

B 3.5 How can the institution of the Synod be strengthened so that it is an expression of episcopal collegiality within an all-synodal Church?

With the Motu Proprio *Apostolica sollicitudo* (15 September 1965) St. Paul VI established the Synod as “a permanent Council of Bishops for the universal Church”. He thus accepted the request of the conciliar assembly to ensure the participation of the Bishops in care for the whole Church, specifying that “this Synod [...] like all human institutions, can be improved upon with the passing of time”. With the Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis communio* (15 September 2018) Pope Francis contributed to this hoped-for “perfecting”, transforming the Synod from an event configured as an assembly of Bishops to a listening process unfolding in stages (cf. Art. 4), in which the whole Church and everyone in the Church—People of God, College of Bishops, Bishop of Rome—participate more fully.

- a) The Synod 2021-2024 is clearly demonstrating that the synodal process is the most appropriate context for the integrated exercise of primacy, collegiality and synodality as inalienable elements of a Church in which each subject performs its particular function to the best of its ability and in synergy with others;
- b) It is the responsibility of the Bishop of Rome to convene the Church in Synod, calling an Assembly for the universal Church, as well as to initiate, accompany and conclude the related synodal process. This prerogative belongs to him as the “visible principle and foundation of unity both of the bishops and of the multitude of the faithful” (LG 23);
- c) Since “The individual Bishops, however, are the visible principle and foundation of unity in their particular Churches ... in and from these particular Churches there exists the one unique catholic Church” (LG 23), it is the responsibility of each diocesan Bishop to initiate, accompany and conclude the consultation of the People of God in his Church. In light of the care that Bishops have for the universal Church (cf. LG 23), it is also their responsibility to cooperate in those supra-diocesan bodies that provide for the exercise of synodality and collegiality. In this way, they perform the function of ecclesial discernment proper to the episcopal ministry;
- d) although these bodies do not bring together the entire College of Bishops, the discernment that Pastors carry out through them takes on a collegial character due to the very purpose of the act. Indeed, the Assemblies of Bishops within the synodal process have the task of scrutinizing the results of the consultations carried out in the local Churches, in which the sense of faith of the People of God is manifested. How could a non-collegial act discern what the Spirit is saying to the Church through the consultation of the People of God who “cannot be mistaken in belief” (LG12)?;
- e) The synodal experience to date has demonstrated that an effective exercise of collegiality can be developed in a synodal Church. While discernment is an act that primarily “belongs to those who preside over the Church” (LG 12), it has gained depth and relevance in relation to the issues to be examined thanks to the contribution of the People of God who took part in the Continental Assemblies.

Question for discernment

In light of the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the Church's synodality, episcopal collegiality and Petrine primacy, how should the institution of the Synod be perfected so that it becomes a secure and guaranteed space for the exercise of synodality that ensures the full participation of all—the People of God, the College of Bishops and the Bishop of Rome—while respecting their specific functions? How should we evaluate the experiment of extending participation to a group of non-bishops in the first session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops? (October 2023)

Suggestions for prayer and preparatory reflection

For Synodal Forum on 10-17-23 St. Anthony's Church Hall

- 1) The synodal process introduces into the Church “a dynamism of communion which inspires all ecclesial decisions”¹⁹:
 - a) How can this dynamism become the standard way of proceeding at all levels of Church life?
 - b) How does the principle of authority fit into the synodal process?
 - c) How does the synodal process affect our understanding of authority in the Church at different levels, including that of the Bishop of Rome?
- 2) The first phase of the synodal process implements a movement from the particular to the universal, with the consultation of the People of God in the local Churches and the subsequent acts of discernment first in the Eastern Hierarchical Structures and Episcopal Conferences, and then in the Continental Assemblies:
 - a) how can we ensure that the consultation truly captures the manifestation of the sense of faith of the People of God living in a given Church?
 - b) How can the Eastern Hierarchical Structures, Episcopal Conferences and Continental Assemblies strengthen the “fruitful bond between the *sensus fidei* of the People of God and the magisterial function of the Pastors” (PD 14)?
 - c) How desirable is the presence of qualified members of the People of God in the Assemblies of the Episcopal Conferences as well as in the Continental Assemblies?
 - d) What role might be played by ecclesial bodies permanently composed of more than just Bishops, such as the recently established Ecclesial Conference for the Amazon Region?
- 3) In the Assembly of Bishops convened in Rome, the second phase of the synodal path expresses the universality of the Church that listens to what the Spirit has said to the People of God:
 - a) How does this Episcopal Assembly fit into the synod process?
 - b) How does it achieve continuity with the first phase of the synodal process? Is the presence of qualified witnesses to the first phase of the synodal process sufficient to guarantee it?
 - c) If the Assemblies of Episcopal Conferences and Continental Assemblies carry out acts of discernment, how is this further act of discernment characterized and what value does it have?
- 4) The third phase involves the movement to return the results of the Synod Assembly to the local Churches for implementation: how can we help to fully realize the “mutual interiority” between the universal and local dimensions of the one Church?