ELF STEERING COMMITTEE QUESTIONNAIRE
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The Reception of Synodality in Europe: Current Practice, Challenges and Emerging Perspectives

Introduction

The responses to the questionnaire provide a comprehensive picture of how synodality is currently being received and implemented across different ecclesial contexts. Although considerable differences exist between countries, dioceses and parishes, several common themes emerge. Synodality is increasingly recognised as an essential dimension of ecclesial life, yet its implementation remains uneven and is still in an early stage in many local Churches. The survey reveals both encouraging signs of renewal and significant challenges that continue to hinder the development of a genuinely synodal Church.

Signs of a Growing Synodal Culture

At parish level, respondents report a gradual but visible emergence of synodal practices. Parish pastoral councils, economic councils and local consultation groups increasingly provide opportunities for dialogue, participation and shared responsibility. In several countries, synodal conversations have enabled parishioners to reflect together on pastoral priorities, strengthening community life and encouraging a broader understanding of the Church as the shared responsibility of all the baptised.

Nevertheless, this development remains inconsistent. While some parishes have embraced synodal methods of discernment and collaborative decision-making, many others continue to function according to more traditional patterns of governance. Respondents frequently observe that the vitality of synodal life depends largely on the openness of individual parish priests and local leadership. Where clergy actively encourage participation, synodal structures tend to become living instruments of communion; where such support is absent, existing councils often remain largely consultative or inactive.

At the diocesan level, signs of synodal development are generally more visible. Many dioceses have established pastoral councils, synodal teams, formation programmes and diocesan consultation processes. Several respondents describe diocesan initiatives that intentionally employ *Conversation in the Spirit* as a method of communal discernment. National synodal teams, pastoral commissions and episcopal conferences have likewise created opportunities for bishops, clergy, religious and laity to work together on questions concerning the future of the Church.

Nationally, synodal structures remain diverse. In some countries, permanent synodal teams and lay forums actively promote implementation of the Synod's Final Document, organise

formation programmes and facilitate communication between dioceses. In others, implementation remains limited to isolated initiatives or has not yet become institutionalised. Nevertheless, many respondents note that synodality has entered the vocabulary of ecclesial life and is increasingly recognised as an important pastoral priority.

Experiences of Synodality

The survey demonstrates that synodality is increasingly experienced not merely as a set of organisational reforms but as a new way of being Church. Respondents frequently describe improved communication, stronger collaboration between clergy and laity, renewed participation in parish life and a growing awareness of baptismal co-responsibility.

The method of *Conversation in the Spirit* receives particular appreciation. Participants repeatedly emphasise that this form of spiritual conversation creates an atmosphere of attentive listening, mutual respect and communal discernment. Rather than producing winners and losers, the process encourages participants to seek together the promptings of the Holy Spirit and to discern common pastoral priorities.

Many respondents observe that synodal experiences have strengthened relationships within ecclesial communities. Parishioners report feeling heard, respected and increasingly involved in pastoral life. In several countries, synodal consultations have also stimulated broader reflection on parish identity, mission and evangelisation.

However, the survey equally indicates that many synodal initiatives have struggled to continue beyond the initial consultation phase. In several contexts, enthusiasm generated during the Synod process has diminished due to limited follow-up, insufficient institutional support or continuing scepticism among parts of the clergy.

Formation as the Foundation of Synodality

One of the strongest themes emerging throughout the survey is the central importance of formation. Respondents consistently argue that synodality cannot become a permanent characteristic of ecclesial life without sustained formation of bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful.

Many dioceses already provide courses, workshops, annual assemblies and formation programmes addressing synodality, spiritual discernment and collaborative leadership. Nevertheless, respondents generally agree that these efforts remain insufficient and should be expanded considerably.

Formation is understood in a broad sense. Beyond acquiring knowledge of synodal structures or methods, respondents emphasise the need for spiritual formation that cultivates listening, humility, dialogue, discernment and co-responsibility. Particular importance is attached to the formation of clergy, whose leadership is widely regarded as decisive for the successful reception of synodality. Many respondents therefore advocate greater attention to synodality within seminaries, ongoing priestly formation and episcopal leadership programmes.

Adult catechesis also emerges as a priority. Respondents note that synodal renewal depends upon mature, well-formed lay people who are capable of participating confidently in ecclesial discernment and pastoral decision-making.

Structures in Service of Communion

Although respondents emphasise that synodality is primarily a spirituality and an ecclesial culture, many also identify structural reforms that would better support synodal life.

Frequently proposed changes include strengthening pastoral councils, granting consultative bodies greater influence, institutionalising synodal councils at diocesan and national levels, increasing transparency in decision-making and developing more participatory models of governance.

Several respondents advocate greater recognition of lay ministries and wider opportunities for lay leadership, particularly for women. Others emphasise the need for more effective consultation mechanisms, clearer accountability and regular evaluation of pastoral initiatives. Throughout the responses, however, structural reform is consistently presented as complementary to, rather than replacing, conversion of mentality.

Barriers to Synodal Development

The survey identifies numerous obstacles that continue to hinder the reception of synodality. The most frequently cited barrier is clericalism, understood not only as an excessive concentration of authority within ordained ministry but also as a mentality shared by both clergy and laity that limits participation and discourages shared responsibility.

Many respondents also identify insufficient trust, weak communication, resistance to change and limited understanding of synodality as significant obstacles. In several countries, respondents perceive a gap between clergy and lay faithful, while others point to consultation fatigue or the persistence of hierarchical patterns that inhibit genuine dialogue.

Cultural and geographical factors also influence implementation. Minority Catholic communities often face different challenges from those living in traditionally Catholic societies. Secularisation, demographic change and increasing cultural diversity require new forms of pastoral engagement and missionary outreach that many respondents believe synodality can facilitate.

Canonical Development and Governance

Relatively few respondents propose specific revisions to canon law, and many indicate limited expertise in this area. Nevertheless, several recurring themes emerge.

Respondents call for greater canonical recognition of the role of lay people in ecclesial governance, stronger participatory structures, clearer provision for synodal consultation and updated canonical frameworks reflecting new ministries and forms of shared responsibility. Particular attention is given to questions concerning diocesan pastoral councils, governance, parish leadership and the participation of women in ecclesial life.

These proposals generally reflect a desire to align canonical structures more closely with the ecclesiology of communion articulated by the Second Vatican Council and developed further through the Synod on Synodality.

Participation, Equality and Ecumenical Openness

The survey reveals gradual progress in promoting the participation of women within ecclesial life. Women increasingly occupy leadership positions in diocesan administration, pastoral councils, safeguarding structures, educational institutions and national synodal bodies.

Nevertheless, respondents consistently observe that women remain underrepresented in many decision-making structures and call for broader recognition of their gifts and responsibilities.

Ecumenical openness also appears as an important characteristic of synodal renewal. In countries where Christian communities have long cooperated, respondents describe positive relationships and joint initiatives. Elsewhere, ecumenical engagement remains limited but is increasingly recognised as an important dimension of the Church's missionary witness. Respondents generally view openness to diversity—whether cultural, ecclesial or social—as essential for a synodal Church.

Evaluation and the Role of the Laity

The survey indicates that systematic evaluation of synodal initiatives remains underdeveloped. While some dioceses have established procedures for reviewing pastoral programmes and integrating feedback, many respondents report that evaluation is either absent or informal. Greater transparency, accountability and regular assessment are therefore widely regarded as necessary for sustaining synodal development.

Lay organisations emerge as particularly significant actors in promoting synodality. In many countries they organise formation programmes, facilitate dialogue, contribute to national synodal teams and encourage participation across ecclesial structures. They frequently serve as laboratories of synodal practice and play an important mediating role between local communities and episcopal leadership. At the same time, respondents caution that lay organisations themselves must remain representative of the wider People of God and continue listening to the experiences of ordinary parishioners.

Good Practices and Conditions for Growth

Numerous examples of good synodal practice illustrate that synodality is already becoming a lived reality in many ecclesial settings. Parish renewal initiatives, youth movements, diocesan pastoral councils, lay forums, religious communities and ecclesial movements demonstrate how participation, listening and communal discernment can enrich pastoral life.

Respondents consistently identify several factors that stimulate synodal development. Effective episcopal and priestly leadership is regarded as fundamental, particularly when characterised by openness, humility and willingness to share responsibility. Equally important are personal spiritual experience, trust, mutual respect, transparent communication and opportunities for genuine participation.

Successful local initiatives often inspire neighbouring communities, demonstrating that synodal culture spreads most effectively through lived experience rather than theoretical instruction alone. Communities where people experience being listened to, where discernment genuinely shapes pastoral decisions and where responsibility is broadly shared are consistently described as places where synodality flourishes.

Conclusion

Taken together, the responses portray a Church that is genuinely moving towards greater synodality, although at different speeds and with varying degrees of success. Synodality is increasingly understood not simply as a temporary programme but as a fundamental way of living communion, participation and mission.

The findings demonstrate that the future of synodality depends less upon the creation of new structures than upon the gradual development of an ecclesial culture rooted in listening, discernment, trust and shared responsibility. Formation, collaborative leadership, transparent governance, meaningful participation of the laity and continual spiritual conversion emerge as the principal conditions for this transformation.

Although many challenges remain—including clericalism, uneven implementation, limited evaluation and the need for deeper formation—the survey reveals considerable hope that synodality is gradually becoming embedded within the life of the Church. The diversity of experiences presented by respondents illustrates that the journey is still unfolding, but also that significant foundations have already been laid for a more participatory, missionary and communion-oriented Church.