

European Encounter on Ecclesial Formation in a Synodal Perspective

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Final document

At the initiative of EcclesiaLab and the CCRFE, a European meeting brought together around thirty theologians, formators, and stakeholders involved in ecclesial and theological formation across various European countries, to reflect on the following question: **“How can the formation of pastoral workers – priests, deacons, religious, and lay people – be thought out and delivered in a synodal perspective for the future of the Church in Europe?”**

Key convictions emerging from the meeting

- Current magisterial documents are insufficient: they call for change but remain trapped in old paradigms that characterize formation.
- Synodality transforms power dynamics: formators are no longer mere transmitters but become companions.
- Artificial intelligence requires a qualitative leap in Church formation: training should focus on contextualized action rather than the accumulation of knowledge.
- Inter-ministerial formation is essential: priests, deacons, religious, and lay people must learn together.
- Resistance to change must be addressed holistically: transforming a vicious circle into a virtuous one.
- Particular Churches in Europe must reflect and work in a coordinated way, supported by a dedicated team: synodal formation can no longer remain a scattered initiative.

Restating the objectives

The question of the formation of the entire People of God, as well as that of pastoral workers, is becoming increasingly important in the ongoing synodal process. Recent documents, in particular the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the first session of the Assembly in 2023 and the *Final Document* of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (FD), highlight an increased need for formation. The challenges are not only practical or pedagogical, they are also profoundly theological. The Synod's *Final*

Document states: “Every new step in the life of the Church is a return to the source. It is a renewed experience of the disciples’ encounter with the Risen One in the Upper Room on Easter evening” (FD 1). This renewed encounter, which was also experienced during the Synod, was shared by all those who took part.

In this context, the European encounter aimed to bring together specialists and practitioners to examine formation methods from a synodal perspective for the future of the Church in Europe. The reflection was based on the need for an epistemological and methodological overhaul, according to the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*, and aimed to overcome pitfalls such as the hyper-specialisation and separation of different types of formation for ministry.

The general objective was to combine various forms of expertise in order to develop innovative formation methods that are adapted to contemporary challenges. To this end, the encounter was structured according to the following three steps:

1. Exploring concrete ways of implementing genuine transdisciplinarity in formation for ministry in the Church (for priests, deacons, religious, and lay people involved in pastoral ministry).
2. Identifying new pedagogical approaches (in particular, from the field of adult education) that take into account the real experience and concrete practices of ecclesial, pastoral, and missionary life (such as through formation engineering, skills-based pedagogy, concrete didactics, inverted teaching, reflective practice, etc.).
3. Envisaging concrete pathways forward for formation that is interministerial and synodal. More than merely forming people on the topic of synodality, this means taking a synodal approach to formation overall in the Church.

What is at stake in a change of era

One of the first fruits of the reflection in common was to identify certain components of the change in era that society is currently undergoing and to observe the significant gap that exists between the challenges of our time, on the one hand, and current practices in the Church, in theology, and in formation, on the other hand.

This is a time of rapid change, with multiple systemic metamorphoses in the areas of research, formation, and education. Our reflection touched upon some of the major factors of this epistemic upheaval. We are moving from a society of *place* to a society of *connections* in which place becomes a density of connections. The knowledge that is developed is ephemeral because it is linked to the connections that it receives, particularly via the Internet, and not to a knowledge of places (including the *loci* of theology). The result is a collapse or metamorphosis of the hierarchy of knowledge as well

as the hierarchy of truth. These dynamics are leading to a profound questioning, and even collapse, of traditional power structures.

Recent developments in artificial intelligence are having a considerable influence on education and formation. As Pope Leo XIV has already pointed out, the current technological revolution – of which artificial intelligence is both the emblematic symbol and the driving force – poses major challenges for the whole of humanity. Moving forward, how are we to form and support people in developing genuine, contextualised knowledge and skills, integrating knowledge, know-how and interpersonal skills, rather than leaving them to evolve without points of reference, without understanding or mastering the issues that are at stake?

Magisterial documents such as *Veritatis Gaudium* (VG) and *Ad Theologiam Promovendam* (ATP) identify the extent of these changes by speaking of a genuine change of era that calls for a paradigm shift, “an epistemological and methodological overhaul” (ATP 3). However, these same documents do not follow through on this call, remaining attached to a classic approach to theological and pastoral formation. The current documents are limited when it comes to responding to the real needs of those being formed in the face of the challenges identified. More specifically, as theologians and those responsible for formation, we have noted that even within the framework of the organisation of the Church, and especially within that of theological and pastoral formation, a synodal transformation implies a modification of power relationships (in particular between teachers and students, between formators and those in formation, as well as how authority is understood and exercised in the Church) and the emergence of new modes of cooperation. This transformation does not only concern formators and those in formation; it also significantly affects those in positions of responsibility, particularly authority figures within the Church, who often bear responsibility and oversight for formation.

Principles and approaches for synodal formation

In order to reshape ecclesial formation in a given context – taking a contextualized approach – three major principles have emerged: listening, co-elaboration, and circularity. Implementing these three principles requires:

1. Incorporating into the formation process spaces for mutual listening, ensuring equitable participation by all, as well as opportunities for silence and reflection. The influence of synodality is not limited to governance: it also extends to formation. As in decision-making processes, so too in formation, it is a matter of building “an atmosphere of openness to the Spirit and mutual trust” (FD 90).
2. Putting into practice processes of co-elaboration (designing and delivering formation pathways more collaboratively) by allowing ourselves to be

challenged by the diversity of our target audiences in order to build and envisage *together* a new approach to theology.

3. Integrating three instances of validation into theological education in a circular and critical manner, namely: personal experience; what is shared with peers; and what is transmitted by Tradition. The synergy between these three levels promotes a truly synodal dynamic.

These major principles make it possible to respond to the challenges posed by *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, which calls for a shift from interdisciplinarity in a weak sense to transdisciplinarity, which is interdisciplinarity in the strong sense (ATP 5).¹

Formators are called upon to make ecclesial formation part of a dynamic of dialogue and collaboration, encouraging mutually enriching exchanges between those in formation and their formators, rather than sticking to lecture-style and unidirectional methods of teaching. We learn through experience and by experimenting. It is crucial to move beyond rigid disciplinary silos to explore the potential offered by innovative interdisciplinary approaches. The way theological studies are structured must also take into account local contexts and cultures, adopting a flexibility that reflects the diversity of realities and situations. Formation in the Church must be oriented towards mission, at the service of the People of God and society, integrating the richness of human and cultural experiences. Formation benefits from being lived out in a synodal style, where learners are placed at the heart of the formation process and where responsibility is shared by all those involved. Finally, formation pathways should offer a solid foundation while allowing for specialisations that are adapted to the diverse needs and profiles of the learners.

A number of new pedagogical approaches discussed during the seminar showed that gradual change is possible. These approaches enabled us to better situate ourselves amidst the current realities facing formation in the Church, while also identifying desirable developments in a variety of formation contexts. We believe that the challenges are indeed great, but as theologians we are ready to help Church leaders.

Three axes for a synodal pedagogy

Based on these approaches and guiding principles, there are three main areas of consideration and development that emerge.

1. A generative, synodal pedagogy

Formation in the Church needs to be a shared process, rooted in a pedagogy of co-construction. Formators can no longer be mere transmitters, but must rather be

¹ Cf. "This relational dimension connotes and defines, from an epistemic point of view, the status of theology, which is driven not to close itself up in self-referentiality, which leads to isolation and insignificance, but to perceive itself as inserted in a web of relationships, first of all with other disciplines and other knowledge. This is the approach of transdisciplinarity, i.e. interdisciplinarity in the strong sense, as distinct from multidisciplinary, understood as interdisciplinarity in the weak sense" (ATP 5).

facilitators of the learning process, which unfolds in a group spirit to foster a collective intelligence. This requires participative learning formats (workshops, laboratories, role-playing, etc.), an active listening posture, and a teaching approach that is open to the unexpected and the incomplete (VG 3).

Transdisciplinary and interministerial approaches should be embedded in the formation design, as illustrated by the calls to reinstate interministerial sessions and to promote university courses that bring together seminarians, candidates for the diaconate, theology students, and other ecclesial ministers in formation.

The *Final Document* of the Synod on Synodality strongly emphasises “the need for a common and shared formation, in which men and women, laity, consecrated persons, ordained ministers and candidates for ordained ministry participate together, thus enabling them to grow together in knowledge and mutual esteem and in the ability to collaborate” (FD 143). This need extends to the ongoing formation of the whole People of God, including the clergy and bishops.

2. An integral pedagogy

Formation today means accompanying learners through a process of personal, spiritual, and professional development. The challenge goes beyond the simple acquisition of content and involves reviewing and evaluating one’s own practice in the dynamic interplay between fidelity and creativity. Concrete tools such as portfolios and logbooks can prove helpful in this regard.

A holistic, integral approach is relevant to all forms of formation in the Church, and must be urgently extended to formation for the permanent diaconate and to formation for future priests. This presupposes a renewed and courageous approach to the mission and model of formation in seminaries. Moreover, the experience of men and women in religious life could inspire both innovative as well as tried and tested approaches, insofar as their experience of formation is often more participative, holistic, and rooted in a solid spirituality.

3. Formation as a synodal experience

Synodality not only gives rise to a constructively critical attitude regarding the contents of formation in the Church, it also challenges and transforms the structures and postures of formation, including those of formators. It is a matter of making each formation environment a space for an authentically ecclesial experience, in which the process is as important as the result. Even for formators, formation is called upon to be formative and transformative: it is not merely a fixed programme but a web of relationships and a space of living connections. This requires a conversion of the institutions responsible for formation. Formation teams must be engaged in the ongoing transformation of formation practices, driven by a synodal spirit and attentive to accompanying all those involved.

Perspectives for the future and implementation

All projects that foster change carry a significant risk of failure due to internal resistance. Some people lose power and influence, and new forms of suffering and discomfort may emerge. All of these elements need to be taken into account when finding ways of transforming what appears to be a vicious circle into a virtuous one. The point of view of those who push for change is very different from that of those who suffer from it. The ability to accept and embrace change presupposes a culture of trust, which requires a long-term commitment. To work towards reform, it is therefore essential to tackle resistance to change in a holistic way, paying attention to the emotional and relational dimensions at play.

We can become a community of learners that journeys forward together (*syn-hodos*). We can be a community of sentinels who draw attention to important and revealing events and phenomena. We can be a community of builders who are engaged together in a work in progress. We wonder how to foster such communities in an academic context, and how best to approach formation partners and create links between institutions (diocesan offices, seminaries, etc.). We incorporate these elements into this synthesis report as points for further reflection that have not yet been fully explored or discussed.

Each participant expressed the desire to further explore what can be done in our diverse contexts and cultural horizons. Other initiatives and seminars will surely be needed to enable this kind of exchange. We are convinced of the need to create a European team dedicated to formation. The mission of this team would be to facilitate exchanges and dialogue with universities, ecclesiastical institutions, seminaries, and centres of formation, as well as with all those responsible for formation, and above all with learners in formation for various ministries, who are at the heart of the People of God.

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