

Why the college of bishops is not an exclusive club, and why the laity share a responsibility in matters of faith

*By Cardinal Gerhard Müller
Translated by Cecilia Fitzpatrick*

Power and synodality

Apostolicity and synodality are two ecclesiological principles of separate origin and meaning. While the connection to the apostles is fundamental for the Catholic Church, and appears as one of the characteristics of the Church in the Creed, **the principle of synodality is a more recent development.** Only the most recent edition of the “Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche” contains the key term “synodal principle.” With the Second Vatican Council, the newly constituted Roman synod of bishops (cann. 342-348) and the diocesan synods more frequently held in some countries (cann. 460-468), “the synodality of the Church came more into focus, which **is in principle intended to accommodate the full participation of all members of the Church**” (Leo Karrer).

Whether the participation of the bishops in the general leadership of the Church, and the cooperation of all priests and laypeople with the bishop in the diocese can be derived from the same principle, remains questionable. The institutions of the Roman synod of bishops, the particular synods and regional bishops’ conferences are, in different ways, founded upon the equality of episcopal ordination. **Membership of the college of bishops gives rise to a shared responsibility among all bishops for ensuring that the whole Church remains true**

to the teachings of the apostles, for unity of faith, unity in the sacraments and the visible communion of all faithful and bishops with and under the Pope. The supreme authority in matters of doctrine, morals and the divine constitution of the Church is vested in the Ecumenical Council. However, as a matter of principle, **the Council never exists or acts without its head, the Pope, who is the representative of Christ and successor of Peter.**

On the other hand, **the shared responsibility of all religious and laity** is not **derived** from participation in the apostolic ministry of the Pope and the bishops, but **from their participation in the priesthood of Christ and thus in the prophetic mission and diaconal task of the Church in martyria (witness), leiturgia (worship) and diakonia (service).** The reason for this lies in the sacramental entry into the Body of Christ through baptism and confirmation. The natural gifts and the supernatural charisms serve to build up the Church in the spirit of the Father and the Son. They are not a concept competing with the sacramental constitution of the Church. That is why the Church's constitution is not a changing conglomerate of heterogeneous (montanistically conceived) supranatural inputs of the spirit from "prophets and charismatics" who refer to their experiences of revival on the one hand, and of adaptation to present political dynamics and sociological structures on the other. **In Christ, the Church is the sacrament for the salvation of the world and not a community of ideas.**

The Church does not adopt as her organizational structure the corresponding system of rule of the present day. For instance, it neither adopts a feudalistic system of government in times of feudalism, nor does it adopt a system of absolute rule in times of absolute or constitutional principality. Nor does it present itself as a direct or constitutional democracy post-French Revolution. This is because the invisible, spiritual community and the visible, sacramentally constituted Church are

“not to be considered as two realities, but rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element...by no weak analogy” to the mystery of the incarnate Word (Lumen gentium 8).

Owing to its different ecclesiological approach, the Catholic Church can by no means take over the “synodal constitution” of the Calvinist and – after the end of princely sovereignty in 1918 – the Lutheran communities. **For the Church, being the chosen people of God, is the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit.** The Church is in no way a merely human religious community which actualizes the ideals of its divine founder as far as possible within its formal structures. **The new forms of synod in the Catholic Church** are neither borrowed from the “Holy Synod” as in the supreme governing body of an autocephalous orthodox church, nor are they the result of a kind of rediscovery of a “buried” early Church tradition. **They are in fact an actualizing to the circumstances of the present, which both essentially result from the sacramental nature of the Church.**

In God’s plan for universal salvation, the Church herself, as the sign and instrument of man’s most intimate communion with God, is the object of faith which emanates from listening to the Word of God. **The Church is, as one of her core characteristics, apostolic, because all her members “devote themselves to the teachings of the apostles”** (Acts 2:42) and because all are obliged and thus entitled, by God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – to share in the mission of the Church. Notably, **the bishops** succeed the apostles, not because they are like these first witnesses of revelation and thereby co-founders of the Church, but rather they **exercise in apostolic succession the authority of the apostles to teach, sanctify and guide the Church of God in the power and spirit of the exalted Christ, the Head of the Church.**

The Catholic understanding of the apostolic ministry is therefore not to be understood sociologically in terms of its functions for the congregation, but christologically and sacramentally as the representation of the Head of the Church. “In the bishops, therefore, for whom priests are assistants, Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Supreme High Priest, is present in the midst of those who believe” (Lumen gentium 21; Sacrosanctum concilium 41). St. Irenaeus presented this principle of apostolicity as the fundamental principle of the Catholic Church in his epochal work “Against Heresies” (circa 180 A.D.). While the Gnostics of the time (and in another form until today) refer to their self-referential speculations and exclusive knowledge of the divine from alleged secret teachings of the apostles, St. Irenaeus establishes the epistemological principles of a sound, catholic theology (Against Heresies, Book III, Chapter 3.2).

Christ is the only mediator

The Christian faith neither confesses nor places its full hope in the anthropogenic interpretations and ever-changing reflections of an absolute in human intelligence, which is necessary to contemplate but always escapes our comprehension. In the Holy Spirit, we acknowledge God’s Truth in His Son, Jesus Christ. He alone is the mediator between the One God and us: the man Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). And by this, we mean the actual man Jesus, not a mythical creature or an ostensive idea.

Through the Holy Spirit, the Church remains in the historically concrete universal truth of God in the Incarnate Word, if the bishops, as successors of the apostles, faithfully and fully preserve the Word of God in Sacred Scripture and Apostolic Tradition. The bishops’ shared responsibility was first realized on a larger scale in the form of assembly (syn-hodos) when a meeting was held in Antioch (268 A.D.) to reject the heresy of Bishop Paul of Samosata. He contested the divinity of Christ and “declared

him an ordinary man by nature” (Eusebius of Caesarea, The Church History, Book VII, Chapters 27-30). Since the faith of the Catholic Church is one and the same, a synodal letter was sent to the bishops of Rome and Alexandria to assure them catholically (universally) of this truth.

The later particular synods or ecumenical councils all follow this concrete principle of the common responsibility of **all bishops in unity with the successor of Peter in Rome. They undertake to ensure the unity of the Church in the handed-down faith of the apostles.** The bishops acted on this principle long before a systematic theology of the councils was developed. First of all, however, **the formal authority of the bishops must not become independent of the substantive authority of revelation in Scripture and Tradition. And secondly, the college of bishops is not an exclusive club. The bishops are, in the name of Christ, the shepherds and teachers of the Church only if they themselves have received the Church’s teaching and are faithful to it. There is a constitutive link between the witness of the apostles and that of all the faithful, priests and laity alike.**

The shepherds must themselves receive the teachings of the Church

The laity have a constructive and, in certain circumstances, critical co-responsibility in matters of faith. Once, historically, this co-responsibility saved the true faith in an extreme way when a majority of erring bishops cowardly and confusedly gave in to the onslaught of Arianism and the coercive power of the state (cf. John Henry Newman, On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine). **The outbreak of the “Reformation,” which ended in the catastrophic division of the occidental Church, was partly due to the carelessness and deplorable incompetence of the Roman Curia and the**

German bishops, who shared a high degree of responsibility for the delayed reform of the Church's head and members. Even Pope Adrian VI himself blamed the Roman Curia and the German bishops at the Imperial Diet of Nuremberg (1522/23).

Admittedly, the Church cannot subsequently ratify an infallible decision of the Pope and the ecumenical council in matters of faith and morals, because it comes about in the authority of the Holy Spirit and nobody can launch an appeal against God. But the sense of faith of the people of God, which is formed by listening to the Word of God and being faithful to the teachings of the Church, leads, by consultation, up to the highest decisions of the teaching authority (cf. Lumen gentium 25; John Henry Newman, On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine).

This sense of faith is therefore not based on the claim to power of a democratic majority, as in a nation. A consensus based on revealed faith, that is, infallibility in faith (infallibilitas in credendo), must precede an assent on the definitions of the Magisterium (infallibilitas in docendo), both logically and chronologically. No one can invoke the sensus fidei fidelium in his opposition to a revealed and defined doctrine, because the binding declaration of revelation has been entrusted only to the living Magisterium of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ (Dei verbum 10).

Synods and Councils have never presumed to reestablish the Church or to adapt her doctrine of faith and morals to the spirit of the times and to prevailing world views and lifestyles. There is a unanimity here with faithful Christians of the Protestant denomination, who reacted to the "German Christians," a popular movement that saw no conflict between Christianity and the ideals of Hitler's national socialism. **The third thesis of the "Theological Declaration**

of Barmen” (1934) refers to the “German Christians” with their false doctrine of the “realities of life as second source of revelation” besides the Word of God: “We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.”

The “Bologna School”: apostasy disguised

The interpretation of the Second Vatican Council spread by the so-called “Bologna School” was the agenda for a refoundation of the Catholic Church according to the ideas of the Enlightenment and religious criticism: **in other words, a transformation of the Church of God into a civil religion without the divinity of Christ. This is nothing other than a disguised apostasy, because the bishops and the Pope “are only successors of the apostles and vicars of Christ, who do not have the right to found another Church, to transmit a different faith and to administer sacraments other than those instituted by Christ”** (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae III, q. 64, a. 2 ad 3). From where would the architects of their own Church receive the authority to indoctrinate, to mainstream and, in the event of disobedience, to excommunicate Christ’s faithful, remove them from the ministries given to them by Christ and pillory them in the anti-Church media?

It can hardly be assumed that a body like the Synodal Path in Germany could claim the Holy Spirit for itself in order to suspend, correct and reinterpret the authority of Holy Scripture, the Apostolic Tradition and the infallible decisions of the Magisterium. Nor is it an entity authorized by the Church, nor an academically-recognized authority that can “further develop” dogmas or divine law. In better times, the German bishops still clearly stated the limits of

Church authority, namely that even the Pope and all the faithful are bound to Scripture, Tradition and the existing Magisterium, and that by no means can anyone, under the pretext of a “new hermeneutic,” substantively reinterpret or undermine the creed and teaching of the Church (in a letter against Bismarck 1875, cf. Denzinger-Hünemann 3116).

It may well be justified to speak of a synodal principle in the cooperation of bishops, priests and laity in diocesan and supra-diocesan bodies. However, **its original defect, which consists of the political misunderstanding that the Church revolved around power that now has to be limited and shared “democratically,” must not be exaggerated. To speak of a “division of powers in the Church” is nothing other than populism and theological ignorance.** In reality, the spiritual authority of the bishops and the mission of the laity is at the service of revealed truth and the eternal salvation of all those for whom Jesus Christ sacrificed His life on the cross.

An anti-Roman sentiment has often been found to lurk behind the demand for “more” synodality. The First Vatican Council had centralized the Church authority in Rome, and now with the Second Vatican Council, a “decentralization of power,” a “reevaluation of the laity” and more “independence of the local churches” had to take place. In this way, the episcopate had to be democratized, so that the bishop is the president of the diocesan assembly rather than the shepherd and teacher of the local church appointed by Christ.

With the pontificate of Pope Francis, a new stage of Church history had begun. It was a matter of finally clearing the “reform gridlock” for which the Pope’s two predecessors, and to this day the Roman Curia, were responsible. **Instead of intellectually and spiritually facing the great theological and anthropological challenges of the dechristianization process, many are peddling the new edition of the 1970s agenda – for example, abolition of priestly celibacy,**

access of women to the priesthood, interfaith communion with persisting separation in faith, recognition of sexual union outside marriage – and wanting to modernize the Church. For whom should the extinguished torch shine, which is courageously carried forward into the future?

The synodal principle should actually be bearing fruit for the common work of the new evangelization in Germany. In this way, we Germans would at least be contributing something to the universal Church, which is not waiting for the export of an unprecedented decline in Christian life, as has happened in central Europe. The apostolic authority of the bishops and the apostolate of the laity, which is constitutive for the Church, arise from the same mission of the whole Church for the salvation of the world. It is therefore important that they also cooperate and coordinate their activities in evangelization and good works for the temporal good of the state and society (cf. *Apostolicam actuositatem* 18 and 23).

Authority and apostolate have the same mission

At its various levels, synodality is a principle derived from the apostolic nature of the Church. **Not to fight for power but to discern the spirits:** this is the way of the Church of Christ in these times. “We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that comes from God, that we may know what has been given to us by God” (1 Corinthians 2:12). **The Church remains catholic and apostolic only if, in fidelity to the one treasure of the Word of God handed down to the Church (in Scripture and Tradition),** “the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers, so that holding to, practising and professing the

heritage of the faith, it becomes on the part of the bishops and faithful a single common effort” (Dei verbum 10).

Summary

As justified as it is to speak of a **synodal principle** in the interaction of bishops, priests and laity, we should not gloss over **its original defect. This consists of the political misunderstanding that in the Church, the main issue revolves around power that now has to be limited “democratically.” To speak of a “division of powers” in the Church is populism and theological ignorance. In reality, both the spiritual authority of the bishops and the mission of the laity are at the service of the revealed truth.**

Cardinal Gerhard Müller’s article was originally written for Die Tagespost. It has been translated by Cecilia Fitzpatrick and is published here with permission.