

On the synod on synodality

Gerhard Cardinal Müller

The synod on synodality will be a blessing for the Church provided all of its participants, starting with the pope, through bishops, priests, religious, and lay faithful, let Jesus Christ illuminate them.

In October 2023, the Synod of Bishops will convene for four weeks and will eventually conclude in October 2024. Its theme will be synodality. This term is a derivative of the word "synod". As we know, reflecting on the principles of supernatural faith is far more difficult than talking about concrete things. This increases the risk of inconclusive results following a disordered discussion. This synod must not be a time for ideologues and their political power agenda.

What is at issue, therefore, is not the content of the creed, but the principle underlying the theory and practice of synods. The Greek word "synod", along with its Latin equivalent "council", became an ecclesiastical technical term (*terminus technicus*) when a number of bishops gathered in Antioch in 268 to condemn Paul of Samosata as a heretic. This false teacher saw Jesus as merely an ordinary man and hence denied His divine nature.

The Synod (*concilium*) of Nicaea (325) with its dogmatic statement against the false teacher Arius was decisive. This synod emphasised that Jesus Christ, even before the incarnation, was the Son of the Father in the Trinity and therefore, together with Him and the Holy Spirit, is one and true God. This marked the beginning of a series of 21 great councils of the Catholic Church recognised as ecumenical and universal. In addition, there have been many other councils and particular synods, among which there are some that have universal ecclesial significance through papal recognition. However, there have also been particular synods that have been declared heretical and invalid by the supreme authority in the Church.

Synodal collegiality

In 1965, Pope Paul VI institutionalized a new kind of synod, a "Synod of Bishops", which, in line with the suggestion of the Second Vatican Council, was to stress the collegiality of the bishops among themselves and with the pope. The pope is the immutable principle and foundation of the unity of the Church in the revealed faith and of the communion of bishops and all the faithful. However, the Church is not centralised in the pope, as is the case in the secular empire. Indeed, the Catholic Church is made up of local Churches which, in doctrine, in their life, and in their essence, locally embody the whole Church of Christ. Therefore, both centralism and particularism deny the truth of one Church subsisting in a community of many local Churches formed by bishops.

Thus, the ongoing dialogue between the bishops and the pontiff as successor of Peter is of great importance for the Church's witness to the salvation God offers to the world of today and tomorrow in Christ. The Synod of Bishops is a consultative assembly. It is not as competent in matters of doctrine and the constitution of the Church as the plenary assembly of all the bishops at an ecumenical council or a particular synod, whose decisions are recognised by the pope, the supreme teacher of Christianity, as a valid expression of the truth of

Revelation. At the council, the bishops, as successors of the apostles, are genuine witnesses to Revelation, teaching nothing other than what Jesus himself instructed them to teach.

Even though the pope has now granted some laity the "right to vote" at the Synod on synodality, neither they nor the bishops will vote there on matters of faith. Indeed, they are witnesses and proclaimers of truth and salvation in Jesus Christ in the sense of participation of all the baptised in the teaching and priestly and pastoral ministry of Christ. It is crucial that we speak about the challenges of faith in today's world precise enough so that Christ might fully appear in the consciousness of contemporary people as the light of their lives.

The competence of the synod

Some see this synod as a kind of primary assembly of the faithful, giving the Church of God a constitution and a new doctrine in line with the anti-Christian spirit of the present time, making it compatible with Woke and LGBT ideologies. Even if a majority of delegates were to "decide" to "bless" homosexual unions or ordain women as deacons or priests, the pope, with his authority, will not tolerate heretical teachings contrary to the word of God in Scripture, Apostolic Tradition, and the dogmas of the Church. We must all pray a lot and boldly engage in word and writing so that the Church does not face such a severe test (as during the Arian turmoil or the tragic division of the Catholic Church during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century).

Pope Francis and many bishops around the world have repeatedly rejected the ecclesiological errors of the so-called "synodal way" of the German particular Church. In Christ, the fullness of truth and salvation is given to all people once and for all in an unsurpassed way. God does not need us humans as His advisors to update or correct His word. On the contrary, it is we who must open ourselves to God's truth, even if the world denies it and hates the disciples of Jesus as much as it hated their Master, the only Teacher and Saviour of all humankind.

Nor can we, in the name of secularist thinking, make our limited human logic the measure of God's word. It is only in Jesus Christ, the Word who is God himself and who in the Son of God assumed our human nature, that we find the fullness of truth, life, and grace.

It is true that the eternal and unchanging word of God in the Church's Creed became increasingly precise in language when it came to opposing heretics and schismatics. But this phenomenon, which we also call the history of dogma, does not mean that truth itself is evolving towards ever more comprehensive knowledge, as liberal Protestant cultural Christianity or Catholic "modernism" wanted. The Word of God remains alive in all its fullness of grace and truth in faith and tradition and in the liturgical life of the Church. The Second Vatican Council teaches: "This tradition which comes from the Apostles develop in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church

constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfilment in her” (DV 8).

Loyalty to Christ

The synod on synodality will be a blessing for the Church provided all of its participants, starting with the pope, through bishops, priests, religious, and lay faithful, let Jesus Christ illuminate them. Christ is “the Light of nations (...) [who] wishes to bring [this] light (...) to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church, which proclaims the Gospel to every creature” (LG 1). To this end, Christ, historically speaking, established the Church - through his life, his death on the cross, which brought us salvation, and through his resurrection. He made it the image of the Triune God, not in order that we become important before others, but so that the bishops and all the faithful realise the importance of the sacramental Church as the sign and instrument of the world's salvation in Jesus Christ, the only mediator between God and mankind (cf. 1 Tim 2:5).

The author holds a post-doctoral degree in theology and is former Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith