

Synodality with Chinese Characteristics*

中國特色的共議同行

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Abstract: Based on a research on faith growth among young Catholics in mainland China, this article reflects on what is emerging in the Church in China and how it helps to better understand synodality in the Chinese cultural and ecclesial context.

In China, the way that people treasure the brotherhood of friends and companions encourages Christians to develop fraternal

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relationships with Jesus as our elder Brother, and with members of the ecclesial community as brothers and sisters. The special Chinese characteristics of brotherhood help the whole Church to better understand the importance of basing Synodality in Fraternity as a way to live in a fraternal community of brothers and sisters in Christ the Brother, as it was the case in early Christianity.

Keywords: Church in China, youth, Christ the Brother, brotherhood, Fraternity, synodality, community

[摘要] 根據對中國大陸年輕天主教徒信仰成長的研究，本文反思了在中國的教會正出現的要素，以及其如何更好地幫助理解在中國文化和教會背景下的共議同行。在中國，人們珍視兄弟情誼，以同道為兄弟、朋友、同伴。這激勵著基督徒與耶穌發展如長兄般的關係，同時與教會團體中各人發展像兄弟姊妹一樣的關係。這些中國特色，有助整個教會更明白將共議同行建基於兄弟情誼的重要性，以其作為一種生活在基督長兄內的兄弟姊妹友愛團體之精神，如同其普遍地存在於早期教會裡一樣。

關鍵詞：大陸年輕天主教徒、基督長兄、兄弟情誼、共議同行

Introduction: Ecclesiological Renewal

As expressed by the *Final Document* of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment in 2018 (hereafter as “2018 Synod on Youth”),¹ it is the “path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium” - “Making a synodal Church a reality is an indispensable precondition for a new missionary energy.” For Pope Francis, synodality will be key for the Church in the future, her new “style.”² This orientation from the Pope has raised the question of the renewal of the Church. One may ask: was the Church not already established by Jesus 2000 years ago? How could we change it? This is a fundamental question of ecclesiology, which cannot be extensively covered in this paper. However, there is one basic principle lying behind the need for continuous reform: the Church has both constant and changing dimensions. The mystery of the Church, the “given” of God, is realized in the concreteness of the historical and cultural actions of the People of God, the “acting” of man. This approach holds together the gift of God and the collaboration of women and men, the “already” and the “not yet,” the “acquired reality” and the “active realization,”³ the supernatural and

1 *Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment*, 2018, no. 118.

2 Pope Francis, *Address to Members of the International Theological Commission*, 29 November 2019.

3 Cf. Yves Congar, “L’Église et son unité” (The Church and Her Unity), in *Esquisse du mystère de l’Église* (Outline of the Mystery of the

historical reality of the Church, her holy and sinful condition.⁴ We are invited to recognize that the Church is not simply established once and for all. Rather, she is always emerging. As the community of those who belong “to the Way” (Acts 9:2), the Church is a pilgrim Church, on the road, a “Church which goes forth,” as Pope Francis likes to say.⁵

As shown in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the process of emergence of the Church is the work of the Holy Spirit, who continues to work in the life of the Church today. Therefore, a balanced ecclesiology needs to take into account the socio-cultural context in which the Church lives, her concrete life and not just her theoretical being. The necessary ongoing reform of the Church does not lead to another Church, but to a Church renewed.⁶ As expressed by the Synod of Bishops, “synodality represents the main road for the Church, called to renew herself under the action of the Spirit and by listening to the Word.”⁷

Church), *Unam Sanctam* 8, (Paris, Cerf, 1941), p. 30.

- 4 As expressed in *LG* 8, this bipolarity between “the visible society and the spiritual community” has to be seen as “one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element.” See also Walter Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), p. 44; Kasper starts his book with this duality of the Church being “black, but beautiful” (Sg 1:5), according to an expression dear to the Church Fathers, *ibid.*, p. 3.
- 5 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, nos. 20-23.
- 6 Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), p. 293.
- 7 *Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, 2021, no. 9.

Following this synodal path of renewal, we become “like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old” (Mt 13:52). This paper proposes five points in contribution to reflections on the concept of synodality in the socio-cultural context of China.

The first point offers a quick definition of synodality which identifies what it is that we are talking about. In the second point, based on years of field work and research, and listening especially to young Catholics, I propose some elements of what is already emerging in the Church in China. The third point takes us back to the early Church to understand the foundations of synodality and its connection with fraternity. Building on this foundational connection, the fourth point will show how the importance of brotherhood in Chinese culture can enrich the understanding of synodality. Finally, a synthesis on how to live out synodality in the Chinese context will be proposed in the fifth point.

1 What is Synodality?

In the present moment it seems the Church is captivated by talk of synodality. Is synodality a novelty? Is it a mere passing phenomenon? Or, is synodality a fundamental aspect of the Church? Synodality is very close to Pope Francis’ heart.⁸ He

8 Since his homily for the imposition of the sacred pallium on metropolitan bishops, on 29 June 2013, Pope Francis has referred to this concept many times. It is in his *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the*

sees it as the will of God for the third millennium: “The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”⁹

Neither in the speeches of Pope Francis nor in the *Final Document* of the 2018 Synod on Youth, which emphasized “The Missionary Synodality of the Church” (nos. 119-127), are we given a definition of synodality as such. A few words often do come to the fore in describing synodality: “walking together” (which is the Greek etymological meaning of σύν-οδος);¹⁰ a “Church which listens” (no. 122) and is in dialogue (no. 126); a “participatory and co-responsible Church” (no. 123); and a Church of “missionary communion” at the service of all (no. 125). There are also a few words that are gathered in the title of the ongoing Synod 2021-2024: “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission.” Perhaps the best document currently available to understand the concept of synod-

50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015), that his pivotal ideas on synodality can be found.

9 Pope Francis, *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015.

10 The second element of the expression σύν-οδος refers to an essential aspect of the Church’s identity: the road, the way, the Way ... Jesus defines himself as “the Way” (Jn 14:6); later, his disciples are called those of “the Way” (Acts 9:2) and who are instructed “in the Way of the Lord” (Acts 18:25).

ality is from the International Theological Commission (ITC), *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, published in 2018 (not yet translated into Chinese).

After offering a long biblical and historical overview of the concept of synodality, the ITC develops an actual theology of synodality which concludes “with a precise description of synodality as an essential dimension of the Church” on three levels: the daily life of the Church, institutional processes, and synodal events (local, regional or universal).¹¹ Synodality is understood as the “*modus vivendi et operandi*”, the “ordinary way of living and working” of the Church; “the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly.”¹² This

11 “[W]e can conclude with a precise description of synodality as an essential dimension of the Church. First and foremost, synodality denotes the particular *style* that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church’s ordinary way of living and working. This *modus vivendi et operandi* works through the community listening to the Word and celebrating the Eucharist, the brotherhood of communion and the co-responsibility and participation of the whole People of God in its life and mission, on all levels and distinguishing between various ministries and roles,” International Theological Commission (ITC), *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018, no. 70a.

12 The *Preparatory Document* of the Synod presents the Church as “constitutively synodal.” “Synodality, in this perspective, is much more than the celebration of ecclesial meetings and Bishops’ assemblies, or a matter of simple internal administration within the Church; it is ‘the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God,

theology of synodality articulates together “the doctrine of the *sensus fidei* of the People of God and the sacramental collegiality of the episcopate in hierarchical communion with the bishop of Rome. This ecclesiological vision invites us to articulate synodal communion in terms of ‘all’, ‘some’ and ‘one,’”¹³ at the different levels of the Church (universal Church, diocese, parish, religious community, lay association, etc.). This “essential dimension of the Church is expressed” as a “dynamic circularity” between the different charisms in the Church.¹⁴ “The concept of synodality is broader than that of collegiality because

which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission’ (ITC 6),” *Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, no. 10.

- 13 “It is possible to go deeper into the theology of synodality on the basis of the doctrine of the *sensus fidei* of the People of God and the sacramental collegiality of the episcopate in hierarchical communion with the Bishop of Rome. This ecclesiological vision invites us to articulate synodal communion in terms of ‘all,’ ‘some’ and ‘one.’ On different levels and in different forms, as local Churches, regional groupings of local Churches and the universal Church, synodality involves the exercise of the *sensus fidei* of the *universitas fidelium* (all), the ministry of leadership of the college of Bishops, each one with his presbyterium (some), and the ministry of unity of the Bishop of Rome (one). The dynamic of synodality thus joins the communitarian aspect which includes the whole People of God, the collegial dimension that is part of the exercise of episcopal ministry, and the primatial ministry of the Bishop of Rome,” International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 64.
- 14 International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, nos. 94, 106a.

it includes the participation of all in the Church and that of all the Churches”, while collegiality focuses on the communion among bishops in the unity with the bishop of Rome.¹⁵ This synodal path deeply influences the mode of governance in the Church.

A synodal Church is characterized as listening, fraternal, participatory, and co-responsible, so as to better fulfill her evangelizing mission. The different documents regarding synodality emphasize the Church as the People of God and a brotherhood of communion (*koinônia*, Acts 2:42). A synodal Church is neither a democracy nor a totalitarian regime. In a democratic system we listen to the majority, while synodality requires us to listen to everyone, to the silent minorities, the poor, young people, migrants, all in order to listen to the Holy Spirit who speaks through little ones like the young Daniel, who voiced his objection to the judgement reached by an errant majority (Dn 13:45-46). Synodality also counters clericalism, a form of totalitarianism in which the clergy can exercise oversized roles within ecclesial dualism of powerful leaders and passive flocks.

Journeying together supposes discussing together in order to actively involve the full range of the differing charisms and roles in the life of the Church. Therefore, *tongxing gongyi* (同行共議) is a better translation for synodality than *tongdao xiexing* (同道偕行), because the latter does not make explicit

15 *Ibid.*, no. 66.

the element of “discussing together,” even though *tongdao* (同道) supposes the sharing of a common ideal.

As understood from the above, synodality is an essential dimension of the Church as the People of God. Our question now is to understand how this new “style” of the Church finds its resonance in the Church in China.

2 What is emerging in the Church in China?

As mentioned in the Introduction, a balanced ecclesiology needs to take into account the concrete life of the Church. Therefore, doing research on what is emerging in the Church presupposes listening to the People of God. Among the People of God in China, I chose to listen particularly to young people who are a suitable demographic for observing what is emerging both in the Church in China, and more broadly, in Chinese society.¹⁶ This age group (between 18 and 35 years old) is naturally attracted to and oriented towards novelty and change. It also encompasses many states of life and social stations (men/women, studying/working, single/married, laity/clergy, rural/urban). Hence, it is a laboratory for what is emerging.¹⁷ During my field research between 2017 and 2019, I

16 “We consider youth to be an important prism to analyze what is going on in China today, and we see them as being a reflection of, but also constative of, the changes taking place in China.” Jeroen De Kloet, Anthony Fung, *Youth Cultures in China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 4.

17 While sociology and market research are closely interested in these

listened to 50 success stories of young people actively involved in the life of the Church, trying to discern what contributes to and nourishes the living faith in them. Their narratives have revealed a lot about the new style of the Church which is emerging through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Many aspects of synodality can be identified in the process of growth of these young people, even if they have never heard of this concept before. They treasure community experience, where they can live like brothers and sisters of the same family, all equal yet different, serving one another and those in need, with love and joy, selflessly and unconditionally. They emphasize teamwork and the participation of everyone, with a specific role for priests, especially in terms of guidance and institutional support. They are eager for holistic formations (including spiritual deepening, team building, and personal growth) and express a strong need for accompaniment, which often is either missing or inadequate. According to their experiences, expectations and dreams, the Church can be defined as a community of brothers and sisters, bound in communion with fraternal love (共融友愛的兄弟姐妹團體). The concept of synodality reverberates well with what they are longing for. For example, during a sharing session among youth ministers on the fruits of the 2018 Synod on Youth, the participants were very excited to discover

400 million individuals born between 1980 and 2000, this aspect of young people in China has not yet been a subject of research within the Catholic Church.

synodality, many aspects of which echoed their experiences and expectations regarding the life of the Church. Once returned to their own dioceses and communities, many of them shared their discoveries with those around them.

In the journey of faith of many young people, their relation with God grew from an earlier understanding of a distant and frightening God in their childhood, to a close, loving and caring friend and brother, revealed to them through community life and spiritual training. They are eager to listen to the will of God and are ready to collaborate with the Holy Spirit. Many of them, especially those from single-child families, love to call Christ “elder Brother Jesus” (*Suge*, 穌哥), and to call their priests “elder brothers.” Is this form of address a childish appellation (as one priest in Beijing commented), or does it reflect a deeper understanding of the proper relation with our Lord and Master?

3 Back to the Origins of the Church

While we discern whether what is emerging in the youth communities in China is the work of the Holy Spirit, it is interesting to go back to the origins of the Church to see how Christian life emerged. *The Acts of the Apostles* is the best reference for us to understand the acts of the Word of God and of the Holy Spirit in the first Christian communities. In it, there are two major summaries (Ac 2:42-47; 4:32-35) which describe the ideal community as founded on fraternal communion (*koinônia*, κοινωνία), being of one heart and mind,

having everything in common, without anyone left in need. The Acts also recalls some important occasions when the early Church exercised synodality: for the choice of Judas' successor (1:15-26), for the choice of the Seven (6:1-7), and for accepting the baptism of the first group of Gentiles (11:1-18). Peter (or the Twelve) explained the situation, the whole community was consulted and a decision was made, followed by a laying-on of hands. The most explicit example of synodality is found in the account of the Council of Jerusalem (15:1-35). As a conflict over the conversion of Gentiles arose in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas were sent with some brothers to Jerusalem to consult the apostles and elders. The assembly in Jerusalem listened to the different protagonists, including Peter, Paul and Barnabas. Then, James, as the Church leader, summarized the debate and gave a judgement, which was understood as the "decision of the Holy Spirit and of us" (15:28), the apostles and elders, in agreement with the whole Church. This decision was then sent by delegates to the brothers in Antioch, who received it with joy. These enlightening examples illustrate the dynamic circularity between "all," "some" and "one" which characterizes synodality, and the creativity of the Church to face new challenges. In the Acts, Luke describes numerous configurations of authority (the Apostles, Peter, Peter and John, the Twelve, the whole Church, James, the elders) and uses various appellations for the first Christians (the brothers, the disciples, the Church, the holy ones, the believers, those who belonged to the Way, those who called on the name of the Lord, the Chris-

tians; all with associations to the *multitude* *πλῆθος* / ὄχλος). This diversity of appellations shows the pluralism within the first ecclesial communities, while the terms “all together” (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό) and “with one accord” (ὁμοθυμαδὸν) demonstrate the emphasis on the communion among them. Yet, “brothers” (οἱ ἀδελφοί) is the most common appellation in the Acts¹⁸ and is mostly a post-resurrection usage.¹⁹ Therefore, it is brotherhood which characterizes the early Christian communities.

In fact, in early Christianity, *adelphotès* (ἡ ἀδελφότης) - fraternity (兄弟會) - was the proper name of the Church, more so than *ekklesia* – assembly (集會). The term is a neologism from the New Testament, built on the word “brothers” (*adelphoi*), that is found in *The First Letter of Peter* (1P 2:17; 5:9) and was very common in the first centuries to designate the Church.²⁰ This vision of the Church as Fraternity is accompa-

18 The different appellations are as follow (the number of times that these words appear in the *Acts* is shown in brackets): the brothers οἱ ἀδελφοί (31), the disciples οἱ μαθηταὶ (24), the assembly ἡ ἐκκλησία (22), the multitude *πλῆθος* (16), those who believed οἱ πιστεύοντες (15).

19 In the Gospel narratives previous to the resurrection, this term appears only for the *brothers of Jesus* (Lk 8:19, 20, 21; see also Jn 7:3, 5, 10) and for the example of the Levirate (Lk 20:29). According to Lk 8:21, brotherhood with Jesus refers to those who listen to and *do* the word of God. The “you are all brothers” of the first Gospel (Mt 23:8) refers to the community of disciples. After his resurrection, Jesus told Mary of Magdala, “(G)o to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’,” (Jn 20:17) implying the new brotherhood with his disciples.

20 The rediscovery of this traditional concept is based on the important studies of Michel Dujarier, *Église-Fraternité, L’ecclésiologie du*

nied by a theology of Christ the Brother, which is commonly seen among the Church Fathers and was based on the writings of St. Paul who presents Christ as “the firstborn among many brothers” (Rm 8:29), who are “joint heirs with Christ” (Rm 8:17) and whom he is “not ashamed to call them ‘brothers’” (Heb 2:11; cf. Jn 20:17). This theological approach shows that, on the one hand, through his incarnation Christ became a brother in humanity with us, and on the other hand, through his death and resurrection he opens us to divine life, adopting us into a divine Fraternity and making us, through baptism in the Spirit, his “little brothers” and “little sisters.” With him, our elder Brother, we become children of God the Father. This intimate union with Christ the Brother, whom John Chrysostom describes as “to be with” (συνουσια), makes us “companion-participant”(s) (κοινωνός) of the divine life in Christ. Chrysostom has Christ say, “You are all things to me, brother, and joint heir, and friend, and member,” and asks the people, “What would you more?”²¹

Christ-Frère aux huit premiers siècles (Church-Fraternity, The Ecclesiology of Christ the Brother in the First Eight Centuries) (Paris: Cerf, 2013, vol. 1 and 2016, vol. 2).

- 21 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 76, 5 (PG 58, 700), <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/200176.htm> [accessed 31 August 2023]. To the newly baptized, St Augustine has Jesus say, “I’m inviting you, to the region of the angels, to the friendship of the Father and the Holy Spirit, to the everlasting supper, to be my fraternity (*ad fraternitatem meam*), to be, in a word, myself. I’m inviting you to my life” (*Serm* 231,5). This divine fraternity with Christ achieves an intimate union, a sharing of life, a divinization, which goes beyond the relationship of friendship with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Elsewhere, Augustine thus describes the multifaceted relationship of every Christian with

This intimate relation with Christ our Brother engenders a deep relationship with our brothers and sisters in divine life. In this sense, Paul invites Philemon to consider Onesimus “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a brother, beloved (ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν) especially to me, but even more so to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord (καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν Κυρίῳ)” (Phlm 16). Through baptism, the former slave became a beloved brother, humanly and divinely speaking. These relationships among Christians are very subversive to any unjust systems. According to Jesus’ requirement, in the community no one can be called father or teacher, as all are brothers and sisters (Mt 23:8-10). It poses a big challenge for the Church of any time. This theology of Christ the Brother is the foundation of synodality pointing to a community in which members live and participate equally and love one another as brothers and sisters, as the young Chinese people experience in their ecclesial communities. It is difficult to translate the word Fraternity with one Chinese expression, as it describes at the same time, the fraternal community, the kind of relationship among disciples and the adoption into the divine life through Jesus.

When the young people in China today call the Lord “elder Brother Jesus,” they are going back to the roots of our relationship with Christ in baptism, following, probably without knowing, the Church Fathers. This brotherhood in Christ that

Christ: “Stick close to your cure, imitate your master, acknowledge your Lord, embrace your brother, understand your God” (*Serm* 380,2).

the young Chinese people treasure is also very much rooted in Chinese culture.

4 Brotherhood in Chinese Culture

In Chinese culture, relationships are essential, and friends and sworn brothers enjoy a special status.²² The purpose of the following review is to better understand how Christian fraternity is being lived out in China and how Chinese culture may help contemporary Christians to deepen fraternal love.

In the hierarchical system based on the five relationships (*wulun*, 五倫)²³ developed by Confucius, love between blood brothers is described as “fraternal respect” (*ti*, 悌),²⁴ with special emphasis on respect for elder brothers. Fraternal respect (*ti*, 悌) and filial piety (*xiao*, 孝) are considered the foundations for virtue (*ren*, 仁)²⁵ and are part of the four moral injunctions

22 On this topic, see a forum published by *The American Historical Review* (AHR) 105 (2000/5), especially Susan Mann, “The Male Bond in Chinese History and Culture,” AHR 105 (2000/5): 1600-1614.

23 “The duties are those between sovereign and minister, between father and son, between husband and wife, between elder brother and younger, and those belonging to the intercourse of friends. Those five are the duties of universal obligation.” 「君臣也，父子也，夫婦也，昆弟也，朋友之交也，五者天下之達道也。」 Confucius, *The Classic of Rites* 《禮記·中庸》，XXXI.20.

24 The character “悌” is composed of the “heart” (心) and the “younger brother” (弟), but it can also be written without the “heart” radical.

25 “Filial piety and fraternal submission! - are they not the root of all benevolent actions?” 「孝悌也者，其為仁之本與！」 Confucius, *The Analects* 《論語·學而》，1.2.

(*xiaoti zhongxin*, 孝悌忠信) recommended by Mencius and later developed by Zhu Xi.²⁶ The word “fraternal respect” (*ti*, 悌) is also extended to refer to friendship (*youti*, 友悌), describing friendship among brothers or among close friends who are like brothers. This fraternal love can even be compared to the intimate relation between hand and foot (*shouzu zhiqing*, 手足之情),²⁷ as expressed in Su Zhe’s (蘇轍) letter written in 1079 in favor of his elder brother who was imprisoned.²⁸

Among the five relationships, friendship has a special status. The first four are given by heaven (*tianhe*, 天合) and hierarchical, while the last one is chosen by human (*renhe*, 人合) and equal. Between friends, even if there are differences in age, status, education, and experience, there is no subordination. Friendship is characterized by mutual respect, loyalty, mutual obligation, and especially trust.²⁹ Friendship is ambiguously

26 “The strong-bodied, during their days of leisure, shall cultivate their filial piety, fraternal respectfulness, sincerity, and truthfulness.” 「壯者以暇日修其孝悌忠信」。Mencius, *Liang Hui Wang I*《梁惠王上》, I.5. Later, Zhu Xi united all those virtues into eight as education principles (「必先以孝悌、忠信、禮義、廉恥等事」)。[朱熹, 《小學·嘉言》五.2]; the actual government continues to promote them with the campaign of “Eight Virtues’ education” (八德教育)。

27 This expression is one of the common translations for “brotherhood” and is very similar to the relations inside the Body of Christ described by St. Paul (1 Cor 12:12-27).

28 「臣竊哀其志，不勝手足之情，故為冒死一言。」 Su Zhe (蘇轍, 1039-1112), *Letter of Petition for his brother*《為兄軾下獄上書》。

29 “In his intercourse with his friends, his words are sincere.” 「與朋友交，言而有信」。Confucius, *The Analects*《論語·學而》，1.7, and “Between friends, fidelity.” 「朋友有信。」 Mencius, *Teng Wen Gong*

treasured³⁰ in Confucianism. Its purpose is to help us grow on the path to virtue.³¹ Confucius encourages one to find friends at least equal to oneself³² in order to progress in virtue and to become a better son, a better brother, a better subject, while he also warns against bad friends.³³ Friendship should not go against the harmony of the system. Yet, the ideal friendship (*Guan Bao zhi jiao*, 管鮑之交) is found in the famous relationship between Guan Zhong (管仲) and Bao Shu (鮑叔) as described by Sima Qian (司馬遷): Guan was poor and Bao helped him to succeed to the detriment of his own career, considering friendship as more important than his own self. Their deep relationship made

I《滕文公上》, V.4.

30 Norman Kutcher, "The Fifth Relationship: Dangerous Friendships in the Confucian Context," *AHR* 105 (2000/5): 1615-1629.

31 "The superior man on grounds of culture meets with his friends, and by friendship helps his virtue," 「君子以文會友，以友輔仁。」 [Confucius, *The Analects* 《論語·顏淵》，XII.24]. The famous saying of Confucius regarding the joy of having friends coming from afar relates to a fellow disciple (朋) with whom Confucius will share the joy to study: "Is it not delightful to have friends coming from distant quarters?" 「學而時習之，不亦說乎？有朋自遠方來，不亦樂乎？」 Confucius, *The Analects* 《論語·學而》，I.1.

32 "Have no friends not equal to yourself." 「無友不如己者。」 Confucius, *The Analects* 《論語·學而》，I.8.

33 "There are three friendships which are advantageous, and three which are injurious. Friendship with the upright; friendship with the sincere; and friendship with the man of much observation - these are advantageous. Friendship with the man of specious airs; friendship with the insinuatingly soft; and friendship with the glib-tongued - these are injurious." 「益者三友，損者三友。友直，友諒，友多聞，益矣。友便辟，友善柔，友便佞，損矣。」 Confucius, *The Analects* 《論語·季氏》，XVI.4.

Guan declare that Bao knew him better than his own parents.³⁴ It is not surprising that the book *On Friendship* (交友論), written by Matteo Ricci in 1595, has received so much acclaim from Confucians in China and in Korea.³⁵ Today, sincerity (*chengxin*, 誠信) and friendship (*youshan*, 友善) are two of the twelve core values promoted by the Communist Party of China.

Another important kind of brotherhood in Chinese culture is the fraternal relationship between disciples of the same master, *shixiong* (師兄), which is still commonly used today between students of the same school. Like brothers on the same journey (*tongdao*, 同道), fellow students (*tongxue*, 同學) encourage one another on the journey towards virtue (共同求德修仁) to become “brothers in virtue” (*renxiong*, 仁兄). On this path to virtue, no one will lack brothers anywhere in the world, as declared in the famous saying about universal brotherhood - “All are brothers within the limits of the four seas” (四海之內，皆兄弟) - by Bu Shang (卜商 ~ 子夏), in response to his fellow disciple Sima Niu (司馬牛) who was complaining about not having any brother.³⁶ This universal brotherhood is

34 「生我者父母，知我者鮑子也。」Sima Qian (司馬遷), *Records of the Grand Historian* 《史書·史記·管晏列傳》，2.

35 For a presentation of this book, see Savio Tai-fai Hon, “A Sapiential Synthesis of Faith and Reason: From *De Amicitia* of Matteo Ricci,” *Catholic Theology and Thought* 66 (2010/Winter): 182-229.

36 “Death and life have their determined appointment; riches and honors depend upon Heaven. Let the superior man never fail reverentially to order his own conduct, and let him be respectful to others and observant of propriety - then all within the four seas will be his brothers.

the consequence of a common moral attitude towards heaven, towards destiny and towards others. In Chinese literature, such brotherhood among fellow disciples is even extended to other creatures. In the 16th-century fantastic novel *The Journey to the West* (西遊記) by Wu Cheng'en (吳承恩), a pig, a monkey and a man are given as companions to Master Tang in his search for the Buddhist scriptures. They call one another brothers and complement one another with their different skill sets.

Another kind of brotherhood refers to sworn brothers, whether chosen or not. Several guilds which gathered non-chosen brothers can be found in the history of China: groups supporting migrants (同鄉會), protective societies for farmers living alone in cities (e.g. the “Elder Brothers Society” 哥老會, originated in Sichuan and Guizhou), secretive triads (三合會), the Taiping Tianguo revolutionary movement (太平天國) of Hong Xiuquan (洪秀全) and his egalitarian community.³⁷ These guilds - inspired by family concepts,³⁸ and usually in-

What has the superior man to do with being distressed because he has no brothers?” “死生有命，富貴在天。君子敬而無失，與人恭而有禮。四海之內，皆兄弟也。君子何患乎無兄弟也？” Confucius, *The Analects* 《論語·顏淵》，XII.5.

37 “There are fields to plow together, food to eat together, clothes to wear in common, money to use together, there is equality everywhere, and no one is not full and warm.” “有田同耕，有飯同食，有衣同穿，有錢同使，無處不均勻，無人不飽暖。” Hong Xiuquan (洪秀全), *The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom* 《天朝田畝制度》.

38 In the 36 oaths of the Triad Hong, members are usually called “brothers of the family Hong” (洪家兄弟), and the first oath strongly emphasizes the sense of family belonging (「第一誓：自入洪門之後，爾父母

cluded rites, an elder (大爺、大哥), and some kind of ancestor - provided critical support and maintained strong connections which were often based on blood pacts to death. Some of them were illegal, violent and subversive.

In contrast, chosen sworn brothers, largely between individuals, emphasize the virtuous and deep connections between brothers who have different family names (異姓兄弟) and different birth dates, but who are willing to die together on the same day, one famous example of which is the “Oath of the Peach Garden” (桃園三結義) narrated at the beginning of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三國演義)³⁹ by Luo Guanzhong (羅貫中). A very rich collection of literature has

即我之父母，爾兄弟姊妹即我之兄弟姊妹，爾妻我之嫂，爾子我之子侄，如有背誓，五雷誅滅。」)

<https://www.kekeshici.com/wenhua/aomen/154541.html> [accessed 12 January 2021].

- 39 “When saying the names Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, although the surnames are different, yet we have come together as brothers. From this day forward, we shall join forces for a common purpose: to save the troubled and to aid the endangered. We shall avenge the nation above, and pacify the citizenry below. We seek not to be born on the same day, in the same month and in the same year. We merely hope to die on the same day, in the same month and in the same year. May the gods of heaven and earth attest to what is in our hearts. If we should ever do anything to betray our friendship, may heaven and the people of the earth both strike us dead!” 「念劉備、關羽、張飛，雖然異姓，既結為兄弟，則同心協力，救困扶危；上報國家，下安黎庶。不求同年同月同日生，只願同年同月同日死。皇天后土，實鑒此心，背義忘恩，天人共戮！」 Luo Guanzhong (羅貫中), *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 《三國演義》, Chapter 1.

been created on the concept of sworn brothers, especially the knight-errant fictions (武俠小說), from the more ancient *Outlaws of the Marsh* (水滸傳)⁴⁰ by Shi Nai'an (施耐庵), to the more contemporary *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils* (天龍八部) by Jin Yong (金庸), and even to a recent TV series (2021) - *Word of Honor* (山河令) adapted from Priest's novel *Faraway Wanderers* (天涯客). Such literature has developed a very rich vocabulary to describe brotherhood bonds and adoptive relationships (結誼, 結義, 結拜兄弟, 上契, 換帖, 認乾親). The character “*tong*” (同), literally “with”, is used recurrently to express the deep companionships among sworn brothers.⁴¹ The strong fraternal relationships between persons having the same heart and mind (*tongxin tongde*, 同心同德) and being ready to die together are also designated as “Gold and Orchids relationships” (*jinlan zhijiao*, 金蘭之交) - strong as metal and fragrant as orchids - based on a quote by Confucius in a commentary of

40 Pearl Buck translated the novel into English with the title *All Men Are Brothers*, as the saying “All are brothers within the limits of the four seas” (四海之內, 皆兄弟) repeatedly appears in the book. In Chapter 71, the 108 men united themselves through a blood oath to fight for justice against the corrupt Qing dynasty. These brothers emphasized equality among themselves, collegial leadership and respect to the family members of each brother.

41 In the Chinese language, the character “*tong*” (同) is used in a lot of expressions related to companionship: 同路人, 同道, 同伴, 同學, 同事, 同志 ... It echoes the multiple usage of *συν-* in the New Testament, especially in St. Paul's letters, to describe companionship among Christians as people “walking on the same path” (*σύνοδοι*, 同路人, 同道), which is developed into the concept of synodality.

the *Book of Changes*.⁴²

This mix of friendship and brotherhood results in the formation of intimate relationships, considering a brother as another me, the one who knows my heart (知己, 知音, 知心) and who shares the same ideals as mine (志同道合), joined in a companionship based on a common aspiration *tongzhi* (同志).⁴³ This expression *tongzhi*, usually translated as “comrades”, has been used by the Communists⁴⁴ to emphasize equal relationships and the sharing of the same ideal, without the need of referring to ranks or positions. More recently, it has also been used to designate homosexual persons.

Such rich literature infused with so many related terms shows the importance of brotherhood in Chinese culture. It is deeply rooted in the longing of many for harmony and universal love. This love is expressed in several different ways. Confucius developed a benevolent love (*ren'ai*, 仁愛) inside the hi-

42 “When two men are one in heart, no iron bolts keep them apart; the words they in their union use, fragrance like orchid plants diffuse.” 「二人同心，其利斷金；同心之言，其嗅如蘭。」 Confucius, *The Great Treatise I* 《周易·繫辭上》，8; but this expression is now more used for female friendship or for love relationship.

43 According to the book of Histories, this “common aspiration” is the culmination of the practice of virtue of the same heart among people of the same clan. 「同姓則同德，同德則同心，同心則同志。」 *Guoyu* 《史書·國語·晉語》，4, 35.

44 For more details on the usage of the term, see Paul Joscha Kohlenberg, “The Use of ‘Comrade’ as a Political Instrument in the Chinese Communist Party, from Mao to Xi,” *The China Journal* 77 (September 2016): 72-92.

erarchical system; Mozi (墨子) emphasized a more equalitarian and impartial love (*jian'ai*, 兼愛) without distinction (*bie*, 別); Kang Youwei (康有為) and Sun Yat-sen (孫中山) translated the third part of the motto of the French Revolution - "Fraternity" - as "universal love" (*bo'ai*, 博愛).⁴⁵ Kang saw such universal love as a way to achieve the ancient concept of the Great Harmony (*datong*, 大同), i.e. the universal harmony that Confucius dreamed of, when "The whole world under heaven united as one family" (天下為一家).⁴⁶ Sun followed this same path with his "The whole world under heaven united as one community" (天下為公), taken from the "Great Way" (*dadao*, 大道) of Confucius.⁴⁷ He further developed it in his theory of the "Three Principles of the People" (三民主義),⁴⁸ which he saw as the

45 On this topic, see the developments of Kin Sheung Chiaretto Yan, *For a Christian Reading of the Core Values of the Chinese Dream: Different prospects in the light of the culture of unity*, doctorate thesis on unity culture (Florence: Sophia University Institute, 2022), pp. 85-93.

46 "A sage can look on all under the sky as one family, and on all in the Middle states as one man." 「故聖人耐以天下為一家，以中國為一人者。」 Confucius, *The Classic of Rites* 《禮記·禮運》，IX.18.

47 「大道之行也，天下為公，選賢與能，講信修睦。故人不得親其親，不獨子其子，使老有所終，壯有所用，幼有所長，矜、寡、孤、獨、廢疾者皆有所養，男有分，女有歸。貨惡其棄於地也，不必藏於己；力惡其不出於身也，不必為己。是故謀閉而不興，盜竊亂賊而不作，故外戶而不閉，是謂大同。」 Confucius, *The Classic of Rites* 《禮記·禮運》大同章，IX.1. For Confucius, if this ideal society is still hidden, it is because each one only focuses on his own family and considers his own interests. 「今大道既隱，天下為家，各親其親，各子其子，貨力為己。」 *The Classic of Rites* 《禮記·禮運》，IX.2].

48 The three principles include nationalism (*minzu*, 民族), democracy (*minquan*, 民權) and socialism (people's livelihood) (*minsheng*, 民生).

implementation of the perfect society dreamed of by Confucius. The Communist Party of China (CPC) took it up, and even today Xi Jinping refers to it.⁴⁹

At the end of this short cultural journey, we can conclude that although the word “fraternity” does not exist as such in Chinese, the concept of brotherhood is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, with rich meanings well summarized by Hao Sisi on the website of the CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.⁵⁰ In the Chinese context, fraternity is understood as brotherhood with strong emphasis on friendship and companionship. It is very male-centred, and may risk going to the extremes,⁵¹ especially of clannism or communitarianism. For a Chinese translation of the “Christian fraternity”, I would suggest the

49 See the last paragraph of Xi’s speech at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on 18 October 2017, insisting on the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Nation in the spirit of the “Great Harmony” of Confucius (大道之行，天下為公), http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm [accessed 28 June 2022].

50 「古時人們常尊稱朋友為『仁兄』，這是因為『君子以文會友，以友輔仁』，朋友之間如果能夠做到互相幫助，共同求德修仁，就是最好的兄弟。…在求仁修德的路途中，不必在乎是否同氣連枝、血濃於水，志同道合便是兄弟。在軍隊中叫『袍澤』，在生活中叫『知己』，在事業中叫『同志』，他會與你惺惺相惜、肝膽相照，同心同德、同路同行。」中央紀委監察部網站，郝思斯，2017-09-01，<http://m.ccdi.gov.cn/content/16/b2/19506.html> [accessed 15 July 2022].

51 “Loyalty among brothers (buddies)” (*gemen yiqi*, 哥們義氣) without discernment may risk going to the extremes, especially among teenagers.

expression *xiongdì qingyì* (兄弟情誼), which literally means love and friendship among brothers. This particular fraternity also includes support on the path to virtue (仁兄), benevolent love (仁愛), friendship love (友愛), impartial love (兼愛), common ideals (志同道合), and deep mutual understanding (知己, 知心). These are the foundations for universal love (博愛) and the ideal of the Great Harmony (大同). The experiences of love and companionship among brothers and sisters inside their Church communities were treasured by the young people whom I interviewed, to the point that they “fell in love with the community” (愛上這個團體). This is also an attraction for others, just as it was in the times of the early Church (Acts 2:47). Many of these elements can help the universal Church to better understand how to live out synodality in a fraternal manner.

5 A New Style of the Church

As emphasized in recent Church documents, synodality is the path that God expects of the Church of the third millennium. From the sharing of the young people in China, the ecclesial experiences which attracted them were very similar to the definitions of synodality. Their fraternal experiences of community life, leading to a close relationship with the Lord Jesus as their “elder Brother,” find echoes in the understanding of brotherhood in Chinese culture and help them to build a fraternal and synodal Church. Walking together as brothers and sisters of virtue (仁兄), connected for life through a holy blood pact (結義) made by and with Jesus (his Eucharistic sacrifice, our baptism),

they encourage each other on the path of sanctity (聖德), learning from one another on the journey.⁵² Unlike the patriarchal family system, all of them are treated equally as friends without subordination. They love and care for one another with mutual respect and impartial love and without self-interest, allowing the participation of all and embodying collegial decision-making processes. The young people had also expressed their deep need for accompaniment. They are looking for guides who can be their companions to walk with them and listen to them, but not simply telling them what to do. Companions on the same path (同道偕行), being of one heart and mind, they share the same ideal (同心同德同志). This kind of fraternity is *as strong as metal and as fragrant as orchids* (金蘭之交), and is very attractive to others.

If the historic theology of Christ the Brother finds a strong echo in Chinese brotherhood, it also challenges Chinese culture, just as it has previously challenged other cultures. Is it possible to call the Master (師父) “elder Brother” (哥)? If the Savior, Lord and Master, revealed himself as a brother and a servant, there is no other choice than brotherhood for all his disciples, particularly the clergy. Jesus warned his disciples not to be called “teacher” or to call anyone “father” (Mt 23:8-10). Priests

52 The following quote from Confucius fits well with synodality: “When three people walk together, there is always one to teach me. I learn from one’s qualities and I correct myself from one’s faults.” 「三人行，必有我師焉。擇其善者而從之，其不善者而改之。」 Confucius, *The Analects* 《論語·述而》，VII.22.

are to be *brothers among their brothers and sisters* as the Second Vatican Council says (PO 3:1; 9:1; in other references, the Council is not fully consistent with this affirmation of common brotherhood⁵³). They are called to exercise pastoral service configured to Christ the Brother and to love their brothers and sisters as Christ loves them: that is, as an elder brother. It is confusing when the priest addresses the faithful as “my dear brothers and sisters”, but the faithful address him as “Father”. In their role as *persona Christi*, priests are elder brothers, not fathers. A true reform of the Church presupposes the possibility for oneself to be deprogrammed, making clear the practical implications and consequences, and not being like the scribes who speak but do not act (Mt 23:3). The same young people who call Christ “elder Brother Jesus” also call their priest “elder brother so-and-so”. In Chinese, the term *shenfu* (神父) coined by Catholics, literally “sacred father”, could be advantageously replaced by a new expression *muxiong* (牧兄), literally “brother pastor”, which values both the common identity of being broth-

53 Elsewhere, the Council refers back to the figure of the father for the bishops (LG 28:2) and for the priests, who “exercise the most outstanding and necessary office of father and teacher among and for the People of God” (PO 9:1); they “should teach them and admonish them as beloved sons” (PO 6:1). “The Christian faithful, for their part, should realize their obligations to their priests, and with filial love they should follow them as their pastors and fathers” (PO 9:6). There are also variations in the vocabulary of different documents: “The bishop ... should treat the priests ... as his sons and friends” (LG 28:2) became on purpose “bishops should regard priests as their brothers and friends” (PO 7:2).

ers (*xiong*, 兄) in Christ the Brother and the specific function of a pastor (*mu*, 牧) in the name of the Good Shepherd, i.e. to serve the community.⁵⁴ Referring to the Church as the big family of God precludes references to the patriarchal system: the only father of the family is God the Father, everyone else is a brother or a sister.⁵⁵ Yet, affectively speaking, priests can develop some kind of fatherhood relationship with their parishioners, like Paul with Timothy (1Tm 1:2).

Conclusion: Towards a Fraternal and Synodal Church

To achieve the renewal of the Church through the “new style” of synodality, paternalism and clericalism have to be avoided through proper ecclesiological foundations in our common fraternity in divine life through baptism. In China, the way

54 The Protestant term *mushi* (牧師, literally “teacher pastor”) is better than the Catholic term *shenfu* (神父, literally “sacred father”), but it still refers to the ministers as “teachers”. A new appellation *muzhang* (牧長) “elder pastor” is becoming common among some Protestant communities, but its reference to the elder generation or to a chief (長) still includes a flavor of subordination.

55 The Chinese expression “Our Loving Mother the Church” (慈母教會) favors a pyramidal conception of the Church. It presupposes the “We” as children vis-à-vis the abstract “She” as the mother, practically referring to the clergy and echoing a paternalistic bipolarity between the clergy and the People of God. A study of the discussions on the ecclesiology of the family in the African context could also help to better understand the cultural challenges of the concept of “the Church as God’s family,” cf. Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 1995, no. 63.

that people treasure the brotherhood of friends and companions encourages Christians to develop fraternal relationships with Jesus as our elder Brother, and with members of the ecclesial community as brothers and sisters. The Chinese characteristics of brotherhood help the whole Church to better understand the importance of basing Synodality in Fraternity as a way to live in a fraternal community of brothers and sisters in Christ the Brother, as it was the case in early Christianity. The path of synodality based on Fraternity is in fact the “antique style” of the Church and could help her to reform continuously. A renewed understanding of God leads to a renewed understanding of the Church. This path of renewal can be addressed with a practical question: how do we develop synodality on the paths we walk together - life paths based on brotherhood relationships with others and with Jesus; building Church communities which are participatory, listening and fraternal; living true communion as ideally described in the *Acts of the Apostles* and which young people are earnestly seeking?

May the Holy Spirit help us to build a more fraternal, and therefore, a more synodal Church!