

## NETWORKS AND NETWORKING AS INSTRUMENTS, PRAXIS AND EXPRESSION OF SYNODALITY

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In his pastoral practice and speeches, Pope Francis highlighted synodality as fundamental to the evangelical call to the Church. We cannot say this is a perfectly understandable or univocal reality, which makes the task more difficult, although no less interesting.

In the Synthesis Report of the First Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod (held from the 4th to the 29th of last year in Rome<sup>2</sup>) the concept is referred to 64 times with the noun 'synodality' (s. perspective, s. style), 94 times with the adjective 'synodal' (referring to church, process, path, itinerary, assembly, way, practices, life, style, spirit, journey, dynamics, perspective, sense, configuration, nature, character, experience, dimension, face, approach, perspective, culture, dialogue, communion, manner, council, key, session), and 21 times the noun 'synod' is used in the singular. The concepts most used throughout the document are 'synodal church' mentioned 24 times (36 in total if we add the occasions in which we speak of synodal assembly (6), synodal configuration (2), and synodal nature), and 'synodal process' mentioned 18 times (26 in total if we add the occasions in which we speak of synodal path (6), synodal journey (1), synodal itinerary). Church, assembly, configuration, or synodal nature refers mainly to a characteristic proper (essential) of being ecclesia, while the concepts of process, path, journey, or synodal itinerary refer to a type of action appropriate (identity) to it. What is certain is that among those gathered at the synod, there was consensus in confessing that they had arrived at "a first understanding that needs to find a better precision" ISS 1, b.

The public debate has been intense and remains open. Thanks to the farsightedness of Pope Francis and his vital coherence, different positions are being freely expressed. The ongoing synod, itself in its development and methodology, is a doctrinal and pastoral way - at the same time - of synodally finding a synodal answer to the questions of synodality. In the same way that *"there is no way to peace, but peace is the way"*<sup>3</sup>, we believe that there is no way to synodality, but that synodality is the way.

The inspiration and fundamental reason for this search lies in the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, on the nature of the Church, which affirms that the Church is *"a people gathered in virtue of the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit"* (LG 4). Accepting this dogmatic premise (the church is the People of God), the temporal institutionality as a whole and, therefore, the forms of the function of government of the church

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<sup>2</sup> I quote here the document published on the official website of the synodal process:

<https://www.synod.va/es/resources.html> For ease of reading, it will be referred to in the text as ISS.

<sup>3</sup> Phrase attributed to Mahatma Gandhi.

must be at the service of its constitution (its entity/status) as People of God under the unique guidance of the Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, with multiple gifts (charisms and functions) for the edification of the whole Body.

If we want to find answers and open paths in the rescue of synodality as a central element of ecclesial nature and practice, we must use new instruments that, not because of their novelty but because of their usefulness, can open us to perspectives of being and doing that had not been thought of before; not even sought or tried. The great challenge, now, is to continue to proceed synodically in the local churches, seeking and finding ('creating' in the best sense of the word) diverse synodal instruments to move forward, as the Synthesis Report indicates: *"It is proposed to experiment with and adapt conversation in the Spirit and other forms of discernment in the life of the Church, valuing, according to cultures and contexts, the richness of the diverse spiritual traditions. This practice can be facilitated by appropriate forms of accompaniment, helping to discover their logic and to overcome possible resistance"* (ISS 2, j).

Conversation or dialogue in the Spirit, in contrast to the simple discussion of ideas or the verbose (indifferent) exposition of opinions, was helpful in awakening and nourishing a new dynamic in which synodality is nourished and realized. This was the experience of the participants in the first session of the synod: *"The experience of the conversation in the Spirit was enriching for all those who took part in it. In particular, the style of communication that privileges the freedom to express one's points of view and to listen to one another was appreciated. This avoids moving quickly into a debate based on the reiteration of one's arguments, without allowing space and time to become aware of the other's reasons"* (ISS 15, a).

Networks and networking also become adequate instruments, a praxis, and an accomplished expression of synodality in the church. Let us see in what sense.

## **NETWORKING, WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?**

Long before we began to speak of "synod" (and its correlatives), we began to speak of networks and networking because of learning and systematization, due above all to research in the field of economic and technological enterprises and, a lesser extent in the field of participation and political articulation of social groups. This has had at least two consequences that should be made explicit. On the one hand, an extraordinary technological development of the so-called 'social networks' which, in their abundance and capacity to penetrate the daily experience of individuals and collectivities, have become hypostases of the relationships they claim to favor; fundamentally dominated by the logic of the development of capital: seduce, sell, win... and so on. On the other hand, we must recognize that the church has participated in some of these developments indirectly (through the participation of some of its members in these 'enterprises') but that - as a social subject - it has arrived late to the discussion (ethical, philosophical, political, scientific) and to the implementation (social, pedagogical, pastoral) of the networks.

Both consequences have significant implications when speaking of networks and networking as instruments, praxis, and expression of ecclesial synodality. The first warns us against the elementary and spontaneous idea that a network or networking is reduced to the handling (simple or complicated) of technological instruments of communication: to be/live/work in social networks. However simple this observation may be, the spontaneous nature of this elementary idea (that networking is working in/with social networks) makes this warning and the following statement necessary: *when we speak of networks and networking, we are not speaking primarily or fundamentally of working in or with social networks; because they are not necessary* (although to some extent they may help)<sup>4</sup>. The second deduction, derived from the second premise, is that in networks and networking, the Church has much to learn and everything to gain if it opens cordially and does not treat networks and networking as a secular threat to its traditional forms.

Let us say for now that **by network** or networks, we mean a collective, differentiated, specific social actor, an apostolic (active) subject that assumes the work in common to reach a more significant objective unattainable by the members of the network independently. **By networking**, we mean, in turn, a specific praxis, which requires pedagogy and a methodology but which - above all - is based on a philosophy, a *raison d'être* that we can express in these three other maxims: "I am because we are, "unity prevails over conflict" and "what is ours is as or more important than what is mine."

Networking is a new phenomenon within the Church and still deserves much observation and discernment before we can speak of it using conceptual instruments that allow for generalizations. For now, it is necessary to promote, accompany, and contemplate what the Holy Spirit is doing in the attempts - successful or not - to work in networks, keeping ourselves open to taste, value, and discern their specific contribution.

For this reason, it is not a question of making an exhaustive study now (it would be worthwhile to do so in a few years' time in a theological investigation). I shall confine myself to presenting some essential characteristics of networking (1) to pointing out two virtuosities of networks in the ecclesial context: on the one hand, their intrinsic value as a praxis and expression of synodality and, on the other, their strategic importance as an instrument (itself synodal) of social participation and realization of the Church's mission: to announce the Kingdom in the world ( 2) and, finally, I will conclude with some current questions (3).

## WHAT NETWORKING CONSISTS OF

A network is a group of people (or groups/organizations) that - from various complex memberships - give themselves some kind of organization as a primary function of a mission that is, for all members, an expression and empowerment of their own mission.

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<sup>4</sup> The attentive reader will have noticed that - up to now - in the text, we have always placed both the expression networks and the expression networking in italics and bold letters **to** specify what we are talking about.

There are networks of various forms and intentions: networks of study and research, networks of work around a problem or challenge, and networks of support and institutional development; some are numerous and widespread, others small and restricted to a region or a type of participant; there are open or closed, institutional or of personal affiliation, among many other types. The richness of their variety constitutes a generative space (genesis) of extraordinary value for ecclesial life, for in them, synodality is expressed in a generous way.

Every network is born, develops, and justifies its existence based on a common mission greater than the sum of the interests of its components since the whole is greater than the sum of its parts<sup>5</sup>. Hence, one of the fundamental axioms of a network is that 'what is ours is as or more important than what is mine.' Networking has no future if the parties only seek their organization's or project's interest (*"I participate to see how I can benefit myself or how I can benefit others"*). If there is no clear common purpose, wanted (not just accepted) and lived (not just verbally affirmed) by all members, regardless of the number and diversity that constitute it, the network is a burden for those who form it; it is useless.

The common purpose does not ignore or override the particularities -individual or collective- of the members of the network. Each member of the network is different: in shape, in texture, in quality, in size, in length, in resistance, in configuration, in color, in function, etc. That is why when describing what a network is, the image of one of the joints of the human body (fig. 1) is much more faithful, richer, and evocative than that of a series of points, even of different quality, color, and size linked to each other in a complex way by different bands or links (fig.2).

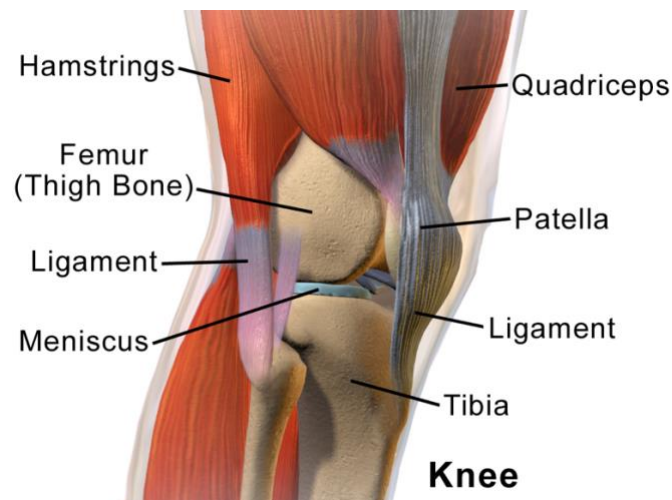


Fig 1.

Blaussen.com staff (2014). &quot; Medical gallery of Blaussen Medical 2014 &quot;. Wikijournal of Medicine 1 (2). DOI:10.15347/wjm/2014.010. ISSN 2002-4436.de las modificaciones Senda1234 - Commons File: Blaussen 0597 KneeAnatomy Side.png, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=131739956>

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<sup>5</sup> One of the four fundamental principles so often mentioned by Pope Francis *"the whole is greater than the sum of its parts"*.

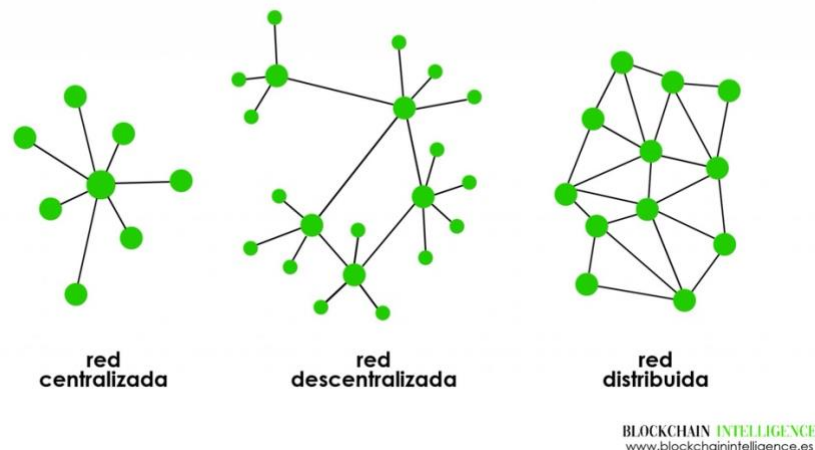


Fig. 2

In a knee, for example, the bone tissue needs the cavity and the synovial fluid to fulfill its ultimate mission just as much as the ligaments need the head of the tibia and fibula and the distal end of the femur, the menisci need the serous sacs, the bones need the various muscles, and so on; all completely different (in extension, color, texture, consistency, size, shape, etc.), all in relation, all participating, all for the same mission impossible to achieve in any other way. The most negligible or unnoticed elements are as crucial as the most prominent and most visible of them. The function of each member has sense and realizes its own identity when it is articulated and completed with the others. Each of the members of a network, on its own, cannot produce the results, much less the impact sought in common.

No matter how important, visible, or powerful one's particular mission and capabilities may be - whether at the level of individuals or institutions - participation in a network implies a more essential and definitive mission that can only be completed with others, who, in turn, also find in it a way to generate a more significant impact than that which they are called upon to produce or can produce individually.

Depending on these particularities and differences, the relationships between them are built, and it is these that make each member, in its essential specificity, and each relationship, in its strategic particularity, fundamental in the network; but, at the same time, it is these same particularities and differences that make networking indispensable to achieve the common purpose.

A network is not built according to the form of the members or their homogeneities (parishes with parishes, women with women, social centers with social centers, etc.). It is the joint mission that guides the alliances to be made: an objective that goes beyond the functions and interests of the individuals or collectivities members of the network, those that give each member its own identity in the difference; that is precisely what each one must bring to the network, no matter the size, the form or the visibility that one or the other element has. One of the temptations and possible causes of failure in networking is to focus on similarities instead of

complementarities when imagining, forming, and building the network.

Weaving the relationships required by networking (whether of individuals or institutions) is not simply the result of a decision or an organizational or methodological strategy; it is not a formality. This type of work presupposes the installation and nurturing of a spirit that goes beyond collaboration and becomes actual complicity in the tasks to achieve the more significant objective. That is why it is so ineffective and always disappointing to baptize any group work as a 'network' or to demand that a group of people accustomed to working in a certain way become a 'network' from that moment on. Organizational and methodological decisions are undoubtedly necessary, but more is needed.

### **INSTRUMENTS, PRAXIS AND EXPRESSION OF SYNODALITY**

For all these reasons, we can affirm that in an actual network (working in a network), we do more and are more. It is not only a matter of being in a network, but of 'being a network,' of giving oneself in a network: of becoming entangled (*en-red-darse*)<sup>6</sup>. Working in a network (networks) more is done, and what is done is done much better. Going beyond individual responsibility to commitment and, above all, to collective responsibility (what we have called complicity) transforms an institution's operational culture.

The network constituted as operative complicity around significant results and impacts in the function of a shared joint mission is a new 'apostolic subject'<sup>7</sup>. In a true network, there are not only more eyes, more wills, more critical mass, and more reflection, but also the common will (a 'complicity' as we called it above) of a collective subject possible to the action of the Spirit who discerns its proposals and plans of action. It is not a project or an initiative executed by allied or aligned partners but a new collective entity, with its autonomy, creativity, judgment, and responsibility, an essential actor with its identity and purpose. This change of entity qualifies it and places it as a definitive interlocutor(s) in the ecclesial service it is called to render, not only among pastoral agents/subjects but also before the hierarchical instances of the Church.

This is one of the most significant challenges both networks in the church and of the Church concerning networking, especially for those who exercise the hierarchical function in all its forms and levels because the exercise of authority in its generic form has not traditionally known how to consider the collective as a proper subject. Hence, the insecurity provoked by the

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<sup>6</sup> In Spanish the happy coincidence between the term 'enredados', which generally has a negative meaning of: confusion, complication, etc. (*entangled* in English, or *emêlé* in French, or *ingarbugliato* in Italian), and the conjunction of the particles: **en** ( preposition), **red** (noun) and **darse** ( the past tense verbal reflexive of the masculine plural of the verb dar), allows us to use the word **en-red-darse** or **enredados** as hyperbole for this new way of 'working enredados' (to network).

<sup>7</sup> This concept was coined in the 1980s within the Conference of Jesuit Provincials of Latin America and the Caribbean (CPAL) causing great controversy at different levels: organizational, legal, anthropological, ethical, philosophical and theological. For some time it was almost outlawed and, although it continues to be the subject of debate, it seems to have a special agency that is put in value in the light of collective rights and duties.

networks and the doubts about their autonomy and control tend to hover quickly (prejudicially) at various institutional levels, be they diocesan or religious life. The same demand of ecclesiality that can be posed to networks (and networking) to gain/have citizenship in the church must be asked of those who exercise hierarchical functions (and the institutions they represent) to open themselves to the reality that the Holy Spirit inspires, speaks and guides the whole of the holy people of God, as the report document of the recent session of the Synod reaffirms: *"By the anointing of the Spirit, who 'teaches all things' (1Jn 2:27) all believers possess an instinct concerning the truth of the Gospel, called sensus fidei. This instinct consists of a certain connaturality with divine realities and the attitude of intuitively accepting what conforms with the truth of the faith. The synodal processes value this gift and make it possible to verify the existence of the consensus of the faithful (consensus fidelium), which constitutes a sure criterion for determining whether a particular doctrine or praxis belongs to the apostolic faith"* ISS 3, c.

## NETWORKS AND ECCLESIAL INSTITUTIONS

Then, what happens at the networking level is an operational complicity assisted by the Holy Spirit in their common discernment, something that we call 'the redarchy'. It is a concept born in the first decade of the millennium in the collaborative and open work environment in technological networks, later redefined in talent management and leadership of complex teams. In our case, applied concretely to work in ecclesial networks, the concept expresses - by analogy with its correspondent: the hierarchy - the dynamics of internal and external organization of the networks in their search for and realization of the mission *in* the Church. I also emphasize the preposition 'in' to indicate that it is not the notion of place or time but of mode, i.e., within the Church, from within the Church: ecclesial.

When we speak of networks, we are, therefore, referring to the organizational dynamics - more or less autonomous - in which the networks give themselves an orientation and an organization in the function of the ecclesial mission of which they are participants in their own right. Networking goes beyond collaboration to reach a real operational complicity in the decision, construction, implementation, and realization of the common mission, and all this - no doubt! - with the light and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to whom we must all listen and follow (*obaudire /obey*). This is confirmed by the words of the current Synod: *"In the light of recent magisterium (in particular, Lumen Gentium and Evangelii Gaudium), this responsibility of all in mission must be the basic criterion for the structuring of Christian communities and the entire local Church with all its services, in all its institutions, in every organism of communion (cfr. 1Cor, 12, 4.31)"* ISS 18, b.

The discernment carried out is in the Spirit and in the Church, even if some of the network members or participants in the work of the network have other ecclesial memberships or do not confess the same faith or do not confess any faith at all. In this way, the networks in the Church are also leaven in the mass, salt on earth, and light in the midst of darkness. This is also the origin of their prophetic and missionary character *ad gentes*.

Before concluding, it is indispensable to clarify and insist on the following: the function of the redarchy is not opposed to the function of the hierarchy, in the same way that 'participation' is not opposed to 'organization'. What is opposed to hierarchy is not the charismatic diversity of the members in their legitimate and full participation, that is to say, in their synodal exercise as actualization of the common priesthood; what is opposed to hierarchy is authoritarianism (power without authority) or anarchy (neither authority nor power). The responsible exercise of the hierarchical function needs, is nourished, inspired, provoked, and enriched by the energy, creativity, and initiative from the redarchical function<sup>8</sup>.

To conclude, let us remember that networking requires, both in the process of formation and in its time of flourishing, people, time, and economic and material resources; if any of these three elements is missing, a network will fail. Without people to nurture relationships and carry out the agreements and tasks already decided upon; without working time explicitly dedicated to cultivating the spirit of the network among the members of the organizations and developing their contribution to the common purpose; and without sufficient resources to achieve results and make the desired impact, no networking is possible. All this has to be built in the networks themselves, but none of this will be possible if the hierarchy (those who are called to the function of confirming in faith) and those responsible for the institutions do not have an open and benevolent attitude of credit (betting on networking), trust (promoting with adult openness) and fraternal support (accompanying with responsibility) for what is being done in the networks.

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<sup>8</sup> *"The articulation of synodality, collegiality, primacy should not be interpreted statically or linearly, but from a dynamic circularity, in a differentiated co-responsibility."* ISS. 20, e.