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WALKING TOGETHER, TRANSFORMING TOGETHER

DEVELOPING POPE FRANCIS'S SYNODALITY INTO A TRANSDISCIPLINARY FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

This article does not claim that Pope Francis formulated a transdisciplinary model of empowerment. **Rather, it brings his vision into dialogue with transdisciplinarity, transformative learning, critical pedagogy and compassionate civic engagement.**



Pope Francis's vision of synodality offers a starting point for reimagining community engagement. It views engagement as a process through which people learn, discern and act together, rather than as one in which institutions deliver services to people. This article does not claim that Pope Francis formulated a transdisciplinary model of empowerment. Rather, it brings his vision into dialogue with transdisciplinarity, transformative learning, critical pedagogy and compassionate civic engagement. It argues that walking together becomes empowering only when it transforms the distribution of knowledge, resources and decision-making power, alongside relationships and perceptions.

1. Beyond Consultation

Synodality is neither an occasional gathering nor a technique for collecting opinions. The International Theological Commission describes it as a way of living and working in which the People of God discern and carry out their mission together. On 10 October 2021, Pope Francis summarised this practice in three words: "encounter, listen and discern". Encounter builds relationships, listening opens us to perspectives beyond our own assumptions, and discernment invites us to consider the collective response that reality demands.

Within the Church, these movements are rooted in faith. Extending them to civic life requires translation rather than direct transfer. A religiously plural or multicultural neighbourhood needs a process through which people of all faiths and persuasions can participate without being required to subscribe to a shared theology. Spiritual depth can remain an important dimension of this engagement, as mystics across religious traditions have demonstrated through their lived experience; nevertheless, participation must remain free from religious pressure or coercion.

2. Beyond Disciplinarity

Community problems and realities rarely belong to a single 'disciplinary field'. A polluted stream, for instance, involves public health, land ownership, planning, livelihoods, caste, household labour and the cultural significance of water. Francis's integral ecology, articulated in Laudato Si', insists that environmental and social crises cannot be separated. The Charter of Transdisciplinarity (Basarab Nicolescu) points towards forms of knowledge that emerge between and beyond disciplines. It also recognises art, poetry, intuition, spirituality, imagination and the body as important dimensions of knowing.

A synodal–transdisciplinary approach would therefore bring together:

- Disciplinary expertise, including scientific, legal, historical and economic inquiry.
- Community knowledge developed through work, care, struggle and everyday experience.
- Cultural memory, local languages and place-based ecological understanding.
- Emotional, embodied, artistic and spiritual ways of encountering reality.
- Public reasoning about eco-social rights, responsibilities and the Common Good.

This does not imply that every claim is equally reliable, since openness must go hand in hand with rigour. The distinctive proposal is that communities help frame the questions, interpret the evidence and determine the appropriate responses. They are not merely sources of data for experts.

3. Transformative Learning

Synodality and transformative learning share a challenge to self-sufficiency, recognising that genuine listening is impossible when we assume that we already possess all the answers. Transformative learning examines the assumptions through which we experience and interpret the world, enabling us to change how we understand reality, our place within it and our responses to it.



This has practical implications. A student may learn the statistics of deprivation without questioning why exclusion persists. An institution may conduct outreach programmes without examining its own paternalistic assumptions. The guiding question is: What must change in our understanding of ourselves, one another and the institutions that shape our lives?

The framework should also move beyond a purely cognitive understanding of change. It must make room for grief, discomfort, affection, ecological belonging, moral imagination and spiritual questioning. It proposes four interrelated dimensions of transformation:

- **Personal:** from certainty to reflective humility.
- **Relational:** from distance to reciprocity.
- **Structural:** from individual blame to institutional analysis.
- **Ecological and spiritual:** from separation to care and belonging.

4. From Kindness to Structural Care

Compassionate civic engagement is more than an expression of courtesy or an effort to help people cope with their circumstances. In Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis links love of neighbour with the building of just institutions and social structures. Transforming the circumstances that produce suffering is also an expression of love. Compassion and critique must therefore work together:

- Compassion without structural analysis becomes paternalistic charity.
- Critique without compassion reduces people to categories or opponents.
- Dialogue without accountability becomes a performance of inclusion.
- Action without reflection reproduces the power relations it seeks to change.

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5. Six Movements of Shared Transformation

The encounter–listen–discern orientation can develop into a recurring cycle of community praxis. The extension proposed below is the contribution of this article rather than an official ecclesial method. The cycle remains open to return, reflection and revision.

Movement	Central question	Sample practices
1. Encounter and immersion	Whose reality have we not yet met?	Community walks, shared work, ecological observation
2. Deep, plural listening	What is expressed, silenced or overlooked?	Listening circles, storytelling, local-language dialogue, confidential testimony
3. Critical inquiry, connecting the dots	How do these experiences link to wider systems?	Participatory mapping, historical timelines, power analysis
4. Shared discernment and reframing	What response is just, feasible and life-enhancing?	Ethical deliberation, comparing alternatives
5. Co-action and shared authority	What will we do, and who controls decisions and resources?	Community-led projects, participatory budgeting
6. Reflection, accountability, regeneration	What changed, who benefited, what needs repair?	Community review, public reporting, ecological monitoring

These movements should not be understood as a rigid sequence or a one-time intervention. They constitute an iterative process in which reflection informs action, action generates new understanding, and accountability creates opportunities for correction and renewal.

The crucial transition is from being heard to having influence. Listening alone does not constitute empowerment. Every initiative should specify which matters participants can decide, which they can influence, which remain constrained by law, and how unmet commitments can be challenged.

6. Dialogue with 'Roots Education'

This proposal is examined through the lens of 'Roots Education', developed by M. Nadarajah through the Gandhi-Mandela-Freire and Dialogical Democracy Initiative programmes at Loyola Extension Services. Five strands help assess whether 'walking together' is genuinely transformative:



• Conscientisation asks whether participants recognise the historical and structural roots of their circumstances.

• Deschooling asks whether the authority of learning extends beyond classrooms, credentials and established forms of expertise.

• Decolonisation asks whose languages, memories and knowledge systems have been marginalised, and whether communities have the freedom to reject imposed interpretations.

• Counter-hegemony asks whether arrangements presented as 'natural' are being questioned and whether alternatives are being cultivated.

• Socially engaged spirituality asks whether inner transformation is inseparable from solidarity, non-violence and care for life.

Synodality provides a relational practice of walking together, while Roots Education offers a searching examination of domination and institutional conditioning, both within and beyond the Church. Together, they contribute to the vision of a Church that is more participatory, inclusive and polyhedral, embracing unity without suppressing diversity. While transdisciplinarity brings different forms of knowledge into dialogue, Roots Education deepens this engagement by examining the historical, cultural and structural conditions that shape whose knowledge is recognised and whose voices are marginalised.

7. Safeguards Against 'Symbolic Synodality'

Participatory language can coexist with concentrated power; indeed, participation, when manipulated or deprived of genuine accountability, can reproduce the very structures of domination it seeks to overcome. Six safeguards are therefore essential:

• Inclusion requires practical support: accessible venues, local languages, suitable timings, transport and, where possible, compensation.

• A common meeting space is not always a safe space. Those affected by caste, gender or employment hierarchies may need separate spaces, confidential channels or independent facilitation.

• Consensus must never be compulsory. Records should preserve significant dissent and unresolved concerns.

• Community knowledge must not automatically become institutional property. Research and publication should clearly specify consent, attribution, access and benefits to the community.

• Alternative institutional pathways and languages should be explored, including non-hierarchical structures, so that existing hierarchies are not treated as inevitable.

Synodality provides a relational and spiritual starting point. **To evolve into a framework for empowerment, however, it requires deliberate additions: transdisciplinary inquiry, critical reflection, structural analysis, shared authority, public accountability and compassionate civic engagement.**



• Followership must complement leadership. Those in positions of authority should be willing to follow community knowledge, accept correction and relinquish control, ensuring that capacity is distributed and that no charismatic convenor becomes a permanent point of dependency.

8. What Counts as Success

Evaluation should examine changes in relationships and power, as well as the activities completed:

• Whose concerns now shape the agenda?

• Can participants identify assumptions they have reconsidered or revised?

• Have previously excluded people gained meaningful influence in decision-making?

• Are resources and responsibilities shared more transparently?

• Can the community exercise its agency and make decisions independently, while engaging institutions through relationships of mutual accountability rather than dependency?

• Have ecological conditions and everyday experiences of care improved?

• Can participants bring about changes to the process peacefully, without fear of retaliation?

Sustainability alone is not enough here. Regeneration means renewing the relationships, ecological conditions and collective capacities through which a community continues to care for its shared private and public life.

Conclusion

Synodality provides a relational and spiritual starting point. To evolve into a framework for empowerment, however, it requires deliberate additions: transdisciplinary inquiry, critical reflection, structural analysis, shared authority, public accountability and compassionate civic engagement. Its promise lies in reconnecting what institutions often keep separate: learning and action, spirituality and eco-social justice, personal and institutional transformation, governance and non-hierarchical structures, and human dignity and ecological care.

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