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## COULD “SYNODALITY” DEFEAT “CO-RESPONSIBILITY”?

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**A**LTHOUGH THE *Preparatory Document* for the sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,<sup>1</sup> and, even more, the *Working Document for the Continental Stage* of the “synodal journey” both feature the idea of “co-responsibility” in the Church, could it be the case that the notion of “synodality” as “the form, the style and the structure of the Church” (*PD* 2) tends in actuality to the erasure of “co-responsibility” as having any meaning independent of “synodality”? And, since the possibilities of genuine lay leadership in the Church derive from the idea of “co-responsibility,” could it be that “synodality,” though intending the contrary, actually tends towards the erasure of authentic lay leadership in the Church? That is the question that motivates this essay, which presents itself as an exercise in theology, that is, in “faith seeking understanding,” where the mystery of faith of which we are seeking deeper understanding is the mystery of the Church.

### I. THE HISTORY OF CO-RESPONSIBILITY

The idea of “Coresponsibility in the Church” emerged on the postconciliar scene in 1968 with the publication of the monograph of the same name written by Léon-Joseph Cardinal

<sup>1</sup> Accessed at <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/09/07/210907a.html>.

Suenens.<sup>2</sup> (We will return to a consideration of this book momentarily.) The term re-emerged in the twenty-first century with remarks of Pope Benedict XVI, which largely went unnoticed until they were brought back into prominence by a few scattered voices, perhaps most prominent among them the Most Rev. Charles J. Chaput as archbishop of Denver and, later, of Philadelphia.<sup>3</sup> Benedict's remarks are found, primarily, in two of his allocutions. The first and most substantial was his May 26, 2009 "Address to the Pastoral Convention of the Diocese of Rome," speaking as the local bishop in his cathedral, the Lateran Basilica of St. John, with the title "Co-responsible for the Church's Being and Action," and the subtitle "Church Membership and Pastoral Co-responsibility."<sup>4</sup> The context of the speech is the Diocese of Rome's renewed commitment to the priority of pastoral work in the local parishes. The second, much briefer, allocution was the 2012 "Message on the Occasion of the Sixth Ordinary Assembly of the International Forum of Catholic Action."<sup>5</sup>

As I attempted to describe in an earlier essay,<sup>6</sup> Benedict's idea of co-responsibility flows from the mystery of the Church as expressed by the "twin images" featured as descriptions of the mystery of communion in the Church by Vatican II. This communion ultimately originates in the Trinity and is effected by the Eucharist:

<sup>2</sup> Léon-Joseph Cardinal Suenens, *Co-responsibility in the Church*, trans. Francis Martin (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), originally published as *Co-responsabilité dans l'église d'aujourd'hui* (Bruges: Desclée De Brouwer, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> For example, in an undated post from the Pontifical Council on the Laity (<http://www.laici.va/content/laici/en/blog/Chaput.html>) or an 2019 address on vocations (<http://www.laici.va/content/laici/en/blog/Chaput.html>).

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20090526\\_convegno-diocesi-rm.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090526_convegno-diocesi-rm.html).

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/pont-messages/2012/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20120810\\_fiac.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/pont-messages/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20120810_fiac.html).

<sup>6</sup> John C. Cavadini, "Co-Responsibility: An Antidote to Clericalizing the Laity?" in *Church Life Journal*, March 26, 2020, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/co-responsibility-is-the-remedy-for-lay-clericalism/>.

The Church, which originates in the Trinitarian God, is a mystery of communion. . . . This communion is captured under the twin images of the “People of God” and the “Body of Christ,” where “People of God” expresses the continuity of the Church’s history, [and] “Body of Christ” expresses the universality inaugurated in the Cross and in the Lord’s Resurrection.

By the “continuity of the Church’s history,” Benedict has in mind continuity with Israel, chosen with an orientation to a salvation with universal extension, an orientation to the Cross, for “in the Cross, St. Paul says, Christ broke down the wall of separation.” It is in Christ, as his body, that “we really become the People of God”:

In giving us his Body, he reunites us in this Body of his to make us one. In the communion of the “Body of Christ” we all become one people, the People of God, in which to cite St Paul again all are one and there are no longer distinctions or differences between Greek and Jew, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, the barbarian, the Scythian, the slave, the Jew, but Christ is all in all. He has broken down the wall of distinction.

This is why it is “in Christ” that we really become the people of God: “For us Christians, therefore, ‘Body of Christ’ is not only an image, but a true concept, because Christ makes us the gift of his real Body, not only an image of it. Risen, Christ unites us all in the Sacrament to make us one Body.”

## II. CO-RESPONSIBILITY:

### THE RELATION OF HIERARCHY AND LAY FAITHFUL

It is therefore the mystery of the Church as constitutively a Eucharistic communion that Benedict is contemplating as he moves to a discussion of co-responsibility. That is why he goes on to note how the First Eucharistic Prayer makes a distinction within this one people:

The First Eucharistic Prayer . . . distinguished between servants “we your servants” and “*plebs tua sancta*”; therefore should one wish to make a distinction, one should speak of servants and *plebs sancta*, while the term “People of God” expresses the Church all together in their common being.

As I noted in my earlier article, the discussion of co-responsibility that follows is thus set up as a discussion about the relationship of two categories of people to the mission of the Church and to each other. Specifically, the hierarchy (“we your servants”) is ordered towards serving the “holy people,” the *plebs sancta*. Benedict warns against two false interpretations of Catholic ecclesiology. The first would be to ignore the emphases that emerged in *Lumen Gentium*, and thus to equate “the Church” with the hierarchy: “On the one hand,” he says, “there is still a tendency to identify the Church unilaterally with the hierarchy, forgetting the common responsibility, the common mission of the People of God, which, in Christ we all share.” On the other hand, he observes, a tendency in the opposite direction still persists, namely, to ignore the distinction between “we your servants” (the hierarchy), and the *plebs sancta*, “at times even crossing the very boundaries that exist objectively between the hierarchical ministry and the responsibilities of the lay faithful in the Church.” This would defeat co-responsibility almost as much as the first tendency, which ignores the laity and thinks of “the Church” as equivalent to the hierarchy, because it removes any particular charism or “responsibility” as lay. Co-responsibility does not do away with the distinction between hierarchy and lay, but presupposes it, and implies a co-responsibility across this distinction which is *co*-responsible in relation to the other group.

It is within the context of having made this distinction that the idea of co-responsibility is raised: “Dear brothers and sisters, it is now time to ask ourselves what point our Diocese of Rome has reached. To what extent is the pastoral co-responsibility of all, and particularly of the laity, recognized and encouraged?” The pope recalls past centuries, in which “thanks to the generous witness of all the baptized who spent their life educating the new generations in the faith, healing the sick and going to the aid of the poor, the Christian community proclaimed the Gospel to the inhabitants of Rome.” It is this same mission of proclamation and evangelization that Benedict highlights as the object of co-responsibility for the being and acting of the Church.

One of the fruits of the Diocese of Rome’s heightened attention to the pastoral work of the parishes, he says, was that it

“helped to develop in the parishes, religious communities, associations and movements a consciousness of belonging to the one People of God which, as the Apostle Peter said, God made his own: *that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him* (1 Pet 2:9).”

To cite this verse is to invoke the people of God as a royal priesthood, with each member sharing, on the basis of his or her baptism, in the priesthood of Christ: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” The theology of co-responsibility begins by invoking Vatican II’s rediscovery of the priesthood of the baptized, the mystery of the people of God as a royal priesthood, with each member ordered towards the prophetic, royal, and priestly vocation to “declare the wonderful deeds of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light,” that is, to mission, to evangelization.

Pope Francis echoes Benedict’s emphasis on the baptismal vocation to evangelization: “Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love.” Further echoing Benedict’s “Address,” Francis pays particular attention to lay people, who, he says, “are, put simply, the vast majority of the People of God. The minority—ordained ministers—are at their service.”<sup>7</sup> This is almost a direct echo of the “servant”/“*plebs*” distinction Benedict invokes, though “*plebs*” includes more than lay people (e.g., religious), even if the laity are a kind of synecdoche for the nonordained. Francis calls attention to the “responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation”; echoing Benedict, he says that this responsibility has been very unevenly received and unevenly formed, “in some cases,” again echoing Benedict, “because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120; 122. These points follow closely the development of these same points in the *Church Life Journal* article mentioned above, where I also trace the further development of these same ideas by Francis.

important responsibilities,” while in others, it is “due to an excessive clericalism” (*EG*, 102). An “excessive clericalism” is, I take it, a description of a situation Benedict had described, where, in people’s minds, both in and outside of the Church, “the Church” *means* the hierarchy and so there is no room for “co-responsibility.”

This articulation of co-responsibility seems to move the center of gravity in the Church away from the hierarchy (as the Church *par excellence*) to the baptized, called to evangelize. It recognizes a sphere of genuine leadership in the mission of the Church to evangelize, to which the laity are called not by the hierarchy but by their own baptism. This is not a leadership independent of the hierarchy, as though the laity are setting up their own Church—for that would not be evangelization—but they are inviting people into an encounter with Jesus Christ precisely in and through ecclesial communion. It is probably better, then, to say that this articulation of co-responsibility seems to move the center of gravity of the Church away from the hierarchy as the Church *par excellence* to the *communio* that is the Church, formed ultimately by the Eucharist. For the grace of baptism is not an absolute, stand-alone, self-referential gift, nor is the baptismal priesthood. Both entail a configuration to the paschal mystery and hence to the sacrifice of Christ that constitutes his priesthood, and which is also what constitutes the communion of the Church. Baptism is therefore intrinsically ordered towards Eucharistic communion.

### III. TWO PRIESTHOODS, TWO TYPES OF LEADERSHIP

*Lumen Gentium*, in the chapter on the people of God, describes the two priesthoods in the Church:

Though they differ from one another in essence and not merely in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, teaches and rules the priestly people; acting in the person of Christ, he makes present the Eucharistic sacrifice, and offers it to God in the name of all the people. But the faithful, in virtue of their royal priesthood,

join in the offering of the Eucharist. They likewise exercise that priesthood by receiving the sacraments, by prayer and thanksgiving, by the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity.<sup>8</sup>

The theology of co-responsibility, when it concerns the laity, is a theology of the co-responsible relation between the exercise of these two priesthoods. The baptismal co-responsibility is always exercised with, or “in relation to,” or “co-”, the responsibility unique to the ordained. This carves out two distinct, though related, spheres of leadership. There is a leadership associated with the hierarchical priesthood, that of pastoral governance, authoritative teaching, and sanctification; this is clearly stated in the passage from *Lumen Gentium*. But it is important to note what is *not* stated. The hierarchical priesthood is not “more” of the same priesthood that the baptized have. It is not a super-priesthood, somehow completing, displacing or superseding the common priesthood. There cannot be something “more” priestly than the priesthood that marks the whole Church, for that would imply that there is an inner Church of super-Christians, the hierarchy. This, it seems, is the essence of clericalism, and in that case those denied ordination on the grounds of sex or some other innate characteristic would be legitimately aggrieved. To say, then, that the two participations in the priesthood of Christ differ in essence, that the difference is not a mere difference of degree, is important.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> LG, 10 (*The Basic Sixteen Documents Vatican II*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. [Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Company, 1996]).

<sup>9</sup> See the analysis of Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *A Priestly People*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Paulist Press, 2013). To liken the effect of holy orders to the effect of baptism, such that it would “transmit a new sanctifying grace, which perfects that of baptism and thus makes the priest a super-Christian” is not the intention of the council (168). In this sense, “there is nothing greater than baptism, which gives the baptized their dignity as children of God” (134). The difference “in essence and not merely in degree,” “*essentia et non gradu tantum*” of LG 10, does not mean that they differ in essence *as well as* in degree: “there is nothing of that here. The difference between them is not a simple one of more or less,” rather, they are related by analogy, as a comment by the drafting committee made clear (138). “*Essentia* does not mean an essential superiority of the ministerial priesthood, but rather the opposite,” because “the royal priesthood is a reality from the order of the life of grace, while the ministerial priesthood is a charism in the service of the life of grace” (138-39).

Ironically, it may be the council's decree on the priesthood that offers the most promising resources for grounding and articulating a theory of co-responsibility. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* begins with inviting the reader to consider the mystery of the whole Church as a priestly body:

The Lord Jesus, "whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world" (John 10.36) gave his whole mystical body a share in the anointing of the Spirit with which he was anointed. In that body, all the faithful are made a holy and kingly priesthood. They offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ, and they proclaim the mighty acts of him who has called them out of darkness into his admirable light (see: 1 Peter 2:5, 9).

Among other things, this justifies the priority that Benedict and Francis give to evangelization as the first task of the Church in which all have a share. Both popes have carried this vision forward.

But to support and indeed to build up the royal, priestly people and all of its members in their mission, such that its spiritual sacrifices are indeed made "through Christ," another participation in the one priesthood of Christ, differing not in degree but in type from that conferred in baptism, is conferred by its own sacrament, the document continues, echoing but also amplifying *Lumen Gentium*:

The priesthood of presbyters, while presupposing the sacraments of initiation, is conferred by a special sacrament which, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, puts a special stamp on them and so conforms them to Christ the priest in such a way that they are able to act in the person of Christ the head (*PO*, 2).

This is, among other reasons, because "no Christian community is built up which does not grow from and hinge on the celebration of the most holy Eucharist" (*PO*, 6). In perhaps the most sublime passage of *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the Eucharist is described as the "source and summit of all preaching of the Gospel" (*PO*, 5). In fact,

the other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate are bound up with the Eucharist and are directed towards it. For in

the most blessed Eucharist is contained the entire spiritual wealth of the Church, namely Christ himself our Pasch and our living bread.

The building up of the Church is not just adding numbers to a humanly formed merely sociological grouping through preaching—that is, bare group proselytizing. Instead, preaching is directed towards incorporating people into the one body—Christ’s body, not a body of our invention or agency—into the one people of God—not our self-designed people—through their reception of the sacraments of initiation, ordered toward the Eucharist, by which people are fully incorporated (see CCC, 1396) into the body of Christ and his royal priesthood.

In other words, the ordained ministry is ordered not towards itself, but rather towards the priestly people, and ordained priesthood retains its fundamental character as the share in Christ’s priesthood, which constitutes the Church. On the other hand, when the baptized exercise their royal priesthood in evangelization, it is not just to spread knowledge of the Word of God dislocated from its ecclesial home, for then it is not really a *priesthood*, since the communion of the Church is communion in Christ’s sacrifice. Evangelization is intended to bring people to the encounter with the risen Lord which *is* incorporation into the Eucharistic body through configuration to Christ’s sacrifice.

The priesthood of the baptized, as a *priesthood*, flows from the one sacrifice of Christ and its exercise is thus intrinsically ordered towards that sacrifice. That means it cannot be exercised fully apart from the ministry of the ordained, nor is it truly exercised if it tends toward the rupture of communion instead of toward building communion. This would include evangelizing activity that rejected the authoritative teaching of the magisterium, or was undertaken in defiance of legitimate hierarchical authority. At the same time, it does not mean permission is necessary: “there is no need of a supplementary mandate from the hierarchy” to exercise the duty to proclaim Christ which comes “by virtue of the grace of baptism.”<sup>10</sup> The two priesthoods

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 130.

are mutually interrelated, and thus we have co-responsibility for the being and acting of the Church.

On the one hand:

The best way to situate the priestly ministry within [the Church] as the wholly priestly people is . . . to emphasize that its service consists in making the royal or spiritual priesthood grow in such a way that, to speak like St. Augustine, the entire holy City of God may become a spiritual sacrifice agreeable to God through Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

The royal priesthood remains primary as the end towards which the ministerial priesthood is ordered: “The Christian minister is not defined uniquely in relation to the Eucharistic body, but also, *by this very fact*, to its mystical Body, of which he is put in charge at his own level of responsibility.”<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the exercise of the baptismal priesthood is always to promote the spiritual sacrifice to which all people are called, and thus is ordered towards the communion of the Church, effected only through the sacramental ministry of priests. Jean-Pierre Torrell points out that “The Eucharist is presented not only as the center of the whole sacramental organism, but also as ‘the source and apex of all the work of preaching the gospel,’” as we have seen. “What this means,” he comments later, “is that evangelization is not only ‘launched’ from the celebration of Eucharistic worship, whence it has its fecundity, but that it ‘lands’ there, because it is only by the Eucharist that the full insertion of believers into the Body of Christ is achieved.”<sup>13</sup>

#### IV. CO-RESPONSIBILITY AND THE EUCHARIST

This means that a theology of co-responsibility, one that is able to distinguish a legitimate sphere of true leadership in the Church for the laity, distinct from that of the hierarchy though related to it, cannot be developed simply from reflection on baptism, but must be developed from that towards which baptism

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 181.

itself is ordered, namely, the Eucharist and the communion of the mystical body of Christ which it efficaciously signifies. This means that, although it is true that all the members of the Church are “co-responsible” for the being and mission of the Church because of their baptism, this “co-responsibility” is exhibited in relationships that depend on one’s position in the mystical body constituted by the Eucharist. The hierarchy are “co-responsible,” since without them there is no Church, no Eucharistic communion, possible, and their co-responsibility exists as a function of their service to the priesthood of the baptized.

Cardinal Suenens’s 1968 treatment of co-responsibility strongly emphasizes its source in baptism:

If we were to be asked what we consider to be that seed of life deriving from the council which is most fruitful in pastoral consequences, we would answer without any hesitation: it is the rediscovery of the people of God as a whole, as a single reality; and then by way of consequence, the coresponsibility thus implied for every member of the Church. (*Coresponsibility in the Church*, 30)

In fact, the cardinal comes close to overemphasizing it:

In presenting the Church as the people of God, the council immediately took a stand, more fundamental than the organic and functional distinction between hierarchy and laity, and considered that which is common to all – baptism. . . . Whether they be members of the hierarchy or not, all Christians are first and foremost “the faithful” in the deepest meaning of this word, that is, “the believers.” We can never meditate enough on the baptismal foundation of the church, this primal mystery of Christian existence. (Ibid.)

## V. BAPTISM ORDERED TOWARD THE EUCHARIST

The reason I say Suenens comes close to overemphasizing baptism as a source for the theology of co-responsibility is that he seems completely to ignore the way in which both *Lumen Gentium* and *Presbyterorum Ordinis* locate communion in the Church as ultimately the fruit of the Eucharist, with baptism itself ordered towards the Eucharist. He seems almost to override this perspective:

The sacrament of baptism is the gateway to Christian life. The other sacraments suppose that we have already “entered.” Their perspective is different. Baptism is the root of all Christian life, and of all religious life. . . . It is that point from which all vocations, functions and charisms derive their life. In the church of God, this fundamental equality of all is the primary fact.

It is true that, as I have mentioned above and as he goes on to say, “there is no superbaptism,” and thus, he says, “there are no castes, no privileges” (Gal 3:28 [Suenens, *Coresponsibility in the Church*, 30-31]). But his development of this point is worrying: “The greatest day in the life of a pope,” or “a bishop or priest” as mentioned in the previous sentence in the text, “is not that of his election or coronation,” or, it is implied, his ordination, “but the day on which he receives that which the Greek fathers call the holy and unbreakable seal of baptismal regeneration,” which may certainly be true enough, in its own way, as would be the next sentence, “His first duty, like that of all of us, is to live the Christian life in obedience to the gospel.” But the exposition seems to pass into overemphasis when he says, next, that “His own proper mission derives from this duty” (ibid., 31). Yes, the ordained minister is called to holiness in that universal call received in baptism, but his ordination does not “derive” from baptism, and therefore his own proper mission, *as ordained*, and thus his “co-responsibility,” *as ordained*, derives from holy orders. If not, we revert to a Reformation doctrine of ministry in the Church. What follows seems to be a fundamental misreading of *Lumen Gentium*, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, and related conciliar literature:

The decision to include within the *Constitution of the Church* a chapter on the people of God sanctioned the desire of the council to derive all that ought to be said concerning the mission, functions and tasks of the faithful from the “common” or universal Christian condition. (Suenens, *Coresponsibility in the Church*, 32)

Even worse, at least as an attentive reading of the conciliar ecclesiology as contained in the documents referenced, “The primacy of baptism entails as an immediate corollary the primacy of community” (ibid.). I say “worse,” because this derives the communion of the Church ultimately from baptism, and not from

the Eucharist. The logic of this would drive towards a version of “co-responsibility” in which not only the specific nature of the “co-responsibility” of the ordained priesthood disappears, but with it the specific nature of the “co-responsibility” of the laity deriving directly from baptism. There is erased the distinction across which we are “co-responsible.”

However, Suenens does not follow this logic to its conclusion, though the basis on which he avoids it is unclear. He never articulates the *communio* of the Church as ultimately Eucharistic, or, as Benedict later put it, that it is only in and as the body of Christ, Eucharistically constituted, that we truly become the people of God. And yet, without providing the proper theological, ecclesiological source for his reflections, his idea of co-responsibility is therefore liable to come unraveled: “It is possible,” he says, “to differentiate individuals and groups within the people of God on the basis of divinely conferred function or charism, and to discuss coresponsibility in terms of these groups.” Since the sacrament of orders is not mentioned, the theology here is unstable.

He continues, “But, in regard to all these distinctions”—without distinguishing those that come from holy orders and those that do not, thus reflecting the instability of the particular theology of co-responsibility he has articulated—“we must bear in mind the fundamental principle enunciated by St. Paul, that all these gifts conspire toward the building up of the *perfect man* (Eph. 4.13).” It is on this unstable foundation that he goes on to say, “This principle is applied to the distinction between laity and hierarchy, and is beautifully expressed in the *Constitution on the Church* when it says, ‘For the distinction which the Lord made between the sacred ministers and the rest of the people of God’—anticipating Benedict’s distinction between “we your servants” and the “*plebs sancta*”—“entails a unifying purpose, since pastors and the other faithful are bound to each other by a mutual need’ (art. 32)” (Suenens, *Coresponsibility in the Church*, 32-33).

He then provides a long list of differentiated co-responsibilities, including those of the papacy, the bishops, the priests, theologians, deacons, religious, and “laymen.” He very

carefully distinguishes two senses of “co-responsibility,” one pertaining without differentiation to the “people of God as a whole,” and one that articulates “also how this coresponsibility is operative in and between the various groups established on the basis of function or charism within the church” (ibid., 33). He follows with chapters on each “level” of co-responsibility, partly based on distinctions within holy orders themselves. For example, the co-responsibility that bishops owe each other in collegiality, and, in a different way, to their presbyterate in governance, given “the profound dogmatic reality of episcopal authority” which nevertheless “while remaining unchanged in itself, has been obliged to assume new aspects within the contemporary context” (ibid., 98), presupposing “a systematic convergence of effort, a mutual collaboration in an atmosphere of confidence” (ibid., 99)—even though bishops are primarily “responsible” in what we have been calling governance.

The distinction of the “coresponsibility of theologians” (ibid., 136-51) muddies the waters in terms of what element constitutive of the Eucharistic *communio* is determining these levels of co-responsibility—thus contributing to the inherent instability of the scheme—but nevertheless, when it comes to the “coresponsibility of priests” he mentions the collaboration they owe to each other in the presbyterate of a diocese and also beyond. The chapter on the priest closes with co-reponsibility with regard to the laity: “Yet, the priest has an incomparable mission to fulfill within the church because he shares in a particular way in the role of Christ as head of the mystical body. It is in this context that his function is situated” (ibid., 134). This is properly balanced and very precise. He goes on: “He is the head and heart giving life to the body”—a little imbalanced, since it is the Holy Spirit that gives this life. Finally, the image of the body of Christ is invoked, perhaps for the first time in the book: “His role is to give life to the community of believers, feeding them with the word of God and the eucharist, making them aware of their mission to evangelize and humanize the world” (ibid., 134-35). This is beautiful, even though the use of the sociological word “community,” instead of the theological word “communion,” tends to the erosion of the basis on which the distinctions the

cardinal is making rest. But the conclusion is flawless: “We must understand that there is no ‘hierarchical priesthood which is not ordered to the priesthood of the people of God’” (ibid., 134, quoting Henri Denis but without giving any reference).

Correspondingly, in the chapter on the “Coresponsibility of Laymen” (ibid., 187-213), he notes it as a positive gain that, though it is “a role reserved to the magisterium” to be “judges in matters of faith,” nevertheless laypeople were invited as auditors and experts in the work of the council, assuming “real complementary functions” (188). And Suenens is careful to carve out a sphere that is not simply “collaboration,” to use Benedict’s term, in the ministry and role proper to the hierarchy at any level, but a sphere that is proper to the laity and therefore a sphere of genuine leadership. “The laity have a twofold task which is proper to them: to christianize the temporal sphere, and to evangelize the world” (ibid., 200). Suenens offers extensive citations from the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* to illustrate the twofold task (ibid., 201-2). He emphasizes the second part of the mission, that is, evangelization:

Thus the council [citing section 6 of the *Decree*] earnestly invites laymen to assume fully the prophetic mission which is theirs as witnesses of the faith in the world. If the task of preaching the gospel was confided to the people of God as a whole, then certainly the laity, by far the greater number of this people, have a great part of the coresponsibility implied in maintaining, spreading and increasing the faith which they are called to live and preach. (Ibid., 202)

## VI. A MUDDYING OF CO-RESPONSIBILITY?

At this point, we can think of the work of Benedict XVI on co-responsibility as an attempt to put the idea of Suenens on a more theologically consistent foundation so that it would not come unraveled by the conceptual instability that I have proposed is at its heart.<sup>14</sup> What we find in the *Working Document for the Continental Stage* of the Synod on Synodality is, I would suggest, the opposite. Here the instability at the heart of Suenens’s vision

<sup>14</sup> It does not matter, in this connection, whether Benedict in any way based his thought on a reading of Suenens.

predominates, and therefore the concept of co-responsibility, though frequently mentioned in the text, tends to be evacuated of any specific meaning. This is because the document bases its notion of co-responsibility exclusively on baptism. There is no reference whatsoever to the communion of the Church as constitutively and definitively Eucharistic. In fact, when the Eucharist is finally mentioned, very late in the document, it is styled as the “source and summit” not of “all preaching of the Gospel” (PO, 5), that is, of all evangelization, nor “of the Christian life” (LG, 11, cf. CCC, 1324),<sup>15</sup> but “of the Church’s synodal dynamism” (WD, 89). This is a far cry from the Eucharist as that which “makes the Church” (CCC, 1396), as the *Catechism* sums up the constitutive role of the Eucharist in ecclesial communion.

In the *Working Document*, this communion fragments into a series of roles unrelated to an ecclesiology of the relationship between two participations in the priesthood of Christ. It is hoped that these roles, which seem to drift into mere functional differentiation, will become more “synodal”: “Many reports strongly encourage the implementation of a synodal style of liturgical celebration that allows for the active participation of all the faithful in welcoming all differences, valuing all ministries, and recognizing all charisms,” including “rethinking a liturgy too concentrated on the celebrant” (WD, 91). Reported as “the main shortcomings of the actual celebratory praxis, which obscure its synodal effectiveness,” include “the liturgical protagonism of the priest,” as though there were no basis for that “protagonism” but a refusal of “synodality.”

It is hard to pin down, but the term “synodality” in this document seems to connote the radical equality of all members of the Church based on their baptism. The document says it will not provide a definition of synodality (see WD, 9). Instead, it

<sup>15</sup> To be fair, this is mentioned briefly in section 5: the fifth of five “generative tensions” is “the liturgy, especially the Eucharistic liturgy, the source and summit of Christian life, which brings the community together, making communion tangible.” But this is a much diminished, and fuzzy, account of the Eucharist relative to the Eucharist as “the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being” (CCC, 1325, citing *Eucharisticum mysterium*, 6).

“expresses the shared sense of the experience of synodality lived by those who took part. What emerges is a profound re-appropriation of the common dignity of all the baptized” (ibid.). Further, this is “*the* [emphasis added] authentic pillar of a synodal Church and the theological foundation of a unity which is capable of resisting the push toward homogenization” (ibid.). Ironically, it seems to be based on homogenization. The flattening out of the Church based on baptism is pervasive in the text. For example, “Practices of lived synodality have constituted ‘a pivotal and precious moment to realize how we all share a common dignity and vocation through our Baptism to participants [*sic*] in the life of the Church” (citing “EC Ethiopia”). The authorial voice of the *Working Document* construes this as a “foundational reference to baptism” (WD, 22), foundational for the Church as synodal and thus as “walking together” (here citing “EC Japan”; WD, 22).

The *Working Document*'s idea of co-responsibility is easily assimilated to its idea of synodality because it is also based on the same foundational reference to baptism. It is easy for a discussion of “responsibility for the synodal life of the Church” (WD, 66) to merge immediately into a discussion of the difficulty “in actually practicing co-responsibility” as though these were the same (or at least ambiguous). At the outset of the *Working Document* we read that “carrying out the mission requires assuming a style based on participation, this corresponds to the full assumption of co-responsibility of all the baptized for the one mission of the Church arising from the common baptismal dignity” (WD, 11). Later, under the heading “Communion, Participation, and Co-responsibility,” the text begins, “The mission of the Church is realized through the lives of all the baptized. The reports express a deep desire to recognize and reaffirm this common dignity as the basis for the renewal of life and ministries in the Church” (WD, 57). Still later we read that “this desire for co-responsibility becomes grounded first of all in the key of service to the common mission, that is, with the language of ministeriality” (WD, 67).

The vague new term “ministeriality” seems to be another “flattening” device, such that any service to the mission derives

ultimately from baptism which invests one with “ministeriality.” The *Working Document* continues,

As the Italian report says, “The experience [of synodal consultation?] . . . has helped to rediscover the co-responsibility that comes from baptismal dignity and has let emerge the possibility of overcoming a vision of Church built around ordained ministry in order to move toward a Church that is ‘all ministerial’, which is a communion of different charisms and ministries.” (Ibid.)

Again,

As bishops we recognize that the “baptismal theology” promoted by the Second Vatican Council, the basis of co-responsibility in mission, has not been sufficiently developed, and therefore the majority of the baptized do not feel a full identification with the Church and even less a missionary co-responsibility. (WD, 66)

This is a point well taken, as is the comment that “Moreover, the leadership of current pastoral structures, as well as the mentality of many priests, do not foster this co-responsibility” (ibid.).<sup>16</sup>

But short of the proper Eucharistic ecclesiology of communion, co-responsibility can only be based on an unstable amalgamation of “ministries” stemming from baptism, synodality reduces co-responsibility to a vague idea of shared “ministeriality” which recognizes distinctions but has no theological foundation for those distinctions: “When it enters into the concrete life of the Church, the theme of ministeriality inevitably meets with the question of its institutionalization” (WD, 69). The question here is not one of *communio* hierarchically constituted, but of institutionalization of an abstractly conceived, homogenized function derived from baptism called “ministeriality.” This tends to reduce both communion and ministry, synodality

<sup>16</sup> Also along these same lines is the text at WD, 66, which emphasizes the need for pastoral structures that foster co-responsibility for mission. This seems to be an echo of Pope Benedict, and is one of the passages that tends to pull in the opposite direction of many other passages, which would conflate co-responsibility with synodality. But the fact that the theological basis for this kind of co-responsibility, in the distinction between the baptismal vocation of the common priesthood, and its relation to the vocation of the ordained priesthood (“we your servants,” in Benedict’s vocabulary), means that the theoretical underpinning of an authentic sphere of lay leadership is lost.

and co-responsibility, simply to sociological categories of function and institution. But this is to flatten and even to secularize the mystery of the Church as Eucharistic communion.

At very least, this flattening tends to erode the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium* as articulated both by Pope Benedict and by Pope Francis. It also leaves behind, or at least muddies, the idea of “co-responsibility,” as evolved in the theology of Cardinal Suenens and Pope Benedict XVI as a term reciprocally locating the roles and identities of those differently located in the *communio* of the Church conceived Eucharistically. In their ideas, as we have seen above, the co-responsibility of the laity indeed arises from baptism, but that of the ordained, vis-à-vis the laity, arises from holy orders (and arises thence even within the degrees of holy orders vis-à-vis each other). It is hard to know what precise value to place on the expressions of the various regional inputs to the process that are quoted in the *Working Document*, but they seem to homogenize the sense of co-responsibility to the first sense we mentioned above when discussing Suenens’s ecclesiology (i.e., as stemming from baptism) at the expense of the second sense (i.e., as stemming from the relationship between the priesthood of the baptized and the priesthood of the ordained and their mutual interrelation). This, in effect, uses the first meaning of co-responsibility noted above in the discussion of Suenens to defeat the second meaning, with its finer resolution of the idea of co-responsibility based on the Eucharistic ecclesiology of Vatican II.

But this, in turn, defeats the theological basis for discerning a true sphere of lay leadership that expresses their “co-responsibility” for the being and acting of the Church in a way that is uniquely theirs. Ironically, in the name of synodality, it tends to re-clericalize the Church. This is especially the case since “synodality” is properly a word expressing a mode of governance in the Church, and governance is the form of leadership that belongs, by virtue of holy orders, to the ordained and the bishops in particular. In *Episcopalis Communio*, Francis is clear that the Synod of Bishops belongs properly to the sphere of governance in the Church insofar as it is intended to “normally exercise a consultative role, offering information and counsel to the Roman

Pontiff on various ecclesial questions,” though “at the same time, the Synod might also enjoy deliberative power, should the Roman Pontiff wish to grant this” (*EC*, 3). Francis thinks that the Synod of Bishops will be more useful to the pope as a consultative or deliberative body if the bishops are aware of what the faithful under their care think because they have consulted them:

Although structurally it is essentially configured as an episcopal body, this does not mean that the Synod exists separately from the rest of the faithful. On the contrary it is a suitable instrument to give voice to the entire People of God, specifically *via* the Bishops, established by God as “authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church,” demonstrating from one Assembly to another, that it is an eloquent expression of synodality as a “constitutive element of the Church.” (*EC*, 6, citing the “Address Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops” [Oct. 17, 2015]).

Clearly the participation of the nonordained, the *plebs sancta*, to use Benedict’s phrase, in listening sessions and consultations organized by the bishop with a view to an upcoming session of the Synod of Bishops, is a participation in governance, in a form of leadership in the Church that is one of the three *munera* of holy orders. It is a participation in a responsibility that is essentially that of the bishop, a “collaboration” with the hierarchy, to use Benedict’s phrase, as distinct, again if we use Benedict’s language, from “co-responsibility” for the being and acting of the Church. In Francis’s articulation, the bishops consult *because* they are established by God as “authentic guardians,” part of the third *munus* of governance.

The *Working Document* also associates synodality with a style of governance, but at the same time the association of governance with the *munera* of the ordained is obscured or even omitted. Under the heading “Synodality Takes Shape” we read, “This is why the Church also needs to give a synodal form and way of proceeding to its own institutions and structures, particularly with regard to governance” (*WD*, 71). But this use of the word “synodal” has left behind the connection to the Synod of Bishops to which Pope Francis had anchored it in *Episcopalis Communio*, as though it were a style of governance where governance belonged essentially to all, as part of the baptismal birthright. Co-

responsibility, considered exclusively as founded in baptism, tends to be “heard” as a name for the same style of governance, a kind of synonym for synodality: “The dynamic of co-responsibility, with a view to and in service of the common mission and not as an organizational way of allocating roles and powers, runs through all levels of Church life” (*WD*, 78). The rest of the paragraph is on consultative processes of governance on the local level such as pastoral councils, “called to be increasingly institutional places of inclusion, dialogue, transparency, discernment, evaluation and empowerment of all.” “Empowerment” means here yielding a role in governance. The next section takes up “transparency” as part of “authentic synodality.” It is part of a synodal style of “leadership,” where “leadership” clearly means “governance.” The word “leadership” tends to be conflated with governance. But the connection to the Synod of *Bishops*, and thus the specific and actual ecclesial location of governance, is occluded. “Formation in synodality” means formation of the faithful “to exercise real co-responsibility in the governance of the Church” (*WD*, 82, citing “EC Spain”).

Therefore, for me the question arises: *Can* “synodality” defeat “co-responsibility” despite the way in which the *Working Document* insists that the two ideas are closely related? The possibility is there. To the extent that “co-responsibility” is not thematized in Eucharistic *communio*, where the priesthood of the baptized and the priesthood of the ordained give rise to spheres of leadership that are truly distinct, though truly mutually related, the question must be answered affirmatively. To the extent that “co-responsibility” is just another way of talking about participatory governance (“synodality”), only one form of leadership, the governance intrinsic to holy orders, takes center stage, with the laity therefore participating in a leadership that is not and never will be truly their own. But this is just a new form of clericalism—precisely what the idea of co-responsibility was meant to leave behind.