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SYNODALITY AS A STYLE OF CATHOLIC ECCLESIOLOGY

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Abstract

From the very beginning, synodality belongs to the genetics of Christianity. Ecumenical councils, regional or provincial synods, diocesan synods were held throughout the centuries. The participants were gradually reduced to bishops and clergy. A regular celebration of synods was codified for each diocese every ten years. Vatican II remembered the “venerable institutions” (CD, 36, 2). Paul VI initiated the Bishops’ Synod as a means to inspire the Church. Synodal experiences on a national level were carried out immediately after the Council, but were suspected by Rome especially after the new Code of Canon Law 1983. Regulations for a diocesan synod were set up in 1997. In 2018 a paper of the International Theological Commission deepened in accordance with Pope Francis the notion of synodality. But its proposition of “all” participating, “a few” discussing and “one” deciding contradicts the development of synodality. Synodality is open for further developments.

Keywords: Acts of the Apostles; Councils; Apostolica sollicitudo; (Pope) Francis; International Theological Commission; (Pope) Paul VI; Synodality; Vatican II

The decree of the Second Vatican Council on the pastoral office of bishops *Christus Dominus* states:

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This sacred ecumenical synod earnestly desires that the venerable institution of synods and councils flourish with fresh vigor. In such a way faith will be deepened and discipline preserved more fittingly and efficaciously in the various churches, as the needs of the times require (CD, 36, 2).

Synods and councils are named together as a means of a local and temporal aggiornamento of the Church. They must therefore not be limited to repeating old things, but should be oriented towards the category of knowledge of “signs of the times” (GS, 4 and 11) introduced by Vatican II. Synods therefore need an occasion and a theme.

The first two synods mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles were held with the aim of electing (from several candidates!) a successor to the Twelve (Acts 1:15-20) and of establishing the ritual independence of young Christianity (Acts 15; Gal 2:1-10). In the first centuries, Christians made sure of their faith at synods, formulated their confession and set themselves apart from groups that did not follow the development of doctrine. Some of these synods were later called “councils.” In the Middle Ages, synods were held at the level of church provinces to focus on questions of church discipline. This was also the case for the assemblies recognized as councils in Rome and other places. The influence of the State on the Church, which is common due to the duality of Regnum and Sacerdotium, was a prerequisite in the 15th century for the restoration of unity at least of the Latin Church, whose internal reform was given important landmarks by the Council of Trent and its centralization by the First Vatican Council.

Diocesan and Provincial Synods were important instruments for the implementation of the Tridentine faith in the early modern era. They took place above all in the Romanic countries, whereby for Latin America particularly the influence of the representatives of the European patronages is to be pointed out. For Europe, the synodal activity of Archbishop Charles Borromeo of Milan in the post-Reformation period was formative. Only very few provincial synods took place in the German Empire, in Cologne in 1536 and 1860, and the Provincial Council of 1860 was in the context of the Ultramontanization of the Church. The Plenary Council of the Latin American Church, held in 1899, should also be seen in this context, although not on the subcontinent but in Rome under the supervision of the Pope and the Curia.

The *Codex Iuris Canonici* of 1917 (canons 356-362) stipulated that in every diocese a diocesan synod was to be held every ten years, whose

only legislator was the bishop, all other participants had only consultative voting rights. These synods were held e.g. in the German-speaking world in the 1920s and partly in the 1930s, and after an interruption due to the war in most dioceses, they were held again after the Second World War. Their practice was probably known to all Council Fathers from their own experience.

When the Council Fathers referred to the “venerable institutions” of the Synods and demanded their revival, they themselves had a double experience. On the one hand, they knew diocesan synods from their home dioceses, had either led them themselves as bishops or participated in them. These synods seldom lasted longer than a few days, served the internal agreement on the diocese’s own regulations and were rather characterized by an introspective view on pastoral decisions than by an examination of the signs of the times.¹

On the other hand, however, the Council Fathers had their own conciliar experience in mind. For three years they had met for two to three months at a time to discuss the future questions of Church and world. Not a single proposal was “nodded off.” They all had to go through the mills of preparatory work by the commissions, oral contributions in plenary, written requests for amendments (“*modi*”) and a second or third or fourth or fifth version of the original text. In the end, the documents were all adopted with unanimous agreement, but this was often preceded by several years of heated debate on the content and form of the texts. With the exception of the decree on social communications *Inter mirifica*,² no text was adopted under time pressure.

But the conciliar experience did not take place only in the Council Hall. It also included the regular meetings of small and large groups, especially the Bishops’ Conferences, which in this context were constituted in many countries in the first place. Just as important was the “briefing” on the topics treated, documented in the press services, as well as lectures and conferences of theologians, which deepened and broadened the horizons of the drafts.

In the context of the discussions about the collegiality of the bishops the question arose how it was to be exercised outside the special situation of the Council. One possibility seemed to be a council of bishops who, in addition to the curia authorities, were to

¹Cf. CIC (1917), can. 356-362.

² Cf. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19631204_inter-mirifica_en.html.

stand permanently at the Pope's side.³ Thus, also the internationalization of the church, as it had been experienced as positive at the Council, could be implemented in the long run.

But it did not come so far. Even before the decree on the pastoral office of bishops had been finally discussed, Pope Paul VI himself took the initiative and established with the *motu proprio* "Apostolica sollicitudo" of 15 September 1965 established a Synod of Bishops:

The Synod of Bishops, whereby bishops chosen from various parts of the world are to offer more effective assistance to the supreme Shepherd, is to be constituted in such a way that it is: a) a central ecclesiastical institution; b) representing the whole Catholic episcopate; c) of its nature perpetual; d) as for structure, carrying out its function for a time and when called upon.⁴

Completely in the sense of the clarifications of episcopal collegiality in relation to the papal primacy in the "Nota explicativa praevia" the Bishops' Synod was differently structured than it would have corresponded to the expectations of the Council Fathers: no permanent organ of participation in papal decisions, convened on a case-by-case basis on the initiative of the Pope, who also determines topic and agenda. Thus, the Council Fathers, who perhaps wanted to imagine under an Episcopal Council something like the coordinating commission of the Council, had only the reference to the "venerable institutions."

In fact, the Synods of Bishops developed in a specific way. The Popes did not and do not use this instrument to deal with topical issues—a synod is not a parliament. In the respective meetings of several weeks' duration, which are held at intervals of two to four years and to which several hundred persons (cardinals, bishops, representatives of the male religious superiors as well as a few selected lay personalities) meet in each case, fundamental questions of church life are discussed. Evangelization, catechesis, mission,

³For example, already during the discussion of the schema "De rationibus inter Episcopos et SS. Curiae Romanae Congregationes" the Dutch Cardinal Alfrink demanded more international governance of the Church. He demanded an internationalization of the government of the Church which should not only refer to the Vatican Congregations, but would require a separate body in the manner of the Central Preparatory Commission, which should meet once a year to deal with matters of importance for the whole Church. Cf. *Acta et Documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando. Series II (Praeparatoria). Volumen II: Acta Pontificiae Commissionis Centralis Praeparatoriae Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II. Pars II: Sessio tertia: 15-23 Ianuarii 1962 - Sessio quarta: 19-27 Februarii 1962*, Vatikan 1967, 560.

⁴ http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19650915_apostolica-sollicitudo.html.

family, religious, laity, the image of priests and bishops, the Eucharist, the Word of God—these themes provide a good panorama of ecclesial life in the synopsis of five decades. The Apostolic Exhortations resulting from the Synods, although their direct connection with the synodal discussions is not always clearly evident, are pastoral letters of the Supreme Pastor of the Church for the universal Church. They also reflect doctrinal emphases and further developments in ecclesial doctrine and discipline.

How did the synodal thought develop after the Council? One form of collegial action is certainly the Bishops' Conferences. But only the bishops are involved in it; the superiors of male orders—let alone religious superiors—have, in contrast to the Council, neither the right to vote nor the right to participate. The regular joint discussions between bishops and religious superiors are sometimes felt rather as embarrassing, but not “at eye level.” The regular contact talks between representatives of the Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics, which were introduced in Germany, do not have the character of a decisional meeting. Both bodies work side by side with partly parallel structured commissions—and thus sometimes also against each other.

After their return to their dioceses the Central European Council Fathers were faced with a changed social situation. In the Netherlands a “Pastoral Council” was convened, in which bishops, priests and laity participated with equal voting rights. It changed the until then conservative local church within a few years. Rome, but also the neighbouring countries, felt the resolutions of the Pastoral Council as a signal. When after the publication of the encyclical *Humanae vitae* and the turbulent Catholics' Meeting in Essen the demand for a German synod arose, the committees of bishops and laity admittedly quickly agreed. In negotiations with Rome it was also possible to achieve equal voting rights for all synodal members, but the bishops had the possibility to object if doctrinal issues were touched. However, this objection could be rejected and overruled with reasons. The statute of the Würzburg Synod is a prime example of a balanced cooperation between bishops and laity in questions of pastoral work and faith on an equal footing. It was also adopted in an applied manner by the Pastoral Synod of the German Democratic Republic and the Swiss Synod 72, although the latter adapted it to the federal structure of the country.

But these synods remained history. The 1983 revision of canon law again restricted the scope for synodal action. The Canons about the Diocesan Synod (canons 460-468, CIC 1983) stipulated the

participation of so many priests, among others of the entire Council of Priests and of one priest per deanery, that a participation of lay people, even if it came close to a majority, seemed hardly possible.

Under these circumstances, in Germany only three dioceses dared to hold a diocesan synod. In 1985/1986 Rottenburg-Stuttgart placed the negotiations under the topic of passing on the faith, Augsburg in 1990 dealt with "Pastoral care in the parish." Since in Augsburg the diocesan bishop had independently made changes to the text before the publication of the resolutions and some synodal members thereupon refused to accept the resolutions, several German dioceses relied on more non-binding diocesan forums. Only the diocese of Trier conducted a formal diocesan synod again from 2013-2016.

In the meantime in 1997 the Congregation for Bishops and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples had issued an "Instruction on Diocesan Synods."⁵ Without prejudice to the accentuated position of the Bishop as sole convener and legislator, the emphasis is placed on his collegial action. It is true that priests have a special responsibility. "The Synod also offers the Bishop the opportunity of calling to cooperate with him and with his priests some members of the laity as well as some chosen religious. This is a particular form of that responsibility and concerns all of the faithful in building up the Body of Christ" (I.1). In choosing synodal candidates for appointment, it is "important that there should be an adequate presence of permanent deacons amongst the clergy. Other members of the faithful should be chosen for their 'knowledge, competence and position'⁶ whose valued opinion will undoubtedly enrich the synodal discussions" (II.4). In so doing, he should take care that, "in so far as possible, reflect the various charisms and ministries of the People of God" (III.B.1).

On the basis of the CIC 1983 and the Instruction of 1997, more than 1000 Synods have been held and "celebrated" in the universal Church since the Council, in some dioceses already two or three times. Arnaud Join-Lambert's overview is an impressive testimony to the fact that synods in many parts of the world have become a steering element of pastoral work.⁷ In this respect they are, from the point of

⁵Cf. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cbishops/documents/rc_con_cbishops_doc_20041118_diocesan-synods-1997_en.html

⁶Quoted from can. 212 § 3.

⁷ Arnaud Join-Lambert, ed., *Synodes diocésains, "parasynodes" et conciles particuliers dans l'Église catholique depuis le Concile Vatican II Cahiers Internationaux de Théologie Pratique, série "Documents," n° 3, en ligne: www.pastoralis.org, 2013, 4e édition, 2014.*

view of the universal church, a successful model of post-conciliar participation.

Popes from John Paul II have used the term “synodality.” A keyword search on the Vatican website shows after all six places of reference for the Italian term “sinodalità” with John Paul II. In the pontificate of Benedict XVI the German term “Synodalität” appears in three speeches. In the case of Pope Francis 114 results are proven. Francis points out the connection between collegiality and synodality and sees in the latter an important form of leadership in the Church, which brings with it a new dynamic. In the context of the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, Francis drew attention to the relationship between synodality and primacy.

On 2 March 2018 a working paper of the International Theological Commission was published. It is entitled *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*.⁸ For the Catholic Church synodality means a new beginning, which Pope Francis wants to make. “In the wake of Vatican II, following in his predecessors’ footsteps, he insists that synodality describes the shape of the Church that emerges from the Gospel of Jesus, which is called to become incarnate today in history, in creative fidelity to Tradition” (No. 9). The theological foundation is the teaching of the “*sensus fidei fidelium*.” In the document of the Theological Commission, synodality is placed in a great biblical and historical context, which had flourished especially in the first Christian millennium. In the second millennium a shift of emphasis is noted for the time after the Council of Trent. The intention was no longer to involve the entire People of God, but to represent the Church as a society of inequalities, in which there was a fundamental difference between a teaching and a learning Church.

The rediscovery of the faith of the faithful in the 19th century by John Henry Newman and Antonio Rosmini brings synodality back into play as a fundamental dimension of the Church. In its theological development synodality is understood by the Theological Commission as a fundamental exercise of the episcopal pastoral ministry. In a communion theology the document distinguishes between “the process of *decision-making* through a joint exercise of discernment, consultation and co-operation, and *decision-taking*” (No. 69). Synodality is thus a style of Catholic ecclesiology as a community of pathways with concrete structures and processes and a punctual

⁸ Cf. vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

occurrence of synodal events. Several times the document refers to the sequence “all, some, one,” e.g. in No. 79:

The participation of ‘all’ is put in motion through *consultation* in the process of preparing the Synod, with the aim of reaching all the voices that are an expression of the People of God in the local Church. Those who take part in Assemblies or Synods *ex officio*, and those who are elected or are appointed by the Bishop are the ‘some’ whose task it is to *celebrate* the Diocesan Synod or Eparchial Assembly. It is essential that, taken as a whole, the participants give a meaningful and balanced image of the local Church, reflecting different vocations, ministries, charisms, competencies, social status and geographical origin. The Bishop, the successor of the Apostles and Shepherd of his flock who convokes and presides over the local Church Synod, is called to exercise there the ministry of unity and leadership with the authority which belongs to him.

With it synodality is quite broadly conceived and practicably to be implemented on the different levels of the church from the parish over the diocese (diocesan synod) and the territory (bishops’ conference) up to the church as a whole (bishops’ synods). But if the decision-making authority is always with “one” only, be it the parish priest, the bishop or the Pope, an aftertaste remains. The Theological Commission titled its fourth chapter “The Conversion to a Renewed Synodality” and suggests a spirituality of communion in which listening and dialogue are essential for a proper discernment.

Here we seem to be at the moment as regards the implementation of synodality in the teaching and life of the Church. For Pope Francis, synodality is the expression of an attitude rather than a concrete instruction for action.⁹ It expresses a style of consultation and search for one another. Behind it there is still no change in the way authority is dealt with. This is also shown by the many indications, almost like

⁹In the Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis communio* (September 15, 2018) Pope Francis affirms: “The history of the Church bears ample witness to the importance of consultation for ascertaining the views of the Bishops and the faithful in matters pertaining to the good of the Church. [...] Above all, the contribution of the local Church’s participatory bodies, especially the Presbyteral Council and the Pastoral Council, can prove fundamental, and from here ‘a synodal Church can begin to emerge,’” http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html#_edn27. The quotation is taken from: Address on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops (http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html).

a litany, presented by bishops, that the Church is not a democracy and that synodality must not be confused with a parliamentary democracy.

A further development of synodality is brought by Pope Francis in his letter to the “Pilgrim People of God” in Germany of 29 June 2019,¹⁰ in which the Pope warns against hasty harmonization, pointing out that “there are tensions and imbalances that have the taste of the Gospel that must be maintained because they promise new life” (n. 5). Synodality is, as the Pope writes, referring to the comparisons explained in his first Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*,¹¹ a way of thinking towards the unity of the Church without blurring the differences:

The synodal vision does not eliminate contradictions or confusion, nor does it subordinate conflicts to the decisions of a ‘good consensus’ which compromise the faith, to the results of censuses or surveys which arise on this or that subject. That would be very restrictive. With the background and centrality of evangelization and the *sensus ecclesiae* as defining elements of our ecclesial DNA, synodality claims to consciously adopt a way of being Church in which ‘the whole is more than the part, and it is also more than its simple sum.’ We must not, therefore, become too absorbed in issues that concern limited special situations, but must always broaden our gaze to recognize a greater good that benefits us all (No 11, quoting EG 235).

Conclusion

Synodality needs courage. The German Church has decided in favour of the “synodal way,”¹² which is less binding under canon law. Australia prepares for a plenary council. The Church of Venezuela already has such a one behind it:¹³ Decided by the bishops in 1996, four years of preparation, from 2000 to 2005 six sessions. The sixteen adopted documents are all structured according to the scheme “see—judge—act.” They deal with the proclamation of the Gospel, ecclesial communion, contribution to the transformation of society, catechesis, religious life, the family, the laity, young people, the celebration of the faith, the mission of the Church, education and formation, evangelization of culture, the

¹⁰ Cf. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/letters/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190629_lettera-fedeligermania.html.

¹¹ Cf. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

¹²Cf. <https://www.synodalerweg.de/>.

¹³ Cf. Concilio Plenario de Venezuela, Documentos conciliares, Caracas: Conferencia Episcopal Venezolana, 2006.

media, ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue, and dealing with free Churches and sects. The whole People of God was involved, 50 of the 240 synodal members were bishops. Lay people were also equally involved in the deliberations and votes. The results were accepted and promulgated by Rome. Venezuela shows how synodality with broad participation is possible, in a binding way. However, the example also makes it clear that synodality can only succeed if no rush jobs are fired, but if sufficient time is allowed for preparation and implementation, so that everyone can participate – not only at the beginning, but also in the process – so that the delegates can deliberate and in the end a uniform and joint decision-making process leads to decisions.