**The Synod of Bishops: Missing the forest for the trees**

**Francis has put forth legislation that could allow him or a future pope to substantially transform the governing structure of the universal Church**

**Le synode : l’arbre qui cache la forêt**

**François met en place une législation qui pourrait lui, ou le pape suivant, de transformer en profondeur le gouvernement de l’Eglise.**

Robert Mickens, Rome, Vatican City

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The Synod of Bishops is soon to enter the final stretch of its 25-day gathering on matters pertaining to young people. But not everyone is happy with the way this XVI ordinary general assembly of the Synod has unfolded up to now.

Some critics have complained that the daily sessions (formally called “general congregations”) are being regulated by muddled, unclear and — according to some — even arbitrary procedures. They say this could jeopardize the credibility of whatever statements this assembly eventually produces.

Others have voiced alarm over the current assembly’s agenda, saying it is too heavily focused on sociological issues rather than those more strictly pertaining to the Catholic faith. That’s the same criticism they made of the gathering’s [working document](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20180508_instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani_en.html) or *Instrumentum laboris*.

In addition, there are those who believe the conversations in the Synod Hall and small discussion groups are too dispersive. The beef here is that they are not focused narrowly enough on a manageable number of topics strictly related to the assembly’s theme, “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment.”

Again, the concern is that this will make it difficult, if not impossible, for the assembly to express anything except vague generalities in its final document.

Beaucoup de commentaires pointent la difficulté, sinon l’impossibilité pour l’assemblée synodale de dire autre chose que de vagues généralités dans le document final.

All of these apprehensions are understandable to a certain extent. But what the critics (and even many people who disagree with them) have failed to appreciate is that this Synod gathering represents but a single step on a much longer and transformative journey.

Ces appréhensions sont compréhensibles mais elles oublient que le synode ‘est qu’un pas dans un long voyage de renouveau.

Just like the two previous Synod assemblies on the family, Pope Francis has made this current assembly on youth yet another necessary juncture on the road towards radically reforming structures of ecclesial governance and effecting a “conversion” of the papacy itself.

In short, it is about the more arduous — and controversial — process of making true synodality a constituent part of the Church’s life and decision-making structures.

What is perhaps most remarkable about this project is the expanded role it has begun to carve out for ordinary Catholics — that is, all the baptized faithful and not just those who have received Holy Orders.

Ce qui est remarquable dans le process synodal c’est la place de plus en plus grande que prennent les catholiques ordinaires face à ceux qui ont « reçu les ordres ».

**The pope’s quiet revolution**

**La revolution tranquille du pape**

It is not an exaggeration to use the word “revolutionary” to describe what Francis is trying to accomplish, certainly if one looks at the post-Constantinian period of Church history. That most people have not experienced it as a dramatic event usually associated with social or political revolutions is a tribute to the pope’s skillful process of bringing about reform.

Ce n’est pas exagéré d’employer le mot “révolution” pour qualifier ce que le pape tente d’accomplir.

He believes the first and most important reform is to change mentalities and attitudes. And he has been surprisingly successful in doing that by excessively repeating key themes and concepts through the use of what we might call buzzwords or turns of phrase.

Il pense que le changement le plus important est celui des attitudes.

Some examples include his continues talk of “mercy,” “a poor Church for the poor,” “who am I to judge?” “an accident-prone Church,” “priests who have the smell of the sheep,” “please-thank you-I’m sorry” as a formula for happy marriage and so forth.

But he has also, although in a quieter way, laid the foundations for radical structural change. This has been less noticeable and disruptive to most people because it has come gradually.

Et il le fait en répétant des mots simples - pas du buzz - : « Compassion », « Une Eglise pauvre pour les pauvres », « Qui suis-je pour juger ? ». Mais aussi, et de manière plus apaisée, il d le fait en bâtissant les fondations d’un changement radical de structure.

Catholics in general, and popes in particular, do not like to use the word “revolution” when talking about developments in the Church. Pope Francis is no different.

He, like his predecessors, prefers to speak of “renewal” or “conversion.” He is even careful about using the term “reform,” which is often too jarring for more traditionalist-minded members of the Church.

**Refounding the Synod of Bishops**

**Refonder le synode des évêques**

The pope issued his blueprint for renewal early in his pontificate with the publication of *Evangelii gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel). But that 2013 apostolic exhortation offers a broad vision of ecclesial reform without decreeing specific canonical or structural changes.

François a publié le plan directeur du renouveau dans Evangelii gaudium.

Like most of the documents that were ratified at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the exhortation has been greeted by reform-minded Catholics as being inspirational but lacking in force.

And so, it is surprising that so many people failed to recognize the true importance of one of the latest major document Pope Francis has issued — the apostolic constitution *Episcopalis communio* (EC).

Mais il est surprenant que beaucoup n’ai pas reconnu l’importance d’un de ses derniers document : la constitution Episcopalis communio.

This [text](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html), which was made public on Sept. 18, sets down the principles for substantially reforming the nature, purpose and function of the Synod of Bishops.

The 6,400-word document replaces all previous texts — including various points of Canon Law — that in any way pertain to or regulate the working of the Synod.

In a sensitive (some would say devious) way, Francis quotes all the previous popes who helped shaped legislation on the Synod in justifying the “developments” he’s introduced.

He respectfully and carefully cites Paul VI, who instituted this permanent institution in 1965, as well as John Paul II and Benedict XVI, to show he has acted in continuity with previous papal initiatives.

But in this new legislative text he also introduces and institutionalizes major shifts and breaks from the previous popes.

Dans ce nouveau texte publié le 18 septembre il introduit des changements majeurs en rupture avec ses prédécesseurs, par exemple la consultation massive des laïcs.

For example, the extensive consultation of the baptized faithful, which Francis introduced in preparations for the 2014 extraordinary assembly on the family and utilized again for the last two ordinary assemblies (2016 and currently), is now a mandatory procedure.

It was never even mentioned in previous papal documents, let alone mandated.

**The Voice of the Faithful**

**La voix des fidèles**

“The history of the Church bears ample witness to the importance of consultation for ascertaining the views of the bishops and the faithful in matters pertaining to the good of the Church.

“Hence, even in the preparation of Synodal assemblies, it is very important that consultation of all the particular Churches be given special attention,” Francis says in *Episcopalis communio*.

“In this initial phase, following the indications of the general secretariat of the Synod, the bishops submit the questions to be explored in the Synodal Assembly to the priests, deacons and lay faithful of their Churches…” (EC, 7).

He then sets down precise articles outlining the consultation of the faithful which is to be carried out, including the “possibility” of holding pre-Synod assembly meetings at the international, regional and local levels.

“The Synod of Bishops must increasingly become a privileged instrument for *listening* to the People of God,” the pope says (EC, 6).

La consultation des fidèles, éventuellement par des pré-synodes, doit être mise en place. Le synode doit devenir un instrument privilégié d’écoute du peuple de Dieu.

**Towards a new type of ongoing Synod assembly?**

**Vers un nouveau type de synode ?**

Many commentators have rightly pointed out that one of the key novelties in the new apostolic constitution is that, should he deem opportune, the pope — the president of the Synod of Bishops — can allow an assembly’s final document to be published as an official act of the magisterium (i.e. as official teaching).

Usually, that text has been used as the basis or draft that would then be modified, re-written and published later as a formal papal document (apostolic exhortation).

Many are anxious to see if Pope Francis will decide for this newer option at the end of the current assembly on young people.

Une des nouveautés-clés est que le document final d’un synode puisse devenir un acte officiel du magistère.

But there is another article in *Episcopalis communio* that few people have commented on.

In addition to the three types of Synod assemblies that have been convoked up until now — ordinary, extraordinary and special — the pope now has complete freedom to use the Synod in a more flexible way.

“If he considers it opportune, especially for reasons of an ecumenical nature, the Roman Pontiff may summon a synodal assembly according to other formats established by himself,” the document stipulates (EC, Art. 1 § 3).

S’il considère comme opportun de le faire le pape peut convoquer un synode différent des trois types connus : ordinaire, extraordinaire et special.

This, too, is a novelty. It is not mentioned in any other papal document regulating the Synod of Bishops. But what might it mean in practical terms?

Perhaps this line from paragraph eight in the new apostolic constitution offers a further clue: “If circumstances so suggest, a single synodal assembly may be spread over more than one session.”

This would offer a pope the possibility to change the format (and membership) of a Synod assembly. He could even use it as a sort of permanent consultative body that meets several times over the course of a year or two.

Le pape a ainsi la possibilité de modifier la forme et la participation d’un synode.

And he could also use the already existing prerogative to give that assembly deliberative power, a possibility that Paul VI foresaw when he established the Synod as a permanent institution.

Et il a aussi la prérogative d’utiliser la décision de Paul VI de donner au synode un pouvoir législatif.

Whether we’re talking about a revolution or — to play it safe — a further development of the Synod in continuity with the past, Pope Francis has put forth legislation that could allow him or a future pope to substantially transform the governing structure of the universal Church.

Right now they may look like baby steps, coming as they do during a Synod assembly on young people. But they are steps nonetheless. And bold ones at that.

They are part of an exciting and sometimes terrifying journey on which Francis has launched the Church, the entire People of God. Indeed, that is what *synodos* means — journeying together.

On peut tout à fait considérer que ce ne sont que des pas d’enfant, mais néanmoins ce sont des pas et certains audacieux. François entraîne l’Eglise dans un voyage excitant, quelque part terrible.