

Article

Lateral Synodality: Academics of Asian Catholicism and Organizational Change

Michel Chambon ^{1,*}, Bubbles Beverly Asor ² and Renchillina Joy G. Supan ³¹ Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Singapore 119077, Singapore² Department of Sociology, De La Salle University Manila, Manila 0922, Philippines; bubbles.asor@dlsu.edu.ph³ Department of Sociology, University of the Philippines–Diliman, Quezon City 1101, Philippines

* Correspondence: mchambon@nus.edu.sg

Abstract: As the Synod on Synodality has massively consulted Catholics around the globe for three years (2021–2024), this paper discusses ways in which academics with knowledge related to Asian Catholics have been involved in these processes. Focusing on this specific community of scholars, we highlight the paradoxical ways in which they contributed to these synodal conversations. They simultaneously illustrate the relatively new production of multidisciplinary knowledge on Asian Catholicism and the hesitations standing between ecclesial organizations and academia. While academics of Asian Catholicism produce scholarship not foreign to the principles of synodal listening and discernment, their involvement within synodal processes has often been indirect and filtered by their disciplinary background and ecclesial status (laity vs. clergy). Based on a survey conducted in May 2024, this paper shows that the production of academic knowledge on Asian Catholics is now driven chiefly by laity and shaped across various disciplines and places. Yet, a significantly higher proportion of scholars who directly engaged in synodal conversations were theologians belonging to the clergy. While other disciplines may have contributed indirectly, theologians were overrepresented. This creates a paradox in which synodal conversations have coexisted from a certain distance with a rich academic knowledge of Asian Catholics, and most academics of Asian Catholicism have remained outside of synodal efforts. Departing from existing theories that approach this Synod on Synodality as a vertical process, either as a bottom-up or a top-down reform of the Catholic Church, we highlight its restrained engagement with academia, a lateral community of listening and discernment.

Keywords: synodality; Asia; Catholicism; academia

Academic Editor: Dyron B. Daugherty

Received: 30 October 2024

Revised: 20 February 2025

Accepted: 22 February 2025

Published: 25 February 2025

Citation: Chambon, Michel, Bubbles Beverly Asor, and Renchillina Joy G. Supan. 2025. Lateral Synodality: Academics of Asian Catholicism and Organizational Change. *Religions* 16: 283. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16030283>

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

On 7 March 2020, Pope Francis announced that the Synod of Bishops would gather in 2022 to reflect on “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission”¹. The aim was to launch a global consultation process or what Pope Francis calls a “style to be adopted”² within the Catholic Church for the expansion of “collective discernment” and the inclusion of lay people, especially women, in the consultation process as the church questions its inner workings, structure, and operation as a religious institution. Pope Francis’s move towards a “synodal style” for the Catholic Church amidst the social, political, and cultural realities it is facing—clericalism, ecclesial ideologies, decrease in and scarcity of priestly and religious vocations, declining Mass attendance, increasing religious apathy of nominal Catholics, and the salience of Catholic faith at the individual level and in the public domain. Since the late 1960s, the Synod of Bishops, a consultative body of

the Catholic Church, has gathered a few hundred bishops on a regular basis to discuss one theme given by the pope and contribute to the governance of the universal church. For this 16th General Assembly, the participants were called to focus on an antique notion of Christianity, synodality, and the idea that the church is governed through collegial listening.

However, a year later, in May 2021, Pope Francis suddenly widened the scope of the conversation and announced that an extensive consultation would be launched worldwide to listen to all people. Thus, the assembly itself would be delayed by a year. The exact reasons behind this methodological shift remained unclear. Gradually, new steps and specific guidelines were released ([Synod of Bishops 2021](#)). At the local level, many dioceses created synodal teams and hosted larger synodal assemblies as platforms for people to share their views on communion, participation, and mission. Reports of these local and regional initiatives were sent to Rome. Later, the General Secretariat of the Synod announced that this 16th General Assembly would not only have one but two Roman sessions (October 2023 and October 2024). Furthermore, these gatherings would not only include bishops but also additional members of the people of God and academic observers.

In the guidelines “Towards October 2024” provided by the General Secretariat in December 2023, local churches were invited to conduct an additional round of consultation before sending a summary to the General Secretariat of the Synod by 15 May 2024.³ In the section “A Guiding Question to Deepen Reflection,” it was specified that social scientists should be consulted as well.⁴ Therefore, since the consultation of academics from various disciplines has been a recurring encouragement of this synod, the Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics (ISAC)⁵—a research consortium fostering social scientific research on Asian Catholics—generated an online survey to quantitatively evaluate the ways in which academics with knowledge of Asian Catholics have been involved in the different components of this Synod on Synodality.

This paper discusses the data gathered through this survey and highlights four key aspects of its findings. After a theoretical discussion of the growing literature on synodality and organizational change, we present the methodology of our survey as well as its scope and goals. Then, our attention turns toward four aspects of our collected data to highlight their significance for what we call *lateral synodality* and research on Asian Catholics.

2. Scholarship on Synodality

As the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality expanded over three years and involved millions of participants around the globe, it produced a massive amount of testimonies, reports, syntheses, and analyses. These burgeoning materials were generated in various languages and ecclesial circles, which did not necessarily communicate with each other. While Catholic organizations struggled to process this gigantic amount of data, academics have also come to produce articles and publications engaging with this Synod on Synodality and its related questions. However, since synodality is an antique concept revalorized during the Second Council of the Vatican (1962–1965), it has always been part of scholarly conversations on Catholicism. Over the past decades, the production of articles and books on this topic has been constant ([Melloni and Scatena 2005](#); [Faggioli 2015](#); [Theobald 2019](#); [Join-Lambert 2019](#)). While this scholarship has long remained quantitatively modest, it has often been associated with research on ecumenical relations. For many scholars of Catholicism, synodality was predominantly perceived as a conceptual resource to deepen institutional dialogue among Christian denominations ([Sullivan 2006](#); [Famerée 2008](#); [Puglisi 2010](#)).

However, since 2020, this situation has radically changed, and the scholarship on synodality has expanded quantitatively and qualitatively. The number of publications has rapidly increased, and topics of debate have multiplied. Moving beyond its ecumenical enclave, synodality became a polysemic resource to discuss questions such as the legacy

of Pope Francis (Gaillardetz 2023; Faggioli 2020), governance and communion (Luciani 2022), the role of bishops (Fisher 2023), the decolonization of the church (Barreto and Latinovic 2023), participation in decision making (Zaccaria 2024), and liturgical renewal (Loughlin 2023; Souletie 2024). While this scholarship continues to deepen and diversify, one may highlight that its various linguistic and ecclesial backgrounds make it difficult to produce a more integrative analysis of the subject matter. From a sociological perspective, synodality is shaped by and shapes an evolving organizational field of a constellation of social actors within a global church of 1.3 billion people. Nonetheless, we must highlight that mostly theologians are at the forefront of these scholarly conversations (Fisher 2023; Souletie 2024; Zaccaria 2024). While a few historians actively contribute to this scholarship (Faggioli 2020), one may argue that other academic disciplines remain relatively absent. Despite rare exceptions (Artaud de la Ferriere 2024; Ingunez and Froehle 2024; Ballano 2024), synodality may have lacked the “intellectual puzzle” to catch the attention of sociologists, anthropologists, and other academic disciplines. Scholarship on synodality remains primarily a theological conversation.

As this theological dominance contrasts with the invitation to include more academic disciplines in synodal conversations, our survey explored further how scholars may have contributed to the Synod on Synodality at a pragmatic level. Without restricting ourselves to formal scholarship and academic publications, a reality that is still limited at this point, we intended to identify whether and how scholars have contributed to conversations related to the Synod on Synodality. Who are these scholars? Which scholarly disciplines have been involved? What does that say about the current evolution of Catholic synodality?

3. Framing Lateral Synodality

The question of who gets to contribute to synodal processes and conversations has theoretical and ecclesial implications. Synodality has been a long and contested tradition within Christian churches. Since the mid-second century, bishops in proximate churches have met each other to discuss issues and problems common to their churches and find conjoint solutions. However, synodality was not a cornerstone of church governance in Western Christianity, especially post-Tridentine Catholicism. A number of provincial synods did exist during the Medieval period but became less significant and systematic during the early modern period. However, in 1965, just before the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops as a permanent institution in the Catholic Church. These Roman assemblies were mainly made of bishops and representatives of religious institutes and clerics with expertise on church issues. It was mandated to read and discern the “signs of times” to respond to not only exigent ecclesiastical affairs but also to pressing social, political, economic, and cultural issues. The synodal route was intended to carry on the participatory, consultative, and collegial essence of the Second Vatican Council.⁶

During the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality, Pope Francis re-introduced and revived some of the synodal practices that may have been neglected or underdeveloped within the Catholic tradition. Giving more space to non-episcopal voices and voting power to female participants, Pope Francis has called for a “synodal church” which he designates as a “Church on her feet (...) that embraces the cry of humanity that brings the light of the Gospel to others (...) that walks with her Lord through the streets of the world’ that departs from a church that is ‘seated, silent, blind, static.’”⁷ Some scholars posit that Pope Francis’s synodal approach is a religious innovation aiming for “wider consultation and participation of Catholic believers” to “understand the urgent ecclesial and pastoral problems, which have unforeseen, complex behavioral components” (Ballano 2024, p. 5). Although Pope Francis’s synodal strategy and goals are a revisiting of an old Catholic practice, the inner

workings and specific methods have also been described as “atypical” (Nweke 2023) and “problematic” (Ballano 2024).

For Nweke (2023), the methodology of the synodal process departed from its past counterparts in three ways: (1) it was longer, spanning two years of deliberation and discussion; (2) it was intended to be a “bottom-up approach” with an emphasis on mutual listening with various individuals and groups as representatives of the faithful including and especially those marginalized rather than the traditional top-down approach with the senior members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and clerical experts as the agenda experts and solution givers; and (3) it was not meant to illuminate particular doctrinal matters but to discern the status and direction of the Catholic Church as a community of believers and as an organized institution to respond to the “new signs of times.”

Following the internal organizational changes brought by Pope Francis’s synodal goals and the call for more profound and critical engagement with various social actors within and outside the Catholic Church, this paper explores the engagement of the Catholic Church with scholars of Asian Catholics during the Synod on Synodality to assess which kind of organizational change this engagement may have represented. We treat the academic community, in particular scholars of Asian Catholic(ism), as an epistemic community and an organizational field which have the social network, analytical tools, and methodological resources to problematize social realities; ask critical questions; and offer solutions to social issues, problems, and phenomena (Phan 2024).⁸ It is the preoccupation and vocation of historians, social scientists, philosophers, theologians, etc., to read the signs of times in various historical periods, geographical locations, and social spaces through knowledge production and knowledge sharing which clerical experts and ecclesiastical hierarchy may find constructive, informative, and expedient in their decision-making and deliberation of the social issues being faced by their flock within the church and those in the peripheries of the church.

Based on our survey among academics of Asian Catholicism, our argument is twofold. First, we argue that over the past few decades, a professional community of scholars with scholarly knowledge of Asian Catholics has emerged. Mostly laity-driven, these scholars are rooted in academic disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc. Unlike a few decades ago, when clergy members were almost the sole authoritative figures with scholarly knowledge of Asian Catholics, the reality has radically evolved, and academic knowledge has already migrated into the public domain. Today, when it comes to listening to the lived realities of Asian Catholics, we argue that a stable community of scholars rooted in various academic disciplines with social scientific training and expertise stands as a parallel source of mutual listening and analysis. Second, our survey reveals that the Synod on Synodality engaged this academic community in quite a paradoxical way. Although the synod intended to include a wide range of voices and expertise, synodal entities mostly consulted theologians and did not engage other academic disciplines extensively. With the exception of history, other disciplines were indeed underrepresented in synodal consultations. We also observed that among the consulted theologians, a high proportion of them were members of the clergy.

Consequently, in this paper, we refer to the engagement of the academic community with the Synod on Synodality as a form of *lateral synodality*. While a community of professional listening and discernment has emerged and partially engaged with synodal processes, disciplinary and clerical lenses have filtered these engagements and kept the academic community quite apart from the synodal community. Going against discourses that approach synodal dynamics as either a top-down or bottom-up reform, our findings highlight the coexistence between academics of Asian Catholics and synodal processes. These spheres of critical inquiry and participant observations have certainly influenced

and engaged each other, but from a safe distance. Therefore, we use the term *lateral* to underscore this coexistence and distinction without assuming that a power or hierarchical relation exists between the two. The academic community stands next to but not under, upon, or within the synodal community. While real dialogue and overlaps exist between the two, significant differences and distance remain as well. And we describe this unique form of distant relationship as *lateral synodality*.

Nonetheless, academics researching Asian Catholic(ism) can work towards and together with the Catholic Church for a more critical approach to the content and methodology employed in synodal processes. The research of these academics can also be a resource not only for analyzing the synodal data but also for a nuanced and holistic assessment of behavioral patterns, social processes, power relations, and social phenomena within and around the Catholic Church that can contribute to the explanation of where the church is at and where it is heading. This notion of *lateral synodality* is operationalized as the understudied and overlooked “academic voice” that may have made one of the following “synodal efforts”: (1) *direct and formal synodal role* (i.e., consultants) as part of the synodal sessions at the diocesan, national, and global levels, and through formal Catholic activities and programs for the synodality; (2) *indirect and informal synodal activities* to deliberate and discuss synodality between academics (workshops, seminars, symposia, and conferences), with the larger public (through mass media and online platforms); and (3) *aspirational and latent synodal goals* for those social scientists and scholars who would have contributed their resources and time if they were given the opportunity to participate in the synodal process.

Through this notion of *lateral synodality*, this paper also highlights that academic and knowledge producers are still part of the larger conversation on and analysis of synodality. While this paper has methodological limitations to identify the extent to which Asian Catholic academic scholarship has been involved in synodal conversations and whether or not theologians have built upon knowledge from other disciplines, we observe that synodal consultations and scholarly conversations on Asian Catholics have remained differentiated. This paper explores one of the neglected aspects of the recently concluded Synod on Synodality and aims to contribute to the discussion of synodality as an organizational strategy for the Catholic Church to discuss, debate, discern, and deliberate social issues. To establish and maintain a constructive yet critical and, at times, unfavorable engagement with academic conversations will be inevitable for the synodal goals to be achieved and beneficial for the Catholic Church as it accommodates diverse voices, needs, interests, and values among the faithful. The Catholic Church is at a critical juncture as the largest, oldest, and most formidable religious institution for institutionalizing organizational changes and innovations by selecting what needs to be continued and discontinued.

4. Methodological Approach

The goal of our research was to survey any academics with knowledge of Asian Catholicism, with at least a master’s degree and one scholarly publication related to Asian Catholics. We aimed to explore whether these academics participated in any activities related to the synod. To document and analyze this further, we conducted an online cross-sectional survey administered through Qualtrics, a survey and questionnaire platform design. The survey included thirty questions with items composed of both open-ended and closed-ended questions (see Appendix A).⁹ Aligned with our research questions, the goal of the survey was to (a) identify the academic background of the respondent (b) identify whether the respondent may have “spontaneously” joined activities and programs related to the Synod of Synodality, and (c) identify whether and how the respondent has been invited to offer academic expertise. We believe that a survey is the most applicable method

for these objectives as it allows for the efficient collection and numerical coding of data to obtain a general picture of the possible relationship among the respondents' answers.

Given the temporal and spatial specificity of the target population, we employed purposive and network sampling techniques by sending out survey invites to scholars listed in a database organized and managed by the ISAC since July 2021. Furthermore, we used online communication platforms (newsletter, social media, professional mailing lists, etc.) to publicize the survey and recruit respondents. Although the sampling criteria may be "open" to all scholars in terms of disciplinary backgrounds and professional status, we nonetheless limited our survey to "knowledge of Asian Catholics," the regional focus of our consortium, while other geographical areas were excluded.¹⁰

Furthermore, one must highlight that questions were only in English, a language not necessarily mastered by all academics with knowledge of Asian Catholicism. Indeed, linguistic diversity is a complex reality in Asia; there is no common language across the whole region, and it impacts scholarly conversations within and outside the region. Yet, English remains the common language of most scholars; hence, we chose to use it for the survey. One of the limitations of this study was not being able to translate the survey into the major Asian and other regional languages due to time and financial constraints. Hence, we cannot fully measure how this linguistic parameter has impacted our data in terms of geographic scope. For instance, this survey might have unintentionally excluded or failed to reach African and Latin American regions where English is not the main language despite the strong presence of Catholics there. However, some respondents confirmed that their primary publication language was not English, which suggests that our survey circulated beyond English-speaking academic circles.

On 15 May 2024, the survey was sent to 292 individual academics, and responses were accepted until the last day of May 2024. Participation was voluntary and open to anyone who qualified. Confidentiality was also secured for the respondents, as indicated in the opening part of the survey.

Regarding data analysis, since respondents were not selected using random probability sampling, we acknowledge that we cannot use the data to generalize patterns related to the population of interest. Instead, we subjected the data to descriptive statistical analysis. Specifically, we constructed crosstabulations to understand the dynamics of different variables, such as the relationship of engagements related to the Synod of Synodality and the socio-demographic information, field of interest, geographic location, and language of the scholars.

5. Results and Discussion

By 1 June 2024, 119 scholars who met the inclusion criteria answered the survey.¹¹ Their responses represent a wide range of academic expertise, geographical realities, and ecclesial involvement, which corroborates the first aspect of our argument: a professional and academic community of listening and discernment is already in existence, and this deserves specific scholarly and empirical attention. While these 119 academics certainly do not constitute the total number of scholars with knowledge of Asian Catholicism, nor do they represent a complete picture of the scholars who have contributed to the Synod on Synodality, they still provide a very rich, diverse, and illustrative pool of academic knowledge on Asian Catholics and synodal engagement.

Among the respondents, 79% of them have a Ph.D. (21% have a master's degree or equivalent as their highest education degree). This means that most academics of Asian Catholicism have achieved high educational attainment and have the professional expertise to sustain high-quality scholarly research. Furthermore, 65% of our respondents are male, and 30% are female (5% do not say). Among them, 75% are laypeople and 25% members

of clergy/religious orders. This suggests that in the contemporary academic landscape, knowledge and research on Asian Catholics are produced by diverse actors, with most of them positioned outside of the clerical sphere. The vast majority of scholarship on Asian Catholics is produced by professional laity outside of Catholic organizations. Our data also show that some academics of Asian Catholicism are not practicing Catholics. This illustrates further how this field of research is gradually migrating into the public domain and is not solely shaped by Catholic believers. This is in conjunction with the argument that we are proposing in this paper: a parallel and lateral production and circulation of knowledge on Catholicism has been present and could benefit the “formal” synodal process.

In terms of generational diversity, the age of the 119 respondents is distributed across different cohorts. While most were born between 1960 and 1979, 33 respondents (27%) are below 45 years old. This diversity of generations suggests that scholarship on Asian Catholicism has been built over multiple decades and continues to attract the interest of the next generation of scholars. Similarly, while a number of respondents are retired or not active in research anymore, 64% of them are still active in research on Asian Catholicism. This community of researchers is not only diverse in terms of age but also professionally dynamic. Most respondents are teaching undergraduate students and engaged in academic conversations and publications. In dialogue with students, peers, and the lived realities of Asian Catholics, these scholars represent a professional community of listening and discernment that exists parallel with the clergy, clerical experts, and church leaders but represents a high-level of grounded knowledge of Asian Catholicism.

5.1. Academic Status and Expertise of Academics of Asian Catholics

As the production of knowledge on Asian Catholics depends on the academic status of its actors, it is essential to explore the academic background of our respondents further. Among the 119 respondents, more than half (54.6%) are faculty members teaching at universities, 5.9% are postdoctoral fellows, and 6.7% are seminary professors. While faculty members, postdoctoral fellows, and seminary professors engage with students from various backgrounds and academic conversations, they also have the financial means to support their research efforts.

The 119 respondents come from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds. Research on Asian Catholicism belongs to multiple academic disciplines. Among them, four main fields of study can be identified: 34 academics with a primary degree in social sciences, 28 in theology, 18 in history, and 17 in religious studies (see Figure 1). Yet, only one respondent claims to be a canon lawyer, which may suggest that the contemporary production of canon law is not academically engaged with research on Asian Catholics, a topic that deserves further investigation.

5.2. The Academic Geography of Knowledge of Asian Catholics

As knowledge production is shaped by the cultural and socio-political environment in which it takes shape, it is essential to assess where research on Asian Catholics is produced. Our survey shows that academics of Asian Catholicism are primarily located in Asia and the West (broadly conceived). In the data collected in this survey, no respondents (except one) indicated being in Africa or Latin America. Despite the strong Catholic presence in these two regions, scholars established in Africa and Latin America remain underrepresented in scholarship on Asian Catholicism. In other words, the survey suggests that there is a bipolarity (Asia–West) in terms of places engaged in the production of knowledge on Asian Catholics. Further investigation will be necessary to assess how this geography of knowledge shapes the ways in which research topics and scholarly priorities are selected and how global discourses on Asian Catholics are impacted by their Western engagement.

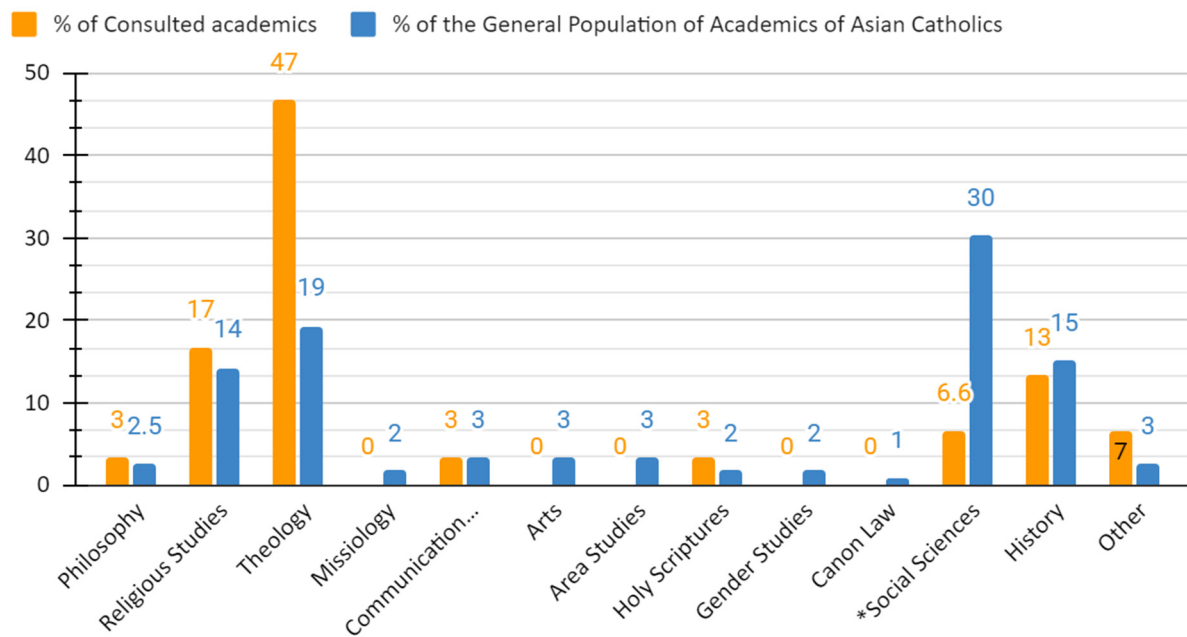


Figure 1. Comparing academic background between consulted academics and the general population of academics of Asian Catholicism. * Social sciences (sociology, Political Science, anthropology, linguistics, psychology).

Recent research also shows that because of various forms of migration, Asian Catholics are not only present in Asia but also across the world (Ninh 2017; Vaidyanathan 2019). Yet, our survey confirms that, with the exception of Central Asia, which has received scant scholarly attention, almost all Asian countries have the academic literature on local Catholics. Similarly, there is a body of scholarship discussing Asian Catholics established in the West (for instance, Vietnamese American Catholics). Thus, there is an overlap between where scholars are located and where research is conducted. However, there is apparently very little, if any, research on Asian Catholics in Latin America and Africa despite the growing presence of Asians in these regions of the world. In Asian Catholic Studies, the geography of knowledge is driven mainly by Asian and Western actors.

In terms of language, we note that in Asia, there is no single, obvious, and predominant language for cross-regional research and scholarly conversations. However, our survey suggests that when it comes to scholarship on Asian Catholicism, most academics use English as their primary language for publication. While the survey was circulated in English and some respondents mentioned other languages as their medium of publication (Chinese and Korean), English appears to remain the *lingua franca* of scholarship on Asian Catholicism. Notwithstanding the primary use of English for publication (72.1% of our respondents), some respondents indicated four European languages (French, Italian, German, Portuguese, and Czech) and six Asian Languages (Chinese, Indonesian, Korean, Vietnamese, Malayalam, and Japanese) as additional languages used. We can infer that scholarship on Asian Catholics has either an English-dominated audience and readership or is in congruence with the global publication culture's demand for written works in English.

5.3. Voluntary Engagement in the Synod of Synodality

To discuss how academics of Asian Catholics have voluntarily engaged in synodal activities, one must consider beforehand the kind of usual ecclesial relations and positioning these scholars cultivate with the church. The survey shows that 81% of the respondents describe themselves as Catholics, 6% Christian, and 8% without a religion. In other words, most of the scholarship on Asian Catholics is driven by individuals who

identify with the Catholic Church and study Catholicism from an emic perspective. Also, as a large proportion of them are personally involved in or/and identify with activities of the Catholic Church, they are not simply external analysts of the Catholic Church but also participant observers.

Among the 119 respondents, 49 scholars (41%) have voluntarily engaged with activities and events related to the Synod on Synodality. It is noteworthy but not surprising that this is a relatively high proportion compared to the general population of Catholics. While we do not have the exact proportion of Catholics worldwide who have joined synodal activities, it is unlikely that 41% of world Catholics have contributed to these conversations. Therefore, we must say that, proportionally, academics of Asian Catholicism have been particularly more engaged in synodal conversations.

Among the 49 individuals who have voluntarily engaged in synodal activities, 23 individuals did belong to the clergy (out of a total population of 30 members of the Catholic clergy/religious order). This means that 76% of “clerical academics” took the initiative to join activities related to the synod. Simultaneously, among the 49 individuals who have voluntarily engaged in activities of the synod, only 26 individuals did belong to the laity (out of a total population of 89 individuals who identify as lay people). This means that, in terms of proportion, only 29% of the “lay academics” took the initiative to join activities related to the synod. In other words, clerical academics were much more likely to spontaneously join synodal activities than their lay counterparts.

Unsurprisingly, the Synod on Synodality still has attracted higher interest from scholars who are members of the clergy than those of the laity despite Pope Francis’s constant and consistent invitation to listen to diverse voices. This interest gap between academic laity and academic clergy warrants further investigation and systematic study. Why would the ecclesial status of a scholar with a professional interest in Asian Catholics impact her/his desire to engage with the synod? How can we explain that the ecclesial status seemed more important than intellectual interest? What does it mean that the Synod on Synodality was apparently more appealing to clergy members?

Nonetheless, this gap of interest between academic laity and academic clergy highlights the lateral coexistence of two communities of listening and discernment: the professional academics and the synodal assembly. Despite their common interest in the lived realities of Asian Catholics, these two communities remained distinct and sometimes distant. This finding is significant given the ambivalent relations between theology, church leadership, and academia broadly conceived. Even if they are investigating Catholicism as a scientific inquiry, most academics tend to work independently from theologians and religious leaders, and vice versa, due to incongruences in methodology, epistemology, and ontology. However, the Synod on Synodality remains a strategic site where theology, ecclesiastical matters, and social science may complement each other, given the complexity of the subject matter.

5.4. Consulted Academics

Besides the voluntary engagement of academics with activities related to the synod, our survey also examined the proportion of academics who have been sought out by ecclesial entities and consulted as experts to provide scholarly insights. Among the 119 respondents, only a quarter of them, i.e., 30 individuals, were consulted by ecclesial bodies to provide expertise for the Synod on Synodality. Among the 89 academics who were not consulted, a vast majority of them (87%) declared that they would have been willing to contribute to the synod if consulted, as long as they had enough time (54 respondents), and there were clear terms of reference in which their expertise would be involved (48 respondents).

Nonetheless, 30 respondents (25%) have been approached to provide expertise for the Synod on Synodality. This section focused on these 30 consulted academics. First, our survey indicates that gender may not be a significant variable in the chance to be consulted by the Catholic Church. Our findings reveal that among consulted academics, 66.6% identified as male while 23.3% identified as female (7), 6.6% preferred not to say (2), and 3.33% self-described. This is very close to the gender ratio of the general population of academics of Asian Catholicism, where it is predominantly composed of scholars who identify as male. We are unable to make a direct relationship between gender and the chance to be consulted in the synodality given that there is a higher male proportion in the field of Asian Catholicism in general, but we must highlight that female scholars were consulted in the same proportion.

Second, when we look at the number of articles and books the consulted academics have published, our findings demonstrate a real diversity of profiles. Among consulted scholars, just 43% have published between 1 and 5 publications (articles, books, etc.), 10% have produced between 6 and 10 publications, and nearly 47% have published more than 11 publications. This suggests that both established and emerging academics have been consulted.

While gender and seniority have apparently not impacted the ways through which academics of Asian Catholics were consulted, our survey reveals, however, that their clerical status probably has. Based on our collected responses, 40% of the consulted academics were also members of the clergy/religious order (12 respondents). Yet, among the general population of academics of Asian Catholics, only 25% of them were members of the clergy/religious order. This represents a significant gap and suggests that while synodal entities have engaged with a significant number of academics from various backgrounds, ecclesial status has influenced the selection process of scholars. Academics who are clergy members were more likely to be consulted by the Catholic Church for matters related to synodality than those who were not. Within synodal efforts to include academic voices, scholarship was not the only and ultimate parameters that ecclesial actors considered.

However, our survey shows that another parameter was also essential for shaping this *lateral synodality*. Among consulted academics, 46.67% are theologians, and other disciplines are underrepresented.¹² If one compares this finding to the disciplinary background of academics of Asian Catholicism in general, significant differences emerge between historians, social scientists, and theologians. Theologians, who represent only 19% of the total academics of Asian Catholicism in this survey, comprise almost half of those consulted. Meanwhile, social scientists, who represent 30.2% of the total academics of Asian Catholicism, constitute only 6.6% of the consulted academics. Only historians are represented proportionately (15% of all academics, 13% of the consulted ones). In other words, along with the synodal efforts to include academic knowledge, theology seems to have been prioritized over social sciences, and disciplinary background has played a significant role in selecting consulted academics.

Among the consulted academics, 66% were still active in this collaboration on Synodality in late 2024 (20 academics). Eight have been involved since 2021, five since 2022, six since 2023, and one since 2024. This suggests real fluidity and diversity in the integration of consulted academics. For four years, academics have come in and out of the Synod on Synodality for short and long periods. Additional comments from our surveys suggest that some scholars provided punctual expertise, while others have remained engaged for a longer period of time. In other words, there were multiple modalities of academic engagement within the formal synodal processes.

Finally, we observe that, on the financial front, 53% of the consulted academics (16 respondents) specified that they did not receive compensation in any form for their

contribution (meals, remuneration, etc.). In almost one case out of two, synodal entities expected that academics would deliver professional and scholarly expertise for free. Yet, among these 16 non-compensated academics, 10 were still active in this collaboration during our survey, and 6 were laypeople. This issue of free labor and its symbolic value would deserve further investigation to understand more precisely how different expectations and value systems may have shaped the lateral coexistence of academic and synodal communities.

6. Conclusions: Communities of Listening

Our study reveals both the emergence of a diverse and robust community of scholars on Asian Catholicism and their paradoxical involvement within synodal processes. While we do not have the means to fully evaluate how this new and diversified scholarship on Asian Catholicism has been integrated into synodal conversations, it appears that it was mostly theologians and clergy members who represented academic voices within synodal processes. This is not a surprising result. While scholarship from other disciplines may have been studied by synodal participants, it occurred in direct dialogue with a stronger presence of theological and clerical voices.

The Synod on Synodality reveals that academics of Asian Catholics who have emerged as a distinct and parallel community of listening and discernment are not necessarily and systematically engaged in synodal dynamics. One must highlight that this distance comes from both sides and, probably, from a mutual lack of interest. Therefore, *lateral synodality* is not a form of antagonism or ignorance. Instead, it is the partial and cautious engagement of ecclesial and academic spheres of listening and discernment. While synodality aims at including more perspectives and deeper attention toward the lived realities of Catholics, all perspectives and voices were not necessarily trying to engage in these conversations or invited to do so.

As *lateral synodality* highlights these paradoxes, the proximity of interests, and the gaps between communities of dialogue, it stands as a theoretical tool to further explore the organizational change in 21st-century Roman Catholicism. As the Catholic Church continues to engage with processes of globalization, cultural diversity, international migration, and geopolitical heteronomy while searching for ways to adjust its mechanisms of governance, the mobilization of academic expertise remains a challenge both for academics and church leaders. The distance between these spheres of dialogue unveils not only lateral tensions between power structures and rationalities but also the ways Global Catholicism negotiates its organizational patterns.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.C. and B.B.A.; methodology, M.C. and B.B.A.; software, B.B.A. and R.J.G.S.; validation, M.C., B.B.A. and R.J.G.S.; formal analysis, R.J.G.S.; investigation, R.J.G.S.; resources, M.C. and R.J.G.S.; data curation, R.J.G.S.; writing—original draft preparation, M.C., B.B.A. and R.J.G.S.; writing—review and editing, M.C., B.B.A. and R.J.G.S.; visualization, M.C. and R.J.G.S.; supervision, M.C.; project administration, M.C. and B.B.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The ethical framework of the survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the National University of Singapore on 22 April 2024, with Dr. Michel Chambon as Principal Investigator. The approval code is NUS-IRB-2024-398.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data supporting reported results can be found through the full report of the survey accessible on <https://www.isac-research.org/surveysynodality>, accessed 21 February 2025.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A Questions of the Survey

- Your year of birth?
- Your citizenship?
- Your country of residency?
- Your gender?
- Your religion (if any)?
- Your ecclesial status?
- Your current professional status?
- What is your highest academic degree?
- What is your main field/ discipline of scholarship?
- What is your subfield of scholarship?
- Have you published at least one publication related to an Asian Catholic population?
- How many publications (papers, books, etc.) do you have related to Asian Catholics?
- In which year (approximately) did you publish your first publication about an Asian Catholic population?
- Where is this Asian Catholic population located?
- In which language(s) have you mostly published about Asian Catholics?
- Are you currently conducting any research related to Asian Catholics?
- Have you heard of the “Synod on Synodality”?
- Have you voluntarily involved yourself in any activity related to the Synod on Synodality?
- Are you part of any organization or commission in charge of implementing the Synod on Synodality?
- As an academic with knowledge related to Asian Catholics, have you been approached to provide expertise and insights for the Synod on Synodality?
 - If NO
 - In case an ecclesial entity would have approached you for your expertise, would you have been willing to contribute?
 - Under which conditions?
 - If YES
 - Which kind of ecclesial group, entity, or figure has approached you?
 - In which country this ecclesial entity is located?
 - When were you approached? (year)
 - Could you briefly describe the nature of your contribution?
 - Have you received any compensation for your contribution?
 - Are you still active in this collaboration?
 - If you would like to receive the final report of this survey, please provide your email.
 - If you would like to disclose your identity, please write your name below (Optional)

Notes

¹ See “Synod of Bishops to take up theme of synodality in 2022” <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/synod-of-bishops-to-take-up-theme-of-synodality-in-2022.html>, accessed on 1 October 2024.

² See note 1.

³ See full document online: https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2023-12-12_towards-2024/ENG_Document_TOWARDS-OCTOBER-2024_XVI_II-Session.pdf, accessed on 1 October 2024.

- 4 “The prospect of an authentically synodal discernment also requires the contribution of theological and canonical expertise, as well as of the human and social sciences, involving experts in these disciplines and academic institutions in the area.”
- 5 For more information on the consortium, visit: <https://www.isac-research.org/aboutus> 21 February 2025.
- 6 The creation of stable bishop conferences is another example of Vatican II effort to revive a more synodal governance.
- 7 See Pope Francis, homily during the concluding mass of the Synod on Synodality, 27 October 2024 <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2024/documents/20241027-omelia-conclusionione-sinodo.html#:~:text=Brothers%20and%20sisters,%20not%20a,of%20the%20Gospel%20to%20others>, accessed on 29 October 2024.
- 8 This was part of Peter C. Phan’s lecture on the relations between theology and sociology together with sociologist, Jose Casanova, at SALIKSIKAN 2024: Engaging with Theology for a Critical Social Scientific Study of Religion at the University of Santo Tomas Manila on 8 October 2024, organized by the Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics (ISAC), De La Salle University Manila and the University of Santo Tomas Manila. The lecture was part of the four-Asian-city tour of Phan and Casanova in Tokyo, Seoul, Manila, and Singapore organized by the Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics (ISAC) between 2 October and 13 October 2024.
- 9 The ethical framework of the survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the National University of Singapore, with (removed for peer reviewers) Principal Investigator.
- 10 This regional focus, however, does not mean “Asia” since a lot of Asian Catholics live in different parts of the world, such as Indian priests serving in France or Vietnamese Catholics established in the USA.
- 11 The two inclusion criteria were one: having at least a master’s degree; and two: having published one academic paper related to Asian Catholics.
- 12 Five belong to Religious Studies (16.7%), and four are historians (13.3%). In the field of social sciences (11% of consulted academics), there was one respondent for anthropology, sociology, and Communication Studies, respectively.

References

- Artaud de la Ferriere, Alexis. 2024. *A Dangerous Business: Synodality, Sociology, and the Good of the Church*. Theology Responding to the Challenge of Synodality. Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana.
- Ballano, Vivencio. 2024. *Pope Francis’s synod on synodality and modern sociology: Exploring the synod’s behavioral and research aspects*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Barreto, Raimundo, and Vladimir Latinovic. 2023. *Decolonial Horizons: Reshaping Synodality, Mission, and Social Justice*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Faggioli, Massimo. 2015. Vatican II and the Agenda for Collegiality and Synodality in the Twenty-First Century. In *A Council for the Global Church*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, p. 229. [CrossRef]
- Faggioli, Massimo. 2020. From Collegiality to Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis’s Listening Primacy. *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 85: 352–69. [CrossRef]
- Famerée, Joseph. 2008. What Might Catholicism Learn from Orthodoxy in Relation to Collegiality? In *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [CrossRef]
- Fisher, Anthony. 2023. *Unity in Christ: Bishops, Synodality, and Communion*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.
- Gaillardetz, Richard R. 2023. Synodality and the Francis Pontificate: A Fresh Reception of Vatican II. *Theological Studies (Baltimore)* 84: 44–60. [CrossRef]
- Inguanez, Joe, and Bryan Froehle. 2024. The Challenge of Synodality. *Religions* 15: 770. [CrossRef]
- Join-Lambert, Arnaud. 2019. «Le concile provincial, une chance pour la synodalité de l’Église». *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 107: 301–20. [CrossRef]
- Loughlin, Thomas O’. 2023. Celebrating Synodality: Synodality as a Fundamental Aspect of Christian Liturgy. *New Blackfriars* 104: 161–78. [CrossRef]
- Luciani, Rafael. 2022. *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Melloni, Alberto, and Silvia Scatena. 2005. *Synod and Synodality: Theology, History, Canon Law and Ecumenism in New Contact: International Colloquium Bruges 2003*. Münster: Lit Verlag.
- Ninh, Thien-Huong T. 2017. *Race, Gender, and Religion in the Vietnamese Diaspora: The New Chosen People*, 1st ed. Cham: Springer International Publishing. [CrossRef]
- Nweke, Paulinus Chukwudi. 2023. Synod on Synodality: A Sociological Analysis of its Participatory Methodology. *Focus-Francis’ Synodality and the Future of a Divided Church* 85: 111–22. Available online: <https://www.acjoi.org/index.php/josstudies/article/view/3765/3689> (accessed on 21 February 2024).
- Phan, Peter. 2024. Engaging with Theology for a Critical Social Scientific Study of Religion. Paper presented at the SALIKSI-KAN 2024, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines, October 8.
- Puglisi, James. 2010. *How Can the Petrine Ministry Be a Service to the Unity of the Universal Church?* Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.

- Souletie, Jean-Louis. 2024. «La liturgie, pédagogie de la synodalité». *Transversalités (Paris)* 169: 71–83. [CrossRef]
- Sullivan, Francis A. 2006. Synod and Synodality, Theology, History, Canon Law and Ecumenism in New Contact. In *The Catholic Historical Review*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America. [CrossRef]
- Synod of Bishops. 2021. For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission. Preparatory Document. September 7. Available online: https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-21x21/en_prepa_book.pdf (accessed on 21 February 2024).
- Theobald, Christoph. 2019. «La synodalité de l'Église: Actes du 26 e colloque des RSR (Paris, 8–10 novembre 2018)». *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 107: 177–80. [CrossRef]
- Vaidyanathan, Brandon. 2019. *Mercenaries and Missionaries: Capitalism and Catholicism in the Global South*, 1st ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. [CrossRef]
- Zaccaria, Francesco. 2024. Synodality and Decision-Making Processes: Towards New Bodies of Participation in the Church. *Religions* 15: 54. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.