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Synodality and Its Implications for Catholic Schools: An Exploratory Study of System Leaders in Western Canadian Catholic Schools

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Abstract: Pope Francis's dream for a synodal Church has implications for Catholic schools globally, but what exactly are these consequences? This paper explores Francis's vision in the context of Canadian Catholic schools in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories (NWT), where these schools are fully-funded by the government and enroll nearly a quarter million students. Ten exploratory interviews with chief superintendents from these schools—which formed the basis of a larger study—were analyzed to understand potential connections to Francis's vision and his four commitments to synodality: focusing on relationships, a culture of encounter, the essentials of the Christian faith, and local decision-making. The pope differentiates synodality from democratic forms of leadership and demands a communal form of listening and discerning God's Spirit. While the superintendents' style of leadership appeared to mirror synodality in many ways, predominant issues remain to be explored: an emphasis on relationships upends the status quo and gives new directions for the schools; encountering others will inevitably demand prophetic leadership by the system leaders; leading with the essentials of faith will not please everyone in Catholic schooling; and shared authority among the superintendents, bishops, and trustees requires further dialogue.

Keywords: Catholic schools; leadership; system leaders; superintendents; synodality; Pope Francis; dialogue; Canada



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1. Introduction

The Vatican's [General Secretariat of the Synod \(2024, p. 2\)](#) describes synodality as “the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church . . . when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission”. The purpose of synodality is “to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands” (p. 3). Given this dynamic vision, we ask specifically how Pope Francis's dream for a synodal Church can impact Catholic schools? How might it spark renewal and change in Catholic schools and relationships both in and outside the Catholic community?

This study considers Francis's synodal vision in light of the realities of separate Catholic schools in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories (NWT) based upon exploratory interviews with Catholic school system leaders in these jurisdictions. Because synodality is about greater “collaboration” and increased “synergy” within a faith-based framework ([O'Neill 2023, p. 98](#)), we outline the relationship between Catholic schools and the local church with an eye toward synodality. Next, we report how system leaders—in this case, chief superintendents—understand the present and future of public Catholic schooling in Western Canada and how this compares and contrasts with the major

themes of synodality. We conclude with considerations for Catholic schools and describe how synodality can potentially renew the mission of the schools.

1.1. Synodality: Four Commitments

To make the connection between synodality and Catholic schools, we must succinctly capture Pope Francis's vision of synodality. To do so, we turn to the work of Richard Gaillardetz, an American theologian of Catholic ecclesiology at Boston College. Although one of many important theologians writing on the topic of synodality, his 2023 article, "Synodality and the Francis Pontificate", is particularly helpful. In it, he argues that Pope Francis makes four commitments to synodality that advances the teachings of the Second Vatican Council (2023, p. 46). This four-fold framework of commitments—that is, Francis's pledge to the spirit and teaching of the Council as a way of renewal—provides a structure for our effort to establish how synodality may impact Catholic education.

The first commitment to a synodal church, as stated by Gaillardetz (2023, p. 46), "requires transformed ecclesial relationships", where priority is placed on baptism as the source of vocation and Christian identity. Instead of prioritizing a clerical Church, where lay people step aside for priestly leaders, Francis emphasizes Vatican II's universal call to holiness. For instance, Francis has instituted new ministries, including the catechist, as a means to broaden the roles and decision-making in the Church. Those who serve in public ministry for the Church are thus called to listen to and serve all of God's people. Theologian James Keenan (2023, p. 128) adds that the Church must also recognize the danger of hierarchicalism and thus he challenges leaders to promote their work as a noble service to bring about "an ethics of vulnerability". Critics fear that Francis's shift toward transforming relationships—where he has highlighted the importance of listening to everyone—potentially downplays the theological nature of the Church (Briola 2023, p. 4). Nonetheless, a focus on transformed relationships in the Church makes room for trust in the *sensus fidei* of the people, where the pontiff underlines the pilgrim journey of God's People (Ruddy 2023, p. 222).

Second, the pope is committed to a Church that moves outward and into the world. This missionary dimension, states Gaillardetz (2023, pp. 49–50), includes a more welcoming church and one that engages the world through Francis's notion of a "culture of encounter". Francis explains this term: "To speak of a 'culture of encounter' means we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone" (Pope Francis 2020, p. 216). God's mercy is personally encountered in one's neighborhood, where friendship is nurtured and assistance is offered to those whom God puts in their lives. A culture of contact is favored over avoidance or isolation. In other words, Francis promotes a disposition of humility, generosity, and patience toward those who think and live differently in the pursuit of unity.

Rather than understanding the Church as an abstraction, the pope believes that people become their complete selves through communal life. This vision counters the influences of consumerism, the technological paradigm, xenophobia, and neoliberal global capitalism and its throw-away culture (Gaillardetz 2023, p. 51). In contrast to these forces, Francis's promotion of Catholic social teaching acts as a counterpoint, providing an effective resource "to restore the frayed social trust in society today", as explained by Keenan (2023, p. 130). Francis wants the Church to go outward, proclaim its message, and accompany others on their journey, according to theologian Christopher Ruddy (2023). Critics press that a change of ecclesial style and a listening ear is not enough in the face of large social issues (Faggioli 2020b, p. 100) and yet encouraging a mindset that moves Catholic leadership outside the parish walls is an important step toward a mission-driven identity.

Third, Gaillardetz argues that Francis's commitment to a synodal church focuses on the essentials of the Christian faith. Instead of a Church preoccupied with "propositional certitude", Francis wants preaching directed toward the core of the Christian faith where doctrines lead people into a relationship with Christ (Gaillardetz 2023, p. 53). Francis's approach focuses on the kerygma as the early Church's initial proclamation of faith, which

can run counter to religious education programs largely based on dogmatic theology. This approach is more understandable for a broader audience, especially the poor and marginalized, and less aimed at the educated elites (pp. 53–54). Francis, much like his namesake from Assisi, emphasizes the Gospel message in contrast to a keen interest on rule enforcement over doctrinal and moral issues (p. 55). Critics warn that Francis's commitment to a synodal experience could act as a cover for doctrinal change (Ruddy 2023, pp. 225 and 231). However, the Holy Father has argued for an encultured Christian message so that the gospel can be respected and understood in different (and in more) contexts (Faggioli 2020b, p. 94).

Francis's fourth commitment to synodality is based on "the authentic exercise of authority ... guided by the principle of subsidiarity" (Gaillardetz 2023, p. 57). Subsidiarity encourages local decision-making and is based on the centrality of baptism for the Christian vocation instead of an ecclesiology focused on ministerial ordination. Thus, fulfillment of the Church's mission is not only the concern of the clergy and the Vatican, but also for lay people and the local church (p. 58). Critics argue, Gaillardetz (p. 58) adds, that the move to decentralize runs the risk of downplaying the spiritual identity of the Church (see also Ruddy 2023, pp. 213–14), as if it is only a sociological reality or one in need of democratization. Francis himself has spoken out against the synod becoming a "parliament", arguing that the Spirit must be at work among and within participants (Faggioli 2020b, p. 96). Without this spirit-led dimension, Francis explains, a synod can fall prey to the "dictatorship of functionalism": creating a system that follows reasoned advice and teachings but forgets that Christianity is first an announcement (Faggioli 2020b, pp. 97–98). Supporters of Francis, like author Gerry O'Neill (2023, p. 98), claim that making the Church more collaborative and less clericalized will increase engagement and improve the psychological safety of Catholics working and ministering in the Church.

1.2. Context: Western Canadian Separate Catholic Schools

Pope Francis's four commitments to synodality mark a change in style for the Church and potentially will influence current and future leaders within Catholic schools. In particular, we wonder about the impact of synodality upon Catholic schools in Western Canada. It is first helpful to explain our context. At the birth of the nation, constitutionally-protected, denominational schooling rights were included in the British North America Act of 1867. In regions where Catholic schools had the right to establish separate schools, like Alberta, Saskatchewan and the NWT, the religious minority (usually Catholics) were able to form school divisions in the same district as a public school (usually Protestant). Those first Catholic separate schools established in the late nineteenth century provided an education that supported the beliefs and values of parents and their local Church.

Because Catholic schools globally follow a number of governance models dependent upon context—for instance, the variety of frameworks used in the United States (Sheehan 1997, p. 130)—it is imperative to understand our Western Canadian situation to conceive how synodality might impact our schools. The schools today maintain many structural similarities to local public schools, which are no longer Protestant but primarily areligious or secular. Catholic schools in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the NWT are fully-funded by their provincial or territorial governments and adhere to the government-mandated curriculum, school inspections, teacher certification, and participation in joint public-Catholic associations (i.e., for teachers, superintendents, and school board trustees). Thus, although "separate" in name, many of the overarching structures are shared with their public school counterparts.

Catholic schooling in Western Canada also contains many distinguishing features. The locally-elected Catholic school board trustees provide oversight for the schools' long-term success. They are accountable to the electorate—as per provincial law—and accept the local bishop as the leader of Catholic education—as stated in Canon Law (Canon Law Society 1983, canon 803). The schools welcome both Catholic and non-Catholic families. This hospitality is actually demanded of the schools from both the State and the Church.

For example, in Alberta, as stated in the provincial Education Act ([Province of Alberta 2012](#), sec. 10(4)), parents have a choice on where their child attends school, whereas Canon Law underlines the importance of a religious and moral education in accord with the conscience of parents ([Canon Law Society 1983](#), canon 799). School boundaries do not generally follow local parish boundaries, which can complicate intra-church relationships. A particularly complex situation is the question of ownership of the land that the schools sit on: the Church has no ownership of the land, yet the school's board of trustees is responsible to care for the property and to respect the authority of the bishop. Overall, this Catholic schooling system in Western Canada contains its own distinctive governance model, which includes elected, appointed, employed, and state partners.

The schools are authentically Catholic in several ways. They teach religion classes which at the high school level are accredited toward graduation. The schools celebrate Masses and other liturgies—where primarily ordained ministers from local parishes preside—and advocate for the reception of sacraments among the student body. The districts promote the schools as a faith-based option that permeate the curriculum with the Christian faith. They can preferentially hire Catholic candidates given their denominational schooling rights ([Feehan 2008](#)). The uniqueness of this faith-based option for schooling is reliant upon their capacity to distinguish themselves from public schools. Local bishops endorse the schools as “Catholic”, as stipulated in Canon Law ([Canon Law Society 1983](#), canon 803), provide an advisory voice in their governance, and approve the religious education programming. Catholic school superintendents and trustees also belong to special Catholic associations that advocate and support publicly-funded separate schooling. All in all, this religious schooling system serves over one quarter of the preK–12 student population, amounting to over 230,000 students in over 600 schools ([ACSTA n.d.](#); [Fortosky 2023](#)).

These separate Catholic schools have one foot in the public square and the other in the parish courtyard. Much of what they do is mandated by government regulation, while they maintain commitments to the local Church and the Catholic tradition. This two-pronged mission has brought about a thriving faith-based option that grows at a faster or equal rate to local public schools ([Fletcher 2018](#)). It maintains government standards and offers a faith-based option that appeals to many families. The mixed sources of support—from the common purse and the Catholic tradition—means that changes brought about by synodality may very well look different from those felt in parishes and other ecclesial agencies. To this end, our paper follows the four-fold synodal commitment framework as articulated by Gaillardetz: we determine how and where system leaders practiced synodality in their leadership, and speculate how a synodal approach can assist in strengthening Catholic schools.

2. Materials and Methods

This article draws from research completed for a larger study describing the challenges and opportunities that face Catholic schools in Western Canada according to chief school superintendents ([Hoven et al., forthcoming](#)). Insight from educational leaders provides an opportunity to examine division structures and programs in Catholic schools from a privileged vantagepoint. Chief superintendents are the CEOs of school districts, which can enroll hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of children dependent on the population and geographical size of the school district.¹ Chief superintendents are hired solely by the school board trustees, must follow the direction of the Minister of Education and the School Act, and consult with local bishops. Providing oversight of a school district's educational plans, engaging the parent community, and listening to special interest groups, they have an incredibly complex position that is politically-demanding and time-consuming ([Parsons and Brandon 2017](#), p. 1). Our study included ten superintendents, all baptized Catholics, who demonstrated an ability to maneuver in both educational and ecclesial circles. They all had taken graduate studies, had previously been classroom teachers and

school administrators, and were now system leaders who were middle-aged or nearing retirement age.

This article takes data from the above exploratory study, which focused on a small group of top experts in their field, and mirrors the approach of other exploratory studies (e.g., [Cook et al. 2022](#); [Sipper and Batra 2022](#); [Stebbins 2011](#)). The superintendents have specialized knowledge about, and much responsibility for, Catholic schools. It is valuable to understand their high-level perspectives on Catholic schooling. The lead researcher spoke at a meeting of superintendents, where many volunteered to participate. As the researcher traveled throughout the region to complete the interviews, the participants encouraged others to also be interviewed. A list of fifteen questions were shared with the participants prior to the interview, as the interview itself was semi-structured. The interviews lasted from 50 to 90 minutes. One participant emailed their responses instead of being interviewed. The recordings were sent to a professional transcriber.

The transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by the researcher and each participant, and then underwent a thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns across the data set ([Braun et al. 2017](#), pp. 12–13). Larger themes revealed clusters of meaning, which included the theme of synodality. That theme became this paper. Because we engaged ten people out of a pool of thirty chief superintendents in this region, we vigilantly seek to protect their anonymity and cannot describe the background connected to any pseudonymized leader. Finally, the study received ethical approval from the primary investigator's home university's research ethics board.

3. Results

In what seemed to resemble a spirit of synodality, chief superintendents showed a commitment toward building communities of strong relationships, an interest toward participation in ecclesial activities, and a desire to foster the faith-based mission of their schools. While the theme of synodality was not explicitly asked about nor discussed in the interviews, the study occurred in the midst of the synod diocesan phase of which some superintendents were directly involved. This engagement may have influenced their familiarity with a synodal approach. Furthermore, synodality was modeled personally by Pope Francis during his papal visit to Canada in July 2022. With the chosen theme of "walking together", the pontiff listened to stories and sought forgiveness from Indigenous Peoples for the Church's role in government-financed Indigenous residential schools. He exemplified "encounter" and "dialogue", hallmarks of synodality. Synodality in many ways appears to mark the leadership styles of these superintendents, but subtle differences and a lack of clarity remain. In this section, we present the interview results within Francis's four commitments to synodality as described previously by Gaillardetz.

3.1. Reshaping Relationships

A synodal church "requires transformed ecclesial relationships", according to [Gaillardetz \(2023, p. 46\)](#), where ecclesial leaders prioritize baptism as the source of vocation, the universal call to holiness for all people, and listening and service to others as a central criterion for leadership. The importance and primacy of relationships was clearly a priority for every superintendent. Lillian described the importance of a leader knowing her schools' staff members, where she could walk into any school and people would "call me by name". She also spoke about the staff and students of her school district as family: "our school division is very close knit and very much a family. . . one of the highest qualities of Catholic schools is their sense of community". She explained that it was through conversations with other educators that relationships deepened and a common language of faith bound people together. The faith identity of the schools created a connection that galvanized and united the community.

Clare spoke about building trust as a foundation for positive relationships. She joined a school district in crisis where "trust was depleted in this division. . .I knew I had to build trust. . .I really became vulnerable. . .my pivotal piece of turning the division around was

communication, and in that communication, they saw that I was a woman of faith". Clare was open and vulnerable to others, witnessing to her own story of faith where "people started to attach to my story". Clare worked to dismantle the top-down structure in her school district and replace it with a collaborative environment that tries to build a "true sense of community".

Ben shared the importance of having "teachers teaching teachers". Teachers are given the opportunity to share their life stories as evangelization and as a means of creating unity and connection. Ben added how acts of faith build community. Once after a school's morning prayer, students were asked to share a sign of peace. As students on a break greeted each other, a guest walked into the school: "These young men and women start going up to him saying, 'Peace be with you.' I can't imagine what that guy felt as he walked out of that school. He must have thought, 'That was the nicest school I've ever seen'". Ben attributed these moments of relational encounter to "blessings, peace, and . . . having more joyful faith rituals". Prayer and rituals strengthened relational bonds opening space for a culture of encounter.

Catherine agreed that conversations about faith cultivated stronger relationships but explained that this bond can be challenged by students asking hard spiritual questions of teachers. A polarized society, or inexperienced teachers unable to adequately respond to these queries, creates tensions. Steve also explained how life-giving conversations lay the foundation for building a strong sense of community, and stated that this was important for welcoming all students: "God wouldn't want to close any doors. . . so we embrace those families and help them learn about our Catholic faith". Barbara added that cultivating genuine relationships comes from knowing each other, where there is "fun, collegiality, and sometimes some good-natured teasing and joking".

Superintendents overall endorsed strong relationships nurtured by belief in a transcendent God, who could create bonds of friendship and understanding through vulnerability and faithfulness.

3.2. A Missionary Church

For Francis, a missionary Church is one that moves outward and into a broken world. In this approach, schools have multiple points of connection to the Church and are also interwoven with the secular education world. Many superintendents noted that the pandemic created spaces where a culture of encounter was not only needed but became intentionally engaged. For example, Frank shared how COVID-19 lockdowns and the slow move back to normalcy meant that school leadership and educational partners tried to understand a deeper sense of illness and dis-ease. They worked with staff "accompanying mental health and wellness" issues, including a painful grieving process over what had been lost. It required a lot of support from the school district. In light of this drive to encounter each other and overcome isolation, Frank felt inspired by the papal visit's theme of walking together: "we made it our own with the whole idea of accompaniment". Underlining the theme of accompaniment, Frank hoped everyone could be more supportive of each other.

Ross underlined the challenges of participating in a culture of encounter. While his district provides opportunities to encounter Christ through worship and teacher faith formation, his school district "has staff of all faiths working in our schools". All staff, including non-Catholics, are contractually obligated to participate in school faith formation and take what they can out of the experiences. Despite the schools having the right to fully permeate curriculum with Catholic teachings and speak about faith in Jesus Christ, he insisted that, "our references to our distinct nature are fragmented". There is a real challenge to communicate faith in today's world: "The better we are at articulating how we are different and demonstrating that, the better chance we have of maintaining our viability". Murray agreed with this perspective and called for a cultural change at the system level in schools. He explained: "We came from a culture where superintendents sat in their office and then occasionally talked to principals, who sat in their offices. We need to build a culture where superintendents are in the classroom, where the central office is in

the classroom". Engaging teachers and parents in formal school reviews—i.e., school-wide assessments of their Catholic identity—enabled voices outside of leadership and helped to build a culture of understanding. One teacher stated that participating in a school review "was the first time in my 25 years of teaching that somebody from the central office asked my opinion".

Instead of circling the wagons, many superintendents explained the importance of having conversations and truthfully naming differences of opinion. Sam explained how a visit to his schools revealed a global student body. This variety was also evident in social values, where "media concerns about the treatment of LGBTQ community members. . . can pit church teaching versus mainstream society. They don't fit together perfectly. . . it's a major issue". Despite trying to find points of convergence, Sam recognized the reality of seemingly unresolvable issues. Others noted encountering politically conservative Catholics who were critical about vaccine mandates and weaker sexual mores. Nevertheless, Sam found solace in trying "to think of Pope Francis and his culture of encounter".

The superintendents endorsed Catholic schools as welcoming places. They sought to encounter and listen to others, seeking to improve the lives of students and staff. They could also feel cultural tensions over politically-charged issues of the day. It was not easy.

3.3. Focus on the Essentials of the Christian Faith

Francis wants a synodal church to focus on the essentials of the Christian faith rather than on doctrinal or moral certitude. He seeks an accessible message for all people: one directed at the marginalized rather than focused on educated elites. The superintendents felt the pressures between these different approaches as exemplified in faith formation. Some, like Clare, argued that teacher faith formation could be overly complicated and staff members wanted a less technical examination of faith and sought a practical application of it. Others, like Ross, recognized that students could ask some difficult questions of a theological nature and oftentimes religion teachers could not handle these well. To be sure, superintendents supported the teaching of religion and their school districts' faith formation programs. Some hoped that there would be an evolution of an understanding of church teaching; others admitted that on some moral issues they could not simply meet in the middle between the Church and mainstream social views. No one was endorsing watering down the Catholic faith, but many were concerned about how well the faith was being passed on to young people, especially when familial connections to the parishes were usually weak—as stated by Sam, for instance.

A major challenge to Francis's kerygmatic inspiration in the schools is that some superintendents wondered about the motives of teachers: some teachers appear to be Catholic only in name. Sam pointed to the lack of authenticity of some Catholic educators. He explained, "If I'm going to have a teacher go into a Catholic school and . . . celebrate being Catholic, they gotta work that through their internal life. Because without that, I think it starts to be . . . pretending". Many wondered how the Catholic faith would be passed on in situations like this. If there is not an authentic witness to the faith, students begin to believe that the catholicity piece is simply an add-on. Ross explained how his schools try to "make our school communities places permeated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and love" while being "welcoming of all faiths". This dual-pronged approach can water down the essentials of faith if not done well.

Murray shared a way of making faith more practical. He asked staff and individual teachers to set goals and review how faith was being actualized in their schools and classrooms. He asked, "what are you doing in your faith life to grow yourself forward?" He explained the "essentials of the faith as answers to the following questions, 'Is faith being integrated in every classroom? Do you have a prayer table? What's the average prayer life of a student who goes to our school, and what's your engagement in social justice activities?'" He explained that the benefit of a Catholic school over a public school is that the faith-based school can examine the purpose behind everything: "we have a more holistic education. . . something that burns at the heart of [our teaching], a lens by which we

see the world.” He wondered how this distinction could be more front and center, which in its own way reflects the pontiff’s concern.

Francis advocates for a kerygmatic approach to religious education broadly speaking, but there appears to be no single answer among superintendents. Yes, improved religious knowledge and practice are necessary, but the contexts and needs vary to such a degree that there seems no simple way forward.

3.4. Attentive to Local Decision-Making

According to Gaillardetz (2023), Francis’s vision of synodality tries to be more attentive to local decision-making as inspired by the principle of subsidiarity. An authentic exercise of authority includes input from lay people and the local church, plus maintaining respect for the authority of the ecclesial officials. Authentic authority, furthermore, is more than merely democratic reforms or bureaucratic refinements. How ought Catholic schools demonstrate this difficult balance among layers of authority?

The superintendents acknowledged the authority of the local bishop within Catholic schooling. He is the standard bearer for the mission of the schools. Many superintendents spoke about a positive relationship with their local bishops, including their personal admiration for their example and leadership. Others were not as positive about their relationship or did not have much to say about it. One generalized that bishops work predominantly within ecclesial circles and local churches, whereas superintendents wade deeper into the waters of regular life. Their complex role includes engagement with the bishop, but also with others: they are hired by a board of trustees, must meet the demands of the School Act and the direction of the Minister of Education, and be attentive to the needs of students, parents, and other groups. Superintendents described functioning inside a bureaucratic reality that contains different kinds of authority.

These tensions were captured well in an example from Murray. He explained how his district—like the others—asks for a priest reference letter when the teacher is hired and also a few years later before they are offered a continuous teaching contract. The authority of the Church exists in tension with, or in addition to, the prevailing secular values and professional teaching requirements. Murray explained how he strives to “find a way through that can both be authentic to Catholic teaching and work with the worldly authorities”. The authority of the Church, through the role of the Bishop and the parish priest, are necessary for the Catholic school to thrive, as stated by this superintendent. He explained a situation where the parish priest wanted “to know how you’re gonna be handling this [Gay-Straight Alliance] group that is going to be trying to form in your high school. If I don’t like your answers, I won’t be able to support the schools”. His rigid approach left little room for subsidiarity. Murray asked if this particular priest knew about the pastoral guidelines on gender and sexuality that the superintendents worked on in consultation with the bishops. The priest eventually read the guidelines and continued his support of the schools. Working together on the policy was functionally beneficial and spiritually unifying, even if the priest was using a strong-arm approach.

Often the superintendents noted how society generally shows little respect for the authority of the Church and its bishops. For example, many superintendents noted low churchgoing rates among students and teachers. Frank wondered how this would affect the long-term projections for enrollment in Catholic schools. Sam added that the lack of parish involvement by families depletes the mission of the schools. It would seem that the broader social influence of the bishops is shrinking.

The complex social roles of superintendents appeared to succeed most with a listening, dialogical stance toward the educational community. Francis’s call for greater attentiveness to the principle of subsidiarity gives support to the leadership style of the superintendents, while obedience to episcopal authority was sometimes less than wholehearted.

4. Discussion

Throughout the interviews, moments of vulnerability, fear, commitment, helplessness, and empowerment were expressed within the research relationship. Superintendents shared both personal and professional experiences in what could be described as a sense of synodality. It might not have been named as such, but in many ways, it mirrored the type of dialogue Pope Francis endorses, “The culture of care becomes the compass at local and international level to form people dedicated to patient listening, constructive dialogue and mutual understanding” (Gaillardetz 2023, p. 53). The pontiff remains dedicated to a collaborative, synergistic form of leadership that is uniquely Christian and inclusive. We divide this section also into the four synodal commitments outlined above and seek to understand possible implications for Catholic schooling.

4.1. A Re-Examination of Relationships Leads to Change

Pope Francis’s call to synodality asks leaders to re-examine and reshape relationships inside the Church. Catholic schools in Western Canada are heavily influenced by policies attached to government regulations and professional associations for educators and trustees. Catholic educators are part of a broader publicly funded schooling system model. In these large bureaucratic systems, cultivating effective relationships is necessary in the face of the temptation to follow a technological mindset or fashionable ideologies (Alberta Education 2023, p. 3; Congregation for Catholic Education 1997, paras. 1 and 10). In Francis’s 2019 address to the German bishops, he adds that the danger of “a new ideological colonization” is that of the “dictatorship of functionalism” (Faggioli 2020b, p. 98). When policies and procedures direct decision-making processes, a synodal approach counters by asking for deep listening to others and attentiveness to the Spirit. Instead of blindly seeking greater efficiencies, smoother transactions, and improved networks, a Gospel-inspired school leadership must seek deeper truths through repentance, openness, and a willingness to respond. Interviewed superintendents believed that their vulnerability and faithfulness forged communal bonds.

All superintendents spoke about the importance of fostering relationships. This emphasis surely reflects their experiences as leaders and their academic studies and professional pedagogies. Many expressed how relations were formative in creating an excellent educational environment for students and their families. This relational perspective underlined an inclusivist approach, where all students were welcome in their schools. Schools must offer an individual “a positive experience of social and fraternal relationships”, according to the Congregation for Catholic Education (2022, para. 19), “as a precondition for becoming a person capable of building a society based on justice and solidarity”.

Through the building of relationships, Francis reminds us that at times God’s Spirit seems adversarial: there are moments when “the Holy Spirit kicks the table, throws it, and starts over” (Faggioli 2020b, p. 98). A synodal church must understand that disruption to the status quo requires careful examination. The pope explains that a tepid response is not enough: “...we run the risk of starting from ourselves and from the anxiety of self-justification and self-preservation that will lead us to make changes and adjustments, but halfway” (Faggioli 2020b, p. 97). Renewal of relations is necessary for a real response to the issues faced. With whatever problem in the education sector, a process of deep listening among administrators, trustees, and bishops is vital as a future guide for how we educate children.

The danger here lies in system leaders who might see nothing new in synodality, as if to say, “we already do that”. However, as the synod document *Instrumentum Laboris* explains, these relationships need to be built upon the method of dialogue called a “conversation in the Spirit”. This is a potential model for co-responsible decision-making amongst Catholic educators. The document describes conversation in the Spirit “as a shared prayer with a view to communal discernment for which participants prepare themselves by personal reflection and meditation. They give each other the gift of a meditated word nourished by prayer, not an opinion improvised on the spot” (Synod of Bishops 2023, para. 37).

Superintendents clearly expressed their commitment to building positive relationships, and that relationships nurtured faith development. It becomes quite evident that spiritual conversations could prove to be the most meaningful approach, given the complexity of decision-making they are often faced with. Relationships, rooted in the model of spiritual conversations, serve as a means to “sincere and respectful encounter between brothers and sisters in the faith: to meet each other is to encounter the Lord who is in our midst” ([Synod of Bishops 2023](#), para. 6).

It is the responsibility of the superintendent to nurture positive relationships and to lead teaching staff in the articulation of mission and vision statements ([Rymarz 2017](#), p. 17). It is also their responsibility to ensure these statements are the lifeblood of the school and have the backing of the bishop. Leadership formation, furthermore, requires formal study, reflective practice, and social interaction, which further roots the schools in the Catholic education tradition ([Neidhart and Lamb 2016](#), p. 61). A relational emphasis offers employees a high level of engagement and greater workplace safety ([O’Neill 2023](#), p. 98). Pope Francis insists that a renewed commitment to relationships is a pillar of synodality.

4.2. Building a Culture of Encounter Includes a Prophetic Voice

A major theme of Francis’s papacy has been to create a “culture of encounter,” where the Church moves outward and scrutinizes the “signs of the times” ([Gaillardetz 2023](#), p. 49). Francis often speaks out against the many ills of our age: consumerism and the throwaway culture, the technological paradigm, xenophobia, and neoliberal global capitalism (p. 51). He believes that a culture of encounter can overcome cultural assimilation or social isolation. For Catholic school leaders who act as faith leaders, this means creating a unique faith-based identity through conversations with others. According to [Johnson \(2009, p. 270\)](#), “people construct identities through their talk and interactions with others”. Leaders must seek creative ways to express the schools’ distinct and unique character. In a post-Christian society this effort cannot be about building walls and declaring that the schools are different. It requires upholding a religious tradition and reading the signs of the times, which includes cultivating communities of deep-rooted inclusion.

The creation of a culture of encounter demands a prophetic vision. Francis states, “we cannot create a culture of dialogue if we do not have identity” ([Congregation for Catholic Education 2022](#), para. 2). Practically speaking, pointed questions must be asked: Does the superintendent have a complex understanding of their schools’ Catholic identity? Are they able to articulate their Catholic identity to both insiders and outsiders? Is this statement of identity more than a branding experiment? How can faith formation opportunities be informed by a culture of encounter? Will suitable financial resources be allocated? Unless leaders can articulate a complex, authentically Catholic identity within a pluralistic society ([Congregation for Catholic Education 2013](#)), the schools will become a diluted entity in the midst of varying interests and educational choices. Educational philosopher John [Sullivan \(2001, pp. 27–28\)](#) promotes the full embrace of the Catholic schools as both distinctive and inclusive. Holding two apparently conflicting imperatives requires a culture of encounter: “. . . the mission of the Church is to transmit something distinctive, a divinely sanctioned message for life. . . on the other hand, an equally important imperative for Catholicism to be fully inclusive, to be open to all types of people. . . the gospel to be offered is not only to be addressed to all people. . . it is. . . for all people”. This complex, relational model requires leadership that seeks to prophetically encounter the world and meet the needs of God’s people.

Because the schools are fully-funded by the government and plug into these public governance structures, Catholic school system leaders run the risk of accepting with little scrutiny the structures and language of bureaucratic functionalism. [Scanlan \(2008, p. 48\)](#) adds that Catholic school systems must critically reflect on their own practices and realize how their organizations “mask injustices” as normalized patterns of schools and society, which can be difficult to alter. When funding is tied to government regulations, will synodality only be given lip service? Entering into this level of encounter requires a

belief in the help of divine grace and in a mercy that can embrace all dialogue partners even amidst cultural tensions, politically-charged issues, and the needs of the weakest in society. Because a synodal Church is a Church of encounter and dialogue, according to *Instrumentum Laboris* (Synod of Bishops 2023, para. 12), “we must begin to learn what it means to live unity in diversity, a fundamental point to continue exploring, trusting that the path will become clearer as we move forward. Therefore, a synodal Church promotes the passage from ‘I’ to ‘we’. It is a space within which a call resonates to be members of a body that values diversity but is made one by the Spirit”.

It also requires the prophetic call to seek the truth of the situation, being peacemakers instead of peacekeepers. Rather than reducing faith in schools to a checkbox approach or a spiritualized viewpoint that lacks lived expressions of faith, a culture of encounter approach demands engagement toward what is true and good (Congregation for Catholic Education 2022, para. 68–72). Further to this, avoiding a narrow viewpoint or an exclusively legalistic approach requires seeking out the mercy of God within the world rather than separating oneself from it. A prophetic cry against shortcutting a culture of encounter can unlock logjams and unleash reform that especially assists the most marginalized.

“Walking together” should not simply be understood operationally and managerially because it demands listening to everyone—including through innovative approaches like social media (Brazal 2023, p. 105)—which in turn requires leadership to prophetically name the problems faced. A synodal approach pushes for encounter with everyone, both in a spirit of mercy and truth. It is a matter of responding “to the needs of the times without, however, ‘losing the synthesis between faith, culture and life, which is the keystone of the educational mission’” (Congregation for Catholic Education 2022, para. 29). Diplomacy is not enough; leaders need a prophetic voice that stirs conversation and is life-giving truth.

4.3. Focusing on the Essentials of Faith

Francis’s vision of synodality wrestles control away from the educated elite, moral purists, and doctrinally-driven leaders, those who too often act as gatekeepers. Instead of following their specialized viewpoints, the pope demands a more humble embrace of the essentials of faith. Explicit articulation of Christian beliefs is indeed a central distinguishing character of Catholic schools versus their public school counterparts. A faith education must emphasize the development of the entire human person within a transcendent framework instead of being narrowly restricted to cognitive learning or ideological interests (Sultmann et al. 2022).

Focusing on the essentials of the Christian faith makes belief more accessible to more people, and the superintendents generally believed that a focus on engaging in the core of faith was vitally important. Improved religious knowledge and practice are needed—not to mention forming witnesses in faith—but how contemporary Canadians receive this message may be mixed, even in a Catholic school. Parents, as the primary educators of their children, choose the school that best aligns with their beliefs, their child’s needs, and other factors. Although parents may choose the school for its faith-based mission, Rymarz (2016, p. 42) explains that parents’ reasons for choosing Catholic schools vary greatly. In many ways, secularized Canadians generally want the many good effects that come from faith-based schooling but without the demands and responsibilities of religious affiliation or moral doctrines. Rearing children in a faith tradition is usually not a priority for parents (Sultmann et al. 2022). Furthermore, those teaching in a post-Christian society may feel awkward about inculcating religious faith in children, even in a Catholic school. It is little wonder then that pragmatic superintendents find this tension of being authentically Catholic unsettling. While the levels of catholicity in school divisions varied and superintendents recognized the need for authentically Catholic schools, they felt the practical limitations of not having undivided commitment from the parent community, teaching staff, etc. Focusing on the essentials of faith potentially earns more buy-in from the broader community, if it can be promoted through trusted relationships and a culture of encounter. Without a doubt, a diluted variation of Catholic schools will undermine the

mission of the schools and consequently their constitutional protection. Striking a fine balance is necessary for publicly funded Catholic schools.

The question remains: what exactly are the essentials of the faith for those in Catholic schooling? Ruddy (2023, pp. 220–23) argues that the essentials of the faith include the universal call to holiness, a missionary element, and themes of sin, grace, and the cross. With the religious education program in particular, Rymarz (2023, p. 6) calls for a faith education premised on “philosophical foundations which do not make a priori assumptions about truth and meaning, and which recognize the need for engaging content which has a strong cognitive foundation”. This recommendation is in-step with Francis: engaging people where they are at and yet ensuring a teaching of substance and quality. Promoting a moral education of generic character traits will not suffice. It requires announcing a message that counters conventional thinking and is rooted in the kerygma (Faggioli 2020b, p. 98). While superintendents rightly elicited prayer, liturgies, and faith formation as foundational practices, leaders still need theological training to deepen and clarify their articulation of faith.

4.4. Exercising Authentic Authority

At a moment when social trust in institutions is at record lows, determining authentic authority is vital for the fate of society—let alone Catholic schools (Keenan 2023, p. 112). Francis’s vision of synodality promotes the principle of subsidiarity as a means to reform the exercise of authority inside the Church and beyond. Subsidiarity involves encountering the other as someone with God-given dignity and engaging in decision-making best exercised at the local community and school levels. It is described in *Instrumentum Laboris* (Synod of Bishops 2023, para. 17): “One common trait unites the narratives of the stages of the first phase [of the synod]: it is the surprise expressed by participants who were able to share the synodal journey in a way that exceeded their expectations. For those who take part, the synodal process offers an opportunity for an encounter in faith that makes the bond with the Lord, fraternity between people and love for the Church, not only on an individual level, but involving and energizing the entire community”. Authentic encounter between fellow human beings enables opportunities to enliven relations. Real authority, then, depends on openness and vulnerability, which was a theme repeated by the superintendents.

The interviews demonstrated that superintendents treasured their faith and had grappled with work and life issues from a faith perspective. Without academic and practical training in theology and practical theology, however, leaders can get caught up in politicized tensions and pragmatic decision-making. Nevertheless, as many superintendents pointed out, there need not be exclusionary thinking between being Catholic versus being Canadian. Leaders can be true to both their vocational commitment to faith and contractual obligations as an educator. Differences in aims, roles, and responsibilities between superintendents, trustees, and bishops meant that superintendents could feel uncertain or frustrated about other leaders’ perspectives. Gaps in understanding could lead to systemic tensions. Superintendents strive to build positive relationships with staff and ecclesial bodies, yet it is difficult to gauge or measure these and their levels of success. While the 2022 Congregation for Catholic Education document tries to define the roles of bishops (para. 59), the apparent global reality of different episcopal viewpoints on sensitive issues means that leaders in Western Canada are no different from others. Authentic authority requires “dialogue and walking together” (para. 82).

Superintendents spoke respectfully of bishops, while bishops in turn have traditionally supported the schools publicly. A mutual respect is evident. However, because superintendents take on many roles, do they see themselves primarily as faith leaders versus administrators, managers, and financial experts? Do they engage ordained clergy as firstly fellow baptized Christians, or do they risk supporting a clericalized church by handing over all ecclesial authority to the ordained? Baptized superintendents as faith leaders have real power in educational circles, but what this means exactly as ecclesial leaders is not defined. Faggioli complains that because synodality is promoted as a way of being in the

Church and has unclear implications for Church governance, there is uncertainty over how synodality affects lay leadership in Church organizations (Faggioli 2020a, pp. 366–68). What practical implications will it have on authority structures at the local level?

Further, if a leader—whether a superintendent, trustee, or bishop—cannot be authentic in and knowledgeable about faith, relationships with other leaders will most likely falter. Or, at the very least, inauthenticity will bring up feelings of uneasiness and untrustworthiness in others. Francis is not asking for people to simply respect one another, but to encounter one another and exercise an authentic authority that enables subsidiarity and local decision-making while reaching out to the most in need.

5. Conclusions

In Pope Francis’s vision of leadership, synodality can enable reform in Catholic education: “to educate is to take a risk and to hold out to the present a hope that can shatter the determinism and fatalism” of our age (Congregation for Catholic Education 2022, para. 7). It is our belief that this spirit is what synodality is trying to awaken. It is not a Christian form of bureaucracy or parliament. Instead, it is an attempt to embed the divine inspiration and organic discernment of the Holy Spirit in the work of the Church and Catholic education.

Catholic chief superintendents in Western Canada have become the advocates of what is or is not deemed Catholic in their schools. This reality is a large responsibility, especially when the Church and State collaborate together to provide an education to children. Francis’s call to synodality is not a move to democratize the Church. Rather it is a challenge to enable the Holy Spirit to upend the predominant patterns within schooling that do not serve the needs of everyone, especially those of the weakest in society. Top levels of leadership tend not to rock the boat: if synodality is not courageously embraced and pushed toward its practical implications, it will likely make little difference. The pope acknowledges how pastoral freedom gives rise to enculturated solutions (Faggioli 2020b, p. 94). Will Catholic schools in Western Canada adventure together to embody a synodal church? What will this shift inevitably look like?

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Note

¹ In Saskatchewan, chief superintendents use the title of “Director of Education”.

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