

The Ecumenical Significance of the Rediscovery of Synodality in the Roman Catholic Church: Conversation in the Spirit and Ecumenical Humility

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Conference of 30 minutes

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends and colleagues,

Contemporary ecumenism is experiencing a troubling paradox. The theological foundations for rapprochement between the different churches have never been so solid. Agreements on justification, Christological convergences, and shared ecclesiology bear witness to a century of remarkable work. Yet these achievements are struggling to translate into practical progress, generating growing weariness.

My proposal today is to examine how the rediscovery of synodality in the Catholic Church, and particularly the methodological innovation of *spiritual conversation*, can renew the ecumenical approach. My central hypothesis is that the most significant impetus lies in the *how* rather than the *why*.

We will then apply this methodological approach to a concrete case: the advancement of the *communicatio in sacris*. In order to go deeper, the emergence of this method paves the way for what I would call ‘ecumenical humility’ – a concept that I offer as an original contribution. This approach, inspired by the social sciences but rooted in the Ignatian tradition of discernment, could transform our practices of interdenominational dialogue.

I. Methodological innovation: Conversation in the Spirit

A method, not merely a concept

Let us first clarify what we mean by synodality. According to the International Theological Commission, synodality can be understood on three levels. First, it refers to “the particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel.” In a more specific sense, it refers to “those structures and ecclesial processes in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed at an institutional level.” Finally, it refers to “the programme of those synodal events in which the Church is called together by the competent authority in accordance with the specific procedures laid down by ecclesiastical discipline” (§70).

Synodality is by no means a novelty. From the earliest Christian centuries, the Church has functioned according to synodal and collegial modalities. But what is truly innovative in the contemporary rediscovery of synodality is the emergence and theorisation of spiritual conversation as a specific method of communal discernment. This approach was implemented at the Plenary Council of Australia and has developed for communal discernment in the context of religious life. The Commission on Methodology of the Synod on Synodality adopted it and proposed it for use in the global Synodal Process from May 2021 onwards.

Distinctive characteristics

The *Vademecum* for this Synod specifies the aims of this method in the following terms: “Synodal listening is oriented towards discernment. It requires us to learn and exercise the art of personal and communal discernment. We listen to each other, to our faith tradition, and to the signs of the times in order to discern what God is saying to all of us” (§2.2).

This method differs radically from a mere consultation: “It is not about engaging in a debate to convince others. Rather, it is welcoming what others say as a way by which the Holy Spirit can speak for the good of all” (§2.3).

Spiritual conversation is characterised by three distinct stages:

- A time of mutual listening without immediate judgement;
- A time of interior resonance in which each person takes in what has been shared by others;
- A sharing of the fruits of this discernment as a group.

This method presupposes that the Holy Spirit can be manifested in the diversity of the participants’ experiences and perspectives, provided that a climate of trust and spiritual authenticity is established.

The importance of this methodological innovation in the ecumenical context has been confirmed by the recent evolution of the ARCIC dialogue. My colleague Ikenna Okpaleke observes that “ARCIC III radically departs from the methods in ARCIC I and ARCIC II, and highlights ‘explicit ecclesial self-critique’ and sharing in the gift of the other” (Okpaleke 2020). This development is thus part of the adoption of the framework of receptive ecumenism, in which “critical self-examination through the prism of ecumenical dialogue and receptive learning can deepen the renewal and participation of the Church in the Trinitarian communion of God” (ARCIC III, §19).

A practice that has been experienced but not theorised

It is remarkable to note that this method, though it has only been formally theorised rather recently, was already being practised intuitively in various ecclesial groups. The Malines Conversations – informal meetings organised by Cardinal Mercier and Lord Halifax – are a particularly illuminating historical example. These conversations were characterised precisely by a climate of mutual listening, respect for differences and a common search for truth: elements that foreshadow the method of spiritual conversation.

The implicit method of the Malines Conversations was already rooted in an embryonic ecclesiology of communion. The Appeal of the 1920 Lambeth Conference already called for a vision of ‘Catholic communion,’ which would be “loyal to the truth, and gathering into its fellowship all ‘who profess and call themselves Christians,’ within whose visible unity all the treasures of faith and order, bequeathed as a heritage by the past to the present, shall be possessed in common, and made serviceable to the whole Body of Christ.” This vision already anticipated the methodological approach that would favour union in diversity rather than a uniformising absorption.

II. Ecumenism today: Beyond stagnation

A methodological challenge

Contemporary ecumenism faces a situation in which institutional issues, historical sensitivities, and power struggles continue to hinder the practical implementation of the theological consensus that has been achieved.

The document *Walking Together* published by ARCIC III illustrates this necessary evolution. This text marks a significant shift in emphasis from doctrinal issues to the practical modalities of an ecumenical rapprochement. ARCIC III proposes a more pragmatic and experiential approach, recognising that Christian communities can ‘walk together’ even while maintaining certain doctrinal differences.

The adoption of receptive ecumenism as a methodological framework is a new development in ARCIC III: “We suggest that the current twofold task, as we seek to walk the way towards full communion, is (i) to look humbly at what is not working effectively within one's own tradition, and (ii) to ask whether this might be helped by receptive learning from the understanding, structures, practices, and judgements of the other” (§78).

Let us highlight here the use of the adjective ‘humbly’ – we will come back to this later.

Ecumenical learning as a source of intra-ecclesial transformation

This evolution is part of what Okpaleke identifies as a process of ecumenical learning that is conceived of primarily as “an intra-ecclesial affair; as an ‘auto learning’ process that happens within an ecclesial community that is in dialogue with another.”

The example of Pope Francis’ pontificate perfectly illustrates this dynamic. His participation in the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in Lund in 2016 testified to a renewed approach. Quoting Luther’s existential question – “How can I get a propitious God?” – Francis recognised that this question about “a just relationship with God is the decisive question for our lives.” This recognition of the Lutheran spiritual experience as authentically Christian demonstrates in a concrete way how the method of spiritual conversation can overcome denominational barriers.

Towards a deeply pneumatological methodology

This understanding finds particular resonance in the teaching of Pope Francis, who identifies the Holy Spirit as “the ‘soul’ of synodality.” According to Francis, “without the Holy Spirit there is no synodality,” and thus the task of theologians is to “listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Church.” This pneumatological dimension transforms ecumenical spiritual conversation into a process of listening together to the Spirit. Francis stated that: “A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realises that listening ‘is more than simply hearing.’ It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7).”

This spiritual transformation raises a fundamental question for ecumenism. Let me quote Thomas O'Loughlin, in his book *Eating Together, Becoming One*: "If the Spirit has made each of us, all baptised, into sisters and brothers, is it appropriate that we would exclude any member of the Spirit-formed family from full participation in the very activity for which the Spirit has transformed us?"

This question ties in directly with the pneumatological approach to spiritual conversation, which recognises the action of the Spirit in the entire community of the baptised, beyond any visible denominational boundaries.

III. Concrete application: Towards *communicatio in sacris*

"Enough!" – Now is the time for action

Given the weariness generated by seemingly stagnant ecumenism, the call to move forward has become all the more urgent. It is time to cry out: "enough!" This 'enough' is twofold. On the one hand, we have had enough of discouraging stagnation. On the other hand, we have enough theological elements and experiences accumulated over a century to dare to take new steps forward.

Evolution in Anglican-Catholic relations

Relations between the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion are particularly fertile ground. The recent document *Sorores in Spe* by the Malines Conversations Group argues that: "there is an overwhelming body of evidence in favour of revising the negative judgment on Anglican ordinations expressed in Pope Leo XIII's Apostolic Letter *Apostolicae Curae* (1896)."

This revision is based on an analysis of contemporary ordination rites that reveals a "convergence in the structure and content" between the Anglican and Catholic traditions, rendering the persistence of the 1896 judgement "untenable." James Hawkey has described this quite well.

The theological achievements of ARCIC I and II, complemented by the methodological perspective of ARCIC III, create a favourable context for deepening the *communicatio in sacris*.

This issue has already evolved in Catholic practice. As canonist Myriam Wijlens observes, a fundamental change has taken place: there has been a shift from an impossibility in principle to a conditional possibility in particular situations.

Pope Francis' question

An emblematic moment occurred in 2015 during Pope Francis' visit to the Lutheran parish in Rome. When asked by a Lutheran woman about sharing in the Lord's Supper, the Pope replied: "Is sharing the Lord's Supper the end of a journey or is it the viaticum for walking together? I leave the question to the theologians, to those who understand."

This explicit invitation to further theological study radically transforms the question. It aligns with the logic of spiritual conversation by shifting the focus from the final result (“the end of a journey”) to the process (“viaticum for walking together”). As O’Loughlin observes, “the widespread opinion that this was a question closed for theological discussion is not one shared by Pope Francis: he explicitly invites new studies of the issue.”

The ARCIC III approach reveals the importance of structures that promote “the fullest possible sharing of the experience of Christ and of the gifts of the Spirit among all the baptised” and recognises that the search for an authentic consensus of faith requires time for “prayer, debate, discussion, and study” (§54). This recognition of the temporality of discernment also aligns with the logic of spiritual conversation.

The sacramental dimension of discernment

O’Loughlin frames this tension through what he calls “the grammar of meals.” He puts the question this way: “Can I allow you to be present at our meal and then refuse to share the food with you? Can you be at the table and not be offered food to eat and a cup to drink?”

He also raises a crucial question from an *eschatological* point of view: “will non-Catholic Christians have a full share in the heavenly banquet? If you answer no, then that solves the problem: they should be excluded now. If you reply yes [...], then it is that heavenly table that we should aim to imitate at the gathering next Sunday.”

IV. Towards an “ecumenical humility”

Inspiration from the Social sciences

Applying the method of spiritual conversation to ecumenism requires a fundamental attitude that goes beyond simple diplomatic courtesy. This attitude can be illuminated by the concept of ‘cultural humility,’ which has been developed in the social sciences.

Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García have defined cultural humility as “a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and critique, to redressing the power imbalances in the physician-patient dynamic, and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations.”

This approach involves a continuous process of self-examination and self-criticism, combined with a willingness to learn from and with others. It recognises that understanding others is always a work in progress and requires an attitude of lifelong learning.

This conceptualisation is echoed in the more recent analysis by Joshua Hook and his co-authors, who define cultural humility as “having an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented rather than self-focused, characterised by respect and lack of superiority towards an individual's cultural background and experience.”

The conceptual analysis conducted by Cynthia Foronda and her co-authors enriches this understanding by identifying five essential attributes of cultural humility: openness, self-awareness, egolessness, supportive interactions, and self-reflection and critique.

The consequences identified by this interdisciplinary research are remarkably aligned with ecumenical objectives, including: “mutual empowerment, partnerships, respect, optimal care, and lifelong learning.”

This convergence between empirical research and spiritual tradition reinforces the validity of the proposed approach to ecumenism. Cultural humility, scientifically defined as an interpersonal posture oriented towards the other that is characterised by respect and the absence of superiority, offers a rigorous conceptual framework for the implementation of spiritual conversation in interdenominational dialogues.

Ignatian spiritual dispositions

Ecumenical humility is rooted in the Ignatian tradition of discernment. Jacques Haers identifies several conditions for authentic discernment, including: “indifference,” the choice of humility as a core value, and open-mindedness (expressed as “magnanimity and liberality,” which are essential spiritual conditions according to Saint Ignatius).

Transposed into the ecumenical sphere, this approach suggests that each ecclesial tradition must recognise the limits of its own understanding of the Gospel and accept that the Holy Spirit can be manifested in and through other Christian traditions in an authentic and enriching way. This ‘ecumenical humility’ does not relativise the truth of the faith, but recognises that this truth is greater than the capacity for understanding and expression of any single ecclesial tradition.

Five practical criteria

I would like to propose the following five criteria for an authentic ecumenical humility that is both relational and structural:

First criterion: Mutual recognition of spiritual authenticity

This criterion is illustrated by the approach that was taken by Pope Francis. Annemarie Mayer observed the following about Francis’ way of proceeding: “Dialogue arises from a respectful attitude towards others, from a conviction that others have something good to say. It assumes that we can make room in our hearts for their points of view, opinions and proposals.”

Second criterion: Adopting a language that is based on experience rather than mere affirmation

The importance of this criterion is evident in the synodal method that was favoured by Francis, which promotes “reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also a gift for us” rather than mere tolerance.

Third criterion: Practicing the “not yet” rather than the “never”

This criterion is rooted in the metaphor of pilgrimage, which is central to the teaching of Pope Francis. As Mayer points out, “For Francis, unity is by no means a static state, but an event, a process, because it is achieved by walking together on a common path.”

For Francis, unity constitutes “an indicator that we are on the right path” because, as he affirmed, “the mystery of unity has already begun.” This dynamic understanding transforms the approach we take to ecumenism.

Fourth criterion: Integrating voices that are excluded or marginalised

This criterion goes far beyond a simple question of representativeness. It is a fundamental theological conviction: the Holy Spirit can be manifested in a special way through those who find themselves on the margins of established ecclesial structures. This was a challenge posed from the very beginning of the Synod on Synodality: “it will be of fundamental importance that the voice of the poor and excluded also find a place, not only that of those who have some role or responsibility within the [local] Churches” (*Preparatory Document*, §31).

Jacques Haers refers to this crucial dimension when he speaks of the ‘table of discernment’ and asks the essential question: “Who sits at the table of discernment, and who is missing (represented by an empty chair in the circle of participants in the common discernment)?” He points out that “diversity is important to allow God to contribute to our discernment process optimally” and that this space must welcome “strange actors and actors who have no voice.”

Fifth criterion: Commitment to mutual transformation

This criterion finds its strongest theological validation in the renewed understanding of catholicity that was developed by Vatican II. According to the Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles, “Vatican II presents catholicity not as a monotonous repetition of identical elements but rather as reconciled diversity.”

This catholicity implies “a permanent exchange of gifts” where “each individual part contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church” (*Lumen Gentium*, §13). Paul Murray formulates the challenge as follows: “What can we learn, or receive, with integrity from our various others in order to facilitate our own growth together into deepened communion in Christ and the Spirit?”

These five criteria do not constitute a rigid method but rather a set of attitudes and practices that can foster the emergence of authentic spiritual conversation.

Conclusion

The decisive contribution

This study sought to demonstrate that the rediscovery of synodality in the Catholic Church can significantly renew the contemporary ecumenical approach. This is especially true when it comes to the emergence of spiritual conversation as a method of communal discernment.

Spiritual conversation, rooted in an ecclesiology of communion and a renewed pneumatology, transforms ecumenism by prioritising the shared experience of faith over abstract doctrinal argumentation. It opens up new avenues for addressing the seemingly intractable issues of ministerial recognition and Eucharistic sharing.

Open questions and challenges

However, this approach raises questions that deserve further exploration, for example: How can this method be concretely articulated with existing institutional structures? To what extent can the results of these spiritual conversations have normative value for ecclesial communities? How can this approach be used in a way that does not lead to doctrinal relativism?

Towards a synodally ecumenical ecclesiology

The stakes remain high: the aim is to enable ecumenism to regain its prophetic credibility by offering Christian communities practical ways of anticipating the promise of unity today, without compromising the theological integrity of each tradition.

As Kristin Colberg observes: “at the heart of the move towards synodality and the move towards common discernment are questions about listening and a commitment to participatory processes.” Ecumenical spiritual conversation is precisely a method for articulating these two movements.

Through its rediscovery of synodality, the Catholic Church could make a decisive contribution to the global ecumenical movement, not by imposing its methods, but by sharing with other Christian traditions the fruits of its renewed experience of communal discernment in the Holy Spirit.

Ecumenical humility is not weakness, but the recognition that the truth of Christ is greater than the capacity for understanding of any single tradition. It is in this humility that space can be opened for authentic spiritual conversation, as an anticipation of the unity for which we long.

Thank you for your attention.