

PLENARY ASSEMBLY
“New steps for a synodal Church in Europe”

The Ministry of the Bishop in a Synodal Church

H.Em. Card. Mario Grech

General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops
St. John's Co-Cathedral, 27 November 2023

The synodal process is going through its second phase, which began with the Ordinary General Assembly in Rome. The *Synthesis Report* was sent back to the churches at the end of the first session, covering various topics and issues that need further study. The three parts of the report develop 20 themes that emerged during the proceedings, which seem to outline – to a greater or lesser extent - the features of the synodal Church. Part I takes stock of the experience of synodality and the understanding that came with it, including the underlying themes that reveal the face of a synodal Church; Part II points to everyone's participation in the synodal Church in mission; Part III instead refers to the "places" of the exercise of synodality.

Each chapter offers insights for further study. This depends on the structure of each theme, organized in three steps: the *convergences* that emerged during the debate, the *matters for consideration*, especially the ones that require further theological and canonical deepening, and the *proposals*, which, of course, must be finetuned through further discernment. During the year between the two sessions, there is an opportunity for study and research. Everyone must embrace this challenge and be prepared for the second session of the Assembly, which will be decisive in determining the outcome of the entire synodal process.

1. The Bishop's Ministry in the Synthesis Report

For this gathering of pastors, let me offer some reflections on the bishop's ministry in a synodal Church. This topic is essential for many reasons, which do not fully emerge from Chapter 12: «The Bishop in Ecclesial Communion. » Here, the bishop's ministry is described in relation to his function as the «visible principle and foundation of unity of both the bishops and of the faithful (LG 23) », without touching on the aspects of ministerial exercise at the level of groupings of Churches and *universa Ecclesia*.

However, the first point of this chapter captures the whole issue effectively:

In the framework of the Second Vatican Council, bishops, as successors of the Apostles, are placed at the service of the communion that takes place in the local Church, among the Churches, and with the whole Church. The figure of the bishop

can thus be understood correctly in the interweaving of relationships with the portion of the People of God entrusted to him, with the priests and deacons, with consecrated persons, with other bishops, and with the Bishop of Rome, in a perspective that is always mission-oriented (2, a).

This is followed by the development of everything that has to do with the exercise of his ministry on behalf of the Church entrusted to his care. On the other hand, the relationship with the other bishops and the Bishop of Rome is described in Chapter 13, devoted to «The Bishop of Rome in the College of Bishops, » which ends Part II of the Report. Further elements are provided in Chapters 18, 19, and 20, respectively, on «Structures for Participation, » «Groupings of Churches within the Communion of the Whole Church, » and «The Synod of Bishops and Ecclesial Assemblies. » As you might imagine, the theme of the bishop's ministry in the *Synthesis Report* is very rich and complex.

A first conclusion can already be suggested, starting precisely from the many references to the bishop's ministry in the text: a synodal Church is not opposed to a hierarchical Church; it does not question the ordained ministry, much less the hierarchical structure of the Church. If anything, it requires a new definition of the bishop's ministry, a different way of exercising it that aligns with the Church's emerging synodal model.

Based on the consensus regarding the role of bishops and the matters for consideration and proposals that emerged during the Assembly, we can conclude that the ongoing synodal process is a remarkable opportunity to revitalize the episcopal ministry at all levels where it is exercised. Understanding the synodal Church and its structure of communion, participation, and mission is impossible without the ministry of bishops. Still, one can no longer think of the ministry of bishops without referring to the synodal Church. The two terms correspond to each other and establish a circular relationship that benefits both the Church and the episcopal body.

It is therefore necessary to rethink, with humility and patience, the bishop's ministry in a synodal way. It is impossible here to discuss, even synthetically, all the elements of a theology of the episcopate. I will merely highlight how the synodal process has fostered the exercise of the episcopal ministry and how that exercise is a step forward in the theological-sacramental understanding of the episcopate and the Church itself, at once synodal and hierarchical.

2. *The Bishop's Ministry at the Service of Synodality*

To understand this, it suffices to focus on the part of the synodal process that is entrusted to the bishops. As we know, the apostolic constitution *Episcopalis Communio* transformed the Synod from an event restricted to an Assembly of Bishops into a process that is organized in phases (cf. EC, art. 4). Some people have interpreted this choice as a weakening of the proper function of the bishops, since a «consultation of the People of God on the theme of the Synod Assembly » (Art. 5) would subordinate their authority to those entrusted to their pastoral care.

Indeed, *Apostolica Sollicitudo* recognized the bishops' right to participate in the concern for the entire Church, which until then had been the exclusive prerogative of the Successor of Peter. In establishing the Synod of Bishops, the Pope applied Chapter III of *Lumen Gentium*, albeit more along the lines of the *Nota explicativa praevia* than conciliar

doctrine. But Paul VI himself, upon establishing this new body, said that «like all human institutions, it can be improved upon with the passing of time. »

Episcopalis Communio is meant to provide such an "improvement," in line with the council's ecclesiology on hierarchy, and not just Chap. II. The Apostolic Constitution translates into norms what Pope Francis stated in his October 17, 2015, address on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod. The Pope stressed his belief that the People of God are infallible *in credendo* and wished that «the People of God would be consulted in the twofold synodal appointment on the family. » This experience gave rise to the concept of a synodal Church as a «Church which listens, » where the Synod of Bishops becomes the «point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church's life: «the Synod process begins by listening to the people of God..., continues by listening to the pastors ..., and culminates in listening to the Bishop of Rome. »

In this way, listening to the pastors seems to be confined to the second phase of the Synod, when an assembly of bishops is convened in Rome to advise the Pope on the topic of the Synod, according to what was already established in *Apostolica Sollicitudo*. However, the function of the bishops in the synodal process does not end with a few bishops participating in the assembly phase as representatives of the Catholic episcopate.

The role played not by some but by all bishops is gleaned from the following passage of the Pope's address when he stated: «In a synodal Church, the Synod of Bishops is only the most evident manifestation of a dynamism of communion which inspires all ecclesial decisions.» The Pope distinguishes levels of synodality: «The first level of the exercise of *synodality* is had in the particular Churches... The second level is that of Ecclesiastical Provinces and Ecclesiastical Regions, Particular Councils, and, in a special way, Conferences of Bishops... The last level is that of the universal Church. Here, the Synod of Bishops, representing the Catholic episcopate, becomes an expression of *episcopal collegiality* within an entirely synodal Church. » Let us try to understand the different levels separately.

3. At the Level of Local Churches

The participation of the People of God in the first phase has been rightly emphasized. Nor could it be otherwise if, as *Episcopalis Communio* states, the purpose of the first phase is «the consultation of the People of God in the particular Churches » (cf. EC, Art. 5). When the first phase was started, I recall that many bishops were concerned that a consultation of the People of God would jeopardize the hierarchical structure of the Church itself. They overlooked the fact that even during times when synodality was not a common practice, Pius IX had asked all bishops worldwide about the faith of the entire People of God in the Immaculate Conception and that John Henry Newman had interpreted this request as a «consultation of the faithful. »

In the case of the Marian dogmas, the bishops had the responsibility, which is well understandable in a pyramidal model of the Church, of reporting to the Holy See the faith of the People of God entrusted to them regarding the Immaculate Conception and a century later, on the Assumption of Mary into heaven. Therefore, in the synodal process, the role of the bishops is even more essential and indispensable. For the Second Vatican Council, the notion of the Church as «the body of the Churches, » «in and from which churches comes into being the one and only Catholic Church, » is closely linked to the

function of the bishop as «the principle and foundation of unity in their particular churches » (LG 23). In this spirit, the Decree on the Ministry of Bishops develops the concept of the diocese as a particular Church by virtue of the bond between a given *portio Populi Dei* and its Bishop (assisted by his priests), insofar as the Bishop gathers the People «in the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Eucharist » (cf. CD 11).

The current synodal process originates from this ecclesiological framework in the logic of «mutual interiority» between the particular and universal dimensions of the Church. It is up to the Bishop of Rome to call the whole Church to synodal action since he is «the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity of both the bishops and of the faithful» (LG 23, quoting PA, prologue). Hence, it is up to the bishops to initiate the synodal process in their Churches because of the proper, ordinary, and immediate power they exercise in the name of Christ over the *portion Populi Dei* entrusted to them.

Therein lies the meaning of the request made to each bishop to solemnly initiate the synodal process in his Church. Could it not have been enough for the Pope to open the synodal process in St. Peter's on October 10, 2021? Wasn't a celebration in cathedrals around the world an unnecessary duplication? Or did it not become instrumental to emphasize *locally* a decision made at the center? In a pyramidal Church, where bishops were regarded as officials of the Pope and dioceses had the legal status of local districts of the universal Church, a decision from the summit was *ipso facto* transmitted to the whole Church by *plenitudo potestatis*.

Not so in a Church that is the body of Churches. In the individual local Church, it is up to the Bishop, as the visible principle and foundation of unity, to initiate, accompany, and complete the consultation of the *portio Populi Dei* entrusted to him. Any other way of consulting the people of God would lead to unfounded claims and an undue intrusion into the life of a particular Church.

4. At the Level of Church Groupings.

But could a bishop refuse to initiate a consultation in his Church? Refusing would be a choice that contradicts *communio* as the principle of unity of the Churches and the episcopal ministry itself, in which the *tria munera* «can be exercised only in hierarchical communion with the head and the members of the college » (LG 21). On the other hand, those who made this choice took on the burdensome responsibility of depriving the People of God entrusted to their care of the possibility to participate in the synodal process: not because individuals could not participate, but because they could not do so as a People, since the Pastor of that *portio Populi Dei* did not join the synodal process.

Those who have chosen this path view the episcopal ministry in absolute terms and not within a constitutive relationship with the People of God entrusted to them. In this case, there is no room for synodality. On the other hand, when bishops seek consultation, it is not a sum of individuals but the entire People of God who express their capacity, which is the *sensus fidei*. Therefore, the contribution of each Church is not merely a collection of opinions that someone has summarized; instead, it is the manifestation of the faith of a specific Church that has committed itself to listening to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In this way, the People of God fulfill their peculiar prophetic function, and bishops exercise their equally peculiar ministry. The fact that the bishop convenes and accompanies the consultation ensures that there is no opposition between the People of God and the hierarchy in the synodal process at the level of particular Churches. At the

same time, the circularity between the synodal and hierarchical dimensions of the Church is made evident: the bishop makes the consultation of the People of God possible, thus allowing it to exercise its prophetic function in listening to what the Spirit has to say to that Church.

However, the bishop's ministry does not end at the level of the particular Church. The first phase of the synodal process includes two additional stages, where the bishops are called to jointly exercise their function as pastors of their Churches in the institutions provided at the level of the groupings of Churches. First, in the Bishops' Conferences and corresponding bodies of the Eastern Churches *sui iuris*, and then at the continental level, in institutions that do not have a defined canonical status but which, under the impetus of the synodal process, are acquiring an increasingly defined form.

Even at these levels, the function of the bishops proves necessary and becomes – and has become - an original way of exercising the episcopal ministry. Indeed, the Bishops' Conferences have been asked to offer a synthesis of diocesan contributions to be forwarded to the Secretariat of the Synod. This synthesis cannot be reduced to a mechanical act of transmission, having involved an analysis of individual diocesan contributions by the Bishops' Conference itself or by an *ad hoc* appointed commission. This means that the bishops exercised together that function of discernment which belongs specifically to the pastors when they are faced with a manifestation of charisms in the People of God: «judgment as to their genuinity and proper use, » the council stresses, «belongs to those who are appointed leaders in the Church, to whose special competence it belongs, not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to that which is good (cf. 1 Th 5:12. 19-21) » (LG 12).

5. In the Bishops' Conferences

I want to focus on Bishops' Conferences now. If individual bishops need to discover what a synodal exercise of their ministry means, then Bishops' Conferences need to rethink their function fundamentally. We all know their status is weak under Canon Law. For the Code, the Bishops' Conference is, indeed, «a permanent institution, » but with limited pastoral functions (can. 447). While this wording provides some leeway to Bishops' Conferences because of how broad the meaning of «pastoral function » is, their actions are severely limited by the *motu proprio Apostolos suos*.

This document refers back to the 1985 Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which «called for a fuller and more profound study of the theological and, consequently, the juridical status of Episcopal Conferences and above all of the issue of their doctrinal authority. » The reason for this recommendation was the risk that such institutions, on the one hand, would weaken «the good of the Church, that is, the service of unity» and on the other, «the inalienable responsibility of each Bishop about the universal Church and to his particular Church. »

Based on this principle, Bishops' Conferences are bodies placed between the Roman Pontiff in the universal Church and individual bishops in their Churches. The consequence is that «in the Episcopal Conference, the Bishops jointly exercise the episcopal ministry for the good of the faithful of the territory of the Conference but, for that exercise to be legitimate and binding on the individual Bishops, there is needed the intervention of the supreme authority of the Church which, through universal law or particular mandates, entrusts determined questions to the deliberation of the Episcopal

Conference» (no. 20). This is especially true for documents of a doctrinal nature, which require the *recognitio* of the Holy See if they are not unanimously approved (cf. no. 22).

Instead, if we consider the Church from the standpoint of individual Churches and their groupings, the role of the Bishops' Conference becomes apparent as a necessary and proper function. This function does not compromise or diminish the authority of the diocesan bishop but instead reinforces it. This is shown by the synodal process, which is the appropriate setting for Bishops' Conferences to exercise their doctrinal function collaboratively. This is not a decision made by an external party but rather a result of the internal logic of the synodal process.

The consultation of the People of God requires an act of discernment by the Pastors. The initial discernment made by the Pastors of each Church when they send their diocesan contribution is further confirmed in the collective discernment of the Bishops who gather in assembly to listen to the guidance of the Spirit as it speaks to the Churches. The syntheses of the Bishops' Conferences resulted from genuine episcopal discernment. Since all Bishops' Conferences participated in the same synodal process, the consensus that emerged can be considered a collegial act of the Bishops in communion with the Bishop of Rome. The statement is not an infallible ruling by the Pope, which requires his recognition to be considered such. Instead, it is an ecclesiastical discernment that grants the Bishops' Conferences a level of authority that extends beyond their current pastoral responsibilities.

6. At Other Levels

This would be enough to show how fundamental and necessary the episcopal ministry is in a synodal Church. The importance of the discernment offered by the Bishops' Conferences gives a glimpse of the way toward episcopal collegiality within an all-synodal Church, as envisioned by the Pope. Unlike the Synod as an event, in which just a few bishops represent the episcopate, the synodal process involves all the Churches with their respective bishops, all the holy People of God, and all the Pastors.

For this reason, the People of God and their Pastors must always be present in all stages of the synodal process due to its unity. They took part in the continental stage, which ended the first phase of the Synod. Indeed, the Continental Assemblies were attended by bishops and delegates from individual nations, who listened and discerned at a level that went beyond Bishops' Conferences. During the Assemblies, it was demonstrated that a process of ecclesial discernment could be based on mutual listening between pastors and members of the People of God, including laymen and laywomen, consecrated men and women, priests, and deacons who all actively participated in the synodal process. This positive experience introduced the possibility of establishing the Continental Assemblies canonically.

Considering how relevant the role of bishops is during the Synod's first phase, some people may support the decision to allow non-bishop members to participate in the Synod's General Assembly. These members would have the right to speak and vote, which may compromise the episcopal nature of the Assembly, turning it into an ecclesiastical assembly. This would be true if they represented the People of God. In reality, they were present because of the unity of the synodal process: they participated as witnesses to remind everyone that the Synod did not begin on October 4 of this year but was a Church journey that was started by the Pope in St. Peter's on October 10, 2021, involving the whole Church and everyone in the Church.

Their presence serves as a reminder that the synodal process will continue even after the second session of the Assembly, which concludes the celebratory phase and marks the beginning of the third phase, the Synod's reception. The principle of giving back will be the hallmark of this phase, as it has been in every step of the synodal process in its initial and subsequent phases. Every document that has set the ongoing ecclesial discernment in motion - the Document for the Continental Stage, the *Instrumentum Laboris*, now the *Synthesis Report* - has been sent back to the Churches, from where the synodal process started with the consultation of the People of God. This step directly involves the Pastors once again: it is the Bishop who, by receiving these documents, is called to ensure the circularity between particular Churches and the universal Church.

Entering into this synodal dynamism means discovering ways to exercise the episcopal ministry in a synodal spirit and finally realizing what a synodal bishop might look like. The whole Church and each individual Church will gain from this; each Bishop and the College; the episcopal ministry and the Petrine ministry, which in the synodal process can finally « find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation » (UUS 95). This will happen only if we listen to the Spirit, who will lead us to discover the style and form of the synodal Church as well as the corresponding style and form of our episcopal ministry.