

JOURNEYING TOGETHER: SYNODALITY AND THE PATH  
TOWARDS SOCIAL SALVATION – INVITED SESSION

Topic: Journeying Together: Synodality and the Path toward Social Salvation  
 Convener: Kevin Ahern, Manhattan University  
 Moderator: C. Vanessa White, Catholic Theological Union  
 Presenters: Maria Cimperman, R.S.C.J., Catholic Theological Union  
 Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, S.J., Jesuit School of Theology, Santa Clara University

The unfolding process of the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, or the Synod on Synodality (2021-2024), offers an unprecedented opportunity for theologians to rethink their engagement in the church and society. Aware that several CTSA members participated in the Roman meetings of the Synod in 2023, this special invited session convened two of the synod participants (Maria Cimperman and Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator) to share insights with peers in the Society. Our session also benefited from the presence of Catherine Clifford (St. Paul University, Ottawa) who briefly shared her experiences at the synod and invited society members to her paper later in the conference, presented in the Synodality Interest Group.

C. Vanesa White graciously read a brief paper from Cimperman, who was in Rome for the drafting of the synod's *Instrumentum Laboris*. Her paper illuminated some lessons from the first session of the synod and focused on participation and co-responsibility as the most important fruits of the synod so far. Orobator's presentation addressed some of the pitfalls and opportunities of this "experiment in ecclesiology." "How," he asked, "do we actually journey together as a reconciled community?"

Following the two presentations, the participants split into six small groups. Dr. Ahern introduced the conversations in the spirit method and facilitated three rounds of listening on the following questions:

- How, in your experience, does synodality relate to social salvation and the sinful divisions and inequalities wounding society?
- What is the role or vocation of the theologian in this unfolding process as we approach the second (2024) session of the synod?

After the third round of discussing what they heard, groups reported several areas of convergence around three broad themes:

*Hopes:* All the groups expressed hopes for the synodal process and acknowledged the role of the Holy Spirit. For one group, this is a moment of "corporate hopefulness." And yet, many reported not knowing exactly how theologians could or should be engaged. On the one hand, participants recognized the potential contributions that theologians could offer. Mention was made of helping to educate church leaders on theological concepts, or translating to the wider public what is happening. "Thinking with the church," in the words of one report, "still means thinking." Others reported feeling under-utilized as resources for the local church. One report stated that "we do

not yet have a sense of how synodality and theology work together.” The long-standing “lack of trust and relationships with” the local church was lamented as an obstacle.

On the other hand, some groups expressed concerns that getting involved might lead scholars to dominate discussions and overshadow the voices of non-academics. To this point, one report emphasized the need for theologians to “deepen their listening skills.”

*Risks:* Several groups reported disappointments in the process and anxieties about the outcome. One report described the local synodal phase as a “mixed experience.” Several worried about what would happen if the outcomes of the process did not lead to concrete changes. Another report pointed to the local reality of parish closings in Baltimore not reflecting this new style. Concerns for the polarized political reality were raised by two groups with one concerned that people approach synodality with a framework of “winners and losers.”

*Opportunities:* Overall, groups identified three opportunity pathways for theologians to develop synodality in their vocation. First, several reports mentioned the challenge of engaging students, including “unchurched students” in the process. Two groups spoke of the need to better listen to the students in the classroom and for faculty to model synodality.

Second, several groups called for greater connection to the local church as reflected in one group report: Theologians are called, as one report stated, to be “rooted in local communities. . . . This includes valuing lived experience, listening to the faithful, talking in a language accessible to the faithful, perhaps simply getting to know the people in one’s own parish more deeply, etc. Synodal theologians need to connect the academy and the church.”

Third, groups pointed to the possibility of synodality shaping the future work of CTSA as summarized by one of the reports: “I’ve been coming to CTSA for 30 years—this is the most substantive dialogue that I’ve had in those 30 years. . . . We still operate under a model of an expert; we listen to someone at the front of the room. We could do this [synodal process] after every plenary session.”

In the end, participants expressed gratitude for all those working in this historic process, particularly the CTSA members with leadership roles in the Roman meetings.

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