

INDIAN THEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION (ITA) STATEMENT 2023

SYNODALITY AN INDIAN THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

1. We, the members of the Indian Theological Association (ITA) convened for the 45th Annual Meet and Conference from 14 – 16 April 2023, at St. Peter's Pontifical Institute, Bengaluru: 560055 deliberated on the theme: *Synodality: An Indian Theological Reflection*. This reflection was carried out in the context of the ongoing Synod on Synodality, entitled *Towards a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*. We, forty-one theologians from various parts of India, gathered for this conference, reflected on biblical and theological foundations of synodality and focused particularly on pastoral implications of synodality in the Indian context, in terms of ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue, civil society and youth, protection of nature along with the aspect of listening, which is a key component of synodality.
2. For this year 2023, we chose this theme as synodality is at the core of the ministry of Pope Francis. In October 2021, Pope Francis announced a two-year process – which was subsequently extended by a year – of listening and dialogue of the Catholic Church, known as the “Synod on Synodality.” Synod means journeying together. To answer Jesus' call today in India is to listen to and to walk with the poor and the oppressed and the people of other religions and ideologies. Is the Church in India, in all the activities, especially in decision-making, inclusive of the discriminated sections of the society? It is a soul-searching question for all of us today. Our answers may vary according to the contexts from where we come and the type of ministries we are engaged in.

Synodality in the Indian Context

3. We realize that a synodal Church is a Church in Communion. The synodal Church can make communion real and inclusive by remaining closer to the poor, the Dalits, the Tribals, women, children, differently abled, aged and all other oppressed people. Thus when we reflect on the synodal Church of the poor and the marginalized, we do not think of only Christians but also of the poor and the oppressed of all churches, religions and ideologies. Such an endeavour would enable us to walk together with all the Children of God.
4. A synodal Church is a Church that participates in the life of the people of God, with the preferential option for the poor and the marginalized, particularly the Tribals and the Dalits. Such an understanding of our ministries aims at the growth of everyone in the society, paving way for the change of heart and transformation of Indian society.
5. A synodal Church is a Church on Mission. In the context of politicization of religions and victimization of minorities, we need a better understanding of the mission of the Church in India today. “In such a dehumanizing and life destroying context of the twenty-first century, ... [we are] called upon to respond rightly and righteously in order to accelerate the growth of the reign of God” (ITA Statement 2019). Being filled with

the Spirit of God, we move from missions “to the nations” to “mission among the nations” with the aim of the mutual mission —the greatest work of promoting God’s Reign in our midst in India today.

Biblical Foundation of Synodality

6. God of the Bible is a synodal God through and through, continuously journeying with his people and compassionately listening to their cry. Intimate knowledge, passionate love and arduous following of this synodal God is the life mission of every Christian.
7. From the beginning of creation, God walked with the first humans (Gen 3:8) and taught humanity how to walk blamelessly before him (Gen 17:1; Lk 1:6). God became liberative *Goel* or the redeeming next-of-kin to his people, and God’s *Shekinah*, his dynamic presence, comforted and guided them. In the mystery of Incarnation, God pitched his tent among us and became *Immanuel*, God with us. In him, we live, move, and have our being (Acts 17:28).
8. God of the Old Testament is primarily a listening God, who especially listens to the neglected and rejected women like Hagar and Leah. The Psalmist repeatedly speaks about God listening to the cry of the poor and the brokenhearted (Ps 34:16-17). God desires that his people have an open, listening disposition (Deut 6:4) and endows his beloved with a listening heart (1 Kings 3:9). Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, teaches his disciples not only to listen but also to act like his Father who is always working (Jn 5:17), and be doers of the word. On his journey to Jerusalem, Jesus stopped after listening to the cry of blind Bartimeus (Mk 10:49), and comforted and healed him. Following the synodal God, we commit ourselves to journey with the neglected, listen to their hopes and aspirations, and respond positively on their behalf.

Theological Foundation of Synodality

9. The synodal Church is a listening Church. It implies that the Church is ready to listen to various voices that demand a deeper listening; voices from the margins demanding rights, equality and freedom; LGBTQI+ persons seeking acceptance and inclusion; prophetic voices within and outside the Church that protest abuse of power. It also needs to listen to the compromising voices resulting from an unholy nexus between politics and religion that endorse a ‘politics of hate’ and respond to them with prophetic courage. It is vital that the Church in India listens to these various voices.
10. The promising concept of synodality holds the potential for remaking the Church of the 3rd millennium, all the same, there is a clash of vision/worldviews in re-envisioning a new way of being Church and this is very true of the Indian situation. Even as listening is taken to be the key that unlocks synodality, it is important to examine whose voice matters and who is listening as the Church. Clericalized hierarchical structuring with the persisting clergy-laity and men-women divide being the dominant mode of

ecclesiastical functioning, if the Church has to grow as body that listens, it is imperative that major structural changes are initiated.

11. The metaphor of 'enlarge the space of the tent' given to the working document for the continental stage of the synodal process is subversive as it challenges the dominant hierarchical structuring of the Church and invites the baptized to share an egalitarian space. Gospel stories can be signposts for learning the art of Christian listening as Jesus listened with the heart while crossing defined and respectable boundaries. The Gospel stories illustrate that listening with the mind and heart of Jesus is a risky affair – leading to the Cross, as it would certainly demand the Church to walk the extra mile. Through listening, synodality can alter the DNA of the Church. Hence it is imperative as the Indian Church to listen and discern the synodal process that we need to undertake.
12. The present synod offers a new vision of the Church as a participative Church, living in communion by listening to and learning from other. The entire Church is involved in the process of discernment. The synodality of the Church is not superimposed on the Church. Church is synodal by nature. There is a paradigm shift from the understanding of the synodality of the Church centring on the power to celebrate the Eucharist to the baptismal incorporation of every believer into Christ.
13. The present synod is the actualization of the Trinitarian and Christological dimensions of every member of the Church to live in communion and give witness to it by inviting everyone to enter the household of God.
14. We are created in the image and likeness of the Trinity or the Absolute Communion. We have a Father-Mother dimension called transcendence. So, by nature we can transcend all the boundaries of class, caste, creed, gender, ethnicity, nationality etc. The actualization of our capacity for transcendence is necessary for communion. We have a Son-dimension, that is, our ability for transparency or openness. Without openness, there is no communication and no communion. Our natural capacity for transparency enables us to be in commune with everyone. Our Spirit-dimension is our interiority or our ability for a contemplative attitude towards other humans and the earth. It recognizes the otherness of the other and his/her freedom. Such an attitude is necessary for communion. Since the origin and end of humans is communion, the present synod calls our attention to this innate nature of humans to live in communion and witness to it.
15. Our Christology influences our vision of the Church. A radical Christology of Christic inclusiveness of everyone and everything in Christ gives us a deeper meaning of the mystery of the Church as the Body of Christ. If Jesus Christ is the all-embracing reality of God, his Body, the Church, too should be an all-inclusive reality of human communion. The exclusive and narrow understanding of the Church needs to be abandoned, and the new vision of an all-inclusive Church following the all-inclusive

Christ is to be embraced. In this new vision of the Church there is no outside and inside of the Church as it is a Church without walls. Such a vision of the Church needs to emerge from participating in the synodal process of the Church.

Pastoral Implications of Synodality

16. We reflected on the pastoral implications of synodality in terms of ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue, engaging with the civil society and the youth, and listening to the voices of all as the Spirit is speaking from everywhere.
17. Indian Christianity is not monolithic. There are many Churches in India. They are different in terms of rites and rituals, languages and cultures. It is in this context, Christian unity should be the concern of all Christians. This concern “extends to everyone according to the ability of each, whether it be exercised in daily living or in theological and historical studies” (*Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 5).
18. The commitment to build a synodal Church has significant ecumenical implications, because both synodality and ecumenism are processes of walking together. In this walking together, we need to find out the way for dialogue, mutual understanding and common agreement and also open new avenues for the understanding of communion, participation and mission of the Church under the power of the Holy Spirit. Synodality must foster Spiritual Ecumenism, Dialogue of Love, Dialogue of Truth and Dialogue of Life in India.
19. The ecumenical dimension of formation of the people of God is a must and it needs to be approached with three fundamental dispositions: “love of the truth, with charity, and with humility” (UR, no. 11). This formation needs to take place through Bible study, the preached Word, catechesis, liturgy and spiritual life, and in a variety of contexts, such as the family, parish, school and lay associations.
20. Synodality is journeying together in the *Parrhesia* – boldness – of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit can speak to the Church through other religious believers. The event of Cornelius described in the Acts of Apostles is an ample proof from the life of the early Church. He received the Spirit even before he received baptism (Acts 10:3-6). Similarly, other members of Cornelius’ household received the Spirit while they were listening to Peter (Acts 10:44). An interesting thing to be noted here is that Peter depended on Cornelius to understand the real meaning of the vision he had. It means the first head of the Church showed the humility to listen to an “outsider” in order to have clarity regarding the revelation he got from God. This reminds us about the need to listen to the followers of other religions in order to understand better the identity and mission of the Church today. If there is only one divine plan of salvation, and if all religions are partakers of that same salvific plan, it is necessary that all those who represent them discuss together about realizing God’s will upon earth.

21. The imagery of the People of God lays the basis for inter-religious dimension of synodality. The people of God include the entire humanity, irrespective of caste and creed. Hence, the synodal process would be incomplete if it does not include in it also the people beyond the boundaries of the Church. If the Council fathers showed the courage to place the people of God at the centre and the hierarchy at its service, the mutual fecundation between inter-religious ministry and synodality invites us to go a step further: make the cries and joys of other believers and non-believers the starting point and locomotive to define the *raison d'être* of the Church. This is not at all revolutionary because there exists in the Church a famous dictum from the first millennium: "what concerns all, needs to be debated by all" ("*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet*"). If the Church is a messianic community, she can function as the agent of general history of salvation only if she associates herself with other religions because it is for them, she exists and it is together with them she can attain the reconciliation of humanity.
22. In a world that offers multiple belief-systems, it is a great challenge for the Church to keep the faithful committed to one single source of spirituality. While managing diversity becomes difficult, one may be succumbed to the feelings of fear and hatred and consequently to become defensive, apologetic and even aggressive. At those moments of crises, the Church has to learn from her master Jesus who followed the course of loving the enemies and from St. Francis of Assisi who made an effort to put an end to the crusades through initiatives of dialogue. Although religions cause at time violence, they also possess great potential to promote altruism. The altruistic potential in religions induces us to consider religious diversity not as a threat but as a providence. The synodal process of listening and dialoguing shall help the participants to cull out the features of altruism in different religions.
23. The pedagogy of inter-religious dialogue and the art of synodal living have much in common. Both of them apply the methods of mutual listening, collective discernment and concerted actions (Document of the International Theological Commission, no. 75). Both demand from the participants the qualities of humility, respect, dignity, trust and openness (ITC 107). Both require self-denial, readiness to accept our fragilities and a sense of forgiveness (ITC 109). Both inculcate a capacity to see things from the viewpoint of other (ITC 111). Both lead to conversion of heart, *diakonia* and building up social ethos (ITC 103). Both consider the common good more important than the personal good (ITC 112). Synodality is the best path shown by the Spirit in order to lead the Church towards a new configuration of faith-living which is nourished by multiple religious traditions.
24. The Catholic Church, through her social teachings from the time of Pope Leo XIII, has encouraged the faithful to engage the civil society for the goals of common good. Though it thought of it in terms of civil government, state and authorities for a period of time, from Pope John Paul II onwards, the Church understood the civil society as the

third space between the family and the state . It serves as a relatively free space of freedom for voluntary initiatives

25. In line with this understanding, recent Catholic social teachings have promoted the involvement of the faithful in these civil spaces. Cultivating human dignity, human rights and common good on the basis of faith in the transcendent and yet immanent God has been underlined as the Christian vision and manner of participating in the civil society.
26. Pope Francis, by initiating the synodal event, calls for a dialogical participation in all spheres of life, including the civil society. He is particularly concerned to address the contemporary ecological crisis and the lack of fraternity in the global world through polyhedral dialogical participation. To him, Christian faith must become alive in the public sphere in terms of the values, brotherhood/sisterhood, solidarity and common good by showing a special commitment to the uplift of the poor and the marginalized.
27. The world population index reveals that several parts of the world, especially the Asiatic region, would have more than half of its population falling under the category of youth (below 35 years of age) by the year 2030. Until the recent past, barring some exceptions, the young people as a whole was not given their deserved recognition and the possibility to engage themselves in a significant way in the life and mission of an otherwise clericalist, hierarchical and institutional Church. The young people are not just “the future of the Church,” but they are “the now of God” (*Christus Vivit*, ch. 3) and “the now of the Church” (Pope Francis). This is a powerful reminder that they have an important role to play in the life and mission of the Church here and now. With the availability of such a gigantic youth resource at hand, it is not an optional extra but a necessity squarely placed before the Church that is contemplating on its synodal identity to engage her young people with serious intent in the synodal journey of the Church.
28. The Bible is replete with several accounts that give panoramic details concerning the crucial roles played by young men and women in the history of salvation with the nearness of God’s continued presence and accompaniment. God engaged with multiple young people in the Bible on their journey towards the realization of the redemptive plan. The history of the Church is also full of luminous examples of several young men and women as saints, martyrs, intellectuals, charismatic leaders and founders and foundresses.
29. Moreover, in the context of our discussion on synodality, it is pertinent to ask whether the Church is adequately addressing the felt needs and aspirations of the young, and whether they are given the due recognition as co-pilgrims in a synodal Church. To this end, the young people need to be accompanied in a holistic way, so to enable them to identify, nurture, develop, sustain and to put into optimum use their human, spiritual,

intellectual, ecclesial and eschatological needs and potentials. A synodal Church with all its characteristics of encounter, listening, dialogue, inclusion, accompaniment, participation, mission and communion is called to recognize the presence of young people as co-travellers, dialogue partners, creative thinkers, change-makers, partners in decision-making and transformational leaders.

Conclusion

30. We realize that we are not alone in the synodal process. Under the power of the Spirit, we journey together with all people of good will, belonging to different churches, believers of other religions, with all the people of the good will and with the entire creation for the common good. We hope and dream of promoting a participatory Church – which listens, discerns, and walks together with the poor and the marginalized, especially the tribals, the Dalits and all the oppressed. The more the Church lives its communion with the active participation all its members and all humans of good will, the more it fulfills its mission of transforming the world into God's Kingdom!

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