Theological Underpinnings and Undercurrents of Lay Governance

Dr Maeve Louise Heaney VDMF[1]

Abstract: This paper seeks to explore the theological and ecclesiological foundations of lay governance in light of the year's research informing this Symposium. Guided by the methodology of Bernard Lonergan (whose framework moves from attention to experience, through understanding and reflection to responsible action), the paper will propose the need for what we might describe as a theology of ecclesial faith that extends our understanding of personal faith to the systemic realities of the local churches and the universal Church. Such a lens enables us to explore the dialogue and trust relationships (or their absence) in each of the areas in which the research took place and to better understand the contextual (socio-political, historical, and ecclesial) factors at play. The intent is to develop a framework for the collaborative relationships essential to the sacramental ordered communion (Cf. Richard Gaillardetz) that is the Catholic Church. The paper seeks to help lay the foundations for the type of local and universal "communities of practice" the project envisages as a way forward for the development of collaborative, sacramental models of lay governance that are essential elements of a synodal church.

Introduction

> *When I think of theology, light comes to mind.*
> *Thanks to light, objects emerge from darkness, faces reveal their contours,*
> *the shapes and colours of the world finally become visible.*
> *Light is beautiful because it makes things appear but without showing itself….*
> *[Our] desire is this: that theology help to rethink how to think.*[2]

The guiding quest of this paper is the quest for understanding. In this case, it is for the theological and ecclesiological underpinnings and pathways that will help us move forward in the core objective of this Symposium: creating, developing and sustaining institutional forms of governance in the Church that are inclusive and synodal, with a particular focus on Ministerial Public Juridic Persons, but which could extend to other forms and areas of Church leadership. While ethical considerations about elements of good governance and the causes of institutional dysfunctionality abound (such as its responses to child sexual abuse), I believe that a lack of understanding is more to blame in both society and Church than any other factor for the success or failure of most systemic ventures.[3] Most people act in good faith. What is often lacking is a better understanding of what is happening, possible, and missing in our Catholic organisational cultures. Such an understanding needs to take into account the perspectives of everyone involved. Such is the challenge and invitation of a synodal Church: that we *listen to and understand* the viewpoints of all those the Spirit has brought together into the body of Christ. This implies the practice of critical reflexive thinking in all involved. Our hope and trust in doing this is that such a dynamic will better help us to access and know the will of God in any given moment, for the

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[2] Pope Francis to Participants in the International Congress On *The Future Of Theology* organized by the Dicastery for Culture and Education. Cf. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/december/documents/20241209-convegno-teologia.html.

[3] J. Michael Stebbins, "Leadership, Discernment and the Elusiveness of Understanding," in *Business as a calling: interdisciplinary essays on the meaning of business from the Catholic Social Tradition*, ed. Michael Naughton and Stephanie Rumpza (Notre Dame, IL: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

concrete situations the Church faces at each stage of history and in each cultural context within which it finds itself.[4]

This is why the *process* of the Synod on Synodality and the importance of its becoming the *modus operandi* of the local churches as well is as, and I would suggest more, important than the concrete or immediate results and decisions it comes to.[5] It is also important that throughout this whole process, the theological and doctrinal foundations of the work we are doing are well understood and interwoven through our reflections and objectives. Only in this way can the steps forward be informed, solid and effective, as well as truthful to the development of the Church's teaching in the current day. The Synod on Synodality is not new teaching, but rather needs to be understood as one further step in the reception of the Second Vatican Council. That Council introduced a vision of Church that places Baptism and the image of the People of God as the foundational reality of the Church and how it is called to operate. It is true that there are different images of the Church present, and that one can sense the push and pull of different visions alongside each other, somewhat unresolved, but even there a shared vision of a People to communion in God and with each other emerges, in which all baptised have a place and a role, out of which its organisational structure emerges and in which its leadership finds a place.

Two initial and interrelated aspects of this vision of Church are of note for our exploration into ecclesial governance: the need for both the magisterial and charismatic dimensions of the Church to work together (*LG* 4), and the importance of paying attention to the "sense of the faith" of the whole people of God that the Church might continue to be guided the Spirit. Two texts from *Lumen gentium* illuminate these dimensions and are cornerstones to good governance in the Catholic Church:

> "The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple, prays and bears witness in them to the fact that they are adopted children. The Church, which the Spirit guides in way of all truth and which he unified in communion and in works of ministry, he both equips and directs with hierarchical and charismatic gifts and adorns with his fruits.

> *Lumen gentium* 4

The governance statement here is the recognition of how hierarchical oversight and charismatic giftedness (personal and organisational) are both essential to the workings of the Church. The foundational one is the reality of the gift of the Spirit poured out into humanity as the principle of ecclesial communion and the foundation of our personal and ecclesial prayer-lives and discernment processes. I intentionally use the word "reality" when we speak of the Holy Spirit, because that is the closest I can get to naming or recovering the density of presence intended in these documents, and indeed in Scripture itself. Spirituality is a word that in Christian spaces has too often been emptied of its defining form, but Christian prayer is in Christ, spiritual conversations in the Church are conversations *in* the Spirit of God; the reality is the body of Christ (cf. Col 2:17).

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[4] For an excellent and comprehensive overview of the theological foundations of this conviction, well before Pope Francis set us on this journey, see chapter nine of Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 242-92.

[5] This is how I understand the decision of Pope Francis to delegate key areas of discussion to subgroups of study. Without going into details of each one, and the people chosen to work in these groups, acceleration of decisions in areas upon which opinions differ greatly amongst the *Christifideles* (all the baptised people, including their bishops, as per *LG* 12) would not help consolidate a synodal way of doing things in the Church.

This foundation is further developed in *Lumen gentium* 12, when it speaks of how all baptised share in the prophetic ministry of Christ:

> The holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office; it spreads abroad a living witness to Him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips which give praise to His name. The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when "from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the people of God accepts that which is not just the word of human beings but truly the word of God. Through it, the people of God adheres unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints, penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life.

Lumen gentium 12

The theme here is that of access to and transmission of the truth. In dialogue with people outside the Catholic Church, the issue of the Pope's "infallibility" can be hard to explain. Indeed, I don't think Catholics themselves are well informed about its meaning and use. But its foundation lies not in some special human giftedness but on what theology at times refers to as the "indefectibility" of the Church: that the Spirit will not defect from the followers of Christ and will accompany us such that "the entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief", as we become ever more who we are called to be.[6] However, Jesus' double promise to be with us to the end of time (Mt 18:30) and that the Spirit would guide us to the fullness of truth (Jn 16:13) rests upon our capacity to listen to that same Spirit. Hence a methodology called "Conversations in the Spirit" whose focus is precisely that of teaching us to listen to and discern the way forward. *Listening* to the Spirit in each person in order to come to a vision of truth is an essential part of the process of accessing truth. This has ever been so, but our understanding of this has not. The theological foundation of this process is the gift to each and every baptised person of a sense of faith, a participatory communion with God that gives us access to what the document calls a "supernatural" capacity to discern, to intuit, to know of God and the things of God.[7] It is not just human giftedness that we bring to the table – although that is never rejected in Catholic anthropology – the fullness of God intends and is best expressed through our human development and fullness in Christ – but the basis of our communion is Christ. That same understanding of self is not individual but communitarian, as is our faith. Therefore, the individual *sensus fidei fidelis* needs to come together in a shared agreement a *sensus fidei fidelium* (in plural) in order to guarantee our

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[6] Cf. Yves Congar, "Indefectibility and Infallibility," *Compass*, no. 5 (1971); Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983); Francis A. Sullivan, "The Definitive Exercise of Teaching Authority," Article, *Theological Studies* 75, no. 3 (09// 2014), https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563914538717, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=rlh&AN=97489900&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s5501413.

[7] *Sensus fidei fidelis* and *sensus fidei fidelium* refer respectively to the personal, individual sense of faith gifted to the Christian by the Spirit, and the shared sense of faith of all the baptised into the body of Christ. See Ormond Rush, "Sensus fidei: Faith "making sense" of revelation," *Theological Studies* 62, no. 2 (2001), https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390106200201. Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation*. explores the latter.

steps forward. This shared sense of faith includes all the people of God, in all its sacramental ordering, up to and including the bishop of Rome. The issue of listening to the signs of the times in the world and the role of the non-baptised in this framework is important.

However, and to finalise this first section, navigating the shift and transition from a pyramidical pre-Vatican II Church to its renewed and developed self-awareness is no easy task. The immediate aftermath of the Council saw both enthusiastic reception, conscious opposition and reams of theological papers and reflection on the interpretation of the Council, its continuity and discontinuity in history (an essential tenet of Catholic Tradition), and its points of difference with sociological democracies. This emerged with particular strength at the time of and in response to the 1985 Extraordinary Synod, twenty-Five yours after the Council with the theme of "Celebration, Verification, Promotion of Vatican II", which landed on Communion as the key interpretative symbol of the Church in the Second Vatican Council.[8]

Now is not the time to explore those normal and perhaps necessary pushes and pulls of history in the development of our reception of the Council's vision and teaching, and the development of doctrine. And in truth, there is plenty in the shared vision of the Church to ground our work here,[9] but it should not surprise us that the journey to implementing the Council's ecclesiological vision in such an ancient, evolving, and culturally diverse reality that is the universal Church is not linear or easy. The issue at stake is the very nature of who the Church is and *if and how* change can take place, as well as who has control over that process. In other words, power, authority, and governance. It is change-management in its highest and most complex form: that of a cross-cultural, universal organisation that claims continuity since its birth and a unity in faith across all its iterations across the world. Even the gathering here, while internationally representative of many Anglophone counties, is quite limited in terms of cultures, age and race. Keeping this in mind is important as we move forward, because the Church's catholicity is a two-way open channel of communication, in which centre and margins mutually affect one another.

One final word on the issue of faith: Our context is a faith context: we are gathered in this space by a shared Catholic faith in a Triune God who is, by definition and doctrine, a loving God in relationship with us and the world. However, the "faith" word is one that needs unpacking, developing and bridging to the world in which but not of which the Church belongs. This is true in regard to one's personal faith, but it is also true in our ecclesial and systemic relationships, and this latter aspect is underestimated, in my opinion. Some attention is currently given to the credibility of the Church (or lack thereof), especially in light of revelations into institutional sexual abuse across the world, but this is often an outward facing quest and does not explicitly address the internal working relationships that

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[8] For an overview of the theological and ecclesiological debates this synodal development provoked, see John Paul II, *Extraordinary Synod 1985: A Message to the People of God and the Final Report* (Washington, D.C: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986); Giuseppe Alberigo, James H. Provost, and Marcus Lefébure, *Synod 1985: An Evaluation*, Concilium 188, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986); S. J. Gerald O'Collins, "Theological Studies and the Reception of Vatican II," *Theological studies (Baltimore)* 81, no. 1 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563919901280.

[9] Of particular interest is the late Richard Gaillardetz's work on the Church as an "ordered communion", which holds together the foundational nature of baptism, the call and role of ordained ministry, and other forms of identified and ritually enacted installed and commissioned "ministries that help perform and realise the interweaving of the hierarchical and charismatic dimensions of the Church. Cf. Richard Gaillardetz, "The Ecclesiological Foundations of Ministry within an Ordered Communion," in *Ordering the baptismal priesthood: theologies of lay and ordained ministry*, ed. Susan K. Wood (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003); Richard R. Gaillardetz, *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015).

actually sustain (or undermine) the whole process. Awakening to the importance of doing so is part of the intent of this paper.

Such is the theological context of this paper on theological underpinnings and undercurrents of lay governance, a necessary backdrop if our progress is to be informed, careful and solid. However, the intent of the rest of the paper is not theoretical, but rather phenomenological and constructive: to shed some light on the theological and ecclesiological underpinnings that have emerged in our interaction with the people, countries and organisations with over this year, in the quest to understand and map out a way forward. The only way to do this in a thorough way is to bring to the fore the oft-implicit dynamics at play in our interactions through a shared framework that might help us to identify shared insights and gaps in a mutually helpful way. The result is a "go slow in order to go fast" dynamic, which can try our patience, but which I believe to be essential – in one form or another – for solid and genuinely inclusive steps forward, especially in spaces that are vulnerable to the hopes and fears, strengths and fragilities intrinsic to *all* governance and authority systems, and in a world that seems addicted to unintelligent polarised opposites. The intent, therefore, pertains to both the practical and constructive areas of theological reflection. For this to work, a word on methodology.

Accessing and Understanding Underpinnings and Undercurrents[10]

Definition of Undercurrent:
noun/ˈʌndəˌkʌr(ə)nt/:
"an underlying feeling or influence,
especially one that is contrary to the
prevailing atmosphere and is not expressed openly."
Oxford English Dictionary

As explained this morning, the overall methodological approach chosen by the research team is that of "Appreciative Inquiry".[11] The approach resonates with and supports a synodal Church in that its starting point is precisely that of appreciating and seeking to understand the choices made at the local level. Collaboration with others is easier and more fruitful when an organisation's prior work, discernment, expertise, and decisions are valued as the starting point. It is the principal of subsidiarity in action. To this I add an additional tool of analysis developed by Canadian Bernard Lonergan call "Intentionality Analysis" to explore the dynamics experienced during the year and their possible sources and solutions. Lonergan's method interweaves well with appreciative inquiry, as it starts with attention to lived experience and moves through three other stages of human knowing: understanding, reflection, and responsible action. "Pay attention! Be intelligent! Be reasonable! Be responsible!" are the four imperatives that mark his epistemological approach. They are based on a thorough analysis of the history

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[10] The need for clarity in relation to methodology is an unquestioned aspect of *any* research project, and increasingly more common in change-management strategies, although far from universal. It is interesting to note that the use of the word only emerged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, alongside the birth of historical consciousness, cultural pluralism, and hermeneutics.

[11] Cf. Neil M. Boyd, "Appreciative Inquiry," in *Handbook of Methodological Approaches to Community-Based Research: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods*, ed. Leonard Jason and David Glenwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); William F. Foster, "Appreciative inquiry: Change at the Speed of the Imagination," *Quality progress* 34, no. 9 (2001); Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations : Appreciative Inquiry, Missional Engagement, and Congregational Change*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Dana M. Griggs and Mindy Crain-Dorough, "Appreciative Inquiry's Potential in Program Evaluation and Research," *Qualitative research journal* 21, no. 4 (2021).

of philosophy and science on the dynamics at play in human understanding, and their application to areas of work in theological method.[12] The process invites us to four spaces of attentiveness, which could we framed with the following questions:

1. What are we experiencing/have we experienced? What is the experience of those we are interacting with? [*Experience*]
2. How might we/they understand these experiences? [*Understanding*]
3. Are we missing anything? Is that really what is happening here? [*Reflection/Reasoning*]
4. What is the necessary and responsible action we need to take, from here? [*Deliberation/Action*]

To these, he adds an overarching stage or premise, as it colours the whole process: be in love (with God)! This final imperative is not sequential, as it grounds and runs right through the whole process and that of any exploration of Christian life and culture, since the love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us (Rm 5:5). This awareness invites us to ask: Where can the fruits of the love of God in human hearts be perceived, right through this process?

Why the need for such a tool? Because of the underpinnings and undercurrents that mark every aspect of human organisations, including those of the church: *understanding* what is actually going on and its root causes is essential to moving forward in any consistent and unified way. We are painfully aware of the lack of dialogue and respect in the political sphere. However, in ecclesial circles, we often sit on different sides or points in a continuum in relation to issues under discussion, certain of our opinions and mildly tolerant of others, without really seeking an understanding of where they are coming from. To do so implies more than good will: it implies awareness of how things are experienced, how these are interpreted, and where they lead people, as well as the personal, cultural, ecclesial, historical, and theological allegiances of those we are working with. To understand and collaborate with others is not a superficial or fast exercise, but one that takes time, investment, and personal engagement. The thought of "slow cooked food" and its nourishing qualities comes to mind: the person of the other, their history, perspectives, fears and hopes, need to affect and influence me, *even* if or as I choose to differ. The same is true of systemic or institutional perspectives. And quite frankly, at times it is not only the context of others that we don't understand, but our own. Self-reflection and conscious ownership of one's own cultural, biographical, and ecclesial biases and undercurrents is surprisingly rare, or at least usually not made implicit. The result is differences and arguments that don't get to the real issues at stake, and we instinctively intuit when the real reasons for points being made are below the surface and not really on the table. System change cannot be left to chance, personalities, or ecclesial styles but necessitates a systematic approach. This was the insight of Bernard Lonergan in relation to the Church during the twentieth century. As he observed the rate of change caused by cultural shifts in the world the Church inhabited, he realised that Catholic theology was quite simply not equipped for its quest to support the transmission of doctrine. It wasn't at the level it needed to be to successfully serve the Church in its task of "traditioning" into the future be for the test at hand. (It is worth noting that he took for granted the collaboration of theologians and the magisterium in this task.) He spent his whole life dedicated to

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[12] His main works encompassing these two stages are Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight*, ed. F. E. Crowe and R. M. Doran, Collected Works of Bernard Lonegan, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957); Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972).

solving that problem. Now is not the moment to explore his full framework, but the use of his approach to how we come to know and understand is useful.

We turn to the above four questions. In asking the first one, we are seeking everyone's experience, and therefore attentiveness is needed to all of those involved: the project lead, the research team, the locally based country writers, the MPJPs we approached, the local bishops and dicasteries, the wider Church, etc. While we may not have access to all the answers, our attentiveness to ask for them is important. In terms of this paper, therefore, the aspects identified are part of an ongoing quest, as we are still unpacking findings, and insights necessitate the input of all those involved (including this forum), so it is an invitation be attentive to the process and contribute to the insights emerging. For that reason, in this initial paper, core attention is given to the first question, on experience, and a tentative attempt to reflect upon, imagine, and discern the second, third and fourth together: what *might* be going on and what might it imply from us, in terms of action. So each section is framed in two parts:

A. What is the experience?
B. How might these experiences be understood, what *might* underly them, and what would that responsibly imply from us.

This is followed by some reflections on possible ways forward. At times, experiences and their insight is crystal clear, but attention to the unclear is the space of possible breakthroughs and prophetic pathways forward.[13]

The year's Research Project: Experiences and Insights

   1. Communication difficulties:

What is the experience?

From the very beginning, the challenges of this research project became obvious. At the most basic level, differences in seasons, semesters, and timetables made a one-year research project with participants from across the globe challenging to coordinate, conditioned also by funding timelines. A second layer of difficulty came from finding the right people to contact: the data is often simply not in the public forum. A third was trying to convince people and organisations to take part in the project, which while not uniform, was a repeated experience across the board, from MPJPs through peak bodies for religious to Episcopal Conferences. These challenges differed across the world, with some countries offering easier access than others, but the "sleuthing" nature of our initial work became our catchphrase to describe it.[14] Communication with Church authorities, relevant dicasteries, etc., was also tentative and is growing slowly as they come to know "who the people are" that lead the project.

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[13] As we do this, an underlying critical awareness of the unnamed premises and biases is important. In his method, Lonergan names a series of necessary conversions and spaces of awareness that ground theological development, which might help us deepen our understanding. While there is no space here to develop this framework further, his insights map well against current growing awareness of the need for self-awareness and emotional intelligence for leadership and good governance, as well as intelligent and intelligible theological research. At this stage, I would simply invite to a difficult but necessary balance between openness and boundaries, trust and questioning, of the possible differing premises or ecclesial frameworks at play.

[14] The expression was coined by Susan Pascoe near the beginning of our work.

How might these experiences be understood, what might underly them, and what would that responsibly imply from us.

Apart from the basic access, we intuit different factors at play: the privacy of individuals giving of their time to support ministries is a basic but real one, as well as the workload and intense pressure some sectors are experiencing which could have precluded the time necessary to invest in the process with any integrity thoroughness. Cultural factors initially underestimated became obvious: for example, the shift from one person based in the UK researching both Ireland and Britain to one in each country, both of whom have relationships and credibility in ecclesial and theological circles in their respective spaces shifted the rhythm and results of the research dramatically. Individual conversations between individual bishops and research team members known in ecclesial or theological circles helped immensely. Conversations also hinted at what I would tentatively describe as a "necessary caution" in publicising what is a legitimate but new form of ecclesial governance and decision-taking in a Church which is still working out what that might look like. Different bishops have diverse understandings of how this might look, and the people of God committed to its mission recognise this and seek to find ways to work within and around the challenges faced. This is not new. The complexity of how authority between religious and bishops is worked out is historically documented and does not disappear when the ministries resulting from their charisms are handed over to the newer forms of oversight they need to carry on and flourish. There is vulnerability in this space when bishops change. The differences in ecclesial models noted above play out very clearly in this forum. There are also risks involved in developing trustworthy entities in cultures where church governance has lost credibility in the eyes of society or state. This is not to say that we perceived tensions between MPJPs and bishops, but rather that there is at times no shared pathway of communication and dialogue, and that this could be richer and that it needs reflection and work.

2. *Internal: Mapping Interdisciplinarity*

What is the experience?

The research team and steering committee brought together people with a variety of gifts: governance, facilitation, theology, administration, organisational, to name a few. However, the blue-sky task of mapping our action plan raised multiple time-sensitive questions about methodology, timing, inclusion, skills needed, who to include, how to approach them, etc. The institutional aspects were no less challenging, as system requirements and processes intersected with unequal timeframes, so the pressure felt by all during the process of the research was considerably higher than in other research projects. This seems to be a shared experience.

How might these experiences be understood, what might underly them, and what would that responsibly imply from us.

It would seem that even when people come around the table with shared concerns and similar objectives, time and communication about the project is necessary. This would recognise the importance of communication and the development of a shared understanding of the diverse approaches, skills, and priorities on hand at the service of the project, and how each can contribute to the end. Also, explicit recognition of the particular kind of challenge this type of foundational work involves was identified quite late in the day. In similar work, space for an exploration of the potential contributions of the various

disciplines necessary for the quest would be important. In this case, it emerged slowly over the course of the year, but a foreknowledge that this is simply part of the process, in hindsight, would be helpful.

3. *Shared Experiences of Synodal Leadership:*

What is the experience?

In the surveys and interviews, we sensed some common factors across all countries. One of these was the synodal nature of the work being done. Across the board, comments about the respectful and inclusive way in which the religious sought to include, mentor, and trust their lay collaborators and future governing bodies shines through. The importance of meetings, listening, and relationships in governance practice was named, in various ways, such as "scheduled wasting time" to combat overly task-oriented approaches or enculturated paradigms of working through issues based on personal encounters.[15] They spoke of a "style of subsidiarity", internal and external communication with "transparency and accountability from the centre to the peripheries (and back) and from the ground to the top (and back)": "flowing" structures, with freedom to innovate.

As part of this synodal experience, the importance of the foundational stories of the religious also emerged, as well as questions surrounding *how* newer Trustees might understand their own role in maintaining and developing it. This shared experience was set against different socio-cultural and ecclesiological frameworks. In Asia, for example, lay leadership is "stranger", and in places clergy can choose to opt out of synodal consultation processes. In Australia, the profile of MPJPs seems high in Catholic circles and well supported by bishops, in comparison to Ireland and England, where work in lay leadership is growing but not well known, and at times, it seems, intentionally so. In terms of the skills and expertise of Trustee/sponsors, formation needs were recognised and normally some form of provision made, particularly in the space of theology, ethics and canon law. In cultures in which past experiences of Church leadership was not good and social sentiment towards the Church more negative, the importance of governance skills, and people with legal and finance expertise in the Trustee/Sponsor roles seems especially important.

Relationship with the local bishops and with Rome is an aspect of this synodal leadership, and the experience here seems to differ slightly. In most cases, some form of reporting takes place, usually with the founding bishop or the Dicastery, but not all. However, the desire for more communication and even a mutuality of relationships in this process was expressed, since the reporting can seem controlling or authoritarian without it.

How might these experiences be understood, what might underly them, and what would that responsibly imply from us.

It seems clear to the research team that there is a widespread synodal culture across spaces of lay leadership, a "way of doing things" that is based on dialogue, discernment, and a shared quest to move the organisations forward. It is a conscious decision to make time for proper discernment, decision-making and taking, with the understanding that "discernment makes something really strong and that means it can weather the storms of whatever people throw at it". It raises questions about how fruitful

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[15] For example, in New Zealand, *kitanga* is named as a way of working through issues having first encountered the other person and deeply listened to them; and *wananga* – "learning conversation" for the more difficult issues.

this could be if it socialised more broadly, including to areas of Church that are less experienced in this way of working (parishes, episcopal conference, etc.). The desire of some Trustees for a more mutual dynamic in dynamics of reporting points towards this, albeit in deficit form. The need for formation in a rich understanding of Tradition, history, and the development of doctrine – understood broadly – seems important, as a way to scaffold these organisations and the Church more broadly in understanding what is moving forward and why.

4. *Awareness of Call to Ecclesial Leadership [credibility*

What is the experience?

The people we spoke to seemed to express various levels of understanding of the ecclesial dimensions of their leadership. Most grew slowly into an awareness of the vocational nature of their work – often in dialogue with the religious who had gathered and trusted them – or specific moments of their shared journey in which a new, concrete and legally distinct entity began to emerge. This evolved in different ways, raising questions about where and how their calling and that of the charism founders overlapped and differed. The awareness of their ecclesial identity and contribution manifests itself in expressed desires to have a place decision-making table and the call to be courageous in speaking out about their work, as a witness to the work of the Church in continuing the healing and teaching ministries of Jesus in the world.

Significantly, prayer and spaces for personal and shared reflection are named as central. The centrality of baptism, however, its importance to the identity of MPJPs and the potential role of non-baptised leaders in this space was perceived as unequally understood. The need for more diversity of voices to favour representation of those being served was named more than once.

Two important dimensions of Church also colour this leadership call. The first is the backdrop of the sexual abuse crisis, the awareness of which, spoken or unspoken, lies at the heart of things in every country in which we worked. Some leaders seem to step up in order to fill the gap, while others become aware of the risks and implications of what they are moving into more gradually. However, the desire to "do better" is clear, as well as to represent a grounded face of the Church. This is combined with the uncertainty or challenges in having to navigate relationships between Church and State. Although with differences across cultures, due the church's past failings, we recognised a certain timidity in owning the positive aspects of the Church's contribution to the world in the field of education and health care understood broadly, although in *some* countries, the credibility of the religious stood more apart from that of the magisterial leadership.

How might these experiences be understood, what might underly them, and what would that responsibly imply from us?

Despite the significant cultural and historical differences between the Anglophone countries involved, there is a clear global phenomenon in this space, not just in the handing over from religious to lay leadership, but also in the governance style emerging. Such phenomena can best be understood as a sign of the Spirit breaking through into the world, in need of discernment and careful cultivation.

The reality of sexual abuse in the background of these entities raises the theological issue of credibility and how to regain that key dimension of the Church's contribution to the world, and indeed the potential role of MPJPs in witnessing to this.

The need for theological – specifically in ecclesiology and the relationship Church – in order to both nurture, ground and clarify both the present and any possible future of these entities and their leadership seems urgent.

Emerging Theological Themes and Pathways

There are more themes to be discussed, but at this stage, some interim conclusions about a few areas of work that might help consolidate, develop and raise the profile of this emerging form of lay governance.

1. **A Communities of Practice Approach**: The dialogical and collaborative nature of the emergence of these entities needs to be protected and could be expanded, both across countries, so that those with less experience and history could learn from those with more, and with those charged with magisterial oversight of the Church. Mutually enriching transparency and accountability processes would bring much needed credibility to the Church more broadly.

2. **Ecclesiological foundation:** there is a gap in ecclesiological understandings of what collaborative ministry could and should look like. The need for reporting and mutual dialogue, the importance and role of baptism, the need for and ways to consult with people of all faiths and none, discerning and reading the signs of the times are all theological issues.

3. **Gaps in theological knowledge**:
   a. **Theology of priesthood:** there is a need to rethink the connection between ordination and authority in each of Christ's three *munere* (prophetic, priestly and kingly).
   b. **Theological implications of recent canonical changes:** recent and ongoing changes in canon law have tremendous impact on Church life and take time to filter even into theological reflection, never mind the ecclesial life of the believers.

2. **Theology of Ecclesial Faith**: According to Orm Rush, the foundational document of the Second Vatican Council is the Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei verbum*, as its transformed the ways we understood revelation and the revealing God.[16] The shift from thinking of Christian faith as truths to be defended to that of a personal relationship with the living God who incarnates those truths lays the foundation for every other dimension of Christian lives. It gave an impulse to rethinking our understanding of faith in richer ways. Faith is the human response to the revealing God, and it is the binding glue of our lives: we respond in faith to the living God, and the sacraments that nurture are sacraments of faith. Study into faith identifies at least two aspects: *fides quae* and *fides qua*, the former referring to the truths of faith in which we believe, its content, the latter to the very trust that enables us to welcome and adhere to the revealing God. This year's research has raised for me the need for similar attention to and reflection upon the ecclesial dimensions of faith, especially our *fides qua* in each other. Just as personal faith finds its roots in and grows out of the human capacity and need to trust, likewise, ecclesial faith is also a human

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[16] Ormond Rush, *The vision of Vatican II: its fundamental principles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2019), https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/acu/detail.action?docID=5849277.

and social reality. Australian journalist Chris Uhlmann nailed it this April (talking about politics, but it resonates well beyond that):

> Trust is the most valuable commodity, even more enduring than gold. We all know this instinctively because we trade in it every day. You know who you can trust. You invest your time, your confidence and your secrets in them. Trust is profoundly personal. Its betrayal cuts deep and when inflicted it's a spiritual wound. Once trust is lost, it's the hardest treasure to recover. But trust is not only the glue of human relationships, it also is the bedrock of society. A community cannot function without it. Every day we rely on strangers to follow unspoken rules: to obey the law, to act decently, to do the right thing when nobody's watching. This trust extends through the human supply chain from homes, to streets, suburbs, cities and nations. It runs through all the veins of community and commerce. Our economy is not just a spreadsheet, it is a moral project: a living network of human exchange."[17]

If such is the human reality, how much more the ecclesial one? What are our trust relationships like? Do the faithful trust their bishops? Do the bishops trust them? And each others? What would that look like? There is work to be done. What does a shared faith or trust look like? While we focus on and argue about the truths we believe or do not, or the way things should be done, we can neglect how we feel about each other, what we know and understand about each other, how we trust one another. And most especially, how we build relationships of trust that will enable and support movement in terms of the development of doctrine itself. Most of the difficulties described above would benefit from such work, which could play out in explicit methodologies developed with moral psychologists and other experts to help bridge gaps and forge faith communities. There is a prophetic space to be opened here that could build credibility and reignite hope.

Conclusion:

The overriding experience in this whole process has been the richness of humanity currently working in continuing the healing and teaching of Jesus in the world today. The generosity of life and thought, the quality of service, the integrity of intention all shine through, as light. Together with this, the importance of the moment in a time of such rapid change is obvious, calling us to both awareness of and attention to how we are imagining and scaffolding the future. It brings me back to the invitation of Pope Francis quoted at the start of the paper: is the desire of Pope Francis quoted above in an address to theologians from across the world last year: that *"theology help to rethink how to think"*.[18] Because willingness to rethink how we think opens us to discoveries in ourselves and others that have the potential to reshape how things are done.

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[17] Chris Uhlmann, "What hope in world of plunging trust," *Weekend Australian, The (Australia)*, 2025/04/12 2025, https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AWGLNB&docref=news/19FE72BC5B647380, NewsBank.
[18] Cf. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/december/documents/20241209-convegno-teologia.html

[1] Cf. Pope Francis, "Inauguration of the Judicial Year of Vatican City State Tribunal: Address of His Holiness Pope Francis" (12 March 2022); https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/march/documents/20220312-tribunale-scv.html; and idem, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors" (29 April 2022). https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220429-pontcommissione-tutelaminori.html (accessed 28 Nov. 2022); cf. Thomas O'Loughlin, "The Credibility of the Catholic Church as Public Actor," *New Blackfriars* 94/1050 (2013): 129–47; Patrick M. O'Brien, "Transparency as a Means to Rebuild Trust within the Church: A Case Study in How Catholic Dioceses and Eparchies in the United States Have Responded to the Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis", in *Church, Communication and Culture* 5:3 (2020), 456–483.

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