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Collectivist Culture and Building a Synodal Church in Vietnam: Opportunities and Challenges

Nguyen Cong Nhat

Graduate School Department, University of Santo Tomas,
Manila, Philippines
nhatnguyencv@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The article aims to argue that the Church life in Vietnam is under the influence of the culture of collectivism, which creates an imbalance between collective faith and personal faith of Vietnamese Catholics. This collectivist culture is shaped through the intertwining of traditional values and religious values throughout the nation's history. On the one hand, the culture of collectivism brings benefits of unity, love, and support in social life and religious life. On the other hand, it tends towards uniformity, group-competence, and inequality, leading to a lack of personal faith. These are manifested in the recent discussions toward synodality in the Church in Vietnam. Influenced by Confucian hierarchical patterns, the collectivist cultural model poses challenges to achieving genuine communion, participation, and mission in ecclesial life. Therefore, the Church in Vietnam is called to intentionally strengthen the dimension of personal faith as a propnetic step toward a more dynamic and synodal Church, both ad intra and ad extra. To this end, the article proposes an inculturated application of the Johannine model of discipleship as an ecclesiological framework capable of fostering mature personal faith within the Vietnamese context. The study employs textual analysis and draws upon interdisciplinary scholarship in social research, religious studies, and contextual ecclesiology.

Keywords: *culture, collectivism, personal faith and collective faith, Catholic Church in Vietnam, communication of faith, inculturation*

1. Introduction

Religion and culture are integrally related to each other, especially in the Asian context. Christopher Dawson (1948) claims that all the great civilizations and cultural creativity went hand in hand with religion. Dawson (1948, 217) opines that “one cannot genuinely speak of culture if the religious horizon becomes so absent or impotent; if detached from spiritual aims and moral values, culture finds itself faced with a spiritual conflict of the most acute kind.” In the context of Catholicism, the concept of “inculturation” emerges as the Church’s appraisal of cultures in which people live and express their faith (Basas 2022, 93).

In this view, Catholicism is inculturated in the context of Vietnam, and it is expressed in a unique way. It is a mutual influence and adaptation between the Vietnamese culture and the Catholic faith. The faith life of Vietnamese Catholics reflects a culture of collective faith, which aligns with the broader Vietnamese culture of collectivism. The origin of Vietnamese collectivist culture stems from the blending of multiple layers of religions and traditional values throughout the nation’s establishment and development. Although the collectivist culture and collective faith offer benefits for the social life of the community, there are concomitant challenges to faith life within the Church in Vietnam. Most prominently, it has challenged aspects of communion, participation, and mission as pillars in building a synodal Church.

The paper aims to explore the collectivist cultural expression in the Vietnamese people and its impact on Church life in Vietnam toward synodality. How does a collectivist culture influence the collective faith of Vietnamese Catholicism, with both opportunities and challenges for building a synodal Church? To approach this primary question is using textual analysis as methodology. It will integrate the results of the social survey on the Vietnamese relationship, the research on the behaviors of the practiced faith life of the Vietnamese Catholics, and the theology of contextual ecclesiology. To solve this problem, the article’s aim is to firstly clarify the conceptual framework of the collectivist culture and communal faith in its general features and in Vietnamese expressions; second, explore the concept of synodality in Catholic teaching; third, analyze the impact of collectivist culture on Vietnamese Catholic life toward synodality; and finally, propose pastoral strategies fostering synodality.

As a result, this article argues that there is a need for an inculturation and application of a new ecclesial model to the Church in Vietnam. Particularly, the values of the Johannine ecclesiology will enhance the growth of personal faith in Church members. The Johannine discipleship model serves as a pattern for transforming the Church in Vietnam toward a new community personally attached to Christ (Brown 1984, 84). It does not mean to negate or underestimate the collective life or communal faith in the Church; rather, personal growth in faith of each Church member is in need of enhancement.

2. Collectivist Culture and Communal Faith: General Features and Vietnamese Expressions

This section aims to give the conceptual framework of the collectivist culture and communal faith in general. It then examines how these concepts are concretely manifested within Vietnamese society, demonstrating that Vietnamese culture is fundamentally collectivist in nature.

2.1. General Characteristics of Collectivist Culture

Regarding the conceptual framework, the research on the individualism-collectivism dimension of culture usually originated within the realm of social psychology. Hoang-Anh Ho et al. (2022) reference the work of H. C. Triadis and G. Hofstede to provide a conceptual definition of collectivism. Accordingly, collectivism is characterized by a focus on the goals of the collective, which delineates the in-group boundary. Consequently, individual interests are subordinate to those of the group, often leading individuals to make significant sacrifices for the collective's benefit. Typically, individuals in collectivist cultures demonstrate lower levels of self-expression and self-esteem, alongside an interdependent sense of agency. Core values such as family, duty, honor, and respect for elders hold great significance in collectivist societies. Additionally, these societies tend to exhibit highly stratified or autocratic leadership structures, often referred to as vertical collectivism, and may display hostility toward out-groups (Ho et al. 2022, 51).

Communal faith, in the context of Vietnamese Catholicism, is illustrated in aspects such as a shared hope for communal salvation, institutionalized religion, and activity-driven practices. Communal faith is most clearly manifested in the collective life, rooted in the family context, with the honoring of ancestors as a central aspect of religion. This creates a collective faith in which a hope for "communal salvation" is necessary (Truong 2008, 2). Then it expands into the spirit of the village with the role of the head of the village. This collective life influences the theological understanding of God as an ancestor or a Chief who has power over them and watches over their lives (Hiebert et al. 2000, 95, 106, 132, 201). While communal faith is a source of strength for Christian life, it also carries certain risks in modern society. Structured religious activities can nourish faith, but they can also overshadow genuine personal belief and an authentic relationship with God. Nguyen Trong Vien (2008, 15) evaluates the faith life of Vietnamese Catholics as largely organizational and activity-driven, sometimes even bordering on formalism. Most churches are populated during organized liturgical celebrations yet remain nearly empty when no official activities are taking place. Few individuals seek God on a deeply personal level, driven by a sincere need for faith in their daily lives. When they do, it is often out of a sense of obligation or in

hopes of receiving divine favor (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam - CBCV 2012).

2.2. Origins and Dimensions of Vietnamese Collectivism

To analyze a culture, there are many approaches that can be employed. One of the most important approaches is the indispensable relationship between religion and culture (Cohen et al. 2016). Religion is inherently cultural in nature, and it is critical in understanding individual psychology and cultures (Belzen 1999; Cohen 2015). In this perspective, the culture of Vietnam is a blend of many layers: traditional culture, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Western culture, and communism (Quynh 2016, 38; Ho et al. 2022, 56). All layers of culture and religion, both directly and indirectly, influence the collective mindset of the Vietnamese people. Due to the constraint, this paper only focuses on traditional culture and Confucianism as the prominent factors influencing Vietnamese collectivism.

2.2.1. Traditional culture

The core value of the Vietnamese traditional culture, which shapes the people's collectivist orientation as an intrinsic value, lies in relational harmony. As Peter C. Phan (2005, 24-27) claims, the central moral orientation of Vietnamese culture is summarized as "to be is to-be-in-harmony," beginning with the family as the cornerstone and extending to the community, society, and the cosmos. In other words, the mindset of relational harmony pervades all aspects of Vietnamese life, such as in relation to Heaven, Earth, and Humanity. Many Vietnamese culturologists have agreed that Vietnamese culture is based on the paradigm of family-village-country, and family is the cornerstone of any relationship (Hac 2022, 80; Quynh 2016, 4). This paradigm shapes collectivism, or a sense of community, as the core value of Vietnam (Quynh 2016, 4).

The core value of Vietnamese traditional culture, rooted in the family as an expression of filial piety and loyalty, encompasses patriotism. This value is formed throughout the formation of national history in the period of war for independence and peace (Quynh 2021, 11). In times of war, the Vietnamese show their solidarity and unity to beat foreign colonialists, while in times of peace, they show active and positive contributions to national development in political, social, commercial, and cultural fields (Chuan 1999, 277). In other words, patriotism is derived from the cultural core value of harmony in filial piety, which extends to communal loyalty. The spirit of patriotism orients Vietnamese people to have more bonds with their motherland, relatives, and family. Some scholars observe that when studying the characteristics of the Vietnamese, the core values of the Vietnamese people include community-collective values, moral respect, frugal ability, reality, patriotism, love of peace, humanism, and optimism (Phong 1963, 40; Huong 2016, 40). Moreover, the socio-political contexts of communism in North Vietnam (since 1945), and the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam (since

1975) have reinforced collectivist patterns of survival, mutual support, and conformity within Catholic religious communities (Thao 2019, 301–305).

2.2.2. Confucianism

Due to over 1,000 years of China’s colonization, the distinctive philosophies and religious traditions of China, particularly Confucianism, were brought to Vietnam and have deeply affected the Vietnamese social and religious fabric (Ho et al. 2022, 56; Hieu 2015, 74; Duong 2011). Confucianism’s main influence is on the social hierarchy of virtues and relations (Quynh 2016, 35). Influenced by Confucianism’s emphasis on social hierarchy and interpersonal relations, personal ideas often seem to succumb to the obligations of filial piety, which involves absolute obedience to the elderly and respected individuals, such as grandparents, parents, teachers, and elders.

The family constitutes the central institution in Vietnamese society, profoundly shaped by Confucian ideals of hierarchy and absolute obedience. Filial piety is instilled from an early age, as children are expected to demonstrate unwavering obedience to their parents and respect toward their elder siblings. This value is encapsulated in a traditional Vietnamese proverb that translates literally as: “A fish without salt will rot; a child who disobeys his parents is a bad one.” Confucian influence also extends to family structure, particularly in defining the role of women. A virtuous woman is traditionally expected to adhere to the three obediences: obedience to her father in youth, to her husband after marriage, and to her son upon her husband’s death (Thi 2014, 3–4).

In education, Confucianism still affects school leadership, teaching, and learning relationships. Vietnamese students learn by memorizing lessons from textbooks and passively following the teacher’s lecture. Lessons are thus structured in a teacher-centered manner. As in family relationship, at school, students must obey teachers absolutely. This system of education, hence, generates a habit of passive learning among students, who are often devoid of critical and problem-solving skills and effective teamwork (He et al. 2011, 98).

Within the community, respect for elders, teachers, and those in positions of authority is expected, irrespective of their economic, educational, or social standing. Moreover, the four cardinal virtues of Confucianism—moral integrity, propriety in speech, modest demeanor, and diligence in work—serve to reinforce gender inequality by implicitly prescribing women’s subservience to men. Consequently, this cultural framework fosters a society characterized by male chauvinism (Hieu 2015, 73, 80).

In the political sphere, Confucianism upholds the principle of unconditional loyalty to the monarch or ruling authority. Historically, Confucian scholars and citizens devoted their lives to defending or restoring the royal dynasty (Hieu 2015, 78). Loyalty was defined as absolute fidelity to a single sovereign until death, as illustrated in the Confucian dictum: “If the king commands a subject to die, the

subject would be deemed disloyal if he or she protests.” Rooted in Confucian thought, personal honor and virtue were thus measured by unwavering allegiance.

More broadly, the Confucian ideal of relational unity—spanning family, village, community, and nation—has profoundly shaped Vietnamese society into a collective culture. This collectivist ethos privileges communal identity, social harmony, and moral interdependence over individual autonomy. As this cultural orientation permeates all spheres of life, Vietnamese Catholics are by no means an exception.

3. Synodality in Catholic Teaching

Synodality is not a new concept in the life of the Church, but a neologism that appeared in recent decades in the theological, canonical, and pastoral literature. It is rooted “in the wake of the Church’s ‘renewal’ proposed by the Second Vatican Council” (General Secretariat of the Synod 2021). The word synodality, as a noun and synodal as an adjective, is rooted in the word “synod.” Both are straightforward for constructing a “Synodal Church” in Pope Francis’ vision (International Theological Commission - ITC 2018, no. 5). The *Final Document for A Synodal Church* states, “Synodality is the walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God’s Kingdom, in union with all humanity” (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024-Synod XVI, no. 28).

3.1. Theological and Ecclesiological Foundations

“Synod,” in Greek, is composed of a preposition *συν* (with) and the noun *ὁδός* (path). Hence, the root word of synodality, indicates the path in which the People of God walk together. The path or the way refers to the Lord Jesus, who reveals Himself as “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (Jn 14:6). His followers were originally called “followers of the Way” (*cf.* Acts 9:2; 19:9. 23; 22:4; 24:14. 22). In ecclesial Greek, “synod” (*συνόδος*) refers to the disciples of Jesus who are called into an assembly, and in some cases, it is a synonym for the ecclesial community (ITC 2018, no. 3).

The emphasized theological foundation for synodality is based on baptismal equality (Synod XVI 2024, no. 4). It lays a ground for equality in speaking, mutual listening, and discerning in the whole Church because all the baptized share in Christ’s triple office: priestly, prophetic, and kingly. *Sensus fidei* (sense of faith) is the key for communion, participation, and mission to include different parts of the Church, not only bishops, but the entire Church. It is an inclusive manner for all members to raise their voices and express their insights on the *ad intra* (inside the Church) and *ad extra* (outside the Church). The ecclesiological foundation of synodality is in continuity with Vatican II’s renewals and reversals (Rush 2017,

304–305). Synodality aims to reclaim the baptismal identity and mission of a faith community.

3.2. Key Themes: Communion, Participation, Mission

Communion in a synodal Church denotes one faith through the covenant between God and his people, rooted and shaped by the model of the Trinitarian unity and love. Christ is the mediator between God and His people, who reconciles and unites humanity with God and with each other in the power of the Holy Spirit. Listening to the Word of God through the living Tradition of the Church and discerning God's call for his people is the responsibility of all Church members grounded in the *sensus fidei*.

The Holy Spirit is the main agent that enables everyone to contribute, not least the marginalized and underprivileged, to making pastoral decisions for the Church as closely as possible to God's will. The power of the Holy Spirit bestowed on the baptized enables and qualifies them to have the capacity to discern God's will through the teaching of Jesus Christ. *Sensus Fidelium* (sense of the faithful), is the Spirit's gift as a collective faith to discern together and offer advice on pastoral decisions. It means a sense of faith is always in communion with the entire Church, in communion with the hierarchy (Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops 2021, para. 1.4).

The most important keyword for the mission is “witness the love of God” to the whole human family. The Church's role in mission is as a leaven at the service of the coming of God's kingdom. “The Church exists to evangelize. We can never be centered on ourselves. Our mission is to witness the love of God in the midst of the whole human family... It is intended to enable the Church to better witness to the Gospel, especially with those who live on the spiritual, social, economic, political, geographical, and existential peripheries of our world” (Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops 2021, para. 1.4).

To conclude, synodality is the nature of the Church's life, its *modus vivendi et operandi*—the lifestyle and culture for living and working in the life of the Church—in the third millennium. It expresses the inclusive manner for the life and activities of the Church, in which all members walk together based on the equality of baptismal dignity, but always in communion and under the authority of the Pope. It is not based on majoritarian votes or a democratic system; rather, it always expresses a communion among all members through the process of listening and discernment together to address *ad intra* and *ad extra* issues of the Church.

4. Positive Impact of Collectivist Culture on Vietnamese Catholic Life

Catholicism was first introduced to Vietnam in 1533 (Phan 2014, 1). From its earliest stages, it developed through adaptation to Vietnam's traditional cultural framework and was, in turn, shaped by the nation's deep-rooted collectivist ethos. Following the family–village–nation paradigm, the family functions as the foundation of all social relationships. This structure reinforces collectivism as a core cultural value, nurturing a communal orientation of faith in which the hope for collective salvation holds significant importance (Truong 2008, 2).

The Church in Vietnam draws upon the ecclesiological models articulated by the Second Vatican Council, namely, the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit, to express both the mystery and the structure of the Church. However, in the Vietnamese context, these models are inculturated primarily through an emphasis on communion, articulated in the contextual model of the Church as the Family of God (CBCV 2011). These ecclesial models illustrate the Church's process of inculturation and adaptation within Vietnam's collectivist and family-oriented culture (Brown 1984, 84), particularly one marked by ancestor veneration. The goal is to cultivate harmony and resonance between Catholic faith and Vietnamese cultural values, given the centrality of the family in Vietnamese social life (Tien 2006, vi).

The inculturation of Catholicism within Vietnam's collectivist culture brings both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, it enriches the Church's spiritual life, especially in liturgical expression and popular devotion. On the other hand, it also presents tensions and limitations, particularly when viewed through the lens of synodality.

4.1. Liturgical Worship

One of the positive impacts of the collective faith is the vibrancy in the Church worship celebration. Immersed in collective faith or a collectivist culture, the Catholic Vietnamese, in general, are fond of festivals and faith-community activities. For example, this strong tradition of communal celebration is reflected in the Catholic community in Nam Dinh province, North Vietnam, where Catholicism was first introduced (Hai 2012, 5). Today, Nam Dinh remains one of the most vibrant Catholic regions in Vietnam, exemplifying the intersection of Catholicism and traditional Vietnamese culture (Dat 2017, 69). Vietnamese Catholics in Nam Dinh, which belongs to the metropolitan archdiocese of Hanoi, are known for their fervent and emotionally expressive faith, often characterized by external displays of devotion. That is why celebrations usually last for several days, while preparation extends to over a week, and even a month, in some cases. Alongside the religious rituals that accompany the feasts, there are performances, cultural programs, and prayer vigils. These not only attract a large number of parishioners but also appeal to non-Catholics in the area (Dat 2017, 69).

A statistical study in the Archdiocese of Hanoi (which includes Nam Dinh province), reported that among 350,000 faithful, 86.1% attended Sunday Mass, and 11% attended weekday Mass. These figures reflect both the high level of Mass attendance and the deep devotion of the faithful (Hung 2022). In a recent survey (2023), on the religious participation of Vietnamese Catholic domestic migrants, the authors found that short-term migrants (those who had migrated within the last five years) continued to maintain a higher frequency of religious practices than perennial migrants (those who had migrated for over five years). Reasons for the discrepancy lie in the lack of community support and care from parents, as they were accustomed to in their hometown (Huong et al. 2023, 60–61). Indeed, communal faith plays a crucial role in nourishing, encouraging, and supporting the religious practices of its members within the Church in Vietnam.

4.2. Popular Devotion

Catholic popular devotion is more welcome through the integration of the collectivist culture, particularly the filial piety (Vietnamese ancestor worship), in Vietnamese Catholic belief. Xavier Nhien Truong (2008, 9) observes that in the aftermath of missionary inculturation in Vietnam, one of the most profound changes was the reconfiguration of the ancestral altar. The Vietnamese Catholics began to place the altar of God above their ancestral altar. This divine altar was adorned with a centrally placed crucifix, flanked by Saints Mary and Joseph on either side, two candles, and a Holy Bible. Beneath this, they positioned the ancestral altar with images of their forebears. Their prayers were directed towards God and the saints rather than their ancestors. Instead of praying to their ancestors, they prayed for them, particularly those believed to be in purgatory. They also sought the intercession of ancestors who were thought to have ascended to Heaven. Praying to the saints, especially the Virgin Mary, by reciting the Rosary, became an integral part of their religious practice. This form of devotion had its roots in their cultural tradition of praying directly to their ancestors. The missionaries introduced the practice of praying the Rosary, often accompanied by the serene image of Our Lady of Lavang, which deeply resonated with the Vietnamese imagination.

Besides the evangelization of the so-called “religion” of ancestor veneration, collectivist culture encourages Vietnamese Catholics to participate in Eucharist adoration, religious processions of saints, which serve as a nourishment of faith. Catholics also express their faith by wearing religious images and rosaries as signs of their devotion. In their homes, they set up elaborate altars according to their financial capabilities. Wealthier families even erect statues of Jesus and the Virgin Mary in their yards or frescoes on the walls. In Vietnam, when a small number of Catholic families reside within a community, they often take the initiative to construct a church of their own, even when another parish church is located nearby. The size and grandeur of the church are regarded as expressions of faith,

devotion, and communal pride. When local resources are limited, families and parishioners seek financial assistance from benefactors or neighboring communities. Major feast days are celebrated with remarkable festivity as churches are adorned with elaborate decorations and village streets are lined with colorful flags and flowers. These visible displays of devotion make it possible to identify which families and villages adhere to the Catholic faith.

In sum, Vietnamese Catholics are emotionally driven and thus their religious practices tend to be lively and fervent, even overemphasizing the outwardly expressive (Thong 2010). Collective faith has contributed to shaping the Church in a stable manner, has continued to thrive, and has managed to establish its place in Vietnamese culture.

5. Challenges for a Synodal Church in Vietnam

This section aims to synthesize and focus on the negative aspects existing in the life of the Church in Vietnam that hinder synodality in the dimensions of communion, participation, and mission. They are directly and indirectly affected by the collectivist culture.

5.1. Communion

In discussing the obstacles to fostering ecclesial communion and advancing synodality, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (CBCV) addresses both objective and subjective reasons (CBCV 2022, 1.3). Among these, the subjective factors are of particular concern because they reveal deeper challenges related to the inculturation of Gospel values within the Vietnamese Church. The CBCV notes that "local mentality, regional discrimination, and inferiority complex are all obstacles for communion. In some cases, pastors also have a responsibility: although most of them are willing to welcome and listen to their parishioners' ideas and opinions, there are still others who treat their parishioners with arbitrary power" (CBCV 2022, 1.3).

The local mentality and regional discrimination present challenges that stem from negative aspects of Vietnam's collectivist mindset. According to Luong Ha Chuc Quynh (2021, 11), one of the defining features of Vietnamese collectivist culture is the village system, which emphasizes close social bonds, loyalty, communal benefit, and unity. While this system fosters cohesion and mutual support, it can also produce problematic tendencies. Individuals may derive their sense of identity primarily from the community, prioritizing collective interests over personal initiative. As a result, achievements are often attributed to the community as a whole rather than to individual effort (Quynh 2021, 12).

The Country Comparison Tool likewise identifies Vietnam as a collectivist society, explaining that "such a society fosters strong relationships, where

everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group” (Group 2021). However, this same orientation can unintentionally trigger competition and comparison between communities or “villages,” undermining broader solidarity and communion. Consequently, regionalism, localism, and group-based discrimination can emerge. Nghiem Thi Thu Nga (2021) also observes that one of the downsides of communal culture is its tendency toward parochialism, factionalism, and the pursuit of group-interest over the common good.

The tendency toward arbitrary authority and inferiority complex likewise reflects the enduring influence of both the Confucian social hierarchy and Vietnam’s collectivist orientation. Applying Geert Hofstede’s 6-D Model of cultural dimensions (2001), Vietnam scores high in Power Distance with a score of 70, indicating widespread acceptance of hierarchical structures and central authority. In such contexts, hierarchy is viewed as natural and unquestionable, subordinates expect to be directed, and the ideal leader is a benevolent autocrat. Challenges to authority are often discouraged (Group 2021; Ho et al. 2022, 51).

This mindset is rooted in the Confucian concept of the Three Bonds, which emphasize the hierarchical relationships between ruler and subject, teacher and student, and father and son (Thi 2014, 3). According to Ly Tung Hieu (2015, 72, 78), one of the more negative impacts of Confucianism on Vietnamese culture is its insistence on absolute loyalty to authority figures, particularly the ruler, to whom individuals are expected to devote their lives unconditionally. Within the Church, this cultural pattern translates into an uncritical deference to ecclesial hierarchy. Many faithful, and even clergy, may hesitate to question authority, reflecting what the CBCV describes as a persistent fear of criticizing the hierarchy (CBCV 2022, 5.1). This cultural dynamic can lead some priests to adopt a leadership style that resembles that of a “king” rather than embodying the servant leadership envisioned by the Gospel.

5.2. Participation

The concept of superiority-inferiority is deeply embedded in the Confucian worldview, which distinguishes between rulers and subjects as well as between men and women. These distinctions reinforce hierarchical and unequal relationships within society. According to Hieu (2015, 73), Confucianism permeated Vietnamese culture and divided society into two broad classes. The first consisted of Confucian scholars, elites, and government officials, while the second included farmers, craftsmen, and merchants. The former group assumed responsibility for governance, whereas the latter was expected to obey and support their directives commands.

From a gender perspective, Confucianism established a patriarchal social order that upheld male dominance and often promoted extreme forms of chauvinism (Hieu 2015, 73). Jung Sun Oh, drawing on the insights of feminist scholars such as Phyllis Andors and Rosemary R. Ruether, affirms that

Confucianism functions as a hierarchical, authoritarian, and patriarchal system. As Andors argues, its structures reinforce gender inequality, while Ruether emphasizes that Asian women experience a dual oppression under traditional Confucian patriarchy (Oh 2024). The moral expectations imposed on women—summarized in the “three obediences” and “four virtues”—confined them to domestic duties and subservience to men. Moreover, Confucian educational systems were reserved exclusively for men, further institutionalizing gender discrimination and limiting women’s participation in public and religious life (Hieu 2015, 80).

This exclusion continues to affect the Church’s social relationships and the full participation of women in ecclesial activities. The National Synthesis of the Diocesan Synodal Phase acknowledges that “Asian culture with its gender prejudice and a tendency of promoting hierarchy also impacts one’s willingness to listen to women and the poor in society and in the Church” (CBCV 2022, 2.3). Thus, a deeper dialogue between Gospel values and cultural traditions is essential to identify areas of convergence, engage in appreciative comparison, and address points of respectful disagreement.

Within this cultural framework, the Church in Vietnam faces ongoing challenges related to equality and co-responsibility in participation. Many laypeople express deep joy, honor, and happiness in serving the Church, recognizing both their dignity as children of God and their shared responsibility for the Church’s mission. Yet inequalities remain, particularly in the relationship between clergy and parishioners. The Synodal Diocesan Synthesis highlights this concern, stating that “pastors should not treat members of parish councils as their servants, but as their helpers and co-workers in the vineyard of God” (CBCV 2022, 4.2). Despite these reminders, some faithful remain hesitant to confront abuses of authority due to fear of retaliation, while others feel inferior because of limited education, leading them to believe they have little to contribute to the Church’s intellectual or pastoral life (CBCV 2022, 5.1).

These attitudes stem from the Confucian legacy of hierarchism and its influence on education. In the Confucian system, a student’s absolute obedience to the teacher discourages critical thinking and innovation (Ly 2021, 77). This mentality upholds the belief that the teacher’s—or, by extension, the authority’s—teachings represent absolute truth. As Ho et al. (2022, 56) observe, such a system reinforces the superiority of the teacher and the subordination of the learner. In the ecclesial context, this dynamic is often mirrored in the priest-parishioner relationship, where deference to authority can suppress open dialogue and mutual accountability.

In cultures shaped by Confucian hierarchy, questioning those with higher status or education is considered disrespectful, whereas in individualistic societies, critique is viewed as an expression of personal insight and intellectual engagement (Triandis 2018; Cohen et al., 2016, 1238). This cultural difference highlights a

significant pastoral challenge for Vietnamese Catholicism; that is, the deeply rooted norms of obedience and hierarchy may hinder the development of authentic synodality, which depends on mutual listening, co-responsibility, and shared discernment.

5.3. Mission

Mission in the Church in Vietnam is largely limited to the transmission of faith from one generation to the next. There is little emphasis on evangelization among non-believers and non-Catholics. According to the CBCV Report (2022, 6.1–6.2), several factors contribute to this limited effectiveness: the lack of missionary priority within diocesan agendas; inadequate witness in the lives of clergy; insufficient catechetical formation that leaves the faithful unconfident in sharing their faith; and the persistent mindset that mission is the exclusive responsibility of priests and religious. At the core of these challenges lies a lack of awareness of the Church's missionary identity and of each believer's personal responsibility as a missionary disciple. In practice, many lay Catholics exhibit passivity and indifference toward evangelization, a disposition also evident among some members of the Church hierarchy (Long 2017, 1.5).

Authentic discipleship, however, entails a personal journey of faith that emerges from an intimate encounter with Jesus, the Master. Yet within a collectivist culture such as Vietnam's, communal expressions of faith often overshadow the personal dimension of spiritual growth and individual autonomy. Psychologically, collectivism tends to foster dependence on group norms and conformity to collective behavior, discouraging initiative and personal accountability. Consequently, many Vietnamese Catholics rely heavily on hierarchical leadership for spiritual direction. Thus, while Vietnamese Catholics demonstrate strong fidelity in maintaining their faith, they frequently lack missionary zeal, perceiving evangelization as someone else's duty and focusing primarily on personal salvation rather than faith-sharing (Long 2017, 1.6).

Another significant obstacle to effective evangelization is the weak Christological foundation among many Catholics. Long (2017, 1.7) asserts that to evangelize effectively, especially in a culture deeply influenced by the "*Tam giáo*" (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism), Catholics must possess a deep understanding of Christian theology, particularly who Jesus Christ is, what he taught, and how his life and message answer to human affairs and salvation in contemporary times. He acknowledges the shortcomings that most Vietnamese Catholics, including clergy and religious, have limited knowledge of Scripture and Church teachings. As a result, faith often fails to translate into concrete witness within society due to the lack of integration between faith and daily life. The Church's vitality tends to manifest outwardly through devotional practices, such as attending Mass, joining pilgrimages, or organizing celebrations, rather than through active evangelization and transformative engagement with the world.

In conclusion, the limited effectiveness of the Church's mission in Vietnam reflects, in part, the constraining effects of a collectivist religious culture that overlooks personal discipleship and missionary awareness. Vietnamese Catholics often depend excessively on hierarchical leadership or confine their faith expression to ritual observance. Within such a context, personal maturity in faith and knowledge of God becomes a challenge, revealing the tension between communal religiosity and the individual call to missionary discipleship.

6. Going Forward: Practical Steps on the Synodal Path

In order to address the current reality of the Vietnamese Church, this section proposes applying the values of the Johannine model of discipleship as an individualist ecclesiology to the Church in Vietnam. In brief, the Johannine individualist ecclesiology lies at the heart of the theology of personality. Embodied in the love of God in Jesus, it mainly emphasizes intimate relationship with Jesus. Raymond E. Brown (1984, 84) describes the Johannine Church by echoing themes articulated by Eduard Schweizer, “the more strongly the direct union of the believer with Christ is emphasized, the more clearly he is seen as an individual.” Brown's book, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, reflects his view that, unlike the strong sense of collectivity seen in Colossians and Ephesians, the Church in John differently emphasizes the individual Christian's relationship to Jesus Christ. While acknowledging a strain of collectivism in John's metaphor of the vine and the branches (Jn 15) and the shepherd and flock (Jn 10), he argues that John offers “an unparalleled concentration on the relation of the individual believer to Jesus.”

Further, John's gospel presents a vision of the Church as a community of disciples that adheres to Christ, gathering individuals who positively respond to God's revelation and salvation through Jesus Christ (Nereparampil 1979, 172). For John, discipleship is not only identified with the Twelve but includes believers portrayed through the literary device of the Johannine characterization. The term ‘disciple’ (μαθητής) occurs more often in John than in any Synoptic Gospel. In comparison, it appears seventy-three times in Matthew; forty-six times in Mark; thirty-seven times in Luke; and seventy-eight times in John (Huntsman 2019, 315). Some scholars correctly observe that discipleship in John is a primary category, and it can significantly contribute to the Johannine ecclesiology (Brown 1984, 84; Culpepper 1983, 115-125). All of these contribute to the vision of the Johannine Church—the community of disciples—in terms of the individualist discipleship ecclesiology.

Practically, as Brown (1984, 100) observes, ecclesiological models that emphasize collectivity are not suitable for highly structured societies, as they tend to foster institutionalism and hierarchicalism, particularly in the differentiation between the ordained priesthood and the common priesthood of all believers. This

observation clearly applies to Vietnamese society, where hierarchical structures, institutional tendencies within the Church, and a culture of collectivism are deeply rooted. In contrast, an ecclesiological model of discipleship that prioritizes individuality within the community is strongly recommended. Emphasizing individuality in communal life fosters holistic personal faith development.

Within the framework of fostering individuality in the Johannine community of discipleship, the Gospel of John presents four defining characteristics of authentic discipleship. Scholars such as Du Rand (1991), Culpepper (1983), and Chennattu (2006) identify these as the *divine call, believing-knowing, following-abiding, and witnessing-love*. Together, these elements articulate a dynamic process of being and becoming a true disciple of Jesus, emphasizing personal encounter, faith, and relational fidelity. This Johannine model of discipleship offers valuable insights for the Church in Vietnam, providing a theological foundation for nurturing personal faith within a strongly collectivist culture. Appropriately inculcated, it can serve as a purifying and balancing force against the extremes of communal conformity that often inhibit individual spiritual growth.

6.1. A Divine Call

In terms of historical criticism, the Johannine community symbolizes the “remnant of God” because Israel and the world reject God, “He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him” (Jn 1:11). According to Lucius Nereparampil (1979, 172), this remnant community believes in Jesus Christ and his words, so they receive the privilege of becoming the children of God: “But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God” (Jn 1:12). Thus, the identity of the new community is the community of the children of God. For its divine origin is from above, “. . . who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man’s decision but of God” (Jn 1:13). This new birth is through the power of the Holy Spirit through baptism (Jn 3:5-8). As the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3 clearly explains the role of the Holy Spirit in the new birth of believers in Jesus. Therefore, the Johannine ecclesial model of discipleship is first and foremost deeply rooted in the foundation of baptism.

This baptismal foundation fosters equality among the members of the Johannine Church, which can be suitably applied to the Church in Vietnam. Promoting baptismal charism is an important means of supporting the journey of discipleship formation. When the faithful understand their baptismal dignity, they become more confident and responsible in the work of evangelization and thus a greater participation in the Church’s mission. In particular, the charism of the prophetic office should be emphasized within the Vietnamese Catholic context, as it plays a vital role in the communication and witness of faith.

In terms of the *sensus fidei*, the faithful, through baptism, participate in Christ’s threefold office: the prophetic (teaching), priestly (sanctifying), and kingly

(governing) offices. Ormond Rush (2017, 310) notes that *Lumen Gentium* 12 offers the classic articulation of the *sensus fidelium*, affirming that “the whole body of the faithful” participates in the prophetic office of the Church because the Spirit bestows upon all the faithful a supernatural sense of faith. This understanding reflects the teaching of Pope Francis on synodality, which insists that the Holy Spirit is not the exclusive possession of the hierarchy but is given to all believers. Synodality, therefore, is characterized by mutual listening, wherein everyone has something to contribute and something to learn. As Pope Francis (2016) states, “Let us trust in our People, in their memory and in their ‘sense of smell,’ let us trust that the Holy Spirit acts in and with our People that this Spirit is not merely the ‘property’ of the ecclesial hierarchy.”

In light of this, the Church in Vietnam is encouraged to cultivate a culture of mutual listening and shared decision-making between the hierarchy and the laity at every level of ecclesial life. This collaboration should extend beyond doctrinal matters to include pastoral decisions as well (Rush 2017, 311). Active consultation of the faithful, therefore, is not only desirable but essential for the Church’s pastoral vitality and authentic synodality in Vietnam.

6.2. Believing-Knowing

According to Rand (1991, 317), the basic condition for becoming a disciple of Jesus is the understanding of Jesus’ identity. The nature of this understanding should be projected on the relationship between Jesus and his Father. As the Father knows Jesus and vice versa, the response of the disciples is also modeled on Jesus’ response to the Father, that is, to listen and to follow (cf. Jn 14:7, 9). Knowing and believing go together for a proper perception and understanding of Jesus. It is only believers, “his own,” who share the relationship of knowledge with Jesus, can know and recognize His voice, and follow Him. However, the disciples’ failure to know and understand Jesus was a reality in Jesus’ ministry prior to his glorification (cf. Jn 14:4-9; 16:18). Unlike the Gospel of Mark, in John, misunderstanding is not an element that poses a threat to being a disciple (Culpepper 1983, 117). Rather, misunderstanding is part of a pattern in Johannine discipleship.

For Vietnamese youth, social movements have become unavoidable phenomena that challenge and often unsettle the faith of young Catholics. Developing a personal faith is therefore essential as preparation for maintaining and living out one’s faith in new environments, even amid anti-Christian sentiment or persecution. When separated from their faith communities due to living circumstances, young people who are well-grounded in theological and spiritual knowledge can continue to witness to God through their ordinary lives. At present, very few laypersons in Vietnam are engaged in theological education or teaching. Theological fields remain largely the domain of clergy and religious, while the laity, especially the youth, tend to be involved primarily in catechetical

work. Although this situation is partly the result of government restrictions on Catholic education, it also reflects a broader lack of interest in deepening academic and spiritual understanding of God. The proposed model, therefore, seeks to foster love for God not only on emotional and devotional levels but also through rational and academic engagement.

In terms of pastoral care, most Catholic student migrants move to Vietnam's two largest cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, which fall under the administration of the country's two archdioceses. These archdioceses possess the most developed pastoral centers, academic institutes, and organizational infrastructures. The Church could expand opportunities for students to enroll in theology and Bible courses offered by institutions such as the Youth School of Faith (YSOF), the Catholic Institute of Vietnam, and the Pastoral Institute of the Archdiocese of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City), as well as the Institute of Theology Peter Le Tuy in the Archdiocese of Hanoi.

This initiative aligns with the culture of discipleship—knowing, following, proclaiming, and witnessing Jesus. Moreover, the increasing availability of online platforms from pastoral centers and institutions now allows students to balance their academic studies with theological learning more flexibly and conveniently.

6.3. Following-Abiding

“Abiding” refers to accepting Jesus’ words, his revelation as the *Logos* of God, His authorized emissary, and the Revealer. Some defect from Jesus, not because of the opposition from Jesus’ opponents or demanding to bear the suffering cross with Jesus as in the Markan discipleship (cf. Mk 8:34), but Jesus’ words are the offense themselves (Culpepper 1983, 116). The issue is the acceptance of Jesus’ revelation, not the danger of persecution. Examples of the defections include Jesus’ sayings of “I AM” (Jn 6:20; 35, 41, 48, 51; cf. 4:26), particularly the eucharistic language in the Bread of Life Discourse (Jn 6:22-59) (Culpepper 1983, 117). As recorded, many of his “disciples” say: “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” (Jn 6:60), and many of his “disciples,” as a result, returned to their former life and no longer accompanied him (Jn 6:66). Those who remain with Jesus, in contrast to those who left, accept Jesus’ words, sayings, “You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68). For Culpepper (1983, 116), abiding and abandoning are responses of the hearers, mainly to Jesus’ words. Jesus’ signs can attract many disciples as a worker of miracles, but his words drive them away. This is the real test of discipleship: “If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples” (Jn 8:31).

A personal encounter with Jesus entails abiding in His word, practically expressed through reading and reflecting on Scripture (Weddell 2012, ch. 11). This practice should be actively encouraged within Catholic families and parish groups. Although many Vietnamese Catholic families still maintain a daily prayer

hour, it often consists mainly of reciting the rosary or using formulaic prayers. To deepen this practice, *Lectio Divina* is recommended as a spiritual exercise for family and group prayer. This method fosters a more personal relationship with the Word of God, as it invites participants to read Scripture attentively and share reflections on their lived experiences in light of the verses that inspire them.

The celebration of the Eucharist holds central importance and serves as a vital opportunity for nurturing discipleship—particularly in the context of the Church in Vietnam. As expressed by the Synod on Synodality, “This is why it is important to rediscover how the Sunday Eucharist is formative for Christians: ‘The Full extent of our formation is our conformation to Christ’... For many of the faithful, the Sunday Eucharist is their only contact with the Church: ensuring it is celebrated in the best possible manner, with particular regard to the homily and the “active participation” (SC 14) of everyone, is decisive for synodality” (Synod XVI 2024, 49). In light of this, it is recommended that priests’ homilies focus more intentionally on Scripture as the primary source for encountering and experiencing God’s love in a deeply personal and transformative way. Communion in the Eucharist is the best way to experience personal union or “abiding” in Jesus, as seen in the union between the Vine and the Branches (Jn 15:5). Such an approach would not only strengthen faith formation but also foster a genuine spirit of discipleship among the faithful.

6.4. Witnessing-Love

In John’s Gospel, love is never static or self-contained; it is always for the sake of God’s mission. The whole movement of the Fourth Gospel portrays Jesus as the one sent on mission to reveal God’s love, not merely to the inner circle, but for the world’s sake. Every command, every act of love, especially the command to love one another a preparation and commission for mission. The disciples, bound together by the love of Christ, continue his work by living out and proclaiming this love as the heart of their mission. The more deeply the community abides in Christ’s love, the more profoundly it is drawn into the Father’s sending, becoming a living witness to the world. Love is, therefore, the very substance of mission—both its source and its goal. Through the love that unites and sends, the world is invited to encounter the divine, life-giving love revealed in Jesus Christ. Mission involves two-fold aspects spontaneously: abiding and going. Abiding in Jesus serves a period of preparation and training for discipleship, and going is an act of mission of love (Gorman 2018, ch. 3). The three characteristics of Johannine discipleship discussed above serve as preparation and training for missionary disciples. The fourth characteristics-witnessing of love is the actualization of going.

Ad intra, the unity and love within the Vietnamese Church, in parishes and faith communities, are a powerful witness for evangelization. The Church’s priority is the formation of missionary disciples (abiding) instead of focusing on

outward activities. For candidates to the priesthood and priests, formation and ongoing formation in the human dimension, particularly regarding humility, is highly recommended. It serves as a remedy to modify the hierarchical structure and institutionalism. At the level of dioceses, there needs to be communal reconciliation between clergy and laity that reflects a recognition of past wounds and imbalances in Church relationships. The surrounding content critiques clericalism—a system where the clergy dominate decision-making and marginalize lay voices. The atmosphere of repentance is a dialogue of love and humbleness, not a condemnation, so that the priests can open and accept their faults. Communal repentance is proposed as a healing act to acknowledge past mistakes and abuses of authority; restore trust and unity within the Church; and create space for mutual forgiveness and renewal.

Ad extra, parishes should consider recruiting lay ministers for evangelization. In the early centuries of evangelization in Vietnam, lay catechists—known as *Thầy Giảng của Nhà Đức Chúa Trời*—played a crucial and effective role in spreading the Gospel, collaborating closely with priests, assisting in teaching catechism, and establishing local communities. Today, the Church in Vietnam can still find a similar role and reinvigorate in Apostolate groups, such as *Legio Mariae*, and among catechists. Their usual activities, such as visiting the sick, non-Catholic neighbors, and sharing suffering with others, demonstrate a love and self-sacrifice that are highly valued in Vietnamese village and neighborhood culture. It is noted that the catechist staff in Vietnam is unique and different from other churches. They are totally volunteers and passionate about faith education in the Sunday catechetical classes in the parish and proclamation. All their self-sacrifice, self-devotedness, and passion explicitly constitute and demonstrate the personal witnessing of love, being emanated from being loved and personal encounter with Jesus. Thus, priests should encourage them in their apostolate activities with material and spiritual support and expand these activities in other apostolate groups of the parish.

7. Conclusion: Implications for the Vietnamese and Asian Church

This paper has examined the manifestation of collectivist culture in Vietnamese society and its influence on Vietnamese Catholicism. Collectivism contributes many positive aspects to the faith life of Vietnamese Catholics, such as a strong sense of community, active participation in Church activities, and mutual support in nurturing faith. However, the same collectivist tendencies can also lead to certain excesses, such as hierarchicalism, inequality, discrimination, and a sense of superiority, that hinder personal initiative and responsibility within the Church's mission of communion, participation, and evangelization.

With the view of building a synodal Church in Vietnam, there is a pressing need for the process of “inculturation of the Gospel” to purify these negative

elements present in both Church and culture. This study proposes adopting the Johannine model of discipleship as a framework for promoting personal responsibility and individuality within the community of faith. Such an approach fosters the growth of discipleship on intellectual, spiritual, affective, and practical levels, enabling each member of the Church to live out their faith as a personal witness to Christ. Moreover, this model resonates with other ecclesiological approaches proposed for the Churches in Asia, where collectivist cultures similarly shape ecclesial life and practice.

The process of inculturating Johannine discipleship values within Vietnamese culture is undoubtedly complex and demands sustained effort from the entire Church in Vietnam. Promoting a balance between individualist and collectivist ecclesiology remains a relatively new concept and may initially be misunderstood within a Church long influenced by collectivist traditions. This study offers a partial reflection on the issue of collective faith in the Vietnamese Church, drawing on limited data from social and ecclesial surveys conducted primarily in the Archdioceses of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. It also acknowledges that the proposed practical applications may vary depending on regional cultural and social contexts across the country.

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