

POST-SYNOD SPIRIT: IS CHANGE IMMINENT?

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The Synod on Synodality is a three-year participatory process that involved the local churches at the diocesan and national to the continental, to the universal, and back in a continuous circular dialogue, discernment, and decision-making. Its lofty goal of Church renewal at a comprehensive level - spirituality, relationships, theology, leadership structures, laws, etc. - is already happening. Understanding the Synod's change process initiated or strengthened through the lens of Organization Development Theories, this paper posits that authentic spirituality, participatory structures, and pastoral skills will sustain this change.

Keywords: Synodality, Synod, Synodal Church, Synodal Skills, Organization Development Theories, Church Discernment and Decision-making, Philippine Church

INTRODUCTION

After a 3-year global synodal process, have doors to change opened? On the other hand, will the Catholic Church go back to 'business as usual'? Will the Synod¹ bear tangible fruit in the Church's theology, law, and structures? Can the renewal of hearts transform traditional cultures built through the centuries?

As a Synod lay voting member, a professional theologian, and an Organization Development (OD) practitioner, I offer an

¹ "Synod," every time it is mentioned in this paper unless otherwise stated, refers to the 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops that ran in two sessions at the Vatican - the whole month of October in 2023 and 2024. The "Synodal Process" refer to the 3-year dialogical process from 2021-2024, including the Synod sessions at the Vatican.

intimate perspective on the Synod process as a possible game-changer in church renewal.

Using the lens of OD - specifically change theories (chaos and two-loop), intervention approaches (diagnostic and dialogic), and identity development (learning organization and living organism) – this paper will explore how change has and is already happening because of the Synod. Aside from my own experience, I also share this space with a team of Synod practitioners and leaders of their respective Diocesan Synod Teams, one each from Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. They shared how they are already experiencing change amid myriad pastoral challenges. Adding to their experiences, I will propose pastoral pathways to sustain this change.

Using another framework to investigate a faith experience can provide a new perspective, but it can also be simplistic. Unfortunately, this paper cannot give enough space to discuss another discipline's complexities, except in a very short, descriptive way. This paper has two parts: the first is entitled Change and the Synod, exploring Change Theories, Interventions, and Identities. After briefly explaining an OD theory or framework, I will explicate its applicability and challenge through my myriad experiences of the 3-year Synodal process. The second part would be exploring pastoral pathways that bring theory and experience forward with the sharing from ground zero – the local churches – as practical examples. This part hopes to answer the question: how can we nourish and sustain this change and transition to the new?

PART 1. CHANGE AND THE SYNOD

The Synod on Synodality is a call to change. I chose two change theories that could dialogue with the change that the Synod initiated: Two Loop and Chaos Theory. It specifically responds to

the call to conversion that frames the Final Synod Document (FSD).

CHANGE THEORIES

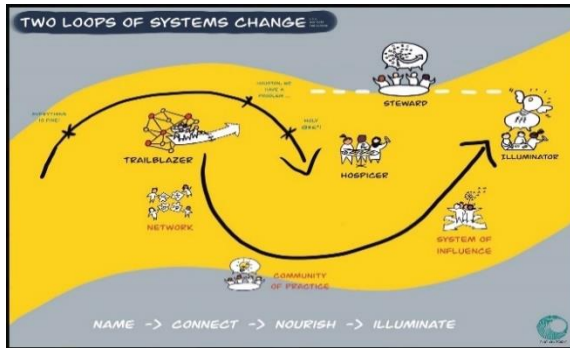
TWO LOOP THEORY FROM BERKANA INSTITUTE²

This theory, designed by Meg Wheatley and Deborah Frieze of the Berkana Institute, argues that organizations in the transformation process are simultaneously in the paradoxical process of living and dying. For them, any organization that decides to develop automatically activates both the growth side of the loop (which involves germination, innovation, maturation, and rejuvenation process) and the death side (which requires stagnation, disintegration, and decomposition). The two-loop theory confirms that all systems tend to decline: “As one system culminates and starts to collapse, isolated alternatives slowly begin to arise and give way to the new.”

In this Two-Loop Theory, those at the peak believe that the organization is here to stay, and if ever there is a need for change, change will be superficial or simply doing the same thing it has been doing, just doing it a bit more. People in the old system will protect it at all costs. It is also important to note that the two loops do not cross. These are two systems, two different paradigms, two different worlds. The loops are discontinuous. One loop cannot be carried to the next loop. The old system must die. “Mind the gap,” its promoters would say.

² Two-Loop Theory is attributed to Margaret Wheatly and Deborah Frieze of the Berkana Institute. The picture used above however comes from an OD firm called Find the Outside, two of its team lead Tim Merry and Tuesday Rivera were part of the originators in the development of this theory. <https://transformationallearningopportunities.com/two-loop-theory>.

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What is interesting is the leadership's role in this theory of change. There are four different kinds of leaders: the steward, innovators, communities of practice, and illuminators. In the image, as the organization peaks or starts to go down, we see a group of innovators jumping out. They can already sense a new wind, and the old system cannot dance to it. They have discovered alternatives already. The communities of practice occur when the innovators connect and find a support system for new ways of doing things. The innovations, through praxis, become pathways to new responses. The illuminators highlight the new practices, which are now more stable for others to see. The steward in the picture, the one with a broken line from the first loop, is the facilitator of the new loop. They can see the innovators and connect them (networks). However, perhaps more than anything, they are the hospice and bridge, helping people navigate the loss of the old system and giving space to the new. They support the communities of practice, primarily through new challenges, and notice and highlight the illuminators. Most people from the old system can now move on to the next one - bridging.

In a simple illustration, this theory clearly shows the context of the three-year (and beyond) Synod process. Pope Francis initiated a call for renewal from the grassroots level up to the global and back through the Synod on Synodality. This massive process

invites church members from all persuasions – called progressives and conservatives by some or simply people who want change, those who think there is no need for change, and those who are already practicing such— people belonging to the entire spectrum of the two loops.

The two loops that do not meet could have created tension, conflict, and chaos among its participants at all levels – local, national, continental, and global. The reality of a dominant, dying loop (for example, hierarchical dominating leadership) and an emerging loop showing signs of life (for example, the Synodal process with the conviction that each baptized is essential and has a voice, even and especially the poor, marginalized ones, the LGBTQ+; women; etc.) invite deep conflicts. As the theory shows, it is difficult for them to see eye to eye because the two loops do not meet.

I recall that during the first session of the Synod, one Church leader noticed that his seatmate in our small group held the opposite view on the issue of LGBTQ+—one was vehemently opposed, while the other was a staunch supporter. He openly declared he did not want to sit, talk, or even share a meal with the other leader. Without hesitation, he stood up and walked out of our group. In another group I joined, a bishop shared that his country and a neighboring one were separated only by a narrow river. He remarked that the people on the other side were “crazy”—claiming they had "crazy ideas about the Mass and the Church." Curious, I asked him how many people attended Mass in his parish, which was a cathedral. He admitted that only around 50 to 100 attended despite a Catholic population of roughly 100,000. His resistance to change, especially given his acknowledgment that Sunday Mass attendance had steadily declined over the years, surprised me.

There was also a heated discussion as we made our final group report: the bishops³ said we should be a church of unity: there should only be ONE teaching, one stand, one belief. I strongly suggested we use “a church of plurality, in unity and the harmony of diversity,”⁴ but all the bishops in my group said no, ‘unity’ is the better language! For me, it is not a question of changing the church's teachings but remaining faithful to the teachings of Jesus while making them relevant to believers, especially to young people and the poor. My small group experience of disagreement is repeated hundreds of times in all the daily sessions of the Synod at the Vatican and most probably also at the local, national, or even regional levels. The Synod was an apparent attempt to bridge the two loops through a 3-year Synod conversion process.

I think the above example of rigidity about teachings, refusing decentralization, and inculturation/contextualization is another illustration of this Two Loop theory - to know that a system is dying and to face the emerging one. The liminal space between the two loops is a critical conversion space. That is why communal discernment must happen. The Spirit leads the dying and emerging loops and decisions, and their implementation should be synodal. In this illustration, the two spaces between the two loops are significant because these are liminal spaces - *puwang* - where conversion happens.

³ Since there are only 20% non-bishop members - clergy, religious and lay - in a small group of 10 members, there would be about 8 bishops and 2 non-bishops. In this small group, we were only two lay women, and the rest were bishops from different parts of the world.

⁴ This was the Synod language. Final Synod Document [FSD] #34-42.

CHAOS THEORY

Chaos Theory originated in Mathematics but has also been widely applied in Behavioral and Organizational Development (OD) science. It presents a contradiction – a science of predicting the behavior of “inherently unpredictable” systems.⁵ The “science of surprises” explores nonlinear and unpredictable phenomena such as turbulence, weather, the stock market, and brain states.

Chaos Theory talks about ‘attractors’ or minor disturbances in a system. Wheatley sees that things in the environment that disturb a system’s equilibrium play a crucial role in creating new forms of order. As the environment becomes more complex, generating new and different information provokes the system to respond.⁶ For example, Wheatley expounds that new information enters a system as a slight fluctuation that varies from the norm. He believes that when the system attentively responds to this fluctuation, the information gains strength through its interaction with the system, reinforcing itself in a continuous feedback loop. The information can grow to such a level of disturbance that the system can no longer ignore it. Jarred by so much internal disturbance and far from equilibrium, the system and its current form fall apart. However, this disintegration does not signal the death. Instead, the system can reconfigure itself at a

⁵ Chaos Theory is discussed under the bigger topic of Complexity Theories which deal with change in complex systems in Ralph Stacey, Douglas Griffin and Patricia Shaw, *Complexity and Managements: Fad or Radical Change to Systems Thinking?* (London: Routledge, 2000), quoted in Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context* (London: SCM Press, 2012), 52 ff.

Chaos Theory: Facts and Definition, accessed 28 February 2020, www.britannica.com; What is Chaos Theory, accessed 28 February 2020, www.fractalfoundation.org; www.theconversation.com.

⁶ Wheatley, 123 ff.

higher level of complexity, making it better able to deal with the new environment.⁷

Wheatley believes that open systems use disequilibrium to avoid deterioration. Disturbances lead to disequilibrium, which leads to growth. Faced with amplifying levels of disturbance, these systems possess innate properties to reconfigure themselves to deal with new information. Living systems are constantly changing, never a 'resting structure' but continually seeking renewal. To stay viable, open systems maintain a non-equilibrium state, keeping the system off-balance so that it can change and grow.⁸

At one point during the Synod, I thought the Synod process would collapse! Halfway through the October 2024 Synod, I felt the whole three years was a waste of time. This is especially true regarding the issue of women's leadership, including them in ALL levels of leadership and decision-making, especially in opening permanent diaconates for women. By the second week, most women were tired of always making a stand because this stand was mostly rejected in some groups, although I heard that this was not the case in other groups. In June 2024, the Pope put all the controversial issues of the 2023 Synod to Study Groups. In this 2024 Synod session, we got into serious conflict with the head of Study Group 5 (where women ministries were assigned).

After the conflict with the Study Group was resolved through apologies and meetings, it was interesting to observe how we heard and felt the support of an increasing majority of the bishops on women's issues, esp. of leadership. It might interest you to know that the women of the Synod met twice during the second session, one for fellowship and support, and the other one was a closed-door meeting with the Pope where women from each region

⁷ Ibid., 19-20.

⁸ Dee Hock of VISA talked about "chaordic organizations" - chaordic for the integration of "chaos" and "order" in Cooperrider, 353 ff.

talked about their experiences, concerns, fears and hopes about the Synod. It was a very open and warm dialogue with the Pope.

During the final voting, the tension in the room was real, especially for groups with a clear division or opposition between the bishops and lay, like my group, about women's issues. As has been reported, the paragraph that talks about the leadership of women and keeping open the discernment on women deacons – paragraph 50 of the FSD – was the one that got the highest NO vote – 97, 20 votes shy of the 1/3 votes needed to cancel a paragraph. Talking to women after the voting, I learned that we were ready to walk out if it was voted down. Can you imagine the consequences? A failure of the 3-year Synod process!

This specific event was an example of bringing people to the edge of chaos - an attractor enters a system and sends it into fluctuation, instability, disequilibrium – and the changes to be able to respond to the ‘disturbance.’

CHANGE AS CONVERSION

The two change theories – Two Loop and Chaos – highlight the need for conversion or change – internally and how that internal conversion flows into external or conversion of processes, bonds, and structures. The Final Synod Document is framed by this need for conversion, with the chapter titles Called by the Holy Spirit to Conversion (chapter 1) and succeeding chapters: The Conversion of Relationships, the Conversion of Processes, and the Conversion of Bonds.

Conversion is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return to God with all our hearts.⁹ The teachings, way of life, attitudes, and behaviors of the historical Jesus become the beacon that motivates Christian conversion. It highlights a grace-filled

⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, no.1431.

experience where the Holy Spirit is the primary agent who facilitates the authentic conversion process. Conversion happens inwardly, and it is manifested outwardly. For Pope Francis, conversion is gradual and “not a magic.” It could also be “as simple as learning something new; it involves openness to reorienting priorities, changing our opinions, reconsidering our worldview, and engaging with the truth” (2017 Audience). He says in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), “It follows that Christian conversion demands reviewing especially those areas and aspects of life ‘related to the social order and the pursuit of the common good.’” (EG182). “An authentic faith - which is never comfortable or completely personal - always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth better than we found it.” (EG 183).

Conversion is not just a spiritual experience but also a *pagbabalik-loob* that manifests in *kagandahang-loob* and *pakikipagkapwa tao*.

For this reason, I realize that the Synod on Synodality is a spirituality (EG 43, 44), an attitude that every member needs to imbibe. I believe now that the Synod Process took 3 years, so it can be a conversion experience. The Pope has always said and constantly reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the protagonist of the Synod.

CHANGE INTERVENTIONS

How does change happen? The role of Organizational Development (OD) is to design interventions that facilitate transformation. Here, we briefly examine two types of interventions: diagnostic and dialogical. While Change Theories illuminate the broader context and challenges of the Synod, these OD interventions assess the effectiveness of the Synod’s initiatives in driving change. They also highlight areas of weakness within the Synod process.

DIAGNOSTIC OD

Bushe and Marshak outline the foundational principles and assumptions of diagnostic OD as follows: It relies on data gathering and empirical action research, which serve as the basis for diagnosis. This diagnosis then informs decisions and interventions. Underlying this approach is the assumption that an objective, discernible reality exists and can be uncovered through systematic research.¹⁰

Compared to literature before the sixties, where organizations were mechanistic structures, the idea of Open Systems arose that says organizations, like people, adapt to their environment like all living things. As living things, there are “healthy” and “unhealthy” organizations. Models of “healthy” organizations arose; hence, the search for objective reality to diagnose the state of organizations before providing “medicine” or interventions so that the organizations continue to develop based on the concept of healthy organizations.

A well-known tool in diagnostic OD is SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). This approach assumes an objective reality that organizations can assess to identify external opportunities and threats within a defined environment. It evaluates an organization’s strengths and weaknesses relative to an ideal standard, providing a structured framework for strategic decision-making.

¹⁰ G. Bushe and R. Marshak, “Revisioning Organization Development: Diagnostic and Dialogic Premises and Patterns of Practice,” *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 45, no. 3, (September 2009):348-368. The online version of this article can be found in <http://jab.sagepub.com/content/45/3/348>.

DIALOGIC OD

Bushe and Marshak, who first coined the term Dialogic OD in the late nineties, used popular OD practices and tools to describe the emerging concept of dialogic OD at this time, such as Appreciative Inquiry (AI), Open Space, or Future Search methods. Described earlier as discursive or conversational approaches in working with people and organizations, change processes are based less on defining the present through gathering data and diagnosing from such but more on bringing out narratives and stories or conversations. Dialogic OD presumes that there are multiple realities, and it will not be productive to agree on one interpretation because it could also mean silencing other voices and perspectives that could enrich the process. When people become aware of a variety of stories about themselves and each other, they also begin to understand their own part in creating unproductive patterns of interaction, work attitudes, etc. in their organizations.

Bushe and Marshak laid down *Eight Key Premises of Dialogic OD*: 1) Reality and relationships are socially constructed. In every conversation, reality is being created, maintained, or changed; there is no objective truth but many “truths” - some dominant, a few marginals, hence the need to listen and engage all. 2) Organizations are meaning-making systems. Organizations do not just interact with the environment but with one another; their daily interactions/conversations make meaning; 3) Language, broadly defined, matters. Verbal and non-verbal communication and the narratives and stories influence people’s thinking and the symbols they use in interacting; changing them can initiate change in organizations. 4) Creating change requires changing conversations. Change who is conversing mindful of marginalized individuals, how people are conversing, what is the content of the conversation, how conversations are framed, and skills of communication; 5) Groups and organizations are inherently self-organizing. Think of

organizations as emerging, constructed every day, continuously flowing, not as stable entities. OD consultants can disrupt, support, nudge, and engage such flows to facilitate change and development. 6) Increase differentiation in participative inquiry and engagement before seeking coherence. Participative processes of inquiry and reflection (instead of diagnosis) express individuality, hence diversity, surfacing various experiences. Maximize such before going into a new coherence. 7) Transformational change is more emergent than planned. For Dialogic OD, transformational change happens when organizations hold an intention while moving into an unknown future. They must disrupt current mindsets and patterns and help uncover collective motivation, desire, and intention. As a result, change processes are more opportunistic and hierarchical, where change can and does come from anywhere in the organization, more than planned, hierarchical and top-down. 8) Consultants are a part of the process, not apart from the process. OD practitioners cannot stand outside the construction of reality but immersed themselves as a resource and part of meaning-making.

Understanding the effectiveness of Dialogic OD requires examining its three core processes of transformational change: Emergence, Narrative, and Generativity.

Emergence - Transformation occurs when disruption leads to the reorganization of systems. Disruption—planned or unplanned—arises when people recognize that the existing order is no longer viable and that returning to it is impossible. Practitioners with a Dialogic Mindset actively push systems toward disruption or controlled chaos while fostering and strengthening stakeholder networks. It is near the edge of chaos that self-organization becomes possible, driven by active stakeholder engagement.

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Narrative – Transformation happens when core narratives shift. These narratives provide coherence and meaning in people’s lives, shaping their understanding of reality. Changing a core narrative—such as redefining women’s societal roles or reimagining hierarchical leadership structures—can fundamentally reshape an organization.

Generativity – Transformation occurs when a generative image emerges because it captures people’s imagination and inspires new ways of living and working. A compelling generative image—such as the vision of sustainable development—sparks creativity, instills hope, and motivates action toward meaningful change.

These two types of OD interventions—diagnostic and dialogical—can effectively describe the entire three-year Synod process, though it has been predominantly dialogical rather than diagnostic. Some diagnosis occurred, particularly during the first consultation in October 2021, when diocesan teams compiled their reports. At this stage, local communities reflected on the challenges and deficiencies within their organizations. They proposed action steps to improve church life and mission based on consultation results. However, the dominant tool used in the Synod process, *Conversation in the Spirit*, does not inherently encourage deep structural analysis or diagnosis of deeply rooted issues such as clericalism, hierarchicalism, machismo, the non-involvement of 90% of the baptized in regular church life, and the massive loss of members. A more robust diagnostic approach could have explicitly helped uncover these systemic fractures.

THE SYNOD AS A DIALOGICAL PROCESS

Fundamentally, the Synod process was dialogical in nature. Generative conversations unfolded circularly— moving from parishes to dioceses, then to national, regional, continental, and global levels, and back in repeated cycles. Across all levels, faith communities engaged in shared narratives, prioritizing voices from the peripheries— especially but not exclusively through Conversation in the Spirit— that led to moments of conversion and transformation. The Synod of Bishops, held across two sessions (October 2023 and October 2024, each lasting 30 days with seven-hour daily discussions), epitomized a Dialogic OD process.

From the outset, the Synod embodied the three core processes of Dialogic OD:

1. *Emergence* - The Synod provided space for disruption, allowing new ways of organizing and relating to emerging organically. As stakeholders engaged in dialogue, the realization grew that the old structures were no longer sufficient, pushing the Church toward reconfiguration.
2. *Narrative* - The discernment process centered on storytelling, capturing the lived experiences of faith communities, particularly those at society's margins. These narratives reinforced existing ecclesial perspectives and actively reshaped them, contributing to a co-constructed and evolving Church identity.
3. *Generativity* - The very concept of Synodality functioned as a generative image—one that sparked imagination, inspired engagement, and took on clearer meaning as the process unfolded. The long, circular nature of the Synod gradually gave form to

what had initially been an undefined reality, while the conversions and transformations experienced by participants helped crystallize its significance.

A key strength of the Synod was its commitment to amplifying voices often unheard in church decision-making. Efforts were exerted at parish and diocesan levels to reach out to diverse social sectors, including farmers, fisher folk, construction workers, street vendors, single parents, LGBTQ+ individuals, persons deprived of liberty (PDL), persons with disabilities (PWDs), and even politicians. As a result, the conversation was not dominated by traditional church leaders—clergy and lay—but was enriched by perspectives that are typically excluded. These voices reshaped the content of the narratives and played a role in co-constructing a renewed and more inclusive ecclesial community.

SYNODALITY AND THE TWO LOOP & CHAOS THEORIES

In alignment with Two Loop Theory and Chaos Theory, Dialogic OD is most effective when the existing system is no longer sustainable, and when disruption or chaos creates an opportunity for transformation. The contemporary Church is precisely at such a crossroads. Scandals, legal cases from abuse victims (primarily but not exclusively sexual abuse), ideological divisions, and widespread disillusionment—particularly among young people—have made the dominant ecclesial system increasingly untenable. These crises signal that the old ways of being Church can no longer hold, making space for the emergence of something new.

The challenge is ensuring that this transformation is initiated, sustained, and integrated into the Church's ongoing life and mission—a crucial discussion explored in Part 2.

Changing Identities

The intention of any change process and intervention is to redefine an organization's identity. Is the church a learning organization? On the other hand, is it a living organism? How can OD identity theories dialogue with the reshaping of the Church's identity through the Synodal process?

Learning Organization

Senge¹¹ proposes five disciplines of learning organizations:

1. Building a Shared vision. In learning organizations, the vision should be created through interaction with members and stakeholders. A shared vision motivates people; motivation moves the whole change process.
2. Systems Thinking. Senge believes that instead of focusing on individual issues, system thinking reflects an entire system where every action and consequence correlates.
3. Mental Models. According to Senge, a correct understanding (mental model) of who we are will enable us to visualize where to go and how to develop further. Senge also emphasizes that an organization must be flexible in accepting new mental models and a new company image.
4. Team Learning. To accomplish excellent functional team dynamics, team learning is of primary importance. For Senge, team learning brings together personal mastery and shared vision.

¹¹ P. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday Publishers, 1990).

5. **Personal Mastery.** For Senge, personal mastery occurs when an individual has a clear vision of a goal and an accurate perception of reality. Senge believes that awareness of the gap between the vision and reality will drive the employee to practice all necessary activities to realize the vision.

How does the Synodal Church define itself? The holding of the Synod on Synodality witnesses the Church as a learning organization. The 3-year process is a communal learning and reshaping of who the church wants to be at this time. The three years also involved building a new vision. The mental models carried by different members, which could hinder the process, were surfacing throughout the discernment process and hence conversion was the main call of the Synod. The communal discernment process and circular dialogue challenged our old mental frameworks regarding ministry, community, power, and leadership.

Transparency, evaluation, and accountability (#95-101) are effective ways for self-mastery when vision is powered by our own conversion as leaders in the church. This leadership practice approved by the Synod is a very important part of team learning in addition to communal discernment.

In the FSD, Synodality is defined as “The walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God’s Kingdom, in union with all humanity...Synodality is a spiritual renewal and structural reform path that enables the church to be more participatory and missionary, so it can walk with every woman and man, radiating the light of Christ.” (#28).

This definition expands on the principles of Learning Organizations by emphasizing inclusive and dynamic learning. First, learning within teams extends beyond members of the Catholic Church to every individual, making the process more

fluid, contextualized, and process-oriented—a true experience of "walking with" others. This approach also shapes how the Church envisions its mission, drawing inspiration from its founder, Jesus Christ, who continually challenges the mental models held by its members.

However, systems thinking remains a significant challenge in the Church's renewal efforts. While the Synodal Church aspires to strengthen its relational bonds (Chapter 4) and enhance its networking capacity—both within the Church and with civil society—it has yet to fully embrace this integrative approach. The Synodal vision calls for a greater exchange of gifts (#12-123), where all voices contribute to an evolving, identity-shaping journey. Yet, the practice of systems thinking in ecclesial structures remains limited, posing an ongoing challenge for renewal.

LIVING ORGANISMS

Another compelling self-defining energy in Organizational Development (OD) is the concept of Living Organisms. This theory highlights a key weakness in the Synodal process and presents a challenge for reshaping the Synodal Church.

A Living Organism thrives through adaptability, interdependence, and continuous regeneration. For the Synodal Church to embody this, it must move beyond structured processes and cultivate a more organic, responsive, and evolving ecclesial life. The challenge lies in ensuring that Synodality is not just a one-time event but also a sustained, living process that remains open to disruption, dialogue, and renewal in response to emerging realities.

ORGANIZATIONS AS LIVING ORGANISMS

For Wheatley,¹² organizations are living systems and should therefore be guided by the way nature and the environment work. She says in *Quantum Physics* RELATIONSHIP is the key determiner of what is observed and how particles manifest themselves.¹³ For her, if the physics of our universe is revealing the primacy of relationships, then we also need to rethink and reconfigure the relationships between organization and society, employer and employee, and management and leadership in relational terms, through relationships that are nourishing and contributing to the life of the organization, each member and the life of the wider world.

Because relationality is at the center of the biological systems, Wheatley also emphasized the PARTICIPATIVE NATURE of the universe.¹⁴ She says in the quantum world, nothing happens until we have observed it. She gave the example of a cat placed in a box and the question of whether it is dead or alive. The cat is both alive and dead until the moment we observe it. Participation means the elements are conscious of one another, and together, they make or construct reality.¹⁵

When we think of relationships or interrelatedness in companies and organizations, structures come to mind. She introduces “PROCESS STRUCTURES” – things that maintain form over time yet have no rigidity, like streams. For Wheatley, a stream can adapt, shift configurations, let the power balance move on, and create new structures. Nevertheless, what drives this adaptability is the water’s need to flow. Water answers to gravity,

¹² Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1992).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 59 ff.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

downhill, to the ocean's call. Wheatley says the forms have changed, but the mission remains clear. For her, structures emerge only as temporary solutions that facilitate rather than interfere.

She also mentioned “dissipative structures”¹⁶ from scientist Ilya Prigogine, who initially introduced the term, which sounded contradictory. Wheatley says that in chemistry, dissipative structures teach a paradoxical truth: disorder can be a source of the new order. Dissipation describes a loss, a process by which energy gradually ebbs away. Yet Prigogine discovered that such dissipative activities play a constructive role in the creation of new structures: dissipation did not lead to the demise of a system but was part of a process by which a system lets go of its present form so that it could reemerge in a form better suited to the demands of the environment.

She believes that organizations should not have a rigid reliance on single forms, true answers, or past/tried practices learned in business but should have dissipative structures to let “transient forms emerge and disappear only to have new forms appear.” Wheatley notes that the strength of self-renewing systems is their relationship with their environment. “Part of the viability of open systems is their internal capacity to create structures that fit the moment.” It tells us that when the need changes, so should the organizational structure.

Living organisms highlight one important insight I learned from the Synod sessions. Structures are connected to mission. The section that got the greatest number of NO votes was the section on Episcopal Conferences and Ecclesial Assemblies (104, 124-129). It talks about the authority and competence of the Episcopal Conferences in doctrinal and disciplinary competence, which also includes appropriation of the authentic teaching of the Church in an enculturated and contextualized way. In the whole Synod

¹⁶ Ibid., chapters 5-6 discuss structures.

sessions at the Vatican, I felt that there was much resistance in giving more power to participatory structures. I realize that structural change is not a question of power, but it is a question of relevance. The call for more power to the conferences, more participation in decision-making, is to be more relevant in our being church, in the way we respond to the issues around us (contextualization, inculturation). Hence, the call above for dissipating structures is very important: process structures are needed so that the structures could be more responsive to the vision and mission of the Church.

Although the Synod emphasizes structures of participation and the inclusion of marginalized voices, it is evident that the Church's fundamental structures—such as leadership models, seminary formation, and ministerial frameworks—have remained largely unchanged for centuries. Even if the Synod leads to structural adjustments, Organizational Development (OD) science reminds us that change does not necessarily equate to transition or inner conversion. While external forms may shift, the deeply ingrained mental models and cultural convictions that shape ecclesial life have been sustained for generations.

This is why systems thinking is crucial in identity formation. Take clericalism, for example—it is not merely a leadership style but a deeply embedded system upheld by cultural, political, economic, familial, and educational forces. True transformation requires more than new structures; it demands a fundamental shift in mindset and practice. The challenge for the Church as a living organism is fostering internal transitions that align with external changes. If Synodal leadership structures are to take root, they must be accompanied by a genuine reorientation of values, behaviors, and decision-making processes. How can fluid leadership models, participatory bodies, and more authoritative episcopal conferences be designed and lived out in a truly Synodal Church?

Moreover, its environment shapes a living organism's identity, yet this remains a glaring weakness in the Synodal Church. From the beginning, the Synod has treated ecology as a mission field rather than an integral part of its identity—a perspective still reflected in the Final Document. The Church has yet to fully embrace Pope Francis' vision in *Laudato Si'*, which calls for a deeper recognition that the cosmos is not just a setting for human life but an essential part of our identity and mission.

To embody Synodality, the Church must move beyond seeing ecology as a secondary concern and instead recognize it as foundational to its very way of being. If the Synodal Church is to function as a living organism, it must acknowledge that its structures, mission, and self-understanding are deeply interwoven with the ecological realities that sustain life. Only then can the Church fully respond to the challenges of both internal renewal and external engagement in today's world.

PART II. PASTORAL STRATEGIES TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION

When we look at the Catholic Church as a developing, relevant organization that can sustain its growth towards a Synodal Church, I can suggest three pathways for renewal that can be surmised from the FSD: Spirituality, Structures, and Skills.

Spirituality fundamentally responds to the call for ongoing conversion toward the new. Bridging the Two Loops—the dominant and the emergent—is an ongoing challenge, and true, sustainable change can only take root through the renewal of cultures. This begins with personal and pastoral conversion, which must flow into daily life and practice.

Engaging, introducing, and facilitating disruptions is essential for fostering an environment that embraces change. Chaos is not an obstacle but a necessity, as it compels the system to

adapt, find balance, survive, and grow. Without disruption, transformation remains superficial.

At the same time, structures provide stability and embodiment to spiritual conversion, both personal and communal. Without structural renewal, experiences of change and renewal risk becoming fleeting moments rather than lasting transformations. Likewise, skills play a crucial role, equipping individuals with the practical knowledge to live out Synodality—whether in everyday interactions or in the Church’s broader mission of renewal.

SPIRITUALITY

Because becoming a Synodal Church is a spiritual movement, spirituality will be the ground and the energy for change and renewal. Without a relationship with Jesus, who brings us salvation, and with the Spirit, who moves us towards a vision, Synodality becomes a project with an action plan, not a vision that inspires and sustains mission with the wider society.

The sharing of Fr. Belstar Ediang from the Synod Team of the Diocese of Pagadian specifically focused on the church's spirituality and the clergy. “This is also what I ask of the groups that helped me in the process and those who were actively involved in the Synodal consultation in the parish: let us own the spirit of Synodality, be possessed by the mystery of synodality, and plant a dream or two for the Church. It is when we recognize that the Synodal consultation was not an academic exercise, diocesan-wide research, or creating structures for the consultation. We understand that these structures and organizations are only scaffoldings. When the synodal process is done, these scaffoldings may be gone. What is left is the audible voice of the Spirit, coming from the peripheries.” For Fr. Bel, Synodality is “a journey inward – into the very core of the life of persons of the living church.”

Foremost in Fr. Bel's experience of the synodal process is the "church as a home," which for him means the church is relational, a church of welcome and inclusion (115). Conversion of our relationships is therefore paramount (50). Reaching out to different sectors of society during the Synodal consultation, including Muslims, tricycle drivers, the poor, fisherfolks, farmers, PWD, street vendors, drivers, quarry workers, street children, Lumads, prostituted women, abused children, military, and many more, the most important voice for him is the voice from the peripheries. As a seminary professor, he also emphasized that being with people at the peripheries should be necessary in forming a seminarian. Fr. Bel also focused on building up a synodal spirituality of the clergy. Realizing how deep the wounds of clergy abuse (sexual, financial, and simply just a lifestyle that shocks people) have hurt the church, he said the renewal of the clergy is very important for the implementation of the Synodal Church.

Aside from a personal discipleship journey, common Synodal Formation has been suggested by the Final Document. But there is also a new way of understanding formation from a synodal perspective: it must be common and together this means bishops, religious, clergy and lay - to be looked at as an exchange of gifts. In the past, formation has been given and taken as specific groups - bishops only, clergy only, lay only. Team learning or learning together helps participants confront their own mental frameworks and enter challenging and inspiring dialogue toward being internally converted. Moreover, women's voices, the poor and the youth must be especially considered for formation (147,148). Formation should also move away from being understood as attending a conference or a seminar but more of a lived formation immersed in the daily life of communities especially the poor and in the perspective of making us more missionary and mission oriented.

The whole section of the FSD on the need for transparency, accountability, and evaluation (95-102) of all serving the church, especially the clergy, is a deeply spiritual exercise. Recognizing that all positions of leadership are positions of trust, all are accountable to the community and not just to one's superior in their exercise of power and leadership. It is very interesting to note that before the Synod, when we talk of transparency and accountability, we are always thinking of financial matters and, later, sexual and other forms of abuse. Conversion calls for regular evaluation - this is a helpful, stable system to continually form ourselves in the spirit of Jesus and his Gospel.

Foremost in the FSD is the conversion of hearts; without this, all the other action steps of renewal will not be sustainable and would be simply compliance and not commitment. Hopefully, regular and sustainable Synodal formation will be fruitful. Formation based on experience with people from the ground fills up, bridges the liminal space between the Two Loops, and moves people towards the emergent loop. The experience-based formation is also a basin that can safely engage chaos. Even before the Synod, Pope Francis espoused encounter and listening as a way of formation, following the way of the historical Jesus, who was more outside the temple and among people as a way of salvation.

STRUCTURES

Structures not only give shape and form to a Synodal Church; spirituality breathes through structures that serve the vision of a Synodal Church. Sometimes, many programs are planned, but if structures remain the same, the effectiveness of pastoral programs is not maximized or even fails. For the past 60 years, the church has had a Vatican II vision, but with Vatican I structures, one of the reasons perhaps is that it slows down and

even hinders its implementation. Many theologians say that the Synodal Church is the last hurrah of the same Vatican II vision.

The FSD talks about building up and widening participation structures (Synodality and Participatory Bodies, (103-108); the Bonds of Unity: Episcopal Conferences and Ecclesial Assemblies (124-129)). It reminded me of the implementation of what is already provided in Canon Law and to further Canon Law, especially in making all decision-making councils mandatory. The FSD clearly states that participatory structures are meant to make the church more missionary. Changing and renewing structures are never a question of power and control. Sound decentralization is for inculturation (129).

Regarding leadership structures, the FSD highlights the communal discernment process that leads to decision-making (87-94), which would be the most important mark of a Synodal Church. How can such enter all participatory bodies, especially councils, as a necessary process? The FSD also made clear criteria of decision making to listen to the voices of the poor, the young and women (106).

When discussing structures, we must recognize the systemic difficulty of renewing and transforming them. In the Church, structures—especially in leadership—are deeply rooted in tradition. Hierarchicalism and clericalism are not merely leadership styles; they have become cultural realities, shaping ways of living and relating. These structures are further reinforced by interconnected subsystems—political, familial, educational, and social—that sustain and legitimize them. Changing them is far from simple; it requires persistent effort, discernment, and a willingness to challenge long-standing norms.

What makes this renewal even more challenging is the call for process structures—also known as dissipative structures—that remain fluid and adaptable to respond effectively to the signs and challenges of the times. Pastoral planning processes at the parish

and diocesan levels could serve as spaces for gradual structural renewal and experimentation. These processes also provide an opportunity to institutionalize communal discernment and decision-making, ensuring that the voices of as many baptized members as possible (87)—especially those at the margins and among the poor—are heard and considered.

Another critical structure in need of deep reflection and renewal is seminary formation. Rooted in an ancient tradition shaped by a vastly different historical and cultural context, seminary structures have largely remained unchanged despite the shifting needs and realities of the present time. Moreover, these structures are deeply embedded in the hierarchical and clerical culture, which may have contributed to various forms of abuse within the Church. Rethinking and reforming seminary formation is not just an institutional necessity but a moral imperative, ensuring that future Church leaders are formed in a more Synodal, inclusive, and accountable way.

Dr. Rieyen Clemente's sharing talked about structures at the ground called Basic Ecclesial Communities - neighbors organized for regular fellowship, gospel reflection and prayer, solidarity, and mission. As has been expressed by theologians and pastoral leaders, BECs are seen as effective and grounded structures to realistically implement a Synodal Church. The FSD discussed BECs, or small Christian communities, as "the terrain where meaningful relationships of closeness and reciprocity can flourish, offering the opportunity to experience synodality concretely." It also especially mentions BEC as the space for a three-fold dialogue of life, action, and prayer, even for interreligious encounters. (117,123). Clemente opines that unless Synodality is seen in the structures that make faith and mission palpable in daily life at the ground, it remains a document and a motto.

Questioning how deep do we understand synodality – beyond the documents and conferences and merchandize – Clemente critiques their church’s commitment to mission and synodality and proposes his experience of BECs as a synodal conversion experience. For him, “The spirit of communal solidarity and compassion for others is actively sustained within the BEC. BEC demonstrates that those with limited formal education are also capable of assuming leadership roles within the Church. This is the essence of the BEC: it is the Gospel of the Ordinary People, and they are the bearers of the Good News. This spirit is present and vibrant within each of the BECs. Each cell serves as a meeting place for the faithful to connect with one another and with God. Such a form of communion should be elevated within the Church. The Synod is, therefore, a moment of encounter— a convergence and mutual recognition. Indeed, the Synod challenges us to return to the essence of the Church, which is to meet God together in our collective mission.

The transitioning of BECs to integrate Basic Human (social sectors) and Ecological Communities would further the intention of the Synodal Church to walk with humanity as cosmic communities. This also strengthens the role of BECs as process structures that continuously reshape how we understand and live as a church.

All in all, the local church, which was the ground for all the theologizing and discerning of the whole Synod process, would be the most practical and sustainable space for the renewal of structures, as well as the main protagonist in moving toward a Synodal Church (110-117). In this sense, we see the full impact of the role of *sensus fidei fidelium* (LG 22, SFD 22) in the renewal process of the local churches. We see their role not only in reading the signs of the time and guiding the discernment and decision-making processes but also in renewing leadership structures in the

church towards becoming more inculturated and, hence, more mission-oriented (81).

The renewing of structures is never superficial. Structures do not only give flesh to a vision and spirituality. As a framework, they reshape identities. Process structures become even more sensitive and responsive to the signs of the time, for indeed, mission reshapes a church's identity.

SKILLS

Pastoral skills would be the hands and feet that would propel synodal spirituality and structures in becoming a synodal church. Learning and imbibing new pastoral skills that serve the many aspects of a Synodal Church should preoccupy this movement of renewal.

Foremost among these skills would be listening and dialogue. This is the starting point of a synodal church because it is the first step of welcoming and inclusion. It is also the ground for communal discernment and decision-making. How can all, especially clergy and lay leaders, imbibe this skill?

The sharing of Mrs. Fe Barino from the Synod Team of the Arch of Cebu gave myriad examples of how these skills flowing into communal discernment were used: from a parish conflict situation to the Charismatic Community where she belongs and to her own family business enterprises. The tool called Conversation in the Spirit has shown how this listening and dialogue skill could lead to decisions that can move a community towards following Jesus in their mission. It was also interesting how using a spiritual skill in business planning led to more principle-based business decisions.

“I was pleasantly surprised to hear these profound reflections from individuals trained to think strategically and economically. This

spiritual exercise led us to identify three key concepts—not merely targets—that will guide our business planning: Strategic Expansion, Community Building, and Culture Building. One of the outputs from our focus on Culture Building is the creation of a CARE TEAM dedicated to listening to and recognizing the contributions of everyone, including daily-paid workers, contractors, service providers, caddies at the golf course, waiters, security guards, janitors, and others – whom we consider the peripheries at the workplace. Indeed, Synodality can also be applied also in the Workplace.”

Mrs. Barino said pastoral leaders must “help our community understand and practice Synodality in tangible and meaningful ways. We must move beyond theory and engage in real-life applications, fostering a culture of collaboration and mutual listening.” One essential pastoral skill for Synodal renewal is pastoral planning—specifically, how to engage in pastoral planning in a truly Synodal way (9). Traditionally, pastoral planning in parishes or dioceses has been limited to a select group of lay leaders, with decision-making largely confined to bishops and priests. These plans often revolve primarily around spiritual activities, with ministries operating in silos, developing independent plans rather than collaborating toward shared goals.

Synodal pastoral planning, however, must embody the core principles of a Synodal Church by:

1. Broadening consultation to include the People of God, especially voices from marginalized social sectors such as farmers, fisher folk, daily wage earners, law enforcement, persons deprived of liberty (PDL), and others.

POST-SYNOD SPIRIT: IS CHANGE IMMINENT?

2. ‘Walking with humanity’ by engaging in mission-oriented responses to socio-political issues, rather than focusing solely on internal Church concerns.
3. Fostering inter-ministerial collaboration ensures that ministries work together toward common goals rather than in isolation.
4. Being purpose-driven rather than merely activity-centered ensures that meaningful objectives rather than just events or programs guide pastoral initiatives.
5. Creating a tangible impact on the daily lives of people, especially the poor, makes the Church’s presence and mission more relevant and transformative.

Recognizing that the pastoral skills required for Synodal renewal are not merely functional is crucial. Skills are practical tools for enacting change, particularly those that align with Dialogic OD interventions. Essential Synodal skills—listening, dialogue, and communal discernment—facilitate deep and meaningful conversations. These conversations, in turn, shape the narratives that give meaning and direction to local communities as they strive to embody Synodality in concrete ways.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Is change imminent? It is already happening.

Let us journey together towards the edge of chaos. Let us get out of our comfort zones. Let us create, if not engage, the disturbance. I am not afraid of conflicts; I am afraid of silence, or silencing. Let us humbly journey through the two loops of change, discerning together, led passionately by the Spirit of God, the dangerous memory of Jesus, to guide us on what must die and to see and sense where the new life of the spirit is emerging. Let us

diagnose and dialogue, conscious always of involving the poor, the marginalized, and the youth. Let us learn collectively, bringing out the *sensus* of faith of the faithful. More than anything, let us be living organisms, letting Mother Earth guide our growth. May the Synodal Church be a living witness to the world that we live in!

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