

Cardinal Grech on Synodality at the European Synodal Assembly, February 2023, Prague

I'm perplexed by the contradictions in Cardinal Grech's definition of "synodality", which he repeated again in Prague.

1. On the one hand, he – in the wake of Pope Francis himself – has been emphasising that the church will have to be a church that listens to all its members, and that "The synodal process is entirely founded on the principle of [mutual] listening" (Card. Grech, speech "Continental Stage: A New Stage in the Synodal Process", 06/02/2023, available [here](#)).

2. On the other hand, both him and the Pope have defended the current practice, which is that at every level – diocesan, national, or international – synods can only be called when the bishops or the Pope say so and, what is more, that it is they alone who can set the agenda for discussion and determine its limits.

Such is the essentially clerical nature of Catholic synods according to the canon law currently in force. Pope Francis inherited this clericalist model from his predecessors. But in 2018 he had the opportunity to disavow it when he promulgated a much-awaited reform of the canon law concerning precisely the procedure to be adopted by synods ([Apostolic constitution *Episcopalis communio*](#)).

And yet, while he softened the exclusively clerical model of synods by mandating the consultation of the laity, he did re-endorse its clericalist essence whereby only bishops and Pope can call a synod, control its agenda, and approve (or not) its decisions.

But in light of all the recent talk about "synodality" I was baffled to hear Card Grech (in his speech in Prague linked above) first quoting approvingly Art. 5 of *Episcopalis communio* – which restricts to the Pope alone both the power both to call a synod and to determine and delimit its agenda; then reiterating the same idea by insisting that "There is no consultation unless the bishop summons the People of God in his care" ("non si dà consultazione se il Vescovo non convoca il Popolo di Dio a lui affidato"); and finally driving the point home by contending that that the "long list" of questions emerged from the worldwide consultation of Catholics and summarised in the DCS "does not and cannot constitute the agenda of the synod", because the latter had been already determined by the Pope, namely "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission". As the cherry on the cake, he immediately added: "This is in no way an imposition which constraints freedom of speech, but an act of respect towards the Church and those who

devoted themselves to deepen that theme”. It’s yet another confirmation that whatever emerges from the synodal consultation can be ignored if bishops or the Pope regard it as going beyond the agenda they alone can set. Insisting that doing so does not constraint freedom of speech will sound like small consolation to most Catholics: I suspect “You are free to speak, and we’re free to ignore you” is not the winning message some may think it is.¹

In fact, only last month Pope Francis defended yet again the view that only the bishops or the Pope can call a synod and set its agenda, by approving a Vatican letter firmly rebuking the crucial proposal by the German “Synodal Way”: namely, to establish a permanent and representative “synodal council” over the Catholic Church in Germany.

3. Thirdly – and in line with their idea that “mutual listening” must only occur within the boundaries set by the bishops and Pope alone – both Cardinal Grech and Pope Francis have also made it clear that they do not want the synod to make recommendations or take decisions on doctrinal issues (see Card. Grech’s quote above about the “long list” of issues emerged in the DCS), and that in any case the ultimate decision-makers will be the bishops.

So despite Cardinal Grech’ encouraging definition of synodality as “mutual listening” between bishops and laity, he’s been adamant that at the end of the day it is the bishops alone who will evaluate whether and how to take into account the voice of the laity.

In summary: according to Cardinal Grech, “synodality” means the laity can only listen to and debate *when* and *what* the Pope or bishops allow them to, and that in any case the laity can have no vote in the final decision-making process, which is still reserved to the bishops.

That’s still a firmly, unapologetically clericalist “synodal” process, and I fail to see how they plan to overcome it, and establish a truly synodal church of mutual listening. Action speak louder than words: if synodality is not to remain a fuzzy feel-good catchword, canon law must be amended to ensure that synodal bodies include representative laypeople and be deliberative, not merely consultative.

¹ The full passage in Italian: “Va detto che le sintesi hanno fornito un lungo elenco di temi emerso dalle consultazioni e registrato con puntualità dalle Conferenze episcopali. Quell’elenco non costituisce l’agenda del Sinodo, come abbiamo ribadito con il card. Hollerich nella recente lettera a tutti i Vescovi: non lo può, non solo per il numero dei temi, impossibile da assumere e sottoporre a un serio discernimento, ma perché il tema del Sinodo già esiste: «Per una Chiesa sinodale: comunione, partecipazione, missione». Non si tratta in alcun modo di una imposizione che riduce la libertà di parola, ma di un atto di rispetto nei confronti della Chiesa e di quanti si sono dedicati ad approfondire il tema.”

In any case, the bottom line is that despite Card. Grech insisting that the “long list” of issues summarised by the DCS will not set the agenda of the October synod of bishops in Rome, I very much suspect it will. To do otherwise would reveal “synodality” to be a mere PR exercise, and I suspect most bishops are aware of that.