



Trans truth and the synodal Church

Nicolete Burbach

To cite this article: Nicolete Burbach (2023) Trans truth and the synodal Church, *Theology & Sexuality*, 29:1, 52-66, DOI: [10.1080/13558358.2023.2257546](https://doi.org/10.1080/13558358.2023.2257546)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13558358.2023.2257546>



Published online: 25 Sep 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 152



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Trans truth and the synodal Church

Nicolette Burbach 

London Jesuit Centre, London, UK

ABSTRACT

The Vatican's Commission on Spirituality Sub-Group's 2022 document, *Towards a Spirituality for Synodality*, offers a vision of a synodal ecclesial life. Central to this vision is the conviction that marginalised groups need to play an equal and active part in that life. This paper reflects on how this inclusion might extend to trans people. It argues that the synodal life of the Church, as envisioned by the CCSG, can include providing a space for the creative overcoming of historical dynamics that alienate trans people from the truths of our own lives, and that the Church fulfils its vocation to synodality in doing so. It concludes by suggesting a model of accompaniment in 'synodal solidarity' to facilitate this.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 June 2023

Accepted 1 September 2023

KEYWORDS

Synodality; accompaniment; transgender; Pope Francis; roots; inclusion

Introduction¹

Intended to inform the 2021–2023 Synodal Process, the Vatican's Commission on Spirituality Sub-Group's document, *Towards a Spirituality for Synodality*² offers a theology of synodality which nevertheless speaks beyond it. The document describes the Process as embodying an ethos of synodality that is 'the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church',³ and in this context it might be understood as one moment in a much broader 'synodal process' of ecclesial living. This paper explores the challenges presented to the Church by transness in light of this theology. I begin by exploring the CSSG's understanding of the Church's synodal life. I continue to argue that overcoming the alienation of marginalised groups through listening is central to this life. Next, I argue that transness has emerged historically in such a way as to render the truth of trans lives inarticulable. I explain this in terms of an abject alienation not only from the Church and society, but from ourselves. This poses a challenge to listening as this truth is not simply available for trans people to speak to the Church. Through a reading of Christ's resurrection in light of Pilate's question, 'What is truth?', I argue that overcoming these historical dynamics can be read in terms of a resurrection that inscribes that work at the heart of the Church's synodal life. I then conclude by suggesting a model of pastoral accompaniment to facilitate this.

A spirituality for synodality

At the heart of the document's synodal ecclesial vision is a social impulse towards inclusion in communion. The document states that synodality strives to realise a

vision of the Church in which, following Pentecost, it is ‘the **new reality of *communio*/community, which overcomes the ancient alienations introduced by personal and social sin**’.⁴ Three particularly interesting characteristics of this aspect of synodality are as follows: first, the document states that this communion is fundamentally a *loving* one, in which we live out God’s love for others around us, as well as standing in loving relationship with God Himself.⁵ Second, it states that this communion harmoniously encompasses people in all their differences. This is a matter of preserving the identities with regards to which people differ from one another, making these differences less an obstacle to communion, and more the ‘material’ of it: we relate to one another *in* our differences, *as* different people.⁶ Third, and perhaps most significantly, the document describes synodality in this latter respect as Eucharistic: the kind of communion aspired towards by the synod is realised most fully in the Eucharist, in which all are united in their entirety, yet without negating any aspect of themselves, in the Body of Christ.⁷ The force of this should not be understated: *Lumen Gentium*, describes the Eucharist as the ‘source and summit’ of Christian life.⁸ To describe the communion of synodality in these terms is to say that it is the expression of the Church’s deepest nature; that the Church can never find its fulfilment except in achieving it.

In short then, synodality as conceived by the document is animated by a vision of inclusion in harmonious diversity that is patterned on the communion of the Eucharist; a communion which not only provides the blueprint for, but is realised in, successful synodal living. In this way, synodality is elevated from simply an ethic for ‘journeying’ together into a principle that captures something essential to the identity of the Church in the world.

For all its importance to the Church, such inclusion is not always easy. This essay focuses on a less obvious difficulty which attends trans inclusion in the Church’s synodal life: that transness is marked by a particular kind of absence which goes beyond simple alienation from the Church, extending to the alienation of trans people *from ourselves*. I will now turn to the nature of this absence and the specific difficulty it presents, before looking to the Eucharistic theology of *Towards a Spirituality for Synodality* to argue that overcoming this alienation can be seen as a vital part of the Church’s synodal life.

Listening and synodality

In order to understand this particular difficulty, we must first turn to a more concrete view of what this inclusion involves; namely, *listening*. One of the most important aspects of the synodal aspiration to inclusion is how it expresses itself in relation to decision-making; a major goal of the Process. The document asserts that ‘**[t]he synodal Church is a discerning Church**’, seeking to see ‘all things in relation to God’ and God’s providential plan for creation,⁹ such that it becomes able to make decisions in light of faith. This decision-making is framed in terms of inclusion, embodied in what the document calls ‘consensus’. This is

... more than just a common agreement about the rightness of a particular decision or course of action. It will certainly reflect a coming together of the community, but it will allow for different levels of appropriation, insight and understanding as well as action.¹⁰

The model for this coming-together is the harmonious communion described above, which does not erase difference, and therein permits these different levels of realisation. In short, synodality aspires not just to inclusion in difference, but decision-making which embodies this inclusion within the Church as a community.

Part of this inclusion is a matter of 'listening'. The document explains that discernment requires us to be open to God's demands on us. In this regard, it requires a 'humility' that 'recognises that we need God's grace to illuminate our entanglements with sin and liberate us from them'.¹¹ This includes illumination where sin has clouded our knowledge and judgment, which in turn requires us to be 'receptive to others who may have the insights we need to guide us'; something that the document notes is 'especially the case when we are engaged in a communal discernment'.¹²

Central to this dynamic of receptivity is that it necessitates listening to voices that are otherwise disempowered within the Church. It continues to describe the synodal Church as a 'listening church', where listening requires

... an act of attention, a gift, and a recognition of the other; a willing generosity to let them speak in their own voice without trying to first determine the categories or translating in order to make the challenge of the other more comfortable and acceptable.¹³

In this sense, listening also has an ethical dimension:

It carries an ethical commitment to walk with them, for once we attend to another, we make their lives and their story part of our story. This is especially true when we choose to privilege those whose lives suffer the violence of poverty and those who suffer the burden of rejection, or marginalization, or carry the weight of false and distorting narratives. When we are listening, we are also consulting; genuinely seeking to draw upon the insight, experience and wisdom of others.¹⁴

The document emphasises the importance of extending this ethical commitment to 'the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed', stating that the Church must offer them 'unqualified solicitude'. In the context of the Synodal Process, this means that

The Church also needs to understand the lives of those on the margins, for it is there that Christ is also to be found (Matt 25:31 ff.). In this process, we are called not only to listen to but to listen with the poor, the marginalised and those whose voices our societies can drown out or whose presence can be made invisible.¹⁵

Crucially, it also notes that

We must recognise that it is not easy to involve people on the margins in processes which have not been developed with them at the heart. People on the margins and those who suffer the violence and vulnerability of poverty will often say unusual and unexpected things; things that are often counter-intuitive and challenging. Here, we need the grace to allow them their own voice and modes of expression rather than trying to absorb them into conventional categories or institutional language. It will be necessary to allow our own language and concepts to be enriched symbolically as well as verbally through these voices and histories from the margins.¹⁶

In short, Eucharistic synodal communion is realised in the Church's being influenced, challenged, and therein *enriched* by excluded voices.¹⁷ However, transness poses a particular challenge to this vision of listening communion: the truth of trans lives is not simply available for us to speak to the Church in order to so enrich it. I outline this

problem below, before arguing that overcoming this particularly difficult form of alienation is a proper part of the Church's synodal life.

The silence of trans truth

The terms used in the passage above identify this process of listening as a reconfiguration of language and culture: alongside explicitly mentioning language, the document's talk of culture evokes the view of culture offered by Pope Francis, which he in turn receives from the Argentine Theology of the People. According to this, culture is made up of symbols through which a cultural group or 'People' understand the world. These symbols are shaped by the history of that People's life, and subsequently situate the current life of the People within that history as it navigates the world through them, thereby also providing an identity for the People themselves.¹⁸ In particular, the Theology of the People emphasises the way culture embodies the People's history of struggle for self-liberation, along with the history of its ongoing knowledge of and relationship with God, which is lived out in the symbols and practices of popular piety.

Read in this way, synodal listening is a process of transformation in which the Church receives language from the silenced and marginalised, eliciting an enriching transformation of its own. But more than this, it is a process in which the Church also comes to understand a culture, and thus a history, and is similarly transformed.

Understanding the listening process in these terms foregrounds a difficulty with inclusion through listening: certain forms of marginalisation are constituted not simply by a failure or refusal to listen to certain groups, but in a privation of those groups' ability to speak at all.¹⁹ Queer and feminist writers reflecting on the phenomenon of abjection have noted that certain groups are deemed socially unintelligible, such that when they speak of their experiences, their 'language and concepts' are received as incoherent and meaningless.²⁰ This goes beyond issues of 'false and distorting narratives', problematising the availability of the very truth they mask. Correspondingly, survival requires attaining social recognition, which in turn means abandoning the truth of one's life, rendered unintelligible in one's abjection, and turning instead to ways of accounting for oneself to which society will grant meaning.

In this vein, the issue here for trans people is that the truth of our lives *itself* has historically been rendered inarticulable, and would still need to be explored and articulated even were we to divest ourselves of the false narratives that would otherwise mask it. Note that in using the word, 'truth' in the singular, I do not mean to imply that there is one, universal, essential 'transness' to be discovered across all contexts and cultures. Nor can this truth can be apprehended or articulated in its totality, once and for all. Similarly, the terms 'trans' and 'transgender' themselves are embedded in social and political contexts in ways that efface real differences among the communities to which they are applied, and it is likewise important not to falsely totalise the assumptions about trans life embedded even in accounts that react against other, deeper-seated totalisations.²¹ There may be as many trans 'truths' in this sense as there are trans people. Moreover, that truth or those truths continue to be elaborated so long as the lives to which they belong continue to be lived. In using this singular word I intend less to assert that trans truth is singular than to offer to others my identification and solidarity in our ongoing struggles against everything that silences and erases us across whatever differences might lie between us,

including those that render the term 'trans' itself porous and unstable.²² What remains to be articulated is less a single, universal and definitive truth than the many different ways in which the lives we might ambiguously call 'trans' are realising themselves amidst the silences and exclusions of the world today.

So how is it that our truth is thus effaced? Central to Francis' view of culture is the idea that self-knowledge comes through situating oneself in the history of one's community through engaging with the culture that arises from it. Hence a central theme in his teachings is that awareness of one's cultural and historical 'roots' is an important component of identity formation. Roots, for Francis, are 'a fixed point from which we can grow and meet new challenges';²³ a source of memory that can be used to navigate the uncertainties of the future,²⁴ and which provides us with a basis from which to encounter others.²⁵ In this regard, Francis has a particular concern for the breakdown of intergenerational communities, which alienates young people from the elders who embody and can pass on this memory.²⁶

Francis' talk of roots has a certain troubling resonance that cannot be ignored,²⁷ although it also cannot simply be dismissed in those terms.²⁸ Either way, his concern about loss of roots nevertheless captures something insightful about trans life. From its origins, the very conditions which enabled transness to emerge in the forms in which it tends to be recognised today systematically worked to render many experiences and kinds of trans life fundamentally unknowable.

While there are, and have been, many trans people who live their trans lives without making use of medical technologies, public awareness of transness is bound up in the ideologies of twentieth Century medicine. In fact, the very idea of gender itself is a product of medicine in this era: in the late 19th and early twentieth century, developments in sexology, particularly around what were known at the time as 'intersex',²⁹ had come to challenge the idea that there are two immutable, discrete human sexes, defined as they were in terms of a broad set of features including genetics, hormones, and secondary sex characteristics. For example, many people were discovered to have characteristics associated with both sex categories. Likewise, new surgical techniques, as well as developments in endocrinology which both revealed hormonal development to change over time and enabled doctors to shape this development, indicated that sex, so conceived, was far from fixed.³⁰

These developments also challenged the *norms* attached to the idea of two, immutable, discrete sexes: society was organised around the idea that everyone was either a man or a woman from birth, the nature of each being associated with distinct social roles. But if people could move between these categories, as well as occupy positions between or outside of them, then how could they be expected to conform to the roles which were seen as following from sexual identity as a man or a woman? John Money, a sexologist working in the John Hopkins Clinic in the US during the 1950s and 60s offered a solution, moving these norms from their foundation in a nature that could no longer support them to one in culture. He did so by positing that everyone has a social 'gender', which orients them from birth towards a 'masculine' or 'feminine' social role.³¹

Clinicians had been diagnosing and treating people for what was then known as 'transsexuality' since the 1920s, following Magnus Hirschfeld's work at his *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* in Berlin.³² What Money's approach offered was a new basis for this diagnosis: 'transsexuality' could be accounted for as a mismatch between one's

physical sex and the significances attached to it by society, and one's social gender. By looking for this mismatch, clinicians could then decide if someone was an appropriate candidate for various treatments. And, just as Money's account of gender was rooted in an attempt to shore up traditional gender roles, the 'gender' clinicians were looking for was conceived in those traditional terms.

For example, the sexologist, Harry Benjamin built on Money's ideas in his 1966 book, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*,³³ which went on to become an important reference point for trans medicine. Benjamin outlines a scale of transsexuality which was used to measure eligibility for treatment. This scale was deeply bound up in the gender norms of the time: trans women had to want to be traditional women who, for example, wore skirts, did certain kinds of labour, and had sex with men - or at least were asexual and therefore *did not* have sex with women.³⁴

These standards meant that trans people had to convince clinicians that they would be a 'man' or 'woman' along these lines in order to access treatment. In turn, this had a conforming effect on prospective service users, including a silencing effect on people whose self-understanding wouldn't have met these expectations. This effect is illustrated in how trans people shared Benjamin's book within their communities and trained themselves to convince clinicians that they met its criteria, and to avoid doing or saying things which would fail to meet them. The result was a feedback loop wherein clinicians would constantly have their criteria validated by the trans people they encountered.³⁵

The influence of this time cannot be overstated. For example, it is some of Benjamin's standards that we find in a simplified form today in popular 'born in the wrong body' narratives.³⁶ This is particularly clear in a Catholic context, wherein these narratives serve as the (almost entirely) dominant framing of transness in bioethics; the field in which most research into transness is conducted by cisgender Catholics.³⁷ The pervasiveness of these narratives, which many trans people have found and still find useful, but which are far from either universal or absolute, testifies to just how powerful these diagnostic criteria have been in shaping the visibility and intelligibility of trans life. Correspondingly, because that shaping included the effacement of more transgressive trans lives, more transgressive forms and histories of transness often remain unknown, unarticulated, and unexplored.

Work has been done to overcome this alienation. The birth of academic trans studies in the 1990s and early 2000s is one example of this, with many of its most prominent thinkers seeking to recover the transgressive truths of their lives from the shadow of the transsexual paradigm. In particular, they figured transness as a social and political phenomenon, against medical overdeterminations; an approach shared by many trans people today.³⁸ There were also doubtless trans people who developed their own understanding of their lives despite these pressures, either as individuals or in community. The memory of these people is sometimes preserved in certain trans cultures, such as what Gossett refers to as the 'black radical trans tradition',³⁹ which are in the process of being recovered. Their wisdom is now being shared in ways that were never previously possible. More recently, the mixed blessing of increased trans visibility⁴⁰ has also empowered trans people to encounter the possibilities for trans life in ways that would have been unimaginable a few decades ago.⁴¹

Nevertheless, there are many people in whom we should be able to see and know ourselves who have not simply been forgotten, but who were rendered unknowable in the

first place. This history lingers as a kind of community trauma, cutting off present generations from their roots, and alienating them not only from other trans people, but therein from themselves.

And this is only one example of many factors which have a similar effect today. For example, another dynamic which obscures our roots is how the focus of trans medicine, as well as (for the most part, at least in the UK) past social expectations about life following it such as ‘going stealth’, has traditionally been on normalising bodies. This served to make transness invisible, rather than on facilitating more varied forms of trans life - including those which revolve less around conformity to the wider social norm.⁴² Similarly, the medicalisation of transness also had the effect of portraying it as an expression of the will and agency of the clinician, negating the ways in which trans people have found and exercise agency within what were often otherwise agency-denying situations.⁴³ Finally, dubious concepts like social contagion and overdetermining narratives around fetishisation are frequently deployed to undermine trans peoples’ accounts of their lives.⁴⁴

Transness is also a diverse phenomenon, and there are many forms of transness which even now rarely get a chance to speak for themselves, let alone be heard by those who might find their roots in them. For example, there are cultures in which transness is an expression of a colonised culture, with its silencing being bound up in dynamics of colonisation that very much persist today.⁴⁵ There are also communities which, denied access to academia and other spaces of power, have their own theories and self-understandings that, because of this marginalisation, struggle to be spoken in wider society.⁴⁶ Evoking both these examples, Huxtable’s ‘black radical trans tradition’ belongs to a community suffering under overlapping marginalisations, and is bound up in a broader radical political tradition that was first violently suppressed, and then later came to be the object of ‘backlash’ on the part of the communities who suffered in the course of that suppression.⁴⁷ Although we may recover some of these voices, not all will be available for easy recovery: many will have existed in, been forced into, or simply faded into obscurity.

Before the Church can listen to us, there must thus be the opportunity for recovery and creativity: to rediscover what we have lost, to understand what remains, and to make new languages and cultures which blossom from those roots. Moreover, just as the Theology of the People emphasises, this means learning anew the history and meaning of our struggles for trans liberation, and once again coming to recognise where God continues to be present in our trans lives. Yet this, as I shall now argue, this too can be part of the synodal life of the Church.

Trans truth and the synodal Church

The Eucharistic dimension of synodality as conceived by the CSSG renders it fundamentally Christological. The communion that it seeks to realise is the communion of the resurrected Body, brought about in the Eucharist. Viewed in this way, the communion that is synodality is inscribed into the wider story of Christ’s Passion and Resurrection: to live a synodal life is to live the resurrected life, albeit in the tensioned Eucharistic register of an ‘already’ that is nevertheless ‘not yet’.⁴⁸ Correspondingly, we can look to the resurrection to understand the synodal life that it inaugurates: what is

resurrected in the Body must be resurrected in the communion in which that Body lives out this new life.

The self-discovery of trans life is a revelation of truth once invisible amidst oppression and falsehood. It is a revelation of truth not simply covered up, but made inconceivable by a society that permitted trans life only insofar as it was invisible, silent, and impossible. It is therefore also a discovery of possibility amidst impossibility, emerging from the deathly nothingness to which it was consigned. In this section, I will argue that there is a profound parallel in this revelation with Christ's Passion and Resurrection. Consequently, the resurrection of this truth might well have a place within the Eucharistic synodal communion in which the Church lives out those events.

In the Gospels, when Pilate calls Christ before himself, he asks: 'Are you king of the Jews?' Christ's answer is ambiguous: Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels have Him reply, 'You say so'.⁴⁹ In doing so, Christ refuses to assert His Kingship, instead leaving Pilate to recognise it for himself. John's Jesus is more mysterious, challenging Pilate by responding with a question: 'Do you ask this on your own account, or have others spoken to you about me?'⁵⁰ Here, He performs the same manoeuvre, explicitly highlighting the question of Pilate's own recognition by distinguishing a question that truly comes from Pilate from one that is simply repeating second-hand accusations. He eventually follows up His remark with the even more confusing, 'My kingdom is not of this world',⁵¹ before re-emphasizing His challenge to Pilate and reframing it in terms of Pilate's relation to truth:

You say I am a king. I was born for this, I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth; and everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.⁵²

If Christ had given Pilate a direct answer, He would merely have been telling Pilate of His Kingship, demanding his hearing and obedience; something which His shift to discussing truth in John reframes in terms of simply bringing truth for Pilate to receive passively. But instead, He indicates something important about His truth: that it is ultimately up to others, such as Pilate, to appropriate that truth for themselves; to actively recognise it, and make it a part of their lives. Indeed, the strange and mysterious claim in John that His kingdom 'is not of this world' redoubles this challenge: were He to simply claim worldly kingship, Pilate would have identified Him as a mere seditionist, concerned with overturning Roman rulership; a view reflected by the chief priests when they respond to Pilate's question, 'Shall I crucify your king?' with 'We have no king but Caesar'.⁵³ Pilate could have consequently dismissed His claims as incompatible with the familiar political reality he was charged to defend. Instead, however, Christ intensifies the mystery, drawing in Pilate to think, reflect, and recognise.

Pilate, of course, fails to rise to Christ's challenge. John's Pilate in particular dismisses it, asking instead, 'What is truth?',⁵⁴ after which Christ refuses to speak to him any further, except to render meaningless the threat implicit in Pilate's question, 'Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?'⁵⁵ – to which Christ replies, 'You would have no authority over me at all if it had not been given to you from above; that is why the man who handed me over to you had the greater guilt'.⁵⁶ Christ's response refuses to acknowledge the threat. Instead it strips the power from Pilate's claim: he enjoys his power because it has been given to him. It is not real power, just the effect of another's power – hence he cannot simply demand

Christ give over the truth to him on his own terms. He must instead receive it as Christ offers it: as something that implicates him, having a claim on his life, rather than as something to simply be received from the position of untouchable power implicitly claimed in his threat. In this regard, this moment is the same as when Christ is taken before Herod in Luke: Luke writes that Herod 'was delighted to see Jesus ... he was hoping to see some sign done by him'.⁵⁷ Christ refuses to perform for him, again highlighting that His truth is not something that should simply be offered up to someone in a position of relative power.

In these scenes, Jesus stands in the place of trans people: our survival has historically depended on our willingness to offer up our truth in an acceptable form, decided by the world from a position of relative power, from which it can never be moved to re-evaluate where it stands in relation to us. And, like Christ, when we fail to do so, both recognition of that truth and other necessities are withheld.

The gospel narratives now move into Christ's passion. Here, it is not enough for the Romans simply to ignore Christ's truth: they parody it in a grotesque inversion that takes the things that would normally signify that truth and makes them signify its opposite. In Luke, Herod has already begun this process, returning Jesus to Pilate in a 'rich cloak'.⁵⁸ Pilate then gives up Christ to be beaten, expressing the power of Roman authority over him.⁵⁹ This then becomes the context for an intensified version of the same inversion in Matthew: the governor's soldiers adorn Him with a 'scarlet cloak', signifying military rulership, along with the crown of thorns and a reed sceptre. They then kneel and hail Him mockingly as a king.⁶⁰ In Mark, the cloak is purple, similarly signifying royalty.⁶¹ Finally, Christ is led away to die a humiliating and accursed death on the Cross, under an ironic declaration of His kingship.⁶² All of the things which might have signified Christ's kingship are turned to silencing its call to recognition, becoming objects of a cruel comedy whereby Christ is rendered laughable and pathetic.

Like Christ, trans people whose truths are deemed impermissible have found it silenced through mockery and humiliation, in which they are reduced to pitiful parodies; gatekeeping, which permits no deviation from the norm; and the physical violence through which trans people are terrorised and thus policed around the world. A further parallel lies in John,⁶³ wherein a grammatical ambiguity also lets us read when Pilate seated himself upon the chair of judgment at Gabbatha as him seating Christ there.⁶⁴ This linguistic slippage between Christ and Pilate might be taken as signifying the appropriation by Pilate of Christ's very powers of judgment themselves. Just as Christ on the throne blurs into Pilate on the throne, Christ's judgment is transformed into Pilate's, much like when trans people are forced to account for themselves in terms foisted upon them by a hostile society.

Yet, in the resurrection, this inversion is itself inverted: Christ rises from this ironic humiliation, revealing and vindicating His truth in doing so. In this way, the ironic humiliations of his Passion, which originally signified the impossibility of His truth, become the means and of its realisation. They also become its signs: nothing illustrates this inversion more clearly than when the disciples recognise Christ not simply in His glory, but specifically in the very woundedness of His body therein.⁶⁵ That is, the triumph of the resurrected Body is recognisable precisely in its having overcome the deathly forces that sought to silence Christ's truth; an overcoming quite literally embodied in the redemptive transformation of the signs through which this silencing was attempted. In

the Resurrection, Christ takes up the very signs that negated His truth and renders them the conditions of its possibility.

If Christ's resurrection is indeed a resurrection of truth from impossibility, then perhaps it can be understood as a resurrection of trans truth from its history of negation through abjection. If Christ's resurrection is that of His Body, then the culmination of the Eucharist likewise includes this resurrection of trans truth. And if this resurrection lies at the heart of the Eucharistic communion of the Church's synodal life, then it must happen there too. Finally, if the Church, which is the Body of Christ, finds its fulfilment in Eucharistic communion, then it is only in working towards this resurrection of trans truth that it can most fully live up to its identity as that Body.

Conclusion: accompaniment in synodal solidarity

More practically, we might say that the Church finds its fulfilment not simply in listening, but in what might be described as a synodal process of 'accompaniment'. For Pope Francis, pastoral accompaniment is a process that seeks to guide people within the complexities, limitations and weaknesses of their lives towards perfection.⁶⁶ What trans history shows is that one such limitation confronted by trans people is the effacement of the truth of our lives. Therefore neither pastors nor trans people ourselves have all of the information that might otherwise be used to make discernments about what growth would look like for us in the first place. This means that a first step in pastoral accompaniment for trans people needs to be to give us space to figure out these details. The accompaniment in which the Church finds its fulfilment can only be one that *refuses* to steer trans people towards a way of thinking about ourselves, however gently: this would just be another silencing imposition, and therefore contribute to the problem. Instead, the Church is called to a more radical, riskier form of accompaniment that is unafraid to give trans people the space to discover ourselves *for* ourselves; that is unafraid to trust that Truth will draw us into itself, and to simply walk with us on this journey without pretending to know the path beforehand. That is to say, it requires the Church to take seriously what the CSSG hints at when it writes:

... we are called not only to listen to but **to** listen **with** the poor, the marginalised and those whose voices our societies can drown out or whose presence can be made invisible. This will require a different methodology, a way of accompaniment and walking with or alongside so that we come to see reality from their perspective.⁶⁷

However, for the Church to play this role, trans people must be able to trust that the Church will be a safe companion for the journey. We know full well how the Church often fails to live up to its vocation. Indeed, for many trans people, these failures put into question that very identity. As such, this trust can hardly be assumed.

This difficulty touches on a second consideration: the Church is not a space apart from the rest of society, but a community structured and riven by the social, economic, and political relationships that shape the world in which it exists. To bear up in itself the resurrection of trans truth, the Church will have to actively resist the various deathly dynamics by which that truth has historically been effaced. This paper has mentioned various examples of these dynamics: policing through medical gatekeeping, animated by a broader project of shoring up heteronormativity; the proliferation of reductive

and overdetermining pathologizing narratives around transition; the colonial imposition of Western sexual and gender norms; the racist suppression of Black radical politics, and therein the Black radical trans tradition; and the exclusion of the full diversity of trans voices (and indeed trans voices in general) from positions of influence. This is far from an exhaustive list of factors, and one aspect of this process of accompaniment would be a matter of learning to recognise and oppose other such dynamics, too. In doing so, the Church would not only help create a space of possibility for the synodal accompaniment of trans people, but also witness that it is sincere about this accompaniment, against the weight of history and current perceptions.

Insofar as many of these dynamics are bound up in the defence of heteronormativity, it is also worth noting that this would go against the grain of what currently passes for Catholic politics in many contexts. Paradoxically, the Church may be called to work for a society that on the face of it may seem *less* Catholic, because it is only in doing so that the Church *itself* can become more synodal, more Eucharistic – in short *more* Catholic – within it. The other side of this paradox is that trans people will thereby be helped to respond to our call to be part of the Church. In turn we will not only be able to know ourselves as trans people but become ourselves more fully within it. And insofar as all Christians are called to build up the Church, even those who are challenged or see themselves as threatened by transness will therefore also find themselves fulfilled in that calling.

In this way, just as the Church itself is something of a paradox, uniting us in our differences and turning the signs of death into signs of life, the resurrection of trans truth is something that concerns us all. The bond of synodality is, therefore, a bond of solidarity: we are all part of that one Body, born from and called to live out its resurrection every day of our life.

Notes

1. This paper is adapted from a talk originally given at QUEST's annual conference 2002 (Burbach, *Trans truth and the synodal process*).
2. Commission on Spirituality Sub-Group (CSSG), *Spirituality for Synodality*.
3. International Theological Commission, *For a Synodal Church*, no. 6.
4. CSSG, *Spirituality for Synodality*, 12–13.
5. CSSG, *Spirituality for Synodality*, 13.
6. CSSG, *Spirituality for Synodality*, 14–16.
7. CSSG, *Spirituality for Synodality*, 18.
8. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11; as translated in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1324.
9. CSSG, *Spirituality for Synodality*, 27.
10. CSSG, *Spirituality for Synodality*, 35.
11. CSSG, *Spirituality for Synodality*, 31.
12. CSSG, *Spirituality for Synodality*, 32.
13. CSSG, *Spirituality for Synodality*, 26.
14. CSSG, *Spirituality for Synodality*, 26.
15. CSSG, *Spirituality for Synodality*, 40.
16. CSSG, *Spirituality for Synodality*, 42.
17. For a critique of harmonized difference, see Rose, *A Theology of Failure*, 43, 49. However, the document's embrace of 'counter-intuitive' and 'challenging' voices potentially suggests a reading that avoids it.

18. Scannone, 'Theology, Popular Culture, and Discernment', 217, 222–225; see also Scannone, 'Pope Francis and the Theology of the People'.
19. Most famously, Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?".
20. See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1–2; Stryker, 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix'.
21. Bettcher, 'Trapped in the Wrong Theory', 384–385.
22. I take my lead from Stryker, *Transgender History*, 24.
23. *Christus Vivit*, no. 200.
24. *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 194.
25. *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 143.
26. *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 19; *Querida Amazonia*, no. 30.
27. See Paternotte and Kuhar, 'The anti-gender movement in comparative perspective'; Case, 'Trans-Formations in the Vatican's War on Gender Ideology'; Faundes, 'The Geopolitics of Moral Panic'; Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 113.
28. E.g. see *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 234–235; *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 146–150, although Dhawan, 'The Empire Prays Back' may qualify the latter.
29. For an overview of the concept, see Morland, 'Intersex'.
30. Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*, 99.
31. Gill-Peterson *Histories of the Transgender Child*, 98–99; see Money, 'Hermaphroditism, Gender and Precocity in Hyperadrenocorticism'.
32. Hirschfield, 'Die intersexuelle Konstitution', 3–27. For a shorts history of "transsexualism" as a diagnostic category, see Vincent, *Transgender Health*, 47–48.
33. Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*.
34. Vincent, *Transgender Health*, 49; Stone, *The "Empire" Strikes Back*, no. 33; see Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, 15–16, 19.
35. Stone, *The "Empire" Strikes Back*, no. 34, 42.
36. Latham, 'Axiomatic', 17–18.
37. E.g. The National Catholic Bioethics Centre, 'Brief Statement on Transgenderism', 182. Ford similarly pushes back on essentialising narratives in affirming Catholic approaches to transness. He argues that these approaches are often deployed to justify transness, often against condemnatory positions which themselves emerge from a failure to listen, citing the Congregation for Catholic Education's *Male and Female He Created Them* as an example (Ford, 'Born That Way?', 93. I also discuss this document in relation to listening in Burbach, *The Vatican's New Document on Transgender Issues*, arguing that it is opposed to listening to trans people in a profound way). We might also take the USCCB's more recent statement on Catholic healthcare as an example of these trends (Committee on Doctrine, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Doctrinal Note*; see DeBernardo, *New Ways Ministry Criticizes New USCCB Guidance*). However, Ford argues, they can instead simply play into wider pathologisation of transness by associating 'legitimacy' with 'unchosenness'; something that is at odds with the decisional aspects of transition, which I would argue are thereby also consigned to this silence (Ford, 'Born That Way?', 92).
38. E.g. Stone, *The "Empire" Strikes Back*; Stryker, 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein'; Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation*.
39. Gossett and Huxtable, 'Existing in the World', 46.
40. See Faye, *The Transgender Issue*, 1–16.
41. E.g. see Kennedy, 'Becoming', 55–56.
42. Latham, *Axiomatic*, 23–25.
43. Stone, *The "Empire" Strikes Back*, 24–25.
44. See Ashley, "A Critical Commentary on 'Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria'"; Serano, 'Autogynephilia'.
45. See Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 74–83.
46. This raises a number of issues for academic trans studies. See Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, 4–5, 11, 14; Namaste, *Invisible Lives*, 21–22.
47. Gossett and Huxtable, 'Existing in the World', 48.

48. Culman, *Christ and Time*, xx.
49. Matt 27: 12; Mark 15: 3; Luke 23: 3 (RNJB).
50. John 18: 34.
51. John 18: 36.
52. John 18: 37.
53. John 19: 15.
54. John 18: 38.
55. John 19: 10.
56. John 19: 11.
57. Luke 23: 8.
58. Luke 23: 11.
59. Matt 27:26.
60. Matt 27: 30.
61. Mark 15: 17.
62. Matt 27: 37; Mark 15: 27; Luke 23: 38; John 19: 19.
63. John 19: 14.
64. Wansbrough, *Holy Bible*, 2053, fn. c.
65. Luke 24: 39; John 20: 20, 25; the paradigmatic exploration of this is Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 99–100.
66. Francis never gives a straightforward definition of accompaniment, but gestures towards one along these lines in *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 291.
67. CSSG, *Spirituality for Synodality*, 40.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Nicolette Burbach is Social and Environmental Justice Lead at the London Jesuit Centre. Her research focuses on resourcing the teachings of Pope Francis to inform the Church's response to transness. She is also a member of LGBT Catholics Westminster Pastoral Council.

ORCID

Nicolette Burbach  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6586-8391>

References

- Althaus-Reid, M. *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Ashley, F. "A Critical Commentary on 'Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria'." *The Sociological Review* 68 (2020): 779–799.
- Benjamin, H. *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. Electronic edition. Düsseldorf: Symposium Publishing, 1999.
- Bettcher, T. M. "Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39 (2014): 383–406.
- Burbach, N. Trans Truth and the Synodal Process. QuestLGBTI <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lypgaET8Cew> (Accessed 03/02/23).
- Burbach, N. The Vatican's New Document on Transgender Issues Is Not Interested in Dialogue, But Dialogue Is What We Need. ABC Religion and Ethics <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-vatican-on-transgender-issues-and-the-absence-of-dialogue/11241116> (Accessed 14/08/23).

- Case, M. A. "Trans Formations in the Vatican's War on Gender Ideology." *Journal Articles* 9669 (2019). https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/journal_articles/9669.
- Commission on Spirituality Sub-Group. Towards a Spirituality for Synodality, Synodus Episcoporum <https://www.synod.va/en/highlights/towards-a-spirituality-for-synodality.html> (Accessed 03/02/23), 2023.
- Committee on Doctrine. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Doctrinal Note on the Moral Limits to the Technological Manipulation of the Human Body, USCCB <https://www.usccb.org/resources/Doctrinal%20Note%202023-03-20.pdf> (Accessed 14/09/23), 2023.
- Congregation for Catholic Education. "Male and Female He Created Them": Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education, Congregation for Catholic Education https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_en.pdf (Accessed 14/08/23).
- Culman, O. *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History (Revised Edition)*, trans. Floyd V. Wilson. London: SCM Press, 1962.
- DeBernardo, F. New Ways Ministry Criticizes New USCCB Guidance on Transgender Healthcare, New Ways Ministry <https://www.newwaysministry.org/2023/03/21/new-ways-ministry-criticizes-new-usccb-guidance-on-transgender-healthcare/> (Accessed 14/08/23).
- Dhawan, N. "The Empire Prays Back: Religion, Secularity, and Queer Critique." *Boundary 2* 40 (2013): 191–222.
- Eiesland, N. L. *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.
- Faúndes, J. M. M. "The Geopolitics of Moral Panic: The Influence of Argentinian neo-Conservatism in the Genesis of the Discourse of 'Gender Ideology'." *International Sociology* 34 (2019): 402–417.
- Faye, S. *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice*. Dublin: Allen Lane, 2021.
- Feinberg, L. *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come*. New York: World View Forum, 1992.
- Ford, C. A. J. "Born That Way? The Challenge of Trans/Gender Identity for Catholic Theology." In *Sex, Love, and Families: Catholic Perspectives*, edited by Jason King, and Julie Hanlon Rubio, 91–101. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2020.
- Pope Francis. Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (Accessed 03/02/23), 2023.
- Pope Francis. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*. Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana. https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf (Accessed 03/02/23), 2023.
- Pope Francis. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*. Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html (Accessed 03/02/23).
- Pope Francis. Encyclical Letter, *Fratelli Tutti*. Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (Accessed 03/02/23), 2023.
- Pope Francis. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*. Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html (Accessed 03/02/23), 2023.
- Gill-Peterson, J. *Histories of the Transgender Child*. London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Gossett, C., and J. Huxtable. "Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility." In *in Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, 39–55. London: The MIT Press, 2017.

- Hirschfield, M. "Die Intersexuelle Konstitution." *Jahrbuche für Sexuelle Zwischenstufen* 23 (1923): 3–27.
- International Theological Commission. For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission: Process for Facilitation Synodal Consultations. Synodus Episcoporum. https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/document/common/resources/external_tools/Process-for-Facilitating-Synodal-Consultations.pdf (Accessed 03/02/22), 2022.
- Ivereigh, A. *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope*. London: Allen & Unwin, 2014.
- Kennedy, N. "Becoming: Discourses of Trans Emergence, Epiphanies and Oppositions." In *The Emergence of Trans: Cultures, Politics and Everyday Lives*, edited by Ruth Pearce, Igi Moon, Kat Gupta, and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, 46–59. London: Routledge, 2021.
- Kristeva, J. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Latham, J. R. "Axiomatic: Constituting 'Transexuality' and Trans Sexualities in Medicine." *Sexualities* 22 (2019): 13–30.
- Libreria Editrice Vaticana. The Catechism of the Catholic Church https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P3X.HTM#-1KX (Accessed 03/02/22), 2003.
- Money, J. "Hermaphroditism, Gender, and Precocity in Hyperadrenocorticism: Psychologic Findings." *Bulletin of the Johns Hopkins Hospital* 96 (1955): 253–64.
- Morland, I. "Intersex." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1 (2014): 111–115.
- Namaste, V. K. *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- The National Catholic Bioethics Centre. "Brief Statement on Transgenderism." In *Transgender Issues in Catholic Healthcare*, edited by Edward J. Furton, 181–188. Philadelphia: The National Catholic Bioethics Centre, 2021.
- Paternotte, D., and R. Kuhar. "The Anti-Gender Movement in Comparative Perspective." In *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality*, edited by Roman Kuhar, and David Paternotte, 253–276. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018.
- Pope Paul VI. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium. Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_lt.html (Accessed 03/02/22), 2022.
- Rose, M. *A Theology of Failure: Žižek Against Christian Innocence*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019.
- Spivak, G. C. "Can the Subaltern Speak?." In *Revised Edition, from the "History" Chapter of Critique of Postcolonial Reason* in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, edited by Rosalind C. Morris, 21–78. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Stone, S. The "Empire" Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto. Uberty. <https://uberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/trans-manifesto.pdf> (Accessed 03/02/22).
- Scannone, J. C. "Theology, Popular Culture, and Discernment." In *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, edited by Rosino Gibellini, 213–239. London: SCM Press, 1975.
- Scannone, J. C. "Pope Francis and the Theology of the People." *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): 119–135.
- Serano, J. "Autogynephilia: A Scientific Review, Feminist Analysis, and Alternative 'Embodiment Fantasies' Model." *The Sociological Review* 68 (2020): 763–778.
- Stryker, S. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 3 (1994): 237–254.
- Stryker, S. *Transgender History*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008.
- Valentine, D. *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. London: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Vincent, B. *Transgender Health: A Practitioner's Guide to Binary and Non-Binary Patient Care*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018.
- Wansbrough, D. H. *Holy Bible: Revised New Jerusalem Bible, Study Edition*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2019.