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Synodality vs. Democracy

Does the synodal process currently underway mark an internal democratisation of the Church? There is no shortage of concerns in this regard voiced by various circles.

Pope Francis has made some changes to the Synod of Bishops, including granting the right to vote on decisions to those participants who are not bishops. Will, however, the synodal assembly turn into a "parliament" that will make changes by majority vote not only in pastoral matters but also in questions of the discipline and doctrine of the Church? I will not attempt to decide whether such a concern is justified or not, but to clarify the relationship between synodality and democracy, to point out convergences and differences.

It must be stressed that the term "synodality" was coined several decades ago and has now become a catchphrase of Francis' pontificate and reform in the Church. Many a time, the phrase "synodal Church" is used to counter the vision of the Church which emphasizes hierarchy, institutions, and authority. The synodal Church is meant to be missionary and to express the commitment to evangelisation of the whole community, especially the laity. However, it seems that the meaning of the term "synodality" is constantly being enriched and subject to different interpretations. "Synodality" describes the Church as a communion of God with people and of people with one another. It relates very closely to what the councils and synods have brought to the life of the Church over two millennia.

Listening to God

The institution of synods dates back to the late second century. At that time, the assembly of the people (*concilium*) and the council of elected citizens (*consilium*) played a role in the governance of the Roman Empire. These were advisory bodies, but in certain situations exercised legislative and judicial powers. The most important role, however, was that of the Roman Senate, presided over by the emperor or his delegate. At the end of the fourth century, Emperor Constantine also established a Senate in Constantinople. Undoubtedly, when it came to the procedures, the way in which debate was conducted, giving everyone the opportunity to speak, the forms in which votes were conducted, the drafting of reports and the promulgation of decrees, much was drawn from the experience of the Senate during the councils or synods in the first centuries of Christianity.

However, the similarities in the application of the rules of procedure or law making cannot obscure a fundamental difference. At councils and synods, bishops from the first centuries were concerned with guarding God's truth, discovering it, understanding it, formulating it as a dogma of faith and condemning heresy. Fundamental in this regard was the Synod of Nicaea in 325, at which the dogma of the deity of Christ was formulated. Over the following decades, this truth had to be defended and even suffered for. In the end, there was a profound realisation throughout the Church that it was not a matter of human doctrine imposed with the support of the Emperor, but of the revealed truth of God handed down by the Apostles as the genuine faith leading people to salvation. Because of the significance of this fact, this synod was considered to be the first universal council and at the same time a model for all synodal activity of the Church in the following centuries.

Democracy is a system that allows the participation of the entire people in the governance of the state. This is accomplished mainly through citizens' voting in parliamentary elections. Unlike democracy, which is the "voice of the people", synodality should be the voice of God and listening to "what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev 2:7). We may rightly compare a synodal assembly to a liturgical celebration, in line with the words of Jesus: "where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18:20). This aspect has been symbolised since antiquity by the Evangeliary opened at synods and councils, by the prayer to the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the sessions, or by voting by acclamation, which revealed an awareness of consensus or unanimity with regard to divine truth. This was the case, for example, at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, when Pope Leo's letter explaining the union of divine and human natures in the person of Christ was read out. The bishops assembled exclaimed: "Peter spoke through Leo", "This is our faith", thus expressing unanimity on this teaching.

Faithfulness to Christ

As we look at the history of councils and synods, synodality is tightly linked to the teaching of the Christian faith. It is first and foremost the task of the bishops who, through consecration, are members of the college of the successors of the apostles headed by the pope. Assembled in councils or synods, they do not exercise their mandate as members of parliament but fulfil their mission as teachers of the faith and stewards of the Church. One can perceive a certain similarity between a synodal decree and a parliamentary resolution or act. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two. What is it?

The discussion at the synod is not a partisan art of persuasion, coalition-building, or seeking the victory of one party over another, as happens in parliaments. Instead, it is about listening together to the "conscience of faith" in order to discover, free from subjective opinions, partial views or pressures from the world, the truth of the faith contained in the apostolic faith of the Church and celebrated in the sacraments, and to express it in a contemporary language. This is why bishops voting at councils or synods in the face of God consult their consciences and do not follow a parliamentary strategy. Their obedience to conscience helps the teaching of the Catholic faith resound far and wide.

Although the basis of synodality is the collegiality of the bishops and the primacy of the successor of St. Peter and the apostolic succession, as well as the mission of teaching and shepherding entrusted to them, this does not exclude to a certain extent the participation of priests and religious sisters or lay people in the synods. Their participation is related to their baptism, ordination, or the charism of consecrated life. Through their participation in the synod, a sense of faith must come to the fore, which is something very different from public opinion.

Democracies constantly resort to polls to gauge public sentiment. Synodal consultation is something else. It has its value, but the synod is not about what the world thinks, but what the faith teaches us. That is why the apostolic mandate of the bishops and the sense of faith of the community play an important role, showing at the same time that the synodal process cannot result in a decision that changes the truths of the faith or overturns the hierarchical order of the Church. In the history of Christianity, there have been false councils and synods whose decisions were rejected by the community of believers and, in time, annulled by successive assemblies of bishops because they contradicted the true faith.

Healthy decentralization

The statement that the Church's system is monarchical is an analogy with political systems. The Church is hierarchical by its very nature, by the will of its Founder. The hierarchy of bishops is like the "backbone" of the communion of the Church and of synodal practice. Councils and synods in the Latin Church are closely linked to the primacy of the pope, who convenes them or approves their decisions. As in other areas, Roman centralism is also evident in synodal practice. Pope Francis wants to see a "healthy decentralisation" of the Church through the synodal process, whereby part of the decisions would be made at the level of the local churches. However, we should remember that this must not lead to a weakening of Church unity or the primacy of the pope.

Societies have moved from monarchy to democracy in the course of transformations, usually revolutionary ones. It is a mistake to expect synodality to become such a "revolution", resulting in a democratisation of the Church, where bishops perform secondary roles and everything, not excluding matters of faith and morals, is decided by majority vote. This would turn the Catholic Church into a federation of communities and make fruitful evangelisation impossible. In this way, synodality would be a repetition of history, reminiscent of the theory of conciliarism proclaiming the superiority of the council over the pope and being a constant dispute over authority. Meanwhile, if we consider the synodal practice of the first and second millennium, we see that it is fundamentally about the truth of the faith and consequently the salvation of the people.

Synodality can do a lot of good in terms of governance of the Church at various levels and in the communities. However, it cannot be a paralysis of the decision-making process, dilution of responsibility or endless discussions aimed at fomenting doubt instead of consolidating the faith.

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