

Synodality and doctrine
Synodality and catholicity

by

Cardinal Mario Grech
Secretary General of the Synod

Special theological exchange - Berne, 19th March, 2024

Thank you for the following two questions you have put to me:

Synodality and doctrine

The synodal process is a learning path for the Roman Catholic Church to incorporate the insights of all its members as it seeks and experiments with ways forward into an as yet unknown future. However, official church regulations on doctrine, law and practice leave little room for manoeuvre in many respects. Moreover, in Catholic mentalities, innovation can often only prevail if it can be presented as continuity. From a theological perspective, we would like to suggest that, together with synodality, it is also necessary to learn how to deal with the development of doctrine and practice in a historically informed and critically self-reflective way. (Prof. Eva-Maria Faber und Prof. Markus Lau, Theologische Hochschule Chur)

Synodality and catholicity

In our presentation we want to argue that plurality and contextuality are not just environmental factors but epistemological foundations for our understanding of synodality, and that with catholicity we already have an ecclesiological and epistemological framework that embraces the complex reality of our times. Synodality happens at the local level, bringing together the diverse voices of the people of God who come together as members of the synod, but also as members of diverse social and cultural communities. This complexity is not something to be 'tamed' by synodality, by finding a minimal consensus between divergent positions. Rather, we argue that synodality – understood by us as an ongoing way of being church, not just a one-off event – should foster ongoing exchange. We see the pursuit of unambiguity not as a fruit but as a hindrance to a church on its way. (We therefore propose an understanding of catholicity that is a gathering of different voices without conflating them into one position. It is more than tolerance; it is a mark of a church that lives in plurality and exchange, recognising the ecclesiological potential of plurality. In ecumenical dialogues we have learned that such an

understanding of catholicity unites rather than divides different churches, and so we see it as a powerful term for redefining our understanding of the synodal process and its outcome as well. (Prof. Nicola Ottiger und Prof. Christian Preidel, Universität Luzern)

In view of the above two questions you are posing to me, I would like to offer, in simplicity, some suggestions, which I hope will be useful to start the discussion of this session.

But first my attention goes especially to the conjunction “et”: synodality *and* doctrine; synodality *and* catholicity. In the past, we used to speak of a 'Catholic *et*', which held closely together realities opposed by the Reformation: Sacred Scripture *and* Tradition, faith *and* works, the visible *and* invisible dimensions of the Church. Today this 'et' has a more positive value, calling not only for overcoming oppositions, but for thinking of a superior unity that helps us to be a synodal Church, the People of God walking 'together' towards the Kingdom, in the unity that respects and composes the diversity of gifts, charisms, ministries, vocations that the Spirit arouses in the ecclesial body.

Synodality does not fuel opposition. To say synodality means to say communion, believed and lived in the Church-People of God. Above all, it means saying communion according to the ecclesiology of the People of God that the Second Vatican Council delivered to us. Chapter II of *Lumen Gentium* recovers the equality of the members of the Church before any differences: of vocation, of ministry, of state of life. Starting from equality means affirming not only the equal dignity of all the baptised, but their active capacity in the Church by virtue of baptism.

The theme of synodality would be completely incomprehensible without starting from the participation of the People of God in the prophetic, priestly and royal function of Christ (cf. LG 10). Here lies the foundation not only of a synodal praxis with which the Catholic Church is becoming increasingly familiar, but of the synodal form of the Church. To affirm, as Pope Francis did, that the synodal Church "is a Church of listening", where the People of God, the College of Bishops, and the Bishop of Rome are listening to each other in order to know what the Spirit is saying to the Churches (cf. Address at the 50th of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015), means translating

the fundamental statements of the Constitution on the Church into ecclesial processes. Within the framework of synodality, in fact, the participation of the three subjects in the synodal process and the exercise of their respective functions fits into a dynamic circularity. Synodality, collegiality, primacy in the synodal Church come together in harmony.

To this more general consideration, now I would like to add a few remarks on the two questions you posed to me:

On the first question, on **synodality and doctrine**.

First of all, thank you for this suggestion. I too am convinced that without an adequate theological foundation, synodality would soon end up emptying itself, without affecting the life of the Church. I am thinking of those sociological interpretations of synodality, which set the People of God against the Pastors, fuelling the oppositions and divisions that weaken the ecclesial body. This leads me to say that there is a need not only for doctrine, but for good doctrine: even ideological readings claim the character of theological interpretation.

It seems to me that a developing theology of synodality is capable of grasping the complexity of the theme and its praxis. I am convinced that the synodal process we are currently experiencing constitutes the mature form of the reception of Vatican II, showing how it is possible to translate into practice the ecclesiological horizon proposed by the Second Vatican Council, welding together synodality, collegiality and primacy in dynamic unity.

To do this we must continue to theologically deepen synodality, study all its aspects, see its implications, re-establish all the connections that a suspension of synodal praxis has obscured and weakened. The first session of the Assembly delivered this need for in-depth study to the whole Church, at the very moment in which, for each theme of the *Synthesis Report*, it did not only indicate the consensus of the Assembly, but the aspects to be studied in depth and the proposals to be implemented. The Bishops' Conferences were invited to involve the theology study centres in their region to deepen the themes of synodality. The Secretariat of the Synod is activating with the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia ten study commissions on the topics that will not be dealt with at the October

Assembly, and five commissions of experts to delve into theological topics in preparation for the second session of the Synod.

I like to emphasise that the theological dimension is inherent to synodality. From the experience we are living, it is becoming increasingly clear that the synodal process is all the more conscious and participatory the more it is supported by a clear and shared doctrine. And that it is precisely doctrine that opens the way for rethinking the Church's "official regulations on doctrine, law and practice". In this regard I can say that we have asked the Holy Father to set up a group of canonists to make proposals on how to rethink Church discipline in a synodal key. It is clear that once it is understood that the Church is constitutively synodal, everything must be rethought in this perspective. This is why the need for a fruitful dialogue between theology (especially ecclesiology) and law is increasingly emerging.

I therefore agree with the suggestion to "learn to approach the development of doctrine and practice in a historically informed and critically self-reflective manner" as an element supporting synodal praxis. But it seems to me that this requirement is internal to the synod process itself, especially if "incorporating the insights of all its members as [the Church] seeks and experiments with ways forward into an as yet unknown future" means listening to the Spirit who guides the Church. At stake in the synodal process is the *sensus fidei* of God's holy people who participate in the prophetic function of Christ (cf. LG 12) and are infallible *in credendo*. This is why I would go beyond the question of "continuity".

It seems to me that too much emphasis has been placed on the issue of continuity and discontinuity, turning it into an ideological issue. This is demonstrated by the use of Benedict XVI's famous speech on the hermeneutics of the Council of 22 December 2005. The continually re-proposed *vulgate* of that speech draws a Pope committed to opposing a "hermeneutics of continuity and reform" to the "hermeneutics of discontinuity and rupture", pushing the Pope's intervention to the side of doctrinal continuity, to disqualify not only the hermeneutics of Vatican II, but Vatican II itself, branded as a 'pastoral council', irrelevant from a dogmatic point of view, dangerous from any other point of view, because it would have broken the thread of Tradition. In reality, Benedict XVI does not

speak of a 'hermeneutics of continuity and reform, but - and I quote - of a "'hermeneutics of reform" (quoting the formula), of renewal in the continuity of the one subject Church, which the Lord has given us'. The register of continuity falls here on the one subject-Church, not on doctrines. If the Church is not the Church of Christ, one and only one, which continues to walk in history, stretched between fidelity to its origin in Christ and its fulfilment in the Kingdom, sustained by the Spirit that propels and guides it on its journey, the reference to doctrine is transformed into a fighting tool, which in fact vitiates both novelty and fidelity to Tradition.

When we speak of Tradition with a capital T (I refer to Congar), we indicate a living, dynamic reality, the dynamism of Tradition. The development of doctrines - Newman teaches us - is a process that takes place within the dynamism of Tradition, which is all the more true if it takes place in synodal terms. The history of the Church demonstrates this: just think of the two Marian dogmas - the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption of Mary (1950), defined on the basis of the "singularis Antistitum et fidelium conspiratio"!

Now I would like to make some mention of the second binomial: **synodality and catholicity**.

It impresses me how the Spirit guides the Church, arousing in different places and contexts the same drive for renewal. The fifth theme that the Synod Secretariat is asking the theologians to explore is that of "place" (*locus*). The scheme presenting the issues that fall under this theme (Article V of the document "Five perspectives for theological exploration in view of the Second Session ..") goes hand in hand with the questions you propose in this question on synodality and catholicity. Just to quote one example, this document states that "(a) the development of an ecclesiology attentive to the cultural dimension of the People of God (with reference to what Pope Francis says in *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 115: "Grace presupposes culture, and the gift of God is incarnated in the culture of those who receive it"). In fact, it seems necessary to translate also on the institutional level the dynamism of reciprocity between evangelisation of culture and inculturation of the faith, giving space to local hermeneutics, without 'the local' becoming a reason for division and without 'the universal' turning into a form of

hegemony; b) the reference to 'place' in the dynamics of proclamation, in relation to the principle that 'the adaptation of the preaching of the revealed word must remain the law of all evangelisation. In this way, in fact, the ability of each people to express the message of Christ in its own way is stimulated, and at the same time a vital exchange between the Church and the different cultures of peoples is promoted" (Gaudium et spes, n. 44)" (ibid)

On the other hand, all of this was already well outlined in the principle of the catholicity of the People of God, formulated in LG 13, where it is said that "in the ecclesial communion (I would like to translate: in the Church-communion) there legitimately exist the particular Churches, which enjoy their own traditions, without prejudice to the primacy of the chair of Peter, which presides over the universal communion of charity, protects legitimate varieties and at the same time watches over, so that what is particular not only does not harm unity, but rather serves it". On this solid foundation rests the praxis (to be developed and made into a principle governing the Church's actions) of the 'exchange of gifts', which is not just about material aid, not even just spiritual aid, but an encounter of ecclesial realities where - as you say - 'plurality and contextuality are not just environmental factors but epistemological foundations for our understanding of synodality' and - I would add - of the Church itself.

The catholicity of the People of God is guaranteed by understanding the Church as the "body of the Churches", "in and from the particular Churches there is the one and only Catholic Church" (LG 23). The whole synodal process is based on the principle of 'mutual interiority', which has made it possible to overcome the idea of the Synod of Bishops as an event circumscribed to an assembly, and to involve the whole Church and everyone in the Church in the synodal process: the People of God in the particular Churches, the body of Bishops, both personally in their Churches and collegially at the different levels of the *communio* of the Churches, the Bishop of Rome as the principle of unity of this complex and harmonious dynamism at the same time. I have the impression that many tend to reason abstractly about unity and diversity, that they fear a synodal praxis that serves to control,

constrain, impoverish, normalise, without having experienced synodality. For my part, I can not only assure that the Secretariat of the Synod has placed itself openly at the service of the synodal process, to ensure the effective participation of all, but also testify that the experience so far has never pretended to simplify or "tame" the complexity of the process.

On the other hand, if it were a matter of reaching 'a minimum consensus between divergent positions', I doubt it could be qualified as an effective outcome of synodality. Consensus is the 'fruit' of the action of the Spirit who guides God's holy people in listening and ecclesial discernment. It seems to me that the criterion of consensus, clear in the development of dogma as evidence to support and even solemnly define a truth of faith, is now entering into the understanding of decision-making processes. Precisely because these are processes, there is a need for ecclesial listening and discernment, which demands the participation of all. This is why I like to draw attention to the principle of "restitution", which we have always implemented during the process we are currently going through. Since the subject of the synodal journey is the Church-Holy People of God, and this People lives and walks in the local Churches, the whole process started from there, through the consultation of the People of God. Every further step of the ecclesial discernment has always been returned to the Churches: with the Document for the Continental Phase after the discernment of the Bishops' Conferences; the *Instrumentum laboris* after the Continental Assemblies; the *Synthesis Report* after the first session of the Assembly. After the assembly phase, the third phase will open, which is based on the ecclesial dynamic of reception.

That is why it is very important to argue, as you do, that 'synodality - understood by us as a continuous way of being Church, not just a one-off event - should foster a continuous exchange'. If there is one thing that I regret, it is that precisely many have not understood this basic principle, and have reduced this synodal process to the mechanical and soulless execution of a request from above. Such a disposition favours the understanding of the synod process as a matter of the universal Church - of the Pope, in the final analysis - which, by initiating a 'quest for univocity', would end up turning the synod process into an instrument of Church government. But if this were the case, synodality would no longer be

such, but a semblance of participation, which in fact conceals and feeds the lust for power. This is evident in totalitarian systems that resort to plebiscites to confirm the strong man. "But it is not so among you," says Jesus! (Luke 22:26).

We prepare ourselves for the holy days, thinking that the greatest contribution we can make to the Church and its maturation towards the synodal form is to live our ministry in the radical logic of service. This will first of all protect us from the temptation to use synodality as a tool to strengthen our position without promoting the good life of the People of God entrusted to us. What we demand at the level of the universal Church, we must be able to guarantee at the level of the local Churches, where we have the responsibility to initiate and sustain the synodal process as a habitual form of ecclesial life.

True, synodality is not a 'one-off' process, but the way of being Church: 'a Church that lives in plurality and exchange, recognising the ecclesiological potential of plurality'. Were it not so, the statement that 'the synodal Church is a Church of listening' would be reduced to a nice formula. In reality, if we take the pneumatological recovery of the Second Vatican Council seriously, we are called to translate into ecclesial processes the principle that it is the Spirit who guides the Church. The Pope always repeats it: "the protagonist of the Synod is the Holy Spirit!"

In the light of the Spirit and his ongoing action in the Church, the dynamic of unity and diversity can be understood. In past models of the Church - it is true - unity has been privileged to the detriment of the richness and diversity of gifts. The two terms always go together, and constitute the very principle of the Church, provided they are in constant balance: never must the demand for unity be used to conculcate and mortify diversity; never must diversity become the pretext for not seeking unity. Unity is not uniformity; diversity is not anarchy. If the Church were to regulate itself in this way, all that would remain would be to invoke tolerance. But in the Church it is not a matter of tolerance, but of "agape", which is "the fullness of the law" (Rom 13:10). In the light of agape, the principle of always applies: 'in necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas'. If we had always applied it, different would be the history of the Church!

