

Synodality of the first centuries of the Church and today.

Hermeneutic of continuity or rupture?

The synod (Greek *synodeuein* – to walk together) is a meeting of bishops, presbyters, and lay faithful to address matters related to the operation of the Church. In the first centuries of the Church, there was no clear-cut distinction between synods and council (Latin *concilia*). Oftentimes, the two terms were used interchangeably, and only later councils were divided into universal and local (regional or, later, national). During Christian Antiquity, regional or local councils can be treated as synods.

The institution of a synod/council emerged to let leaders of Christian communities reflect and make decision on matters of faith and morality of life (*disciplina*). In the 2nd century, bishops of Asia Minor convened at a local synod to address the heresy of the Montanists, while at the end of that century bishops of Pontus, Palestine and Syria meet at synods to establish the date of celebrating Passover. Around 220, a local synod in Africa, followed by a decision of Bishop Agrippinuns, pronounces the invalidity of the sacrament of baptism administered by heretics. By the mid-third century, the institution of the synod was widespread and applied at the local level. During the age of Constantine the Great (so-called *Pax Constantiniana*), the role of local synods further increased, and their new structure is defined in patriarchal and metropolitan churches, which will later impact regional synods and universal councils. During the Constantine era, it was the emperor who convened both local synods and universal councils to address many questions. In 314, Constantine the Great convened a synod of bishops of the western part of the empire in Arles to counter Donatism and in 325 he convened the universal council in Nice against Arianism. Synods and councils had a variety of formats, frequency, and impact on the life of the universal Church or local communities.

The functions of councils and synods in antiquity were essentially threefold: dogmatic (defining truths of faith), liturgical (establishing liturgical rules and regulations), and legal (arrangements for church discipline). The tenets of faith were mainly defined at the seven universal councils, which laid down the foundations of Christology, while liturgical or legal issues were often decided at regional synods, which laid the foundations for solutions later adapted to new conditions. The first diocesan synod is believed to have been held in

Rome in 389 during the pontificate of Pope Siricius. During regional or diocesan synods, the bishop promulgated resolutions and presided over trials. The Lateran Council (1215) issued a universal law on synods and from the 13th century onwards the practice of promulgating synodal statutes became widespread. The Council of Trent maintained the injunction to convene diocesan synods annually and a significant development in synodal practice occurred during the pontificates of Pope Gregory XIII and Sixtus V, when synods served to implement the Tridentine Reform.

The Synod of Bishops, a gathering of bishops from some or all regions of the world, cardinals and staff of the Roman Curia, established by Pope Paul VI in 1965, is a separate practice, held on specific dates to advise the pope on matters of strengthening the faith, customs, and ecclesiastical discipline and to make decisions relating to the Church's activities in the world.

From antiquity to the present day, the councils and synods have always been guided primarily by the principle of expressing as fully as possible the truth of Christ's teaching contained in Sacred Scripture and in the living Tradition of the Church, treated in the Catholic Church as a source of teaching in matters of faith and morals. In this sense, in answering the question posed in the title, we are undoubtedly dealing with a hermeneutic of continuity. It has never been the case that a truth of faith, such as the divinity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, was proclaimed in the universal Church and then revoked a few centuries later. If we follow the teaching of the Church in general councils and synods, we see a continuous crescendo towards an ever deeper and fuller clarification of the truths of the faith. We see this very well in the example of, for example, the Council of Nice of 325, the first universal council to defend the truth of the deity of Christ, the Son of God. The Council did not invent anything, but only confirmed the teaching already present in the preaching of the Apostles and recorded in the Gospels, and later confirmed in the writings of the Church Fathers from the first to the third century such as Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and many others. This line of continuity in teaching is perfectly evident and was the basis for defining heretical views and creeds when administering the sacrament of baptism: if one denied the deity of Christ, one automatically placed oneself outside the Church. Unfortunately, many people without theological training and historical knowledge do not understand this process and sometimes some ill-educated journalist writes nonsense to the effect that the Church actually started to believe in the

deity of Christ (to use the same example) only as of 325 and it is unknown what was believed in prior to this time, while most probably for the first three centuries Christ was not seen as God. The Nicene Council of 325 only confirmed and defended the Church's earlier belief in the deity of Christ, the Son of God, and did not create new tenets of faith. Instead, we can and should speak of a hermeneutic of rupture in the case of the language or formulas used to express a particular tenet of faith. Before 325, various terms were used to express the divine nature of Christ: "angel", "spirit", "Wisdom", etc. When in the early fourth century, Arius questioned the deity of Christ, the above terms proved to be vague and insufficient to adequately express the divine nature of Christ. Arius himself explained it obscurely and vaguely, once claiming that Christ was not the Son of God equal in deity to God the Father, another time that he was the Son of God but possessed a different, lower deity or divine nature different from that of God the Father. And although at the Council of Nice some of its participants, such as Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, insisted that no new theological terminology should be introduced into Christology and that they should try to explain everything only on the basis of the language of Scripture and the earlier writings of the Church Fathers, the participants of the Nicene Council boldly broke with the earlier practice by introducing two new terms into the *Nicene Creed*: "homoousios", proclaiming that the Son of God is co-substantial with the Father, and the second phrase "begotten and not made" clearly emphasising that He does not belong to the realm of creatures, but is eternally begotten of God the Father. In this sense, we can speak of a hermeneutic of rupture with the earlier, imprecise theological terminology at the Council of Nice. Still, this rupture did not at all threaten the substance of the faith. On the contrary, it enabled its deeper and fuller explication. The aforementioned Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, on the other hand, turned out to be an opportunist and signed the *Nicene Creed* at the behest of Emperor Constantine, but immediately upon his return to Caesarea, he began to preach views opposed to it.

The teaching on matters of morality was no different. We do not find situations where the Church deemed some conduct sinful at a council or synod, only to find it morally appropriate at another council or synod. This consistency of the Church's magisterium is evident in all areas. There were no cases when theft or murder was deemed a sin in the 2nd century, which was retracted in the 4th c., revoked again in the 6th c., and once more abolished five centuries later. By way of example: the earliest post-apostolic text *Didache*, ultimately edited at the end of the 1st century yet conveying the earlier teaching of the

Apostles, expressly prohibits Christians to perform abortions and we see that the Church has been faithful to this teaching since. Naturally, we do deal, quite often at that, with a changed qualification of an act following a more precise discernment of its moral context. This, again, is ungraspable for people estranged from the Church, who accuse the Church of opportunistic changes in moral principles for their own convenience. A contemporary situation comes to mind, as many people have asked me about it. In the earlier moral teaching of the Church, suicide was defined as a grave sin because it was regarded as a rejection of God's commandment "Thou shalt not kill". For this reason, parish priests refused to celebrate a Catholic funeral for such people, and parish cemeteries set aside a special, "inferior" burial space for them. Today, the Church's practice is different and we celebrate a Catholic funeral for a person who has committed suicide. Why this change? While the qualification of the act itself has not changed and it is still a grave sin, today, thanks to the development of human sciences such as psychiatry and psychology, we know that the sanity of people who decide to take such a drastic step is very much reduced or even non-existent. And we deal with grave sin only when someone is fully aware of what they are doing and when they do it voluntarily. In other words, in most cases a person committing suicide does not take his or her own life out of contempt for God as previously thought, but because of profound psychological distress. If, however, someone were to state that they consciously and voluntarily wanted to commit suicide out of contempt for God, then they would also be committing a grave sin. Thus we see that not only in matters of faith, but also in those of morality, the Church's teaching remains faithful to the hermeneutic of continuity.

Fr. Prof. Dr Habil. Leszek Misiarczyk