listen, walk together, and remain open to conversion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHARLES BERTILLE has served in various ministries in the Asia Pacific region and also globally as a lay person and missionary—youth, lay formation, mission & governance, Caritas & community development, pastoral institute, bishops' conferences, and philanthropy. With a Master's degree in Theological Studies from the Loyola School of Theology at Ateneo de Manila University (2014), he recently completed his PhD from Adamson University with a dissertation on synodality and cultural integration within the Malaysian Church. Married to Beatrice, they currently live in Malaysia.