

# Towards a synodal Church

This is our [instrumentum laboris](#) for the first meeting of the sinoditalgutiim on 2022-02-16. Our final goal is to write a common statement that expresses *what we have to say* at the Synod on Synodality. This document is only what I personally imagine at the moment for this text. It is possible that none of my suggestions will be accepted. During our working sessions I suggest to meditate these suggestions and classify each item into one of (a) we consent to say it, (b) we consent to remove it or (c) no consensus yet. Everybody is welcome to formulate their own suggestions at any time until end of March 2022. Luc Saffre.

## About this document

- (1) Does it make sense that non-Catholic followers think about the Pope's question and formulate their common thoughts? Already the process that lead to this document deserves some explanations (...) We are an extraordinary group because (...)
- (2) It seems unavoidable that a number of Christians in Estonia disagree with this document. We invite them to dialogue with us and to explain us where exactly our positions differ.

## The challenge of the Church today

- (3) Estonians have a reputation of being the least religious country in the world. This claim as such would be a mere *fait divers* and by the way is not uncontested [Kalda20211031]. What makes it worrying is the observation that Estonians are *proud* of it. Indeed most people in Estonia *refuse* to even *consider* the Church as a partner. By **Church** we mean everybody who publicly claims to believe in the Gospel. Our government refuses to cultivate anything that focuses on the Gospel. Most schools in Estonia teach to our future generations a picture of the Church that is obsolete by about 500 years. Getting ignored is in a certain way worse than being repressed. As a result, many people in Estonia have no chance to hear about the Gospel. The job of the Church, which is to announce the Gospel, is dramatically failing in Estonia.
- (4) This situation has complex causes. One can blame our local history or those who refuse to listen. It is true that “among the most important causes of the crises of the modern world are a desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values and a prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies that deify the human person and introduce worldly and material values in place of supreme and transcendental principles” [20190204].
- (5) But let us rather look at our own sin ([Matthew 7:3-5](#)): Who is responsible when people fail to understand the Gospel: the teacher or the pupil? We as the Church fail to explain the Gospel in an understandable language. We have a collective guilt of not doing our job very well.
- (6) Estonians are reasonable and practical people. When you tell them something that is in contradiction with plain common sense, they simply turn away and stop listening to you for the rest of their life. The Church in Estonia happens to say things that are in contradiction with common sense.
- (7) How can we dare to speak about a “failure” of our beloved mother Church? When you are a child and go shopping with your mother, and when you see that your mother has put her coat inside-out, will you let her get exposed to laughter of other people? No! Of course you will help her to turn her coat right. [Croix2018]
- (8) Each time the Church is seen “wearing her coat inside-out”, people of good will turn away from her – and from Jesus. This happens world-wide and might be the most important chal-

lence of the Church in our time. Most representatives of [New Atheism](#) don't criticize the *ideal* Church, they criticize an obsolete vision of a Church that is wearing her coat inside-out.

## The two camps

(9) The consultation phase of the Synod on Synodality shows that the Church in Estonia and in the world is experiencing a controversial battle between two "camps". There are two fundamentally opposing views about how the Church should "live and operate".

(10) Certain parts of these views do exclude each other, there is no way to embrace both. Jesus refers to such situations when he says "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24, Luke 16:13), or "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!" (Luke 12,49)

(11) The situation resembles that of a man who puts his pullover in a dark room and realizes that the pullover has one sleeve inside out. Turning one of the sleeves around can result in having the whole pullover inside-out.

(12) We cannot solve a problem by refusing that it exists. The first step in every dialogue is to agree on what we are talking about.

(13) Often the two camps are labelled "traditional" or "conservative" versus "liberal" or "progressive". But trying to cut *reality* into two halves ([dichotomy](#) of a controversial question) would be a naive simplification. Nobody is fully on one side. You can be labelled "liberal" without perceiving *faith* as individual choice. You can be labelled "progressive" and still be very conservative in many regards.

(14) Because the problem is more complex than a simple dichotomy, some call it a [paradigm shift](#). We might also call it a [metamorphosis](#) : the Church as a butterfly that hatches from its [pupa](#) after a seemingly long period of invisible activity.

## Synodality

(15) The neologism "synodality" acts as a signal. Synodality reminds the expression "[Unity in Diversity](#)", a prominent principle of the Bahá'í Faith, which also has become the [Motto of the European Union](#). Synodality also reminds the [code of conduct](#) and the [Conflict of interest policies](#) of the Wikimedia Foundation, or the [Ubuntu philosophy](#).

(16) The Synod on Synodality is going to make a few fundamental things clear. It gives us hope that this battle turns into a dialogue. We suggest the following definition of the word „synodality“.

(17) **Synodality** it is the awareness of being **together** and **on our way** as a community.

(18) **Together**: We cannot refuse anybody who follows the Gospel. When our interpretations of the Gospel conflict with each other, we must consent upon which differences are welcome and which are unacceptable. We obviously cannot tolerate the intolerant or include those who choose to exclude some.

(19) **On our way** : We are not yet there: we *know* that we don't *know* the final truth. Our teachings, traditions and rules require continuous maintenance, which includes research, updates, quality control and deployment.

## Synodal language

(20) Our hearts and teachings still contain much **presynodal** stuff. A *presynodal* teaching, expression, tradition or conviction is one that bears a danger of getting misunderstood because language usage has evolved since it was formulated. While convictions are in our hearts and we cannot change them deliberately, teachings and traditions can change. **Failing to update presynodal** teachings, traditions and rules **promotes disorder**. In order to become synodal, the Church will have to identify **presynodal** teachings, traditions and rules and to distantiate from them.

(21) We suggest the following basic definitions.

(22) The **faith** of a human is their individual set of beliefs and convictions. Every human has a faith. There are no two humans whose faiths fully cover in every point. Your faith is an integral part of your identity, your spiritual fingerprint. It is the result of what you have learned during your personal history. It is influenced by your body, your [temperament](#), your metabolism, your culture, your education, your personal history. It is a rather stable and immutable part of your personality. On the other hand every faith can evolve, grow or eventually experience revolutionary changes (“conversions”) as long as we live. Faith is the result of a life-long learning process.

(23) The word **faith** is also being used for a fundamentally different meaning: followers of the Gospel have used it as a shortcut for “a faith based the Gospel”. Also non-followers use it in this meaning, for example Sam Harris in his book “[The End of Faith](#)”.

(24) The **Gospel** is the divine message brought to humanity through Jesus Christ. It answers questions of the **invisible world**, for which science does not give any answer: How can we imagine God? What does God want me to do? What is the meaning of my life? Does humanity have a purpose? The Gospel **does not answer** questions like “How old is the Earth?”, “Is democracy better than monarchy?” or “Can women be priests?” because these questions are about the **invisible world**. God gave us brains and we developed science to answer them.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” ([John 20:29](#))

(25) The word **faithful** is confusing and presynodal because everybody is “full of faith” (the question how we cultivate our faith). Let us replace it by *follower*. A **follower** is any person who decided to follow the *Gospel* and publicly declares this. The **Bible** is the Holy Scripture used by all *followers*. It is the immutable collection of texts we use for cultivating our *faith* and to grow our trust in the Gospel. The **Church** is the community of all *followers*.

(26) A **tradition** is a rite or sacrament that is defined and regulated by the Church. While faith is an *individual* characteristic of a human, **religion** is a collective set of teachings used by its members to cultivate their faith.

## Announcing the Gospel today

(27) The mission of every *follower* is to “announce” the *Gospel* to “all peoples”, to every group and culture of humans. The purpose of the Church is to help the followers in their mission.

(28) The Gospel it is a *divine* message; it is more than the Bible, more than any teaching or tradition. It is revealed to us also in nature, in the thankful smile of a poor or in a personal experience of success or failure.

(29) You cannot announce something without **knowing** it. But what is knowledge? What makes us say „I believe this and this?“

(30) **Individual knowledge**, also called **faith**, is the sum of beliefs you rely on, the result of what you have learned during your personal history. It is stored in your heart. Your faith tells you in every concrete situation, spontaneously and without further reflection, whether a given choice is “good” or “bad”. It says this with a varying degree of conviction, ranging from “vague feeling” to “doubtless belief”. This choice happens unconsciously and independently of how skilful you are for explaining it to others using words.

(31) **Community knowledge** is similar, but with a fundamental difference: it isn’t stored in your heart. It is stored somewhere else. It needs a medium. Every collection of teachings maintained by a community is such a medium. Every community is defined by its teachings. Teachings are the heart of every community, they are also the heart of the Church.

(32) An important activity of the Church is to publish and maintain reliable teachings. The teachings of the Church are probably the biggest and most complex documentation library in the world, collected during more than 3000 years, with the biggest community of contributors, with document types ranging from blog entries, news, homilies, prayers, songs, books, films, to dogmatic constitutions, research reports or law collections, with audiences ranging from 2 year old children to experts of every branch of science. Maintaining this documentation library is a huge and never-ending task.

(33) Every teaching includes answers to moral questions. No teaching can be ethically neutral. Even a teaching about how to cook an egg assumes certain choices regarding moral questions (e.g. “Is it good to eat eggs?” or “If it’s okay to eat them, isn’t it better to eat them uncooked?”). The Gospel does not say “everything is okay”. There are things in this world that are not good. The Gospel is a moral message and gives answers to ethical questions. The big question we need to agree on is: which questions does the Gospel answer and which questions not.

(34) Every teaching is meant to be reliable. That’s why teachings exist. A teaching makes no sense when nobody relies on it. But what can we teach reliably about the Gospel if we assume that God is beyond human knowledge? Or more shortly: how to explain the unexplainable?

(35) The Bible is a first answer to this question. It is recognized as a historic text by all scholars of all religions, and as such a milestone in human history. The Church is the community of those who use the Bible as their Holy Scripture, as the immutable base of their teachings.

(36) But the Bible is a very fundamental document. It can give contradicting answers to certain concrete questions of the visible world, which evolves constantly. It can get interpreted in different ways, leading to different sets of teachings. Each church institution has its own set of teachings. While parts of these teachings are in harmony with each other, some of them differ considerably among the church institutions. Which confirms that God is beyond human knowledge.

(37) Teachings evolve constantly. Teachings are neither eternal nor immutable. The Gospel is eternal, the Bible is immutable, but teachings aren’t. The teachings of the Church need constant maintenance because they are our interpretation of the Gospel for now and here.

## The church is not a truth provider

(38) For many generations, the Church has seen herself as a **truth provider**, i.e. an authority that *knows* and guards the truth and is responsible of keeping it from getting spoiled. A pre-synodal reaction heard during the consultation phase was “The Church is rooted in the Christ and grows like a vineyard or a cedar of Lebanon, it does not *journey around*.” The synodal Church acknowledges clearly: we cannot prove the truth of the Gospel and are not here to protect it. We live *through* it, *in* it and *with* it, we discover, observe and witness this truth, but „the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head“ ([Luke 9:58](#)).

(39) “The revelation given to Moses and the prophets is to be taken as it has been passed on to us. (...) The valid interpretation is the one Jesus taught his disciples and which those passed on to us, and which the church has taught throughout the centuries without change. This is the right interpretation, any different interpretation is wrong or distorted.” (Arne Hiob, 10 October 2019 on Facebook group “Kiriku sõbrad”) or “The truth of the Gospel has been taught reliably and without mistakes by our church from its beginnings.” → Any teaching can turn out to be wrong or misleading or to cause harm. (“Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.” Luke 17:2) Religioossete elus võib tekkida kiusatus „põgeneda puhta õpetuse juurde“. Usk peab osutama tõeks ja kasvama seal, kus see puutub kokku tegelikusega. [VN 2021-07-26] Every teacher is always also a learner: these two go together. Teaching always includes learning. [Jürgenstein2022-01-14]

(40) The teachings of our church are reliable as long as they are carefully researched, elaborated **and maintained**.

(41) The fruits of a teaching, by which it is to be judged, are the convictions it cultivates and deeds motivated by these convictions.

(42) **Richard Dawkins**, in his letter to his daughter Juliet (published in his 2003 book, *A Devil's Chaplain*), names observation and scientific evidence as the “good” reasons to “believe” something, while tradition, authority and revelation are “bad” reasons. He reacts to the presynodal concept of the Church as a truth provider. The same does **Sam Harris** when he says “Tell a devout Christian that his wife is cheating on him, or that frozen yogurt can make a man invisible, and he is likely to require as much evidence as anyone else, and to be persuaded only to the extent that you give it. Tell him that the book he keeps by his bed was written by an invisible deity who will punish him with fire for eternity if he fails to accept its every incredible claim about the universe, and he seems to require no evidence whatsoever.” –

(43) Tõeasutused olid ropult veendunud, et neil on alati õigus. Nad polnud nõus vigu tunnistama, sest vea tunnistamine tähendaks ju, et nad pole enam TÕEasutused. Nad olid üsna aeglased ja kinnised. Ikka samal põhjusel, et nad kartsid vigu teha või siis neid välja näidata. Seetap rääkisid nad ka keerulises Tõe Keeles. Hoolimata nende kramplikest pingutustest saadi neist asutustest aga pidevalt valesti aru! Muidugi saadi valesti aru, sest inimesed ammutasid oma tõesid, arvasid, lugusid ja konspiratsiooni nüüd ju Googlest. [Vaarik2021-10]

(44) The Bible does not express **positions**, it inspires them. Positions are texts formulated in human language at a given time. They are always those of the community that publishes them. The first commandment is to love God and to not venerate any other idol. Saying that God is

the Lord and that His name is hallowed means that no human position, no interpretation of the Bible, no teaching, can claim to be absolutely true or to have authority over others.

## Presynodal language

(45) Hüpotees: „Eelsinodaalne keel“ tähendab ajaloolisi väljendeid, mida tuleks ümber sõnastada, sest nii inimeste keeletaju kui ka Kiriku arusaam Evangeeliumist muutuvad aja jooksul. Näiteks:

(46) “The Bible **teaches us clearly** what is good and true.“ → „The Bible **tells us important stories about our searching for** what is good and true.“

(47) “EKN peab (...) kõrgeimaks autoriteeteksiks **Piiblis väljendatud seisukohti**” või “Piibli järgi ...” [EKN2008] or “Piibel määratleb (...) seega siin kaksipidi mõtlemist ei saa olla” [private dialogue] or The Sacred Scriptures need an authority to take position and to authentically interpret the Word of God. [Dei Verbum] nr 9-10

(48) The Gospel has nothing **magical** or **supernatural**. Christian faith is about right relationship to **reality**, not an idolatry of something “supernatural”. [Saler1977]

(49) There are presynodal summaries of the Gospel. “It should not surprise us that young people en masse are turning their backs on religion (...) when "the gospel", God's supposed Great News for all of humanity, is reduced to this: An unnatural king who occasionally engages in unnatural acts sends his unnatural son to Earth in an unnatural way. He's born an unnatural birth, lives an unnatural life, performs unnatural deeds, and is killed and unnaturally rises from the dead in order to redeem humanity from an unnatural curse brought about by an unnaturally talking snake. After 40 days of unnatural appearances he unnaturally zooms off to heaven to return to his unnatural father, sit on an unnatural throne, and unnaturally judge the living and the dead. If you profess to believe in all this unnatural activity, you and your fellow believers get to spend an unnaturally long time in an unnaturally boring paradise while everyone else suffers an unnatural, torturous hell forever.” [Dowd2006]

## The Gospel says that your sins are forgiven

(50) A particularly wide-spread presynodal idea is that you need to confess your sins before God can forgive them. **Christians dare to speak about sins because we believe that God forgives them even before we realize or repent them.** Your sins can cause you trouble in the visible world, but they cannot separate you from God's love nor from communion in the Church. Inspired by Luke 15:11–32 (the Parable of the Prodigal Son) where the father had been waiting for the return of his son already before the son had shown repentance.

(51) We get too easily into sins, especially other people's sins, while turning a blind eye to the collective sin of our particular culture, nation or church. Sin is more fundamental than sins, both in the harm that we cause collectively, but also in the way that Sin, as St Paul taught, underlines our dependence on divine grace for that reason is what the [Exultet](#) calls a ‘happy fault’.

(52) Every mistake opens a new door. “Fear of making a mistake (...) undoubtedly causes upheaval and stress. But as surely as a door closes, another one opens. The objective is not to stay mired in the loss, but to look for the new door that is opening. They are always there if we learn to look for them.” [Schwartz2010] See also [Mistakes are good](#)

(53) „*tunnistagem oma patud, et meid arvataks väärilisteks seda püha ohvrit tooma*“ on ametlik sõnastus Eesti roomakatolikus kirikus. See on eelsinodaalne. See erineb sisuliselt Vatikani ametlikust tekstist (“*agnoscamus peccata nostra, ut apti simus ad sacra mysteria celebranda*”, mille tõlege oleks „*et me oleksime võimelised seda püha saladust pühitseda*“). Kas peab olema „vääriline“ või „võimeline“? Kas „ohvri toomine“ või „saladuse pühitsemine“? vt ka [Kurg2022-01] Üks klassikaline EELK tekst on sinodaalne: „*Väga õnnis on inimene, kelle üleastumiune on andesks antud ja kelle patt on kinni kaetud. Sellepärast tunnistagem issandale oma patud üles, südames nõnda üteldes.*“

(54) Humans always have right to mercy, ideas never. [private dialogue] („ideas“ includes positions, corporations and institutions). Even Adolf Hitler can expect God’s mercy.

## Apostolic governance

(55) Unity of Christians. Do we need a new institution that unites all Christians and is given authority? [CDF] The Roman Catholic church is not a member of the [WCC] why? And why is it a member of the [EKN](#)?

(56) The Church has always been **apostolic** and can be proud of this *modus vivendi et operandi*, which deserves better documentation and integration into modern law systems in order to make it useful also for organizations that don’t consider themselves as religious. Apostolic governance unites democracy and monarchy and as such can be an answer to issues of these government forms. The basic idea behind **apostolic governance** is that an individual person gets *appointed* to do a given job. Any appointed person can herself appoint other persons to help her with her job. The Pope is the top-level appointer and gets appointed by the procedure of papal succession.

(57) The **indelibility** of roles like **priesthood, husband, wife, baptized** Christian does not always align well with human experience, or with the freedom in which the Spirit calls and calls again. The Spirit may send the desert fathers into the wilderness or a pope to retire to Castel Gandolfo and to prayer.

(58) Should the Church develop and apply **public accounting**? Basic idea in [Public money, public agreements](#).

## Local project ideas

(59) The “Thanks for your help” project: the Church might actively watch public life in Estonia and send “Thank you” messages (“benedictions”) to organizations that are not explicitly Christian (they do not actively use the Bible as a tool of inspiration and hence their language is not biblical), but their mission is in harmony with the Gospel. We would consider them as “indirectly inspired”. They “work for the Kingdom of God” and help us to “do our job”. (Example: [Ühispalvus looduskaitsjatega Mustamäe kirikus](#))

(60) A synodal commission to help institutions in Estonia to find more synodal language? A liturgical group responsible for the maintenance of liturgical texts and songs used by congregations in Estonia?

(61) Contact [Maavalla Koda](#) and write a joint statement inspired by [20190204] or [20220205] ?

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“It is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. (...) Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church. (...) The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church. It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls. (Excerpts from no 9-10)

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