

The Synodal Dimension of Catechesis. The Third Book of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok from a Twenty-Five-Year Perspective

Introduction

The synodal renewal of the Church's life belongs to the most profound spiritual and organizational impulses brought forth by the Second Vatican Council and by successive popes¹. Its essence is the communal discernment of God's will, engaging the whole People of God and oriented towards the renewal of the Church's mission. It is in this light that one can also read the recent Apostolic Letter of Leo XIV *In unitate fidei*, promulgated on the occasion of the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, in which the Pope recalls that "Christians have been called to walk in harmony" safeguarding and

¹ The reform carried out by Paul VI was a direct consequence of conciliar ecclesiology. In 1965, through the Apostolic Letter Issued Motu Proprio *Apostolica sollicitudo*, he established the Synod of Bishops as a permanent institution of the universal Church: "And so, after carefully considering the whole matter, because of our esteem and regard for all the Catholic bishops and with the aim of providing them with abundant means for greater and more effective participation in Our concern for the universal Church, on Our own initiative and by Our apostolic authority, We hereby erect and establish here in Rome a permanent Council of bishops for the universal Church, to be directly and immediately subject to Our power. Its proper name will be the Synod of Bishops". Paul VI, *Apostolica sollicitudo*, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19650915_apostolica-sollicitudo.html (date of access: 20.11.2025).

lovingly transmitting the gift of faith expressed in the Creed, and that the truth of faith “*deserves to be professed and understood in ever new and relevant ways*”.² Such a perspective underscores that every form of synodal renewal – including at the level of the local Church – must be rooted in the faithful living and transmission of the Church’s profession of faith. In a particular Church, the diocesan synod³ constitutes a distinctive expression of this process: an event both spiritual and juridical, leading to the ordering of ecclesial life and to its pastoral transformation. Pope Francis emphasized this profoundly spiritual character of the synod at the opening of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, reminding us that “*Synod is not a parliament or an opinion poll; the Synod is an ecclesial event and its protagonist is the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit is not present, there will be no Synod*”⁴ His words clearly indicate that every form of synodal renewal – including at the diocesan level – is above all spiritual and ecclesial in nature, rather than merely organizational.

² Leo XIV, *In unitate fidei*, 1 see https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost_letters/documents/20251123-in-unitate-fidei.html (date of access: 29.11.2025).

³ Most authors believe that the first diocesan synod assembly took place in France in Auxerre in A.D 578. (see A.M Jaszcz, *La doctrina histórico-jurídica del sínodo diocesano y la normativa vigente. La actividad de las diócesis polacas*, “Review of Comparative Law”, vol. XXVI–XXVII (2016), p. 169.

⁴ Francis, *Address for Opening of the Synod*, see <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-caminosinodale.html> (date of access: 20.11.2025). Pope Benedict XVI likewise emphasized that a synod is not a place for political maneuvering or competition for votes, but a space of shared listening to the faith of the Church. The aim of its deliberations is not the pursuit of novelty, but the liberation from individualism and the discovery of a common response that flows from the Gospel and can be expressed in the language of our time. The value of synodal decisions is not determined by the number of raised hands, but by the degree of discernment and the manifestation of the truth that speaks in the conscience of the Church. Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Kościół – znak wśród narodów. Pisma eklezjologiczne i ekumeniczne. [Church – Sign among Nations. Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Writings]*, in: *Opera omnia*, vol. VIII/1, transl. W. Szymona, Lublin 2013, p. 523.

It is precisely in this spirit that the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok (1991–2000) should be interpreted, for it set new frameworks for pastoral life at the dawn of the third millennium.

Catechesis constitutes one of the foundations of the Church's life, a point clearly emphasized in the documents of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok. In the preface to the synodal decrees, Archbishop Stanisław Szymecki – referring to the address delivered by John Paul II at the opening of the synod in the Białystok cathedral – observed that the synod was meant “to enliven the parish, and within it above all the family, but also other communities and environments”⁵. One of the key instruments of this renewal was to be the strengthening and re-foundation of catechesis. The very fact that the entire Third Book of the synodal documents was dedicated to catechesis confirms its central importance for the identity and mission of the local Church. In the perspective outlined by Leo XIV – who in *In unitate fidei* presents the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed as the common heritage of all Christians and as a constant source of hope in “these difficult times we are living”⁶ – the synodal reflection on catechesis appears even more clearly as a service to that same profession of faith, lived and proclaimed within the concrete circumstances of the local Church.

This perspective acquires a particular depth when one takes into account the historical context of the Archdiocese of Białystok, which – although before the Second World War, and formally until 1991 – belonged to the structures of the Archdiocese of Vilnius. This heritage formed the immediate backdrop for the first proper synod of the Church in Białystok and shaped its understanding of the role of catechesis in the life of the community. Today, a quarter of a century after the promulgation of the synodal documents, a renewed reading of Third Book, entitled Catechesis, offers not only

⁵ S. Szymecki, *Preface*, in: *I Synod Archidiecezji Białostockiej*, Białystok 2000, p. 5.

⁶ Leo XIV, *In unitate fidei*, 2.

an opportunity to revisit that heritage but also an invitation to reflect on the future of catechesis. The vision of catechesis articulated by the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok at the threshold of the 1990s can serve as a point of reference for the contemporary challenges faced by the Church: the need for a new evangelization, the formation of adults, the renewal of parish life, and the development of a culture of synodality so strongly emphasized by Pope Francis. Therefore, viewing Third Book from the perspective of the past 25 years is not merely a return to the past but also an opening toward the future -toward seeking ways by which catechesis may continue to be a space of maturing in faith and a place where a community of missionary disciples is formed, rooted in the Creed and capable of carrying it into the realities of the modern world.

Synodality and Diocesan Synods

Synodality, understood as the common journey of the People of God⁷ in the light of the Holy Spirit, stands today as one of the key ecclesiological paradigms and, at the same time, one of the most ancient practices of the Church's life. Although the term has been newly brought to the forefront and deepened in the teaching of recent popes, its essence has from the very beginning been expressed in the assemblies of bishops, presbyters, and the faithful who engage in the shared discernment of faith and of the life of the community. In theological terms, synodality signifies not only the participation of all the baptized in the mission of the Church, but also a dynamic process of listening to the Word of God, of listening to one another, and of jointly seeking ways to fulfil the Gospel within concrete historical circumstances.

⁷ “What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word “synod”. Journeying together – laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome (...), Francis, *Address for Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015)*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html (date of access: 22.11.2025).

Understanding synodality requires referring to its most fundamental definition, which is presented in a concise form in the Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops:

The terms “synodality” and “synodal” derive from the ancient and constant ecclesial practice of meeting at synods. According to the traditions of the Eastern and Western Churches, the word “synod” refers to institutions and events that assumed different forms over time, involving a plurality of agents and participants. This variety notwithstanding, what unites them is gathering together to dialogue, discern and decide. Owing to the experience of recent years, the meaning of these terms has come to be better understood, and what they represent is more vibrantly lived. They have become ever more deeply associated with the desire for a Church that is closer to people and more relational – a Church that is God’s home and family. During the synodal journey, we have witnessed a fruitful convergence regarding the meaning of synodality that forms the basis of this Document. Synodality is the walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God’s Kingdom, in union with all humanity. Orientated towards mission, synodality involves gathering at all levels of the Church for mutual listening, dialogue, and community discernment. It also involves reaching consensus as an expression of Christ rendering Himself present, He Who is alive in the Spirit. Furthermore, it consists in reaching decisions according to differentiated co-responsibilities. Along these lines, we can understand better what it means to say that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church (cf. ITC 1). In simple and concise terms, synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ.”

Francis, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission Final Document*, 28.

The concise definition cited above presents synodality as a dynamic reality, rooted in the Church's tradition and, at the same time, oriented towards mission. This offers a key hermeneutical lens for interpreting the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok and its understanding of catechesis.

As Pope Francis reminds us, “the first level of the exercise of synodality is had in the particular Churches”, in which the institution of the diocesan synod plays an important role, since it is there that “priests and laity are called to cooperate with the bishop for the good of the whole ecclesial community”⁸. The diocesan synod is, therefore, a distinctive form of living out synodality – an event in which a particular Church renews its spiritual life and orders its structures, discerning how to fulfil its mission amid changing social, cultural, and pastoral circumstances. Its fruit should be not merely the updating of norms, but above all a renewed “missionary commitment”⁹ of the community¹⁰. In this perspective, diocesan synods appear as spaces in which the local Church undertakes the task of reading the signs of the times, confronting faith with the challenges of the age, and shaping forms of pastoral ministry appropriate to the real needs of the faithful. This process – rooted in tradition

⁸ Francis, *Address for Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015)*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html (date of access: 22.11.2025).

⁹ Francis, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission Final Document*, 3.

¹⁰ “A truly missionary Church is not one that speaks from above but walks alongside her people. Only then can the Church embody the Gospel she proclaims and restore her credibility in a wounded world. If the Church is truly to be seen as the Body of Christ in the world, she must embody its message in every facet of its life. This includes the structures through which decisions are made, voices are heard, and the Gospel is proclaimed. Only then will she fully become a missionary Church – not in name only, but in spirit and truth”. S. Mullick, *A Missionary Church for All: Synodality and The Role of Laity Co-Responsibility, Reform, and The Journey Toward an Inclusive Ecclesial Mission*, “Word & Worship”, vol. 58, no. 2 July. – Dec. 2025, p. 128.

and yet open to new impulses of the Holy Spirit – makes it possible to better understand the path taken over the past quarter-century by the local Churches in Poland, including the Archdiocese of Białystok.

Since the diocesan synod functions as an instrument of discernment and renewal, the question naturally arises regarding the conditions for its convocation and the factors that lead the Church to embark upon such a process. According to the norms of canon law, the competence to convoke a diocesan synod belongs to the diocesan bishop¹¹, who makes this decision on the basis of discerning the pastoral, social, and institutional circumstances of his diocese. This initiative is therefore not an isolated act but is embedded in a broader ecclesial and historical context that takes into account both the local needs of the particular Church and the wider impulses arising from the universal Church.

At this point, it becomes essential to view the broader dynamics of the universal Church, for it is precisely these dynamics that set the direction for the renewal undertaken within dioceses. A particular role is played by the Bishop of Rome, whose teaching and decisions determine the rhythm of synodal processes initiated after the Second Vatican Council. After the period of conciliar *aggiornamento* developed by Paul VI, the pontificate of John Paul II became a time that strongly inspired the growth of synodal processes in the Church. During his meeting with the bishops in Manila in 1995, the Pope noted that although he was often referred to as “the Pope of the young” or “the Pope of the family”, from the perspective of history his pontificate would be remembered above all as a distinctive period in the development of the idea of synodality – as the pontificate of “the Pope of the Synod” and “the synodal Pope”¹². This

¹¹ Code of Canon Law 462 §1. For further information on the diocesan synod, see the *Code of Canon Law*, Canons 460–468.

¹² “What the Pope received these days are all the words that say: “Papa dei giovani”, “the Pope of the Youth”. And so, he is still looking for the young people, how to meet them, how to stay close to them and so on. That is now how they

self-reflection of John Paul II was not a personal remark but an accurate diagnosis of the processes taking place in the Church: many dioceses at that time were deciding to convoke synods.

The Church in Poland likewise participated in this wider synodal dynamism. During the pontificate of John Paul II (1978–2005), numerous dioceses in the country undertook the decision to convene synods. Their final shape was significantly influenced by various factors that A. Jaszcz described as historical – both of local and universal scope – as well as by the doctrinal and juridical reforms emerging after the Second Vatican Council¹³. Since every diocesan synod is not only a juridical event but also a process rooted in a particular heritage, a natural step in examining the synod of the Church in Białystok is to look at the history and tradition from which it emerged. It is therefore a logical continuation of the above reflection to turn to the synods of the (Arch)Diocese of Vilnius, from which the identity of the Church in Białystok developed. It was there that the ecclesial models of community life, pastoral ministry, and catechesis were shaped – models that formed the historical foundation for the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok.

Synods of the Vilnius (Arch)diocese up to the Second World War

The history of diocesan synods in the Diocese, and later, in the Archdiocese of Vilnius, reveals the centuries-long effort of the

call him: “Papa dei giovani” and also “Papa delle famiglie”. But what I would like to underline in this moment is of the other nature. Perhaps, the present Pope will be called once the “Pope of the Synod”, “Synodal Pope”. See John Paul II, *Address of his holiness John Paul II at the conclusion of the meeting with delegates of the Federation of Episcopal Conferences (Manila, Sunday 15 January 1995)*, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1995/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19950115_s-carlos-seminary.html (date of access: 10.09.2025).

¹³ A. Jaszcz, *Determinanta historyczna oraz reformy doktrynalno-prawne jako przyczyny zwoływania polskich synodów diecezjalnych podczas pontyfikatu św. Jana Pawła II*, “Fides, Ratio et Patria. Studia Toruńskie”, 18/2023, pp. 335–353

Church in this region to shape the religious, pastoral, and administrative life of both clergy and faithful. Synods, in accordance with canon law and tradition, served as the forum where the most important matters concerning the functioning of the diocese were regulated. In the long-term perspective, they constituted an instrument for implementing the teaching of the universal Church – especially the decrees of the Council of Trent – while also responding to local pastoral challenges. Diocesan synods were among the permanent tools of governance within the Vilnius Church. It is worth noting that the aforementioned Council of Trent intensified the holding of diocesan synods. However, in the Polish and Lithuanian context, this requirement proved very difficult to fulfil; therefore, the Diocese of Vilnius at first obtained permission to convene synods every two years, and under Bishop B. Wojna, permission for a three-year¹⁴ inter-synodal period. In practice, however, this regulation, for various reasons, was not always observed¹⁵.

It should be noted that in the sixteenth century nine synods were convened in the Diocese of Vilnius. The earliest references to synods date from the beginning of that century. The first was held at the end of 1520 or at the beginning of 1521, during the episcopate of Bishop Jan from the Lithuanian Princes. Very little information has survived regarding its course. Owing to a synodal oration delivered by the papal legate Zacharias Ferreri, on the “office of the good shepherd”, we know that it indeed took place¹⁶. The tradition of cyclical gatherings of the clergy became firmly embedded in diocesan life, as evidenced by eight other sixteenth-century diocesan or provincial synods: the synod at the end of 1527 or in the first half of 1528 under the same Bishop Jan; four synods under Bishop P. Holszański – in 1538, 1542, 1546, and 1555; two synods under Bishop W. Protase-

¹⁴ W. Wójcik, *Ze studiów nad synodami polskimi*, Lublin 1982, p. 148.

¹⁵ See T. Krahel, *Zarys dziejów (archi)diecezji wileńskiej*, in: T. Kasabuła, A. Szot (ed.), *Diecezja wileńska. Studia i szkice*, Białystok 2014, p. 109.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

wicz – in 1559 and 1563; and the first post-Tridentine synod under Bishop Jerzy Radziwiłł in 1582.

The seventeenth century brought further synods, despite wars and political instability. They continued to serve as an instrument for ordering ecclesial life. Under Bishop B. Wojna, four synods are known: from 1602, 1606, 1611, and 1613, dealing with pastoral and disciplinary matters. The preacher at the synod of 1613 was Fr. Piotr Skarga. Three more synods were held under Bishop Eustachy Wołowicz, in 1618, 1623, and 1626; however, “there are no statutes from these synods or information on their course”¹⁷. Some sources even question the synod of 1618 and that of 1623, as the latter “may not have taken place due to the plague spreading in the diocese and was postponed to a more convenient time”¹⁸. Two synods are attributed to Bishop Abraham Wojna – those of 1631 and 1635. The episcopate of Bishop Tyszkiewicz brought two more synods: one in 1651 and another in 1654, the latter connected with a provincial synod announced by the Archbishop of Gniezno. The synod of 1669, convened by Bishop A. Sapieha, was preceded by deanery visitations of churches and priests in the respective deaneries. The short episcopate of Bishop Andrzej Kotowicz produced a three-day synod in 1685. Under Bishop Konstanty Kazimierz Brzostowski two synods were held, in 1691 and again in 1717, the latter of which has well-documented sources. The last synod before the partitions was that of 1744, during the episcopate of Bishop Michał Zienkiewicz.

The next synod was convened only almost two hundred years later, despite the fact that Bishop I. Massalski had unsuccessfully “announced the intention of convening a diocesan synod (in 1774 and 1777)”¹⁹. During the partitions and under Russian rule, it was not permitted to convene synods. Only the twentieth century made it possible to renew synodal activity. After Poland regained inde-

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 110.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 111.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 113.

pendence, Bishop Jerzy Matulewicz inaugurated preparatory work for a synod. These efforts proved fruitless, however, because he “left the episcopal see of Vilnius”²⁰.

The synod of the Archdiocese of Vilnius – which in 1925 was raised to the rank of an archdiocese and metropolitan see²¹ – convened by Archbishop Romuald Jałbrzykowski, held from 9 to 11 July 1931, was a significant event of the early twentieth century. It was the last diocesan synod before the outbreak of the Second World War. Before the war, in addition to this diocesan synod, a provincial synod was also held in Vilnius in 1939. In total, as emphasized by Fr. T. Krahel, up to the Second World War, 25 synods were held in the Diocese and Archdiocese of Vilnius,

of which 9 took place in the sixteenth century, 13 in the seventeenth, 2 in the eighteenth, and 1 in the twentieth century. Statutes printed from 11 synods have survived, constituting valuable sources for the history of the Archdiocese²².

An analysis of the centuries-long synodal practice of the Diocese and later Archdiocese of Vilnius reveals the Church’s consistent pursuit of a mature, stable, and orderly religious life. Despite shifting historical circumstances – Reformation, wars, political turmoil, and periods of foreign domination – synods remained the principal instrument for regulating clerical discipline, parish organization, liturgical uniformity, and pastoral norms. Their decrees consistently returned to the same essential elements: care for the proper preaching of the Word of God, the obligation of catechizing the faithful, safeguarding doctrinal orthodoxy, and ensuring the efficient functioning of diocesan structures. For this reason, the preserved synodal statutes constitute today an exceptionally valuable

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 114.

²¹ T. Krahel, *Archidiecezja Białostocka, in Spis kościołów i duchowieństwa archidiecezji białostockiej 1998, stan z dn. 31.08.1998*, Białystok 1998, pp. 24–25.

²² Ibidem, p. 115.

body of sources, allowing us to discern how the vision of pastoral ministry and religious formation developed in this region. The synod of 1931²³ – at once a summary of the entire interwar period – closes the great synodal tradition of Vilnius, a tradition which, despite many adversities, shaped the religious identity of the diocese for more than four centuries.

The First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok

As noted in the introduction to this study, the Archdiocese of Białystok – because it was, before the war and formally until 1991, part of the Archdiocese of Vilnius – is the natural continuator of its history and tradition. The idea of convoking a diocesan synod in Białystok emerged nearly sixty years after the last diocesan synod in Vilnius. It grew from the universal call of the Second Vatican Council, which desired that the institution of the diocesan synod – known for centuries – should acquire new dynamism and become an effective instrument of ecclesial renewal²⁴.

The preparatory work was initiated in 1989 by the Apostolic Administrator, Bishop Edward Kisiel²⁵, thus drawing upon the well-established synodal tradition of the Archdiocese of Vilnius. He

²³ See in this monograph *Dziedzictwo synodalności*: A. Szot, *Synod Archidiecezji Wileńskiej z 1931 r.*, in: A. Proniewski, L.M. Jakoniuk, T. Kasabuła (eds), *Dziedzictwo synodalności*, Białystok 2025, pp. 205–221.

²⁴ A historical outline of the forms of synodality after the Second Vatican Council was delineated by Alphonse Borras. See A. Borras, *Trois expressions de la synodalité depuis Vatican II*, “Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses” 90 (2014), pp. 643–666.

²⁵ Archbishop Edward Kisiel, before becoming a bishop, had served for many years as a catechetical visitor in the Archdiocese of Białystok, and matters of catechesis were particularly close to him. See further: E. Młyńska, *Ksiądz Edward Kisiel – wizytator katechetyczny w Archidiecezji w Białymstoku*, in: *W małej salce... Katechizacja na Białostoczyźnie w okresie PRL*, (ed.) A. Szot, Białystok 2014, pp. 105–122; E. Młyńska, L.M. Jakoniuk, *Archbishop Edward Kisiel: the “primary catechist” of the diocese*, “Rocznik Teologii Katolickiej” vol. 17, no. 3 (2018), pp. 9–23.

undertook a thorough study of the synodal statutes of 1931, still in force at that time, as well as the decrees of other diocesan synods in Poland. He examined the current norms of canon law promulgated in the 1983 Code of Canon Law and held numerous conversations and consultations with clergy and lay faithful²⁶. The need for a synod was also maturing within the broader context of discussions regarding a possible plenary synod in Poland. The preparatory work initiated by Bishop Kisiel lasted nearly two and a half years²⁷. After obtaining the approval of the Holy See on 31 December 1990, the synod was fully prepared, and on 5 June 1991 it was solemnly opened in the Białystok cathedral by Pope John Paul II. His words assumed particular significance. His address not only confirmed the appropriateness of convoking the synod and situated it within the broader history of the Church in Poland, but also became the theological programme and pastoral roadmap for the entire synodal process in the archdiocese. The Pope presented the essence of the synod as an event in which tradition and contemporary realities meet, and in which the ecclesial community undertakes a shared effort to discern God's will in the face of new challenges and social transformations. He also emphasized the need for a deepened reflection on the heritage of the Second Vatican Council and its reception within the particular circumstances of the local Church, which was shaping its identity on the threshold of the third millennium. John Paul II's words thus became a kind of programme charter for the synod, identifying its goals: the renewal of pastoral ministry, the revitalization of catechesis and preaching, the strengthening

²⁶ See A. Skreczko, *I Synod Archidiecezji Białostockiej*, in: *25 lat Archidiecezji Białostockiej*, H. Ciereszko (ed.), Białystok 2020, p. 83.

²⁷ The stages of preparation and the course of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok were presented in detail by Archbishop Stanisław Szymecki in the *Preface* to the published synodal decrees (see S. Szymecki, *Preface*, in: *I Synod Archidiecezji Białostockiej*, Białystok 2000, pp. 5–7) and, twenty years later, by one of the three synodal secretaries, Rev. prof. Adam Skreczko, in the volume: *25 lat Archidiecezji Białostockiej*, H. Ciereszko (ed.), Białystok 2020, pp. 83–88.

of parish life, and a deeper commitment of the Church to works of mercy, culture, and social transformation. The Pope made it clear that the synod is not solely the undertaking of the clergy but the shared task of the entire community of believers²⁸.

The Synod – which lasted nine years, with an interruption caused by the death of Archbishop Edward Kisiel, and was subsequently resumed and continued under the leadership of Archbishop Stanisław Szymecki – became, after John Paul II established the Diocese of Białystok (5 June 1991) and raised it to the rank of an archdiocese (25 March 1992), a key instrument for reflecting on the entirety of the life of the newly created local Church. In this way, the synod extended beyond its original aim, which was to revise the decrees of the Vilnius synod and to adapt the diocesan structures of the Archdiocese in Białystok to the norms of the Code of Canon Law, becoming instead the place where the principles of organization, pastoral ministry, and mission of the new Archdiocese of Białystok were elaborated²⁹.

The conclusion and promulgation of the decrees of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok – as emphasized by Archbishop Stanisław Szymecki – was a great grace, a gift and an appeal of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. He affirmed that the published doc-

²⁸ See Jan Paweł II, *Przemówienie Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II w związku z otwarciem I Synodu Diecezji Białostockiej*, in: *I Synod Archidiecezji Białostockiej*, Białystok 2000, pp. 8–9.

²⁹ The final name of the synod is “The First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok”. During the preparatory phase, a difficulty arose concerning the appropriate designation of the synod. It was concluded that the formulation “Synod of the Archdiocese in Białystok” did not accurately reflect its character, whereas a more detailed name referring to that part of the Archdiocese of Vilnius located within the borders of Poland would be overly complex and impractical. A definitive solution was provided by the decision of John Paul II, by which the Diocese of Białystok was established. From that moment the name “The First Synod of the Diocese of Białystok” was adopted, and after its subsequent elevation to the rank of an archdiocese, the title “The First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok” came into use. (see A. Skreczko, *ibidem*, p. 84)

uments, as the fruit of synodal work, “are an expression of fidelity to tradition and to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council”³⁰. Archbishop Szymecki also interpreted the mission of the synod in a perspective that, from today’s standpoint, proved surprisingly prophetic, when at the moment of promulgating the synodal decrees he wrote:

Let us not be afraid to enter these spaces with faith and hope. Let us not be afraid to leave behind our stability and the sense of security offered by the existing order. Let us not be afraid when “something new is coming”³¹.

His words, though rooted in the context of the local Church at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, bear the marks of a deep, mature ecclesiological intuition (*sensus Ecclesiae*)³². The Archbishop of Białystok, already having the experience of conducting a synod in Kielce³³, thus introduced the Church of Białystok into a form of synodality that is not merely an organizational process but a new quality of life, requiring both individuals and communities to have the courage to relinquish a “safe order” for the sake of the Gospel.

³⁰ S. Szymecki, *Słowo wstępne*, in: *I Synod Archidiecezji Białostockiej*, Białystok 2000, p. 6

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 6

³² Pope Francis – as noted by Ysabel de Andia – in his *Letter to the People of God on the Journey* in Germany (29 June 2019), the title of which refers to the tradition of St. Ignatius of Antioch emphasizing the pilgrim character of the Church and thus its synodal dimension, develops the concept of *sensus Ecclesiae*. It concerns an attitude of living “in” the Church and “with” the Church, which also entails a readiness to suffer with it. As de Andia points out, no one can possess an authentic “sense of the Church” unless one is rooted in a living community, draws from its sacraments and liturgy, and participates in the events that shape its history. Cf. Y. de Andia, *Le flair du troupeau: sensus Ecclesiae, sensus fidei et sentire cum Ecclesia*, “Nouvelle Revue Théologique” 142–2 (2020), p. 213.

³³ See *III Synod Diecezji Kieleckiej (1984–1991)*, Kielce 1992.

This perspective corresponds not only to the later teaching of Pope Francis, who, from the beginning of his pontificate, has emphasized the need to “go forth” to the peripheries, to abandon pastoral comfort, and to be ready to take risks for the sake of the Gospel³⁴, but the same logic is also found in the reflection of Pope Leo XIV. In his message to the bishops of the Italian Episcopal Conference, he stressed that a synodal Church, journeying through history and facing new evangelizing challenges, must be continually renewed. At the same time, he underlined the need for vigilance so that even the best intentions do not degenerate into inertia that delays the necessary transformations³⁵.

The decrees of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok, the mature fruit of many years of work by a community which, at various levels of ecclesial life, listened to one another, engaged in dialogue, discerned together, and built consensus as a sign of Christ’s presence, constitute a clear witness to synodality – a constitutive dimension of the Church, as taught by Pope Francis³⁶.

The synod, together with its new decrees, did not signify a closing off of the past nor a negation of the path previously taken by the Church in Białystok within its earlier territorial structures. On the contrary, it became an event inscribed within the continuity of tradition and history, while at the same time opening a new chapter in ecclesial life, responding to the pastoral needs and chal-

³⁴ See Franci, *Evangelii gaudium*, nr 20, 27, 45,49; Francis, *Carta del papa Francisco a los participantes en la 105 asamblea plenaria de la Conferencia Episcopal Argentina*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/letters/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130325_lettera-vescovi-argentina.html (date of access: 15.11.2025).

³⁵ “Una Chiesa sinodale, che cammina nei solchi della storia affrontando le emergenti sfide dell’evangelizzazione, ha bisogno di rinnovarsi costantemente. Bisogna evitare che, pur con buone intenzioni, l’inerzia rallenti i necessari cambiamenti”. Leon XIV, *Discorso del Santo Padre Leone XIV, Incontro con i vescovi italiani alla conclusione della 81ª Assemblea Generale della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, Assisi 20.11.2025*, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/it/speeches/2025/november/documents/20251120-assisi-cei.html> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

³⁶ See Francis, FD 28.

lenges that arose from full institutional independence. As an event of communal discernment, the synod not only orders the inherited legacy but also enables the shaping of the foundations for the future identity and mission of the Church in Białystok. In this sense, the Archdiocese of Białystok – “although it bears within itself the rich experience of the Archdiocese of Vilnius, to which it belonged until receiving its autonomy” – is, as Archbishop Szymecki emphasized, a Church “that at the same time seeks its own identity within the new conditions of its existence”³⁷. The undertaken synodal process thus became for the Archdiocese of Białystok a natural space for gradually discovering and shaping its identity, responding both to the heritage of the past, the challenges of the present, and the need to chart future directions of development.

From the perspective of the 25 years that have passed since the promulgation of the synodal documents, it is precisely in this key that the content of the decrees should be reread – especially since the synod was not merely an administrative procedure nor an act of correcting norms, but a spiritual process leading to ecclesial maturation, the capacity for self-critique, and openness to new impulses of the Holy Spirit. This was strongly emphasized by Archbishop Szymecki in the Preface to the synodal documents, when in the context of the synod he encouraged all:

Let us open ourselves to the action of this grace, which urges us to personal and communal examination of conscience, to a revision of life and to taking clear and courageous decisions. To such experiences the synodal decrees lead us, as they encompass the entirety of our Christian life³⁸.

This entirety of Christian life in the Archdiocese of Białystok was structured into nine books: Book I – Organization of the Church in Białystok (nos. 1–120), Book II – Proclamation of the Word of God

³⁷ S. Szymecki, *ibidem*, p. 6

³⁸ S. Szymecki, *ibidem*, p. 6

(nos. 121–166), Book III – Catechesis (nos. 167–212), Book IV – The Teaching of Theology (nos. 213–251), Book V – Principles of Christian Worship (nos. 252–431), Book VI – The Liturgy of the Sacraments (nos. 432–563), Book VII – Non-Sacramental Worship (nos. 564–590), Book VIII – Pastoral Ministry in the Archdiocese of Białystok (nos. 591–823), Book IX – Maintenance of Diocesan Institutions. Material Matters of the Clergy (nos. 824–847). All the synodal decrees were contained within 847 paragraphs and 36 annexes, forming a unified corpus of norms that set a new rhythm for the life of the local Church at the beginning of the third millennium³⁹.

Within this panorama of synodal activity and the structuring of diocesan life, particular significance is assumed by reflection on those areas that are crucial for shaping mature faith and responsibility within the Church. Among these areas, catechesis⁴⁰ is unquestionably central.

Diocesan Synods in Poland and Catechesis

Questions concerning catechesis appeared both in the Vilnius synods – especially those of 1744 and 1931, where they concerned the

³⁹ In this study, a detailed presentation of the content of all the synodal books and annexes has been omitted, since a synthetic yet competent outline has already been provided by A. Skreczko. His work conveys the essential structure of the documents and the main thematic lines of the nine books, allowing the present analysis to focus primarily on the third book, entitled Catechesis. See A. Skreczko, *I Synod Archidiecezji Białostockiej*, in: H. Ciereszko (ed.), *25 lat Archidiecezji Białostockiej*, Białystok 2020, pp. 85–88.

⁴⁰ A detailed study of catechesis in the years 1991–2017 was presented by E. Młyńska and B. Skłodowski on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Białystok Church. Their study partially covers the years during which the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok was taking place. It could be of particular interest to analyze catechesis in the archdiocese from the perspective of the synod's reception in the years following its conclusion. See E. Młyńska, B. Skłodowski, *Katechizacja w latach 1991–1917 w Archidiecezji Białostockiej*, in: *25 lat Archidiecezji Białostockiej*, H. Ciereszko (ed.), Białystok 2020, pp. 238–258

functioning of cathedral, monastic, and parish schools⁴¹ – as well as at the synods convened during the 1980s. The latter stemmed from the need to receive the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, to adapt local norms of particular law to the new Code of Canon Law promulgated by John Paul II in 1983, and to reread the Church's catechetical mission in the light of the Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi tradendae* (1979). Naturally, catechetical issues also became an important element of the synods convened or carried out in the 1990s. One of the key factors prompting particular Churches to reflect on catechesis was the reintroduction of religious education into schools, which created the need for a comprehensive revision of catechetical activity in the context of rapidly changing socio-cultural realities. The publication of significant universal Church documents, such as the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997) and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) was an additional impulse for deepening synodal work on catechesis. At the national level, the same period saw the development of the *Catechetical Directory of the Catholic Church in Poland*, finally adopted in 2001.

Catechetical issues became the subject of synodal deliberations in numerous dioceses, including:

- the Second Synod of Częstochowa (1976–1987)⁴²,
- the First Synod of the Diocese of Drohiczyń (1994–1997)⁴³,
- the First Synod of the Diocese of Ełk (1997–1999)⁴⁴,
- the Third Synod of the Diocese of Kielce (1984–1991)⁴⁵,

⁴¹ See *I Synod Archidiecezji Białostockiej*, 168. ; T. Krahel, *Zarys dziejów (archi)diecezji wileńskiej*, in: T. Kasabuła, A. Szot (ed.), *Diecezja wileńska. Studia i szkice*, Białystok 2014, pp. 118–122.

⁴² *II Synod Diecezji Częstochowskiej. Chrystus światłem, Maryja wzorem*, Częstochowa 1987.

⁴³ *I Synod Diecezji Drohiczyńskiej. Statuty. Dokumenty wykonawcze*, Drohiczyń 1997.

⁴⁴ *I Synod Diecezji Ełckiej 1997–1999*, Ełk 1999.

⁴⁵ *III Synod Diecezji Kieleckiej 1984–1991*, Kielce 1992.

- the First Synod of the Diocese of Koszalin-Kołobrzeg (1985–1990)⁴⁶,
- the Second Synod of the Archdiocese of Lublin (1977–1985)⁴⁷,
- the First Synod of the Diocese of Łomża (1995–2005)⁴⁸,
- the First Synod of the Diocese of Łowicz (1995–1999)⁴⁹,
- the Third Synod of the Archdiocese of Łódź (1996–1998)⁵⁰,
- the XLII Synod of the Diocese of Płock (1987–1991)⁵¹,
- the Second Synod of Poznań (1992–1993)⁵²,
- the Synod of the Archdiocese of Przemyśl (1995–2000)⁵³,
- the Second Synod of the Diocese of Sandomierz (1996–1999)⁵⁴,
- the First Synod of the Diocese of Sosnowiec (1995–2004)⁵⁵,
- the Second Synod of the Diocese of Włocławek (1977–1994)⁵⁶,
- the Synod of the Archdiocese of Wrocław (1985–1991)⁵⁷,
- the Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Tarnów (1982–1986)⁵⁸.

This overview demonstrates that catechesis has belonged, in recent decades, to the key areas of synodal reflection in Poland. One such example is Archbishop Jerzy Ablewicz who, in the context of

⁴⁶ *I Synod Diecezji Koszalińsko-Kołobrzeszkiej*, Koszalin 1990.

⁴⁷ *II Synod Diecezji Lubelskiej 1977–1985*, Lublin 1998.

⁴⁸ *I Synod Diecezji Łomżyńskiej 1995–2005: prawo partykularne Kościoła Łomżyńskiego*, (ed.) L. Brzostowski et al., Łomża 2005.

⁴⁹ *I Synod Diecezji Łowickiej 1995–1999*, Łowicz 1999.

⁵⁰ *III synod archidiecezji łódzkiej*, (ed.) M.B. Libiszowska, Łódź 1999.

⁵¹ *XLII Synod Diecezji Płockiej*, "Miesięcznik Pastorski Płocki" 76 (1991) nr 10.

⁵² *Poznański Synod Archidiecezji 1992–1993. Dokumenty*, Poznań 1994.

⁵³ *Synod Archidiecezji Przemyskiej 1995–2000. Statuty i aneksy*, Przemyśl 2000,

⁵⁴ *Aby byli jedno. Drugi Synod Diecezji Sandomierskiej*, Sandomierz 1999.

⁵⁵ *I Synod Diecezji Sosnowieckiej: prawo partykularne Kościoła sosnowieckiego*, (eds) U. Paździor, W. Skoczny, Sosnowiec 2005.

⁵⁶ *Drugi Synod Diecezji Włocławskiej. Statuty*, Włocławek 1994.

⁵⁷ *Synod Archidiecezji Wrocławskiej 1985–1991*, Wrocław 1995.

⁵⁸ *IV Synod Diecezji Tarnowskiej. Ad imaginem Ecclesiae universalis (Lumen gentium 23)*, Tarnów 1990.

the Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Tarnów, explicitly placed catechesis within an ecclesiological perspective, emphasizing that catechesis “belongs to the very essence of the Church, just as the Church in its essence is missionary. Without catechesis there is no Church. For the Church is the living Christ (...)”⁵⁹. This was an important voice in the broader debate taking place in particular Churches on the shape of transmitting the faith at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Catechesis in Book III of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok

Within this broader context, the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok also takes its place in the nationwide search for catechetical solutions that must be rooted in the concrete realities characteristic of the specific context of the Church in Białystok. Among the nine synodal books, a particularly significant place is held by Book III, entitled Catechesis, which expresses the deep conviction that the future of the local Church depends on the quality of Christian initiation and formation. It is in this section that the synod articulated its vision of the role of catechesis in the life of the community, its aims, its intended recipients, and the instruments designated to serve the renewal of the transmission of faith within the archdiocese.

It is noteworthy that Book III, in its six principal parts, presents a multidimensional approach rooted both in the tradition of the universal Church and in the young local history of the archdiocese. It begins with a theological-pastoral definition of the nature of catechesis, then presents the responsibilities of various ecclesial agents for its implementation, analyzes contemporary social and cultural conditions, specifies the groups addressed and the sources of catechetical content, and finally formulates the principles and

⁵⁹ Ibidem, Tarnów 1990, p. 7.

methods of catechetical work together with the scope and structure of systematic and occasional catechesis. Thus, Book III is not merely a collection of norms but also a kind of a roadmap intended to guide the development of catechesis in the new pastoral situation after 1989 – a roadmap that merits detailed examination.

Book III of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok opens – drawing on the Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi tradendae* – with an attempt to define catechesis as a specific form of proclaiming the Word of God, distinct both from homiletic preaching and from academic theological instruction. Its aim is “to form in people a life of faith as a conforming of oneself to Jesus Christ”⁶⁰, most often carried out through systematic catechesis. This introduction clearly situates catechesis within a Christological-existential perspective⁶¹, in which the task is not merely the transmission of content but the formation of the person according to the model of Christ. The document then anchors the catechetical mission in the long tradition of the local Church. The Archdiocese of Białystok – rooted, as noted earlier, in the former Archdiocese of Vilnius – draws upon the heritage of cathedral, monastic, and parish schools, the Stefan Batory University⁶², and the earlier diocesan synods (1744, 1931)⁶³.

⁶⁰ I Synod Archidiecezji Białostockiej, *Księga III: Katechizacja*, 167. (=SABK)

⁶¹ See M. Majewski, *Wymiar egzystencjalny katechezy*, in: *Podstawowe wymiary katechezy*, Kraków 1991, pp. 187–194.

⁶² More about the Stefan Batory University in Vilnius, and in particular about its Faculty of Theology see: T. Krahel, *Wydział Teologiczny Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w Wilnie 1919 Wilno – Białystok 1948*, in *Między Wydziałem Teologicznym Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w Wilnie a Seminarium Duchownym w Białymstoku*, (ed.) Andrzej Proniewski, Białystok 2019, pp. 11–22; see T. Krahel, *Wydział Teologiczny Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego 1919–1948*, Białystok 2025; T. Krahel, *Wydział Teologiczny Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w Wilnie 1919 Wilno – Białystok 1948*, in: *Między Wydziałem Teologicznym Uniwersytetu Stefana Batorego w Wilnie a Seminarium Duchownym w Białymstoku*, (ed.) Andrzej Proniewski, Białystok 2019, pp. 11–22; M. Gawrońska-Garstka, *Uniwersytet Stefana Batorego w Wilnie. Uczelnia ziem północno-wschodnich Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej (1919–1939) w świetle źródeł*, Poznań 2016, pp. 137–144.

⁶³ SABK, 168.

Particular emphasis is placed on the role of bishops, presbyters, and lay faithful in sustaining and developing catechesis, especially in the post-war period and under the communist regime⁶⁴. The explicit naming of the ordinaries and outstanding catechists, as well as the homage paid to all clergy and laity who “at times risked their own lives solely to continue the work of catechesis”⁶⁵, lends this section the character of a memorial: catechesis emerges as the continuation of the communal witness of many generations.

The first part of the book (*I. The Church's Responsibility for Catechesis*) systematizes the map of ecclesial co-responsibility for catechesis. Beginning with the affirmation that “the whole Church is responsible for the proclamation of the Word of God” and that catechesis is “a sacred duty and a permanent and inalienable right of the Church”, the synod proceeds to describe successive levels of responsibility⁶⁶. At the diocesan level, the bishop is the center of this responsibility – he is defined as the “first catechist” and guardian of catechesis – who acts through the Catechetical Department and the institutions responsible for the formation of catechists. In the parish, the primary burden of organizing catechesis rests upon the parish priest and the presbyters who collaborate with him. They oversee the inclusion in catechesis of “children, young people, and adults”, the selection of catechists, the planning of catechetical work, and care for the spiritual formation of those who teach. Within the process of catechesis, a special place is oc-

⁶⁴ The post-war years in Poland were a difficult period of recovery and reconstruction for a country that, during the war, had suffered enormous human and material losses – as noted by B. Skłodowski. Catechetical activity unfolded under conditions of intense social transformation. Catechesis was twice removed from schools and twice returned to the parish setting. For more on catechesis in the People's Republic of Poland, see: B. Skłodowski, *Katechizacja w Polsce Ludowej w latach 1945–1990. Zarys problematyki*, in: *W małej salce... Katechizacja na Białostoczyźnie w okresie PRL*, (ed.) A. Szot, Białystok, 2014, pp. 17–30.

⁶⁵ SABK, 169.

⁶⁶ SABK, 170.

cupied by Christian parents, presented as the first responsible for the upbringing in faith. The synod also draws attention to ecclesial movements and communities which – according to their respective charisms – participate in the work of catechesis while remaining in unity with the official forms of teaching. Completing this picture of responsibility is a reminder of obligations from the perspective of labour law: by undertaking the ministry of religion, a teacher in a school or a catechist in a parish, clergy, consecrated persons, and lay faithful commit themselves to carrying out this service conscientiously, for the glory of God and the good of the faithful⁶⁷.

The second part of the book (*II. Conditions and Threats to Catechesis in the Present Age*) outlines the socio-cultural context of catechesis. After a brief reference to the tradition of ancient schools and the classical authors of catechetics, the synod turns its attention to the realities of contemporary Poland: systemic transformation, the market economy, school reform, and the expansion of areas of freedom⁶⁸. The return of religious instruction to schools is presented as a new opportunity to influence children, youth, parents, and teachers, as well as to build an atmosphere of trust and sound educational work. At the same time, however, numerous threats are identified: social pauperization, unemployment, deliberate atheization, imposed indifference and liberalism, and the promotion of a lifestyle based on consumption and comfort, accompanied by the marginalization of traditional Christian values⁶⁹. In the face of these phenomena, catechesis is entrusted with the task of defending human dignity and leading people to salvation. The Church's response is to consist in safeguarding the integrity of the faith, the correctness of the liturgy, and the inviolability of moral norms, as well as resisting syncretism and relativism. Finally, the specific religious landscape of the Archdiocese is noted: the pres-

⁶⁷ SABK, 171–175.

⁶⁸ SABK, 176–178.

⁶⁹ SABK, 179.

ence of members of other religions and denominations, and the challenges related to the proselytizing activity of certain groups, accompanied by a simultaneous call to an ecumenical attitude and to love toward those who “believe differently.”⁷⁰

The third part of the book (III. The Subject of Catechesis) develops, from the outset, an ecclesiological perspective on catechesis. Following the Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi tradendae*⁷¹, it recalls that the subject of catechesis is the whole Church, and that all the baptized possess an “inalienable right” to a formation that leads to a “truly Christian” life⁷². The synod also clearly emphasizes the primacy of catechesis in the life of the local Church: granting it priority strengthens both its internal life and its missionary dynamism. In this context, a distinction is made between the universal right of every believer to share the faith and the specific canonical mission that conditions the possibility of catechizing in the name of the Church. This mission requires proper theological and pedagogical preparation, spiritual formation, and a readiness to transmit faithfully the teaching of the Church. The book underscores the necessity of the permanent formation of catechists, carried out through diocesan institutions, retreats, courses, and deanery meetings. It then broadly defines the circle of those addressed by catechesis: it encompasses all age groups and life situations – from the youngest children to religiously indifferent adults and those who have abandoned the practice of the faith. Special importance is attributed to family catechesis and pre-sacramental catechesis, and preparation for the sacraments of Christian initiation is to be carried out simultaneously in the school and in the parish⁷³.

The fourth part of the book (*IV. Sources, Content, and Aim of Catechesis*) identifies the principal points of reference for the content

⁷⁰ SABK, 180–181.

⁷¹ CT 14.

⁷² SABK, 182.

⁷³ SABK, 183–188.

of catechetical teaching. The primary sources are Sacred Scripture and Tradition, interpreted by the Church's Magisterium. Secondary sources include ancient catecheses, professions of faith, catechisms, and catechetical homilies⁷⁴. Among contemporary documents, the book lists the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the General Directory for Catechesis⁷⁵. The synod also highlights the Archdiocese's own catechetical heritage (study booklets, catechism, prayer book, publications, and scholarly works), which demonstrates the continuity of the local catechetical reflection. The content of catechesis is defined as the deposit of faith pertaining to the salvation of the human person; catechists, upon making their profession of faith, commit themselves to transmitting it faithfully and to deepening their knowledge in response to new challenges and emerging questions. The aim of catechesis is to lead to Christian maturity: the deepening of faith, initiation into the mystery of worship, and the formation of a life consonant with the Gospel⁷⁶. The synod stresses that catechesis cannot be reduced to a "dry transmission of knowledge", but must teach prayer, participation in the life of the Church, and responsibility for the world, so that believers "in all situations strive to imitate Christ"⁷⁷.

The fifth part of the book (*V. Principles and Methods of Catechesis*) develops the theological and pedagogical foundations of catechetical practice. On the one hand, it emphasizes the primacy of grace – the fruitfulness of catechesis depends more on God's action than on human skill – while on the other hand it does not overlook the natural capacities of the human person, upon which – as the well-known Thomistic principle expresses it (*gratia supponit naturam et perficit eam*) – grace rests and which it perfects⁷⁸. The synod stresses

⁷⁴ SABK, 189–190.

⁷⁵ SABK, 191.

⁷⁶ SABK, 192–197.

⁷⁷ SABK, 198.

⁷⁸ SABK, 199.

that theological principles are derived from the Trinitarian, Christological, and ecclesiological character of the economy of salvation: catechesis is rooted in the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, carried out within the Church and ordered towards the fullness of the Kingdom. The didactic principles, in turn, highlight the personal dignity of those being catechized, the integration of content with formation, and the unity of theory and practice. In this perspective, the synodal Book III recalls the richness of methods developed by the catechetical tradition and the necessity of knowing them and choosing them appropriately. The synod also notes the diverse educational backgrounds of catechists (ranging from full theological studies to professional formation) and the need for pedagogical professionalism. Elements of a sound method include simple and vivid language, a clear structure of presentation, dialogue and exchange of experience, and the joint search for solutions⁷⁹.

The final part of the book (*VI. Systematic and Occasional Catechesis*) describes the organizational forms of catechetical activity. It identifies systematic catechesis, conducted since September 1990 in schools, kindergartens, and other educational settings, and regulated both by state law and by the Church's normative provisions⁸⁰. The synod explicitly emphasizes the need to preserve the genuinely catechetical character of religious instruction in schools and its complementarity with parish, sacramental, and occasional catechesis. An occasional catechesis unfolds in the rhythm of the liturgical year and the sacraments; it includes family catechesis, sacramental catechesis, and formation within various parish communities and movements. The synod assigns particular importance to catechesis connected with the sacraments of Christian initiation, whose "proper place is the parish", as well as to family catechesis, described – following *Catechesi tradendae* (CT 68) – as

⁷⁹ SABK, 200–204.

⁸⁰ SABK, 205.

that which “precedes, accompanies, and enriches all other forms of catechesis.”⁸¹ Finally, the synod allows for the possibility of conducting catechesis in public spaces, within the context of camps, gatherings, congresses, or even street catechesis, while stipulating the necessity of obtaining the bishop’s permission in order to avoid abuses⁸². All these forms are meant to lead “towards one and the same profession of faith, towards the same commitment to the Church, towards serving society in the same evangelical spirit” (CT 67).

The six sections of Book III of the synodal decrees present a comprehensive vision of catechesis: one rooted in the history of the local Church, grounded in the actual socio-cultural context, defining the subjects, sources, content, and aims of catechesis, while also indicating the principles, methods, and organizational forms of catechetical activity in the Archdiocese of Białystok. The synod depicts catechesis as a multidimensional reality in which elements of tradition, ecclesial identity, and responses to contemporary challenges converge. It delineates the tasks of the various agents responsible for the transmission of the faith, diagnoses the context of social transformation after 1989, describes the dynamics of Christian maturation, and emphasizes the necessity of an integral linkage between systematic, parish, and sacramental catechesis. The structure of the document rests fundamentally upon two principal pillars of the Church’s teaching at the time – the Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi tradendae* and the *General Directory for Catechesis* – which serve, among other things, as reference points for the synodal understanding of the nature of catechesis, its aims, principles, and methods.

It is worth underscoring that in Book III catechesis is presented as an organic element of the Church’s mission, engaging its various agents and leading to the gradual maturation of faith. It is precise-

⁸¹ SABK, 209.

⁸² SABK, 211.

ly this inner structure – combining ecclesiality, responsibility, and communal action – that may today, a quarter of a century after the conclusion of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok, serve as a key for its renewed interpretation. From the vantage point of the past twenty-five years, one can discern in the book on catechesis a foundation for a broader interpretation in the light of synodality as a constitutive dimension of the Church – a dimension that has found particular development in the recent years of the pontificate of Pope Francis.

The Synodal Dimension of Catechesis

The Second Vatican Council, as a moment of ecclesial renewal, opened the way to a new understanding of the Church as the People of God⁸³. While earlier ecclesiological models emphasized the hierarchical dimension of the Church, the Council presented it as a communion. Pope Francis – already mentioned above – has reread and significantly developed the theme of synodality in the Church within his teaching. During his pontificate, two major documents on catechesis were promulgated: the *Directory for Catechesis* (2020) and *Antiquum Ministerium* (2021). These documents present synodality not in an explicit manner, but indirectly and in a way that is nonetheless highly significant. A detailed study by C.-M. Sul-tana on the synodal aspects of the most recent catechetical documents shows that the Directory highlights the synodal dimension of the structures responsible for catechesis (from the level of the Holy See down to the dioceses), emphasizes catechesis as a process of accompaniment, and underlines the role and formation of catechists as a service within the community. *Antiquum Ministerium* complements this vision by establishing the ministry of catechist and defining its requirements in the spirit of co-responsibility and shared journeying. Although neither document develops the theme

⁸³ LG, 9–14.

of synodality directly, they both shape an ecclesial framework conducive to an increasingly synodal model of organizing and carrying out catechesis within the Church⁸⁴.

A detailed analysis of Book III of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok – read from the vantage point of the past quarter century – reveals significant parallels with the contemporary vision of synodality. Despite the different language of the period, the document contains numerous intuitions that today can be recognized as foundational for a synodal understanding of catechesis within the Church in Białystok. The synodal dimension of catechesis emerges above all in five areas: in the structure of co-responsibility for the catechetical mission; in the understanding of catechesis as a process of accompaniment and maturation in faith; in the role and formation of catechists viewed within the perspective of ecclesial service; in the dialogical mode of transmitting the truths of faith and in mutual listening; and in its fundamental missionary orientation.

The first manifestation of synodality evident in Book III is the way responsibility for catechesis is understood and distributed within the Church. The synodal document presents it as a task of the entire ecclesial community, unequivocally recalling that “the whole Church is responsible for the proclamation of the Word of God”⁸⁵. In this perspective, the bishop, the Catechetical Department, parish priests, clergy, lay catechists, families, and formation groups constitute a diverse yet complementary structure of collaboration, in which each subject contributes its own part to the work of transmitting the faith within the Archdiocese of Białystok. This vision aligns well with the Final Document of the Synod of Bishops, which emphasizes that a synodal Church requires “a differentiated

⁸⁴ See C.-M. Sultana, *Aspects of Synodality in Recent Catechetical Documents: The Directory for Catechesis and Antiquum Ministerium*, “*Verbum Vitae*” 41 (2023) no. 4, pp. 127–130.

⁸⁵ See SABK, 170–175.

co-responsibility by all the baptized”⁸⁶. The structure of responsibility for catechesis presented in Book III is, therefore, not merely an ordered scheme of competencies. Its inner logic expresses a deeply synodal conviction: that no member of the Church remains passive or marginalized, and that catechesis becomes a task discerned, co-created, and carried out in shared responsibility by the entire community of believers. The understanding of responsibility for catechesis articulated in Book III may thus be read as an early form of a synodal model of shared discernment – one that many years later would become one of the principal pillars of the vision of the Church developed by Pope Francis.

The second manifestation of synodality is the understanding of catechesis as a process of accompaniment and maturation. The vision of catechesis proposed by the synod is process-oriented and dynamic. Book III defines catechesis as a journey whose aim is “to lead people to Christian maturity” (no. 197), that is, as a process of spiritual formation – a gradual initiation into faith, liturgy, morality, and prayer (nos. 197–198) – rather than as a purely intellectual transmission of content⁸⁷. This approach corresponds closely to contemporary documents, including the Directory for Catechesis (2020), which, drawing on Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, describes catechesis as a “process of accompaniment”⁸⁸, in which the Church walks with the person, integrating their experience, faith, and communal life. The Final Document of the Synod (2024) similarly describes Christian initiation as the space in which the Church leads, discerns, and matures together with the faithful⁸⁹. In this process of accompaniment, an essential

⁸⁶ FD, 36.

⁸⁷ See DGC 67; “The transmission of faith cannot consist solely in communicating religious information and its assimilation by those being catechized; rather, its purpose is to develop and shape their faith (*Catechetical Directory of the Catholic Church in Poland*), DKP 37.

⁸⁸ Directory for Catechesis, 3; *Evangelii Gaudium*, 169–173.

⁸⁹ FD, 24–26.

role is played by an understanding of the life context of those being catechized – a theme that corresponds to the discernment of the signs of the times, emphasized by Francis as a hallmark of a synodal Church⁹⁰. Attention to the concrete situation of the catechized is likewise evident in Book III of the synodal document, which addresses social transformations, the difficulties faced by contemporary men and women, religious pluralism, and the spread of secularization (nos. 176–181). Thus, although the Białystok synod did not yet employ today’s synodal terminology, it consistently understood catechesis as accompaniment and as the shared maturation of the Church: from catechesis in the family, through parish catechesis, to systematic and occasional catechesis.

The third manifestation of synodality concerns the role and formation of catechists who minister within the community. The Polish model of catechesis – characterized by the simultaneous practice of teaching religious education in schools and providing sacramental catechesis in parishes – made the role of catechists multidimensional and co-responsibility a daily reality. The Białystok synod attempted to define the tasks and formation of catechists precisely at the moment when the Polish Church was learning a new catechetical structure. Book III presents an extensive description of the role and formation of catechists (nos. 183–186). The synod portrays catechists as individuals sent by the Church, acting not individually but within the ecclesial community. The ecclesial nature of catechetical ministry is unambiguously emphasized: “only those who have received a canonical mission may catechize in the name of the Church” (no. 183). Beyond its formal aspect, the canonical mission constitutes a real rooting of the catechist in the community’s co-responsibility, encompassing both doctrinal and pastoral dimensions. Consequently, the synod requires catechists to possess appropriate theological and pedagogical formation (no. 184) and ex-

⁹⁰ Francis, *Address for the Opening of the Synod*, (9 October 2021), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html> (date of access: 20.11.2025).

PLICITLY obliges them to “permanent personal formation” (no. 185). The synodal realism of Book III becomes even more apparent when one considers the context of the 1990s, when religious education was reintroduced into public schools. This change created a new structure of catechetical responsibility comprising:

- school catechists, employed within the state education system and active among children, youth, parents, and teachers;
- parish catechists, who support parish priests in a parish (sacramental) catechesis;
- close cooperation between the parish priest and both groups of catechists, which Book III describes as the necessity of regular meetings, joint planning, and care for the spiritual development of the catechetical team (no. 172). In light of these elements, the ministry of catechists, especially lay catechists, appears as one of the concrete loci of synodality in the life of the local Church: it brings together different persons and environments, relies on cooperation and dialogue, requires shared discernment, and possesses a distinct missionary dimension. In this way, the understanding of the role and formation of catechists serving within the ecclesial community offered by Book III of the Białystok Synod anticipates in a mature manner the later synodal ecclesiology⁹¹.

The fourth manifestation of synodality is the presence of dialogue and mutual listening within the catechetical process. In Book III of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok, the idea of dialogue, the exchange of experiences, adaptation of language, and care for the catechist–catechized relationship appears repeat-

⁹¹ The contemporary understanding of synodality develops this idea by emphasizing that the path of the Church requires not only openness to listening and shared responsibility, but also the creation of real space for the laity who – as full members of the community – have both the right and the duty to express their own insights, propose solutions, and participate in discerning the directions of the Church’s action. Cf. J.P. García Maestro, *Los laicos en una Iglesia Sinodal*, “Sinite” 187 (2021), pp. 111–133.

edly. The synod stresses that effective catechesis requires: “simple, vivid, and precise” communication (no. 204); dialogue and joint searching for answers (no. 204); and attentive listening to the life context of those being catechized (nos. 176–181). The contemporary Church, as emphasized by the Directory for Catechesis, needs this dialogical style in order to make the face of Christ more clearly visible. Catechesis thus becomes an authentic “laboratory of dialogue”, capable of reaching into the deepest layers of human life⁹². Every dialogue presupposes an element of listening so that it does not become a monologue. Pope Francis has strongly emphasized that a synodal Church is a Church of listening⁹³, while the Final Document of the Synod (2024) describes dialogue and discernment as fundamental dimensions of synodal ecclesial life⁹⁴. Book III of the synodal text presents catechesis as a concrete place where synodality is realized: where catechists and those catechized learn from one another, and where the community itself – by listening to the faith experience, questions, and sensitivities of the catechized – matures in its understanding of the Gospel. In this sense, dialogue and listening are not only methods of catechesis but a fundamental style of a synodal Church that walks together and, in the Holy Spirit, discerns the path of faith.

The final element worth highlighting is the missionary dimension of catechesis. The missionary orientation of catechesis appears in Book III of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok from its very first formulations (no. 170). The reference to Christ’s mandate, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28: 19), situates catechesis not as an action of a purely administrative nature

⁹² *Directory for Catechesis*, 54

⁹³ “A synodal Church is a Church which listens (...)”, Francis, *Address for Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015)*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html (date of access: 22.11.2025).

⁹⁴ FD, 28.

or as an educational process, but as a fundamental expression of the participation of the entire local Church in the salvific mission. The ecclesial community of Białystok, inscribed within this logic of evangelical sending, presents catechesis as a task undertaken jointly by the bishop, presbyters, lay catechists, families, and the entire parish community. In this perspective, the content and aims of catechesis (nos. 193–198) point to the formation of Christians capable of acting according to the teaching of the Gospel within the realities of the contemporary world. The task is to form witnesses of faith who are able to share it within the family, school, professional, and social environments. The role of catechesis is therefore to lead to such Christian maturity that enables a person to live the Gospel, to imitate Christ in daily life, and to participate responsibly in the life of the Church and society. This goal constitutes an integral part of the broader missionary dynamism of the synodal Church. In *Episcopalis communio*, Pope Francis reminds us that the Church remains in a permanent state of mission and that missionary activity is “the most important and most sacred task of the Church”⁹⁵.

The Final Document of the Synod of Bishops likewise states unambiguously that synodality is not an end in itself; its meaning flows from the mission that Christ, in the Holy Spirit, has entrusted to the Church. Mission and synodality are therefore closely linked: mission sets the direction of synodality, and synodality enables the mission to be carried out fruitfully. The essence of this mission – as the Final Document further emphasizes – is evangelization, which *Evangelii nuntiandi* describes as the Church’s fundamental task and deepest vocation⁹⁶. Hence, the synodal Church is presented as a “Church that goes forth”, a People of missionary-disciples capable of journeying together⁹⁷. In this spirit, the Final Document adds that catechesis should “not only be integrated into the

⁹⁵ Francis, *Episcopalis communio*, 1.

⁹⁶ FD 32; EN 14.

⁹⁷ FD 155.

paths of Christian initiation, but become increasingly «outgoing» and outward-facing⁹⁸, thus assuming a missionary character. This means the capacity to reach those distanced from the faith, to seek paths of dialogue, and to ensure the Church's presence within new cultural environments⁹⁹. Consequently, catechesis is not “art for art's sake.” Its goal is not merely teaching or didactic effectiveness, but the formation of missionary disciples who can bear witness to Christ with their life and with their words. Its mission does not end in the classroom or the parish meeting room; it leads to apostolate – to a life that evangelizes¹⁰⁰. Catechesis must develop in parallel along two dimensions: the theological, strengthening the personal encounter with Christ, and the missionary, fostering attitudes capable of responsible engagement in the life of the Church and the transformation of the world. This process leads to new ways of experiencing ecclesial life – a Church that goes forth, undergoes pastoral renewal, and learns the synodal way – which constitute the direction of contemporary reflection and practice¹⁰¹. In the light of con-

⁹⁸ FD 145.

⁹⁹ N. Becquart, R. Luciani, *Synodalité et cultures: des expériences synodales diverses selon les continents*, “Lumen Vitae. Revue internationale de catéchèse et de pastorale” 76 (2021), pp. 421–430.

¹⁰⁰ Such a missionary dynamism of catechesis, however, presupposes a deeper understanding of the nature of the Church as a community called to grow in Christ. This is precisely the direction indicated by the Pastoral Program of the Catholic Church in Poland, which reminds us that Christian formation must incorporate the faithful into the life of the People of God, so that no one remains a passive recipient but instead discovers his or her mission as a disciple-missionary. In this perspective, catechesis becomes a space in which the personal encounter with Christ matures, processes of integral growth are initiated, and the capacity to undertake missionary commitments – both within the ecclesial community and in the transformation of the world – is developed. Cf. R. Buchta, *Wprowadzenie*, in: *Uczniowie-misjonarze. Program duszpasterski Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce na rok 2025/2026. Zeszyt katechetyczny*, Opole 2025, pp. 7–9.

¹⁰¹ Cf. “El camino de la predicación catequética debe avanzar en sus dimensiones teológicas, en el fortalecimiento del encuentro personal con Jesucristo que inicia procesos de crecimiento integral y en las diversas proyecciones de los com-

temporary theology of synodality, it becomes clear that Book III of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok presents catechesis as a reality rooted in the missionary nature of the Church – in accordance with the logic of Christ’s mandate, “Go and teach.” It understands catechesis as a space in which the missionary sending is realized through shared discernment, accompaniment, formation, and witness. Already in the 1990s, the Białystok synod recognized catechesis as a dynamic and missionary process – one that becomes a key locus for shaping the synodal culture of the local Church¹⁰².

Conclusion

An analysis of Book III of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok – carried out from the perspective of the past 25 years – allows us to conclude that its vision of catechesis proved to be both deeply rooted in tradition and prophetic in relation to the challenges the local Church faces today. The Białystok Synod presented catechesis as an organic dimension of the Church’s mission, situated within the dynamism of the entire community: from the bishop and presbyters, through lay catechists, to families and parish groups. At the same time, this conception – despite its maturity and internal coherence – bears the marks of a particular historical moment: it reflects the realities of the 1990s, the first

promisos misioneros, tanto en la Iglesia como en la transformación social. Esos aportes se orientarán siempre a la generación de unas nuevas maneras de vivir la eclesialidad: Iglesia en salida, conversión pastoral, camino sinodal, son algunos ejemplos por donde se está caminando desde hace poco tiempo”, M.T. Cogollo, *La predicación catequética enriquece las dimensiones eclesiales y la sinodalidad*, “Revista De Educación Religiosa” 2 (2023), p. 26.

¹⁰² Pope Francis, in the note accompanying the Final Document, encourages the particular Churches to receive the indications it contains, asking “what remains to be done so that the style proper to the missionary synodal Church can be ever-better learned and developed”. This expression, “a missionary synodal Church”, appears repeatedly throughout the Final Document. See FD 8, 15, 40, 49, 59, 66, 115, 137.

period after the political transformation, and therefore cannot be considered definitive or exhaustive. Like every synodal assembly, the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok was not a “perfect model” but a stage on the journey in which the Church in Białystok learned discernment, co-responsibility, and the missionary orientation of catechesis.

In light of the contemporary reflection on synodality – deepened in the magisterium of Pope Francis, who reminds us that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church and a path of “*spiritual renewal and structural reform*” (no. 28) – the reading of Book III takes on the character not only of a historical analysis of the reception of the Second Vatican Council but also of an invitation to continue a process that has not been definitively concluded. If the Church lives synodally, she cannot rest on a single act of discernment.

The changing reality of parish life, new forms of presence – and increasingly, absence – of children, youth, and adults in the Church, the challenges of digital culture, social mobility, and worldview pluralism, as well as questions concerning catechesis across different age groups and the shape of cooperation between parish, school, and family, all call for renewed communal reflection. In this context, Book III of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok appears as an important point of reference, but it cannot be treated as the final word on the matter.

The constitutive dimension of synodality for the Church encourages us rather, with gratitude for the fruits of the first synod and with awareness of its inevitable limitations, to undertake serious reflection on the possibility of convoking a new diocesan synod. The very need for such reflection arises from a careful analysis of the entire heritage of the First Synod of the Archdiocese of Białystok, viewed from the perspective of the past 25 years. A new synod could enable a renewed and deepened reading of the task of catechesis in the light of synodality as a stable form of the Church’s life and mission, helping the Archdiocese of Białystok to continue

walking the path of “communion, participation, and mission” in the dynamically changing pastoral reality¹⁰³.

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¹⁰³ For example, from the perspective of the past 25 years, one can observe a very rapid development of issues related to cyberspace, which also opens new horizons for catechesis and for deepening its vision in the context of digital culture. As shown by Asian authors, even cybercatechesis may become a “space of synodal accompaniment”, in which listening and shared discernment take place within a digital environment, particularly close to the experience of the young. See K. Dessindi, D. Sukristiono, *Cybercatechesis: Journeying Together with the Youth in Communicating Faith Towards A Synodal Church*, “Asian Horizons” 18 (2024), pp. 304–315.

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