

SYNOD ON SYNODALITY AND LUMEN GENTIUM

Bishop Elias R. Lorenzo, O.S.B.

Auxiliary Bishop in the Archdiocese of Newark

INTRODUCTION

- The word **synod** comes from the Greek σύννοδος (*synodus*) meaning assembly, or meeting.
- **Lumen Gentium** (Light of the nations; cf. Jn. 8:12) is the Dogmatic constitution of the church issued by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council and the approval of Pope St. Paul VI in 1964.
- It is organized in 8 chapters with 69 paragraphs, which is important in as much as I will refer to these chapters and paragraphs in this presentation. There are 302 footnotes all from sacred scripture; so the dogmatic constitution is based on the living and enduring Word of God (1 Pt. 1:23). Supplementary footnotes: 186.
- This presentation is organized in four parts: 1) Vatican II & Synods; 2) Synodality; 3) Lumen Gentium; 4) Conclusions

1. VATICAN II AND SYNODS

Following the Second Vatican Council, Pope St. Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops in 1965, in response to the desire of the Fathers of the Council to keep alive the positive spirit engendered by the conciliar experience: fraternal dialogue and discernment; collegiality and communion (cf. *Apostolica sollicitudo*, September 15, 1965)

- Link: https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19650915_apostolica-sollicitudo.html
- Since 1965, the “Synod of Bishops” is a permanent body that serves to advise the pope. There are three types of synods:
 - 1) “Ordinary General Assembly” is a synod that generally meets every three years e.g. 1985 on family; 1988 on the laity; 1990 on formation of clergy; 1995 on consecrated life; or 2018 on youth, etc.
 - 2) “Extraordinary” synods can be called to deal with specific situations, e.g. 1985 Pope St. John Paul II on the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the synod.

3) “Special” synods are called concerning issues in a specific region or continent, e.g. 2019 Amazon, but there have been similar synods on Africa, Asia, Oceania, etc.

- The post-conciliar synods have been composed of bishops and religious superiors general, elected by bishops’ conferences, or elected the Union of Superiors General, or appointed by the Pope.
- They vote on proposals to present for the pope’s consideration; votes are not deliberative since a synod is a consultative body.
- In practice, following a synod, the pope manifests his teaching office with a “post-synodal apostolic exhortation” on the themes discussed, e.g. *Christus vivit* in 2019 following the synod on youth.
- While the members of a particular Synod express its collective wishes, it does not issue decrees, unless in certain cases the pope authorizes it to do so.
- Even then, an assembly’s decision requires ratification by the pope.
- The pope serves as president of a synod (or appoints the president), determines the agenda, and summons, suspends, and dissolves the synod.
- On the 50th anniversary in 2015 of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis wrote: “Walking together is the constitutive way of the Church; the figure that enables us to interpret reality with the eyes and heart of God; the condition for following the Lord Jesus and being servants in this wounded time. The breath and the pace of the synod show what we are, and the dynamism of communion that animates our decisions.”

2. SYNODALITY

- Pope St. John Paul II wrote, “Because of the one dignity flowing from Baptism, each member of the lay faithful, together with ordained ministers and men and women religious, shares a responsibility for the Church’s mission.” (*Christifideles Laici* in 1988 following the Synod on the Laity)
- Synodality is a major focus of the pontificate of Pope Francis, and it refers to the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church.

- The International Theological Commission (ITC) studied synodality from February 14, 2017, and published their work in March 2018. ITC states that synodality designates “the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church as the People of God, which reveals and expresses her communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission” (March 2, 2018; §6).
- Link: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html
- The significance and value of synodality is consulting everyone in the Church (cf. ITC § 68).
- Synodality is the theme of the 16th Ordinary Synod that was held in Rome in October 2023 (after a year of dialogue and discussion in parishes, movements, and associations) and will conclude in October 2024, to collaboratively chart a path forward in these modern and complex times, emphasizing listening, discernment and mission.

3. Lumen Gentium

- Link: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html
- Before the council, the predominant understanding of the church was a *societas perfecta*. The council returned to biblical and patristic texts in **Lumen gentium** that underly the concept of synodality.
- In **Lumen gentium**, the universal church is presented as a sacrament (LG I §1) and the People of God (LG I §4, II §12). **Lumen Gentium** strongly emphasizes the image of the Church as the People of God on a journey, based on the experience of the Jewish people journeying to the promised land.
- Biblical Images of the Church LG I §6
 - “The Church is a sheepfold whose one and indispensable door is Christ.” (Jn. 10:16)
 - “The Church is a farm or field.” (1 Cor. 3:9)
 - “The Church has also been called the building of God.” (1 Pt. 2:5)
 - “On this foundation the Church is built by the apostles.”

- “As living stones we here on earth are built into it.”
 - “The Church is, also, ‘that Jerusalem which is above,’ and called ‘our mother.’” (Gal. 4:26 & Rev. 21)
- Christ is the head of the Church LG I §7 (Col. 1:18-20)
 - “The Head of this Body is Christ.”
 - “All the members ought to be molded in the likeness of Him, until Christ be formed in them.”
 - “From Christ ‘the whole body, supplied and built up by joints and ligaments, attains a growth that is of God.’ He continually distributes in His body, that is, in the Church, gifts of ministries in which, by His own power, we serve each other unto salvation so that, carrying out the truth in love, we might through all things grow unto Him who is our Head.”
- LG II § 10: One of the most innovative aspects of **Lumen Gentium** is the recovery of the doctrine of the “priesthood of the faithful” in which the laity are understood as central in the life of the Church and their active participation in the mission of the Church is necessary and indispensable.
- With these affirmations, the council put an end to centuries old *de facto* distinction between a teaching hierarchy and a learning laity.
- Graced with dignity of the sons and daughters of God by baptism in Christ, laity also have a responsibility to proclaim the gospel and participate in the governance of the church according to their specific duties, roles, and way of life.
- LG II § 12: The Holy Spirit, notes the council fathers, bestows special charisms on the laity making them “fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices which contribute to the renewal and building up of the church.”
- LG II § 17: “The obligation of spreading the faith is imposed on every disciple of Christ, according to his state.”
- LG IV § 37: The laity are, in fact, “permitted and sometimes obliged to express their opinions on those things which concern the common good of the Church.”

- This is only possible through the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In LG I §4, we read “The Church, which the Spirit guides in the way of all truth and which He unifies in communion and in works of ministry, He both equips and directs with hierarchical and charismatic gifts and adorns with His fruits.”
- LG II § 10: “Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ.”
- The Holy Spirit, of course, is the source of unity that brings together all the members of the Church, with our various vocations, ministries, and charisms, into a single, dynamic, living communion (cf. ITC §§ 46 & 48).
- LG II §12: On the Holy Spirit notes “It is not only through the sacraments and the ministries of the Church that the Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the People of God and enriches it with virtues, but ‘allotting his gifts to everyone according as He wills, He distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts He makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which contribute toward the renewal and building up of the Church, according to the words of the Apostle: ‘The manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for the common good’ (1 Cor. 12:7). These charisms, whether they be outstanding or simple, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation for they are perfectly suited to and useful for the needs of the Church.’
- LG II § 10: “The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light. Therefore, all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.”
- LG IV § 33: affirms that the laity have a “special vocation: to make the Church present and fruitful in those places where it is only through them that she can become the salt of the earth.”

- The order of the chapters is also revealing. Note that ch. 2 is on People of God; ch. 3 on Hierarchy and ch. 4 on the laity; the order is unambiguous!
- The hierarchy is surrounded by the People of God and the lay faithful because “the hierarchy is at the service of the People of God.” (cf. ITC § 54)
- LG III §19: The Church is hierarchical; no question about it. But...the bishop must listen to his faithful as LG III § 27 clearly states: “let him (bishop) not refuse to listen to his subjects, whom he cherishes as his true sons and daughters and exhorts to cooperate readily with them.”
- The unique significance of **Lumen Gentium** in our understanding of synodality as the ecclesial “style” appropriate for the Church cannot be underestimated. Without **Lumen Gentium**, I do not think we would be in the midst of a Synod on synodality (cf. ITC §§ 9, 40, 54).

4. Conclusions

- **Lumen gentium** is uniquely significant in our understanding of the *sensus fidelium* of the People of God (cf. LG II § 12ff), that is, a supernatural instinct for the truth, which manifests itself in all the faithful and allows them to spontaneously judge the authenticity of doctrines of our faith and its expression in Christian practices.
- *Sensus Fidelium*
 - LG II §12: “The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One cannot err in matters of belief (cf. 1 Jn. 2:20). They manifest this special attribute by means of the whole peoples’ supernatural discernment in matters of faith, when ‘from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful’ they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.”
 - This *sensus fidelium* is discernment in matters of faith inspired and sustained by the Spirit of truth.
 - In a synodal Church, the *sensus fidelium* becomes the *consensus fidelium* constituting an indispensable criterion of discernment for the life of the Church moving forward together in faith, hope and charity (cf. ITC § 94). It represents a valid and important resource for her evangelizing mission “exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the People of God accepts that which is not just the word of men but truly the Word of God. Through it,

the People of God adheres unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints, penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life” (cf. LG 12 § 12).

- *Consensus fidelium* happens when I listen to YOU, YOU listen to ME, and WE listen to EACH OTHER in a spirit of sincere dialogue and discernment, communion, and cooperation to hear what the Spirit says to the Church. Rev. 2:7: “Every person who has ears should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.”
- *Every person*: bishops listening to their priests and deacons, consecrated women and men, and most especially their lay faithful.
- This renewed understanding of the Church as People of God in this dogmatic constitution on the Church, represents a fundamental theological premise for our understanding of synodality.
- **Lumen Gentium** makes it possible for to see how synodality is broader than collegiality; while synodality implies the participation and involvement of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church, collegiality refers to a specific form which is exercised through the ministry of bishops always *cum et sub Petro* (cf. ITC § 66).
- Therefore, any manifestation of synodality requires the exercise of the collegial ministry of bishops.
- Pope Francis uses the term *synod* – synodality in the broad sense, that is, to translate theological orthodoxy (what we believe) into pastoral orthopraxis (how we put those beliefs into practice).
- **Synodality**, therefore, does not exclusively refer to an ecclesial structure headed by the collegial government of the Church.
- **Synodality** is the visible expression of true communion, a path of ecclesial fellowship, a stance and style of being Church, in which all the baptized participate and contribute to in their own way, and through their own respective vocations and way of life the path that the “Spirit is speaking to the churches.” (Rev. 3:22)
- Finally, adopting the ecclesiology of Vatican II as articulated in the teaching of **Lumen Gentium**, Pope Francis affirms that “this path of synodality is precisely what God expects from the Church of the third millennium.” The pope stresses that synodality “offers us a most adequate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself” and traces

the image of a Church which – “as an inverted pyramid” where the peak is beneath the base – harmonizes all those involved in it: the People of God, the episcopal college and the Successor of Peter (2015 - 50th anniversary of the synod; cf. also ITC § 57).