



Papal Primacy and Episcopal Collegiality in the *Vota* for Vatican II

MAREK GILSKI 

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, marek.gilski@upjp2.edu.pl

Abstract: In this paper, we examine the relationship between papal primacy and episcopal collegiality by analyzing the *vota* submitted for the Second Vatican Council. We highlight the growing criticism of the excessive centralization of power in the person of the pope and the Roman Curia, as well as the calls for a restoration of the balance between the primacy and effective responsibility of bishops. The analysis comprises three main areas: (1) the value of papal primacy, (2) proposals for reforming its mode of exercise, and (3) suggestions for strengthening collegial structures—patriarchs, cardinals, and episcopal conferences—in the governance of the Church. Theological, linguistic, and hermeneutical methods have been used, allowing for a thorough reading and interpretation of the multifaceted source material found in the *Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando, Antepreparatoria 1*. We have concluded that the calls for collegiality were not a late invention of Vatican II, but had already matured within the episcopate, both in the East and West. Moreover, the reform of papal primacy and the strengthening of collegiality clearly had an ecumenical dimension and were perceived as conditions for closer relationships among the Churches.

Keywords: Second Vatican Council, papal primacy, episcopal collegiality, decentralization, *vota*

Among the many voices sent to the Vatican in the antepreparatory phase of the Council, one text in particular contained a bold diagnosis of the crisis surrounding the exercise of papal primacy:

The main cause of this evil, it seems to us, is the tendency of most Latin theologians and canonists to concentrate all the power entrusted by Christ to His Church in the single person of the Supreme Pontiff, to make him the source of all power, and consequently to grant disproportionately centralized and practically sovereign powers to the Roman Curia, which acts in his name. From this perspective, they find it difficult to see the apostolic power of Patriarchs and Bishops anything other than a pure and simple delegation of the supreme power of the Pope, limited and revoked at will. In this way, the Pope, the Father of Christians, has become as a Christian currently dissident from his communion, a distorted figure, accused by non-Catholics of insatiable pride and human ambition, often antipathetic, regardless of the charm of his person, his human qualities, and his eminent holiness. (*CVE* Pars IV, 454)¹

¹ In the original: “*La principale cause du mal est, nous semble-t-il, la tendance de la plupart des théologiens et canonistes latins à concentrer toute l’autorité confiée par le Christ à son Eglise dans la seule personne du Souverain Pontife, à faire de lui la source de tout pouvoir et, par voie de conséquence, à donner des pouvoirs démesurément centralisateurs et pratiquement souverains à la Curie Romaine qui agit en son*”

This voice was signed and sent for the Second Vatican Council by the Greek-Melkite Catholic Patriarch of Antioch, Maximos IV Saigh, together with nineteen other bishops of this rite. They noted the disappearance of—what they called—*all power in the Church*. Therefore, the first step was to continue the work of the First Vatican Council, which had clarified the pope's powers but, due to its adjournment, could no longer define the nature and powers of the episcopate. They emphasized that the hierarchy established by Jesus was based on the Twelve, with the primacy of Peter. Therefore, as they wrote, Peter's power should be balanced (*équilibré*) by that of the Twelve (*CVE Pars IV, 454*). The joint statement of the Greek Melkite bishops was evidence of a problematic approach to collegiality, and in fact a confirmation of its absence in many areas in the Catholic Church in the era before the Second Vatican Council.

The fragment quoted above was not an isolated position, as this topic appeared in many pre-conciliar *vota*. Although the relationship between papal primacy and episcopal collegiality in the context of Vatican II has been widely studied, this issue has not yet been examined based on the source material presented here.² This paper aims to fill this gap.

The goal of the paper is to present, systematize, and analyze the complex and multifaceted *vota* from various areas of the Catholic Church submitted as proposals for conciliar topics. Therefore, the main source is the *Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando, Antepreparatoria 1*.

Considering the nature of the source material and the specificity of the issue under analysis, several research methods will be employed. Besides theological analysis, the work on the *vota* will require the use of linguistic and hermeneutical methods in the process of their interpretation.

nom. Sous cette perspective, il leur est difficile de voir dans le pouvoir apostolique des Patriarches et des Evêques autre chose qu'une délégation pure et simple de l'autorité suprême du Pape, limitable et révocable à volonté. De la sorte le Pape, le Père des chrétiens, est devenu, en chrétienté actuellement dissidente de sa communion, un personnage défiguré, accusé par les non-catholiques d'orgueil insatiable et d'ambition humaine, souvent antipathique, quoi qu'il en soit du charme de sa personne, de ses qualités humaines et de sa sainteté éminente." Accessed February 10, 2026. <https://archive.org/details/ADAI.4/page/n449/mode/2up>.

² Although Massimo Faggioli (2005) has addressed the *vota* most extensively, he has focused on the nature of the episcopal ministry, and so he has discussed the relationships to the primacy marginally. The *vota* have also been examined in several recent Polish conciliar commentaries, which, however, concern only selected documents; the *vota* have been analyzed as regards their content, without systematizing the question of the primacy and collegiality. In the context of this paper, most references can be found in commentaries on: *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (Gilski, Wąsek, and Blaza 2025) and *Unitatis reintegratio* (Wąsek, Gilski, and Kałużny 2024). In other studies, regarding this question, one can hardly find reflections on the *vota*; see Rahner and Ratzinger 1962; Kasper 1962, 47–85; Afanasiev 1965, 7–15; Ratzinger 1965; Ryan 1966, 208–41; Sullivan 1983; Buckley 1998; Swaine 1998; Sullivan 2002, 472–93; Krzywda 2008; DeClue 2008, 642–70; Okafor 2013; Wąsek 2014; Marmion 2017, 25–48; Pallath 2024, 36–75; Laksito 2025, 395–411.

The structure of the paper reflects the issues that have most frequently emerged in the research material. The first question will concern the value of papal primacy, then proposals of changes in the way it was to be exercised, and finally, specific suggestions for increasing the role of bishops in the government of the Church.

1. Value of Papal Primacy

In the *vota* for the Second Vatican Council, we find no statements questioning the truth about the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. If there were critical voices, they concerned the forms of exercising his primacy. Those who most sharply criticized the limitation of the powers of bishops and patriarchs in favor of the power of the pope and the Roman Curia also expressed the most beautiful voices regarding the meaning and need for papal primacy itself.

The strongest voice in favor of papal primacy came from the Melkite Greek Church. Patriarch Maximos IV, along with nineteen other bishops, wrote:

The primacy of Peter, the infallible primacy, is a great grace, a charism placed by God in His Church, not for the benefit of a few nor solely for Catholics, but for all Christians: Orthodox and Protestants included. All these Christians *have the right* to benefit from this charism. However, there are obstacles that prevent them from seeing and accessing it, obstacles placed either by themselves or by Catholics. We must, as far as we are concerned, begin by removing the obstacles that originate within ourselves, without waiting for others to make the first move. (*CVE* Pars IV, 456)³

It was not just the Melkite bishops who appreciated the treasure of the papacy, and indeed, it was not just the Catholic Church. Bishop Thomas Leo Parker of Northampton, England, wrote that the value of papal primacy was discernible among some Anglican clergy, who openly professed that the Catholic Church was the one true Church of Christ, and that the Bishop of Rome enjoyed the charism of infallibility. These clerics, though few in number, did not join the Catholic Church simply because they wanted to promote ecumenism within their Church (*CVE* Pars I, 27–28). However, another English hierarch, Cardinal William Godfrey, noted that there were

³ In the original: “La primauté de Pierre, la primauté infallible, est une grande grâce, un charisme placé par Dieu dans son Eglise non pour l’avantage de quelques-uns ni des seuls Catholiques, mais de tous les Chrétiens: Orthodoxes et Protestants compris. Tous ces Chrétiens *ont le droit de profiter de ce charisme*. Or, il y a des obstacles qui les empêchent de le voir et d’arriver à lui, obstacles placés soit par eux-mêmes soit par nous autres Catholiques. Il faut que, en qui nous concerne, nous commençons par enlever les obstacles provenant de nous, sans attendre que les autres commencent.” Accessed February 10, 2026. <https://archive.org/details/ADAII.4/page/n451/mode/2up>.

significant differences of opinion on this issue within the Anglican Church itself; there was no clear position regarding papal primacy (*CVE* Pars I, 41–42).

The importance of the primacy in the ecumenical debate was highlighted by the conference of German bishops meeting in Fulda. They stated that there was no other doctrine that had been the subject of so many debates, symposia, and monographs in Protestant circles than issues in the field of ecclesiology, including the unity of the Church, apostolic succession, and the primacy of the pope (*CVE* Pars I, 738). Moreover, the bishops observed that biblical studies had led many of the most eminent Protestant theologians to find traces and “primitive elements” of the Catholic Church (*vestigia et “primitiva elementa” Ecclesiae catholicae*) in Holy Scripture as well the beginnings of her hierarchical structure, the apostolic succession of bishops, and even the primacy of Saint Peter. They referred to two Lutheran ministers (Richard Baumann and Maximilian Lackmann), who suffered serious consequences in their Churches for confessing the primacy (*ministri lutherani etiam hanc successionem accipientes*). They were suspended from office, because by confessing the primacy of the Roman Pontiff (*per confessionem Primatus Romani Pontificis*), they openly opposed the symbols of the Reformed communities, formulated in the 16th century. These ministers opposed their suspension, affirming that only Scripture, which was the supreme norm of the Lutheran faith, had led them to confess the Primacy of the Roman Pontiff (*se sola scriptura, quae sit suprema lutheranorum norma credendi, ad confessionem Primatus Romani Pontificis pervenisse*), and since Scripture was the only regulating norm, and the symbols were only norms regulated by Scripture, they merely corrected the work of the Reformers (*CVE* Pars I, 746).⁴

In addition, the German Episcopal Conference highlighted the contribution of the First Vatican Council to this issue, which, by defining the primacy and infallibility of the Bishop of Rome, initiated the development of the Constitution on the Church of Christ (*CVE* Pars I, 746).

Many voices were raised about the Council’s addressing the issue of papal primacy and its role in building the unity of the Church, e.g., Domenico Caloyera (*CVE* Pars II, 788–89),⁵ Ruggero Raffaele Cazzanelli (*CVE* Pars III, 845), Angelus Delahunt (*CVE* Pars VIII, 308), defining (e.g., Joseph Emmanuel Descuffi) the pope as the center of Unity (*centrum Unitatis*) (*CVE* Pars IV, 632). At the same time, it was emphasized (Clemente Micara) that many circles were ignorant of the true doctrine of the Church on the primacy (*CVE* Pars III, 718).

⁴ Some theologians, and even moderators of Lutheran communities, recognized the primacy of the Apostle Peter, furthermore arguing that the succession of the primacy of the Roman Pontiff was not in itself impossible (*successionem primatus in Romano Pontifice per se non esse impossibilem*), but simply not confirmed by Holy Scripture.

⁵ Some bishop from the European part of Turkey also suggested addressing the issue of the relationship between the infallibility of councils and the infallibility of the pope, as well as the nature of the fullness of the supreme power of the pope.

As we can see, several years before the Second Vatican Council, the issue of papal primacy was present in discussions held both within and outside the Catholic Church. Numerous voices—Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox—recognized the value of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. Therefore, suggestions arose to help other Churches accept the primacy by providing the greatest concessions in terms of customs and traditions, as well as the endless maternal tenderness bestowed by the Church (*maternamque sine fine teneritatem ab Ecclesia praebendas*) (CVE Pars III, 114).

In summary, it is worth noting once again that although critical remarks how the primacy was to be exercised were included in the *vota* for the Second Vatican Council, the doctrine of the existence and necessity of the primacy remained widely accepted. Both Catholic hierarchs and representatives of the Orthodox and Protestant traditions saw papal primacy as a significant element of Christian unity. Many of them emphasized that papal primacy, properly understood and based on the Gospel and the priority of love, could become not an obstacle but a help in ecumenical dialogue. Therefore, even before the Council, there was a growing conviction that a renewed, more collegial and pastoral, understanding of the primacy would be crucial for the future shape of the Church.

How should papal primacy be reformed? In the next section, we will examine some selected changes in this respect.

2. Changes Concerning the Way the Primacy Was to Be Exercised

From the Eastern Churches—though not exclusively—there was particularly much criticism directed at the devaluation of the role of patriarchs and the patriarchal structure. Numerous speakers cited examples from the early centuries of Christianity as well as the current functioning of the patriarchates in the Churches that were not in communion with Rome. The difficulty was perceived as the excessive emphasis on the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, which had led to the removal or limitation of the ancient rights and privileges of the Eastern Churches.

This was pointed out by Isidore Borecky, emphasizing that similar voices were coming from other Churches. The Orthodox—he continued—were ready to recognize the primacy of the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome over the entire Church, but not in the extended form (*non in hac extensione*) that was adopted in the West, but rather in accordance with the norm, idea, and practice (*sed potius ad normam, ideam et praxim*), in force during the first seven ecumenical councils held in the East (CVE Pars VI, 118).

The Armenian Patriarch Gregory Peter XV Agagianian drew attention to the willingness of the Orthodox to accept papal primacy, the pope being understood

as *primus inter pares* among the patriarchs (CVE Pars IV, 398). The aforementioned Archbishop Descuffi of Smyrna, referring to his meetings with other denominations, proposed such a functioning of the Church after the unification of all Christians, in which the pope would have the primacy of jurisdiction and honor (*cum primatu iurisdictionis et honoris*), but the competences and methods of election and exercise of power by the patriarchs would also be described in detail (CVE Pars IV, 632–33).⁶

The voices concerning the exercise of the primacy focused, among other things, on describing the relationships between the pope and the Church. Placing the pope above and in isolation from the Church was met with criticism. Presenting the Bishop of Rome at the center of the Church, yet in close connection with the entire Church, was therefore advocated by numerous Council Fathers. It is worth citing a few of the most representative examples.

Archbishop Jean-Julien Weber of Strasbourg emphasized the central role of popes as Bishops of Rome in the Church: they sit in the middle of the Church (*in medio Ecclesiae sedent*) as the center of the entire Christian world (*ut centrum totius orbis christiani*). However, he postulated a complementary approach to papal primacy, which would take into account both the writings of the Fathers (e.g., Ignatius of Antioch, Cyprian, Leo the Great) and the teaching of the First Vatican Council. As stated by Weber, papal primacy should not be separated from the Church, because the disconnection of the pope entirely from the flock was inconceivable (*disiunctio Papae et gregis prorsus excogitari nequit*). Thus, he proposed to highlight the intimate union (*intima unio*) of the Holy See with the entire Church (CVE Pars I, 416).

A critical voice also came from the German episcopate assessing the forms of exercising the primacy by the Bishop of Rome. The separated brethren in the East—as Lorenz Jäger emphasized—were scandalized by this concept of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome and his infallibility with respect to the Church; this primacy, as it were, was cutting him off and isolating him from the Church (*ab Ecclesia quasi prae-scindente et isolato*) (CVE Pars I, 641). Consequently, the archbishop of Paderborn called for a more thorough explanation of the understanding of not only the primacy but also the episcopacy in the Catholic Church, emphasizing in particular the unifying role of the primacy. Such a presentation would allow for a better understanding of its value and might help attract dissenters to the fold of Christ. In his opinion, presenting the primacy required drawing on the traditions of both the East and West (CVE Pars I, 645–46).

Finally, it should be noted that the pre-conciliar *vota* clearly revealed a desire to renew the way the primacy was to be exercised so that it would better correspond to both the ancient tradition of the Church and the sensibilities of other Christian communities. Critical voices—particularly from the Eastern hierarchs—did not seek

⁶ The issue of the relationship between papal primacy and the powers of the patriarchs was also raised by Nicholas Thomas Elko (CVE Pars VI, 473).

to weaken the primacy itself, but to restore the proper balance between the primacy and the patriarchal structure, and to conceptualize the role of the pope in a way that would more evidently demonstrate his unity with the entire Church rather than his isolated position. It was pointed out that the power of the Bishop of Rome should be understood in light of the Church's original practice and read in parallel with the traditions of the East and West, which would also foster ecumenical dialogue.

These statements allow us to see a broader intuition: that the renewal of papal primacy should go hand in hand with a deeper appreciation of the role of bishops in the life and mission of the Church. Therefore, the next natural step in the reflections of the Council Fathers—and thus of my own—became the postulates for strengthening the collegial responsibility of bishops and their greater participation in governing the universal Church.

3. Proposals to Increase the Bishops' Role in Church Government

It is impossible—due to their enormous scale—to recall all the voices that demanded an increase in the powers of individual bishops so that they would not have to constantly turn to Rome with requests for dispensations.⁷ At this point, we will only mention these *vota* that postulated an increase in the competences of various groups of bishops, i.e., areas where they act as a college. We will look at the role of the college in the governance of the Church.

The very issue of increasing the powers of the college of bishops in the administration of the ecclesial community and the degree of their responsibility for decisions was presented from various perspectives. The *vota* included historical analyses of the pope-bishop relationships, proposals for rethinking the nature of episcopal collegiality, and specific suggestions for bishops' greater involvement in church government. The Faculty of Theology of the Lateran University provided the most comprehensive historical perspective, presenting in Italian a characterization of the pope-bishop relationships from the 4th–8th centuries (*SVU Pars I.1*, 231–37).

Gabriel-Marie Garrone from France drew attention to the need for the Council to address the issue of unity, seen from both the perspective of the function of the Bishop of Rome and the college of bishops led by the pope (*CVE Pars I*, 428–29).

Regarding the understanding of the relationships between the pope and bishops, the pope and patriarchs, and the pope and episcopal conferences, the Faculty of Canon Law of the Pontifical Gregorian University sent an important proposal that

⁷ For example, it is worth referring to Archbishop Weber, who in this context emphasized that the bishop was the head (*caput*) of the diocese (*CVE Pars I*, 416). There are many more of this type of *vota* submitted from Europe (*CVE Pars I*, 88, 114–15, 215, 246–47, 250–251).

decisions made at the central level should complement what was lacking in local procedures. The need for greater flexibility in the management of church structures was also suggested. The faculty argued that the pope's power should be balanced by the powers of bishops in their dioceses. To achieve this goal, the faculty called for not only the reform of the territorial institutions but also the creation of new administrative units of a personal nature. The idea was to take into account the changing world and the challenges facing the Church (*SVU Pars I.1*, 37).

There were also a few voices seeking to emphasize the role of the council, i.e., the bishops gathered under the pope's leadership. Certain procedural changes were proposed to accommodate ecumenical initiatives. Hence, suggestions were made that the conciliar documents should be issued by the council itself and only approved by the pope (*CVE Pars I*, 412) or that the conciliar acts should be issued not only in Latin but also in Greek (*CVE Pars II*, 730–731).

The written submissions explicitly included three collegial bodies, on which we are now going to focus.

3.1. College of Patriarchs

The issue of patriarchs, their status in the Church, as well as their role, dignity, and power appeared repeatedly in the *vota* for Vatican II. Regarding the governance of the Church, the proposals included increasing patriarchs' powers and autonomy within the patriarchates, participating in the election of the pope, and recognizing their dignity as at least equal to that of cardinals, but often higher. Generally, the idea was to return to the practices of the first millennium, although sometimes with a broader scope. Many of the opinions contained extensive analyses, but there were also undeveloped ideas, suggesting treating patriarchs as counselors to the pope.

Bishop Joseph-Marie-Jean-Baptiste Chappe, France, advocated for granting patriarchs real, not merely honorary, power. He wanted the patriarchs to have the actual ability to issue precepts and even establish laws to be followed throughout the region under their jurisdiction, rather than only issuing exhortations or admonitions (*CVE Pars I*, 297–98).

John George Chedid, Vicar of the Maronite Patriarch of Antioch, noted that the Eastern patriarchs perceived themselves as alien to the government of the whole Church (*alienos a regimine totius Ecclesiae*). In this respect, there was some degradation (*aliquam degradationem*) of the roles they had played in the early Church. Therefore, he postulated that they should be restored to their former status, and that in the governance of the universal Church, they would be allowed to participate to a degree befitting a truly patriarchal dignity (*in regimine Ecclesiae universalis partem, quae dignitati vere patriarchali convenit, realiter habeant*). Chedid saw the appointment of all patriarchs of the Eastern Churches as cardinals as the best solution to the problem (*optima problematis solutio*), which would promote the increase in the

patriarchs' participation in church government.⁸ They would participate in the election of the pope and in the governance of the universal Church (*in Ecclesia universalis regimine*). The Maronite Bishop did not specify the scope of the patriarchs' powers in the Church (*CVE* Pars IV, 416–17).

The question of the patriarchs' participation in church government was also addressed by the Faculty of Canon Law of the University of Paris. In its *vota*, the faculty emphasized that the patriarchs' power consisted in exercising direct and ordinary rule over their Churches as well as over the faithful of their rite who were outside the patriarchate. Their role was to serve as advisors to the pope. Thus, the faculty focused on the patriarchs' real power in the Church (*SVU* Pars II, 514–15). In turn, the University of Beirut proposed granting the patriarchs broader power not only over their own rite, but over all the bishops and faithful living in the territory of the patriarchate (*SVU* Pars II, 42–44).

The Pontifical Oriental Institute supported the recognition of the dignity, power, and privileges of the Eastern patriarchs. The patriarch, as Head and Father (*Caput et Pater*) of the particular Church, should be duly honored, including by the Holy See. A return to ancient tradition regarding the place, role, and function of patriarchs was advocated (*SVU* Pars I.1, 149–50).

Bishop Henri-René-Adrien Brault, France, suggested establishing new patriarchates. He proposed that they should be established in areas converted to the Christian faith, which were not “the West” (*CVE* Pars I, 395).

The *vota* lacked any proposals to create a kind of *collegium* from among the patriarchs. Although the phrases “college of patriarchs” or “collegial power of patriarchs” did not appear, some of the requests seemed to suggest such an understanding of the patriarchs' role in the Church. However, the patriarchs' participation in the process of governing the Church was explicitly mentioned.

3.2. College of Cardinals

Regarding the issue of cardinals, there were voices calling for all nations and rites to have their own cardinals (*CVE* Pars I, 357; Pars II, 538).⁹ Some even proposed that there should be one cardinal for every five million Catholics (the number of cardinals in individual countries would then depend on the number of the faithful in that country) (*CVE* Pars VII, 351). The *vota* regarding equating patriarchs with cardinals

⁸ Requests to appoint Eastern patriarchs as cardinals or to give them equal rights with cardinals repeatedly appeared in the *vota* (*CVE* Pars II, 445; Pars IV, 130, 207, 212, 215; Pars VI, 106; Pars VIII, 67; Pars I.1, 149–50; Pars II, 44–45; Wąsek, Gilski, and Kałużny 2024, 97, 101, 136). The University of Paris proposed the creation of a new group of cardinals, namely cardinal-patriarchs (*SVU* Pars II, 514–15; Gilski, Wąsek, and Blaza 2025, 157). There were also voices proposing to leave a special group of patriarchs without appointing them cardinals, but granting them the power to, e.g., elect the pope (*CVE* Pars IV, 367–68; Gilski, and Wąsek, and Blaza 2025, 95, 101, 104–5, 109; Wąsek, Gilski, and Kałużny 2024, 97).

⁹ Suggestions to increase the number of cardinals (*CVE* Pars II, 550, 730–731).

or granting them the dignity of cardinals were votes for their greater participation in the life of the Church, for their advisory role toward the pope, and also for their active participation in church government.

On the question of church government, a significant voice was raised from the French community, its author being Joseph-Marie-Eugène Martin. He suggested that the cardinals should meet not only during conclaves, but regularly, with greater frequency. They would exchange and share observations and inform one another about the situation of the Churches in various parts of the world. The purpose of these meetings would be to assist the Universal Pastor in governing the Church more effectively (*efficacius Universalem Pastorem in Ecclesia regenda adiuvent*) (CVE Pars I, 386).¹⁰

Ivan Bučko, Apostolic Visitor for Ukrainian Catholics in Western Europe, noted the assistance provided to the pope by the cardinals in fulfilling his duties. He believed this assistance would be more effective if they represented all Catholic nations (CVE Pars II, 730–731).

3.3. Regional Bishops' Conferences

The institution of episcopal conferences existed before the Second Vatican Council. However, it was not universal. The *vota* for Vatican II focused primarily on establishing broader collegial structures (national, regional, continental) and granting them real power in the process of governing the Church.

Justifying the need to increase the competences of regional bishops' conferences, Bishop Brault, France, highlighted the regional differences existing within the Church. Without understanding the specifics of a region, it was impossible to find appropriate solutions to the emerging local problems. Therefore, a true mandate to govern (*accepto regendi mandato*) should be granted to the Episcopal College proper to each region (*Episcopale vero collegium unicuique regioni proprium*), united around the primate or patriarch (CVE Pars I, 394).

Bishop Paulus Rusch, Austria, called for increasing the autonomy of episcopal conferences (*si conferentiae episcopales sui iuris essent*). The need to send the agenda of the episcopal conference to the Secretariat of State in advance made it difficult to introduce new issues. Greater independence would foster greater accountability (CVE Pars I, 88).

The Belgian circles sent a request to make regional and national conferences of Ordinaries (*conferentiae Ordinariorum in variis regionibus et nationibus*) more effective. This would allow for more in-depth examinations of problems, better coordination between bishops, and the development of more uniform solutions for a given region (CVE Pars I, 150).

¹⁰ A similar voice in SVU Pars II, 579.

The importance of local bodies with real competences to govern the Church in individual countries was highlighted by Bishop Jacques-Eugène-Louis Ménéger, Secretary General for Catholic Action in France. Without them, unity could not be achieved, neither in action nor in defining the purpose and direction of action. Therefore, it was necessary for one body—whether personal (the primate) or collegial—to have limited, yet precisely defined, power to make laws (*potestate leges edendi, limitata quidem, sed presse definita*). Referring to the example of the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) and the Philippine Episcopal Conference, Bishop Ménéger asked whether these experiences should not be used to ensure the coordination of the Church's activities within larger regions (*CVE* Pars I, 476).

The French bishops also signaled the dangers associated not only with convening synods (provincial or plenary), but also with the increasingly frequent (regional or national) assemblies of bishops. While necessary, these gatherings should be subject to certain canonical rules. It happened that not only did the equality and independence of bishops decline, and that diocesan bishops relied too much on these assemblies without demonstrating their own initiatives, but also that the laity perceived these collegial bodies as having real jurisdiction, in the space stretched between the universal Church and the particular ones. Therefore, it was desirable—Jean-Édouard-Lucien Rupp postulated—that these assemblies should be presided over by apostolic envoys or delegates, and that they would not deal with moral, dogmatic, and liturgical matters, but rather with practical issues that required resolution (*CVE* Pars I, 482).

All in all, we see that the reflections contained in the *vota* demonstrated a clear desire for bishops to be more deeply involved in the governance of the universal Church. The proposed solutions—both historical and legal-ecclesiological—aimed at restoring the balance between papal primacy and bishops' real responsibility within their structures. Thus, there were many calls for the revitalization of the old collegial forms, especially the role of patriarchs and cardinals, who were assigned advisory and co-management functions in the Church, as well as greater autonomy in making decisions concerning their particular Churches.

In this context, a particularly significant conclusion was the growing awareness of the need to establish, formally recognize, and strengthen regional episcopal conferences as permanent bodies in which bishops—in their shared responsibility—could exercise their ministry of governance in a manner more relevant to the realities of the contemporary world. In the *vota*, it was emphasized that these structures should have not only advisory roles but also specific executive powers, especially in pastoral, administrative, and liturgical matters. It was believed that episcopal conferences could play a key role in the decentralization of the Church, facilitating decision-making closer to the local communities and reducing the need to delegate every issue to Rome.

Ultimately, these submissions allowed for one fundamental conclusion: if the Church was to remain faithful to her tradition and at the same time respond to the challenges of modernity, she must recapture the dynamics of collegiality, in which the pope acts in unity and communion with the bishops, and the bishops—within structures such as patriarchates, the college of cardinals and episcopal conferences—participate actually, and not only declaratively, in the governance of the universal Church.

Conclusions

Our analysis of the *vota* concerning the relationship between papal primacy and episcopal collegiality has revealed a fundamental truth: no one questioned the very existence or necessity of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. Criticism, though sometimes very sharp, concerned only the way in which it was to be exercised and the consequences of the excessive centralization of power in the pope and the Roman Curia. The written submissions ranging from Patriarch Maximos IV and the Greek Melkite bishops to the reflections of the German and English bishops unanimously indicated that the time had come to balance—reinterpret—the prerogatives of Peter with the real responsibility of the Twelve, i.e., the college of bishops.

The source material examined has shown that the issue of collegiality was not an *ad hoc* “invention” of the Second Vatican Council or the fruit of purely theoretical debates among theologians, but had been maturing within the episcopate itself long before the opening of the Council. Bishops from both the East and West, diocesan hierarchs, and university representatives unanimously pointed to the need to return to the practices of the first millennium, in which the patriarch, the synod of bishops, and regional structures participated effectively in church government. In this light, the subsequent teaching of *Lumen gentium* on the college of bishops, the legal establishment of episcopal conferences, and the establishment of the Synod of Bishops appear as a response to the specific requests and tensions revealed in the pre-conciliar *vota*.

The ecumenical dimension was significant in the material under analysis. Many authors of the *vota* noted that the way of exercising the primacy was one of the key “flashpoints” in relationships between the Catholics and Orthodox Christianity as well as the communities stemming from the Reformation, but at the same time, this area could lead to a kind of rapprochement. The *vota* of the Eastern bishops, indicating their readiness to accept the primacy of the pope understood as a service of *primus inter pares* and rooted in the practice of the early councils, demonstrated that reforming papal primacy and strengthening episcopal collegiality were not merely an internal organizational matter of the Catholic Church but had direct significance for ecumenical dialogue.

Finally, the examination of the *vota* has exposed a growing awareness of the need for permanent structures in which bishops could exercise their responsibilities in a collegial manner: from clear requests regarding the role of patriarchs, through reflection on the function of the college of cardinals, to numerous suggestions aimed at establishing and strengthening episcopal conferences at the regional and national level. From a historical perspective, it can be stated that the Second Vatican Council—and the subsequent post-conciliar legislation—did not introduce radically new solutions, but rather institutionalized and developed the intuitions already present in the awareness of the episcopate at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s. Importantly, voices demanding the creation of local, single-person centers of governance were very rare (the exception were suggestions for establishing new patriarchates¹¹). We have rather observed a tendency to establish advisory and administrative bodies.

The results presented in this paper seem not to signify the end of the discussion on the relationship between papal primacy and episcopal collegiality, but rather point to its important stage: they reveal the historical roots of our contemporary thinking about this issue and indicate that the future of the Church—including her ecumenical dimension—depends largely on whether it will be possible to permanently combine unity around the Successor of Peter with the actual, and not merely declarative, participation of bishops in governing the universal Church. The Council did not fully accomplish his task, and so it still appears as a perspective.

Translated by Maria Kantor

FUNDING

This paper is co-financed from the state budget under the Minister of Science and Higher Education programme called “Science for Society II,” project no. NdS-II/SN/0050/2023/01, grant amount 512 600.00 PLN, total project value 512 600.00 PLN (Poland).

Bibliography

- Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando*. 1960. Antepreparatoria 1. Vol. 2: *Consilia et vota Episcoporum ac Praelatorum*. Pars I: *Europa*. Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis. (= CVE Pars I).
- Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando*. 1960. Antepreparatoria 1. Vol. 2: *Consilia et vota Episcoporum ac Praelatorum*. Pars II: *Europa*. Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis. (= CVE Pars II).

¹¹ A study of this issue in the perspective of the conciliar debate can be found in Wąsek and Gilski 2023, 109–27.

- Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando*. 1960. Antepreparatoria 1. Vol. 2: *Consilia et vota Episcoporum ac Praelatorum*. Pars III: *Italia*. Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis. (= CVE Pars III).
- Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando*. 1960. Antepreparatoria 1. Vol. 2: *Consilia et vota Episcoporum ac Praelatorum*. Pars IV: *Asia*. Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis. (= CVE Pars IV).
- Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando*. 1960. Antepreparatoria 1. Vol. 2: *Consilia et vota Episcoporum ac Praelatorum*. Pars VI: *America Septemtrionalis et Centralis*. Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis. (= CVE Pars VI).
- Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando*. 1961. Antepreparatoria 1. Vol. 2: *Consilia et vota Episcoporum ac Praelatorum*. Pars VII: *America Meridionalis – Oceania*. Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis. (= CVE Pars VII).
- Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando*. 1961. Antepreparatoria 1. Vol. 2: *Consilia et vota Episcoporum ac Praelatorum*. Pars VIII: *Superiores Generales religiosorum*. Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis. (= CVE Pars VIII).
- Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando*. 1961. Antepreparatoria 1. Vol. 4: *Studia et vota Universitatum et Facultatum ecclesiarum et catholicarum*. Pars I: *Universitates et Facultates in Urbe* 1. Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis. (= SVU Pars I.1).
- Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando*. 1961. Antepreparatoria 1. Vol. 4: *Studia et vota Universitatum et Facultatum ecclesiarum et catholicarum*. Pars II: *Universitates et Facultates extra Urbem*. Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis. (= SVU Pars II).
- Afanasiev, Nicolas. 1965. "Réflexions d'un orthodoxe sur la collégialité des évêques." *Le Messager Orthodoxe*, nos. 29–30, 7–15.
- Buckley, Michael J. 1998. *Papal Primacy and the Episcopate: Towards a Relational Understanding*. Ut Unum Sint. New York: Crossroad.
- DeClue, Richard G. 2008. "Primacy and Collegiality in the Works of Joseph Ratzinger." *Communio* 35 (4): 642–70.
- Faggioli, Massimo. 2005. *Il vescovo e il concilio: Modello episcopale e aggiornamento al Vaticano II*. Testi e ricerche di scienze religiose 36. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Gilski, Marek, Damian Wąsek, and Marek Blaza. 2025. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum: Sobór Watykański II o Kościołach katolickich wschodnich*. Sobór na Nowo Odczytany 4. Kraków: Wydawnictwo "scriptum"; Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II w Krakowie. Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
- Kasper, Walter. 1962. "Primat und Episkopat nach dem Vatikanum I." *Theologische Quartalschrift* 142 (1): 47–85.
- Krzywda, Józef. 2008. *Prymat papieski i Kolegium Biskupów w świetle nauki Vaticanum I i II*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Papieskiej Akademii Teologicznej.
- Laksito, Petrus Canisius Edi. 2025. "Gérard Philips and the Triumph of *Via Media*: A Historical Note on the Redaction of *Lumen Gentium*." *Verbum Vitae* 43 (2): 395–411. <https://doi.org/10.31743/vv.17858>.
- Marmion, Declan. 2017. "Karl Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church." *Theological Studies* 78 (1): 25–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563916681992>.
- Okafor, Peter Jude. 2013. "The Theological Portrait of the Diocesan Bishop as a Servant Leader in the Light of the Second Vatican Council." PhD diss., Boston College.
- Pallath, Paul. 2024. "Primacy of the Pope and Collegiality of Bishops According to the Second Vatican Council." *Ephrem's Theological Journal* 28:36–75.

- Rahner, Karl, and Joseph Ratzinger. 1962. *The Episcopate and the Primacy*. Quaestiones disputatae 4. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 1965. "The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality." In *The Church and Mankind*, edited by Edward Schillebeeckx, 39–67. Concilium 1. Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Ryan, Seamus. 1966. "Vatican II: The Re-Discovery of the Episcopate." *Irish Theological Quarterly* 33 (3): 208–41.
- Sullivan, Francis A. 1983. *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Sullivan, Francis A. 2002. "The Teaching Authority of Episcopal Conferences." *Theological Studies* 63 (3): 472–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390206300302>.
- Swaine, Mario. 1998. "Collegiality and Papal Primacy." Master's thesis, University of Malta.
- Wąsek, Damian. 2014. *Nowa wizja zarządzania Kościołem*. Kraków: WAM.
- Wąsek, Damian, and Marek Gilski. 2023. "Joseph Ratzinger's Proposal to Decentralise the Ecclesial Structures in the Context of Conciliar Debates on *Lumen Gentium*." *Collectanea Theologica* 93 (4): 109–127. <https://doi.org/10.21697/ct.2023.93.4.08>.
- Wąsek, Damian, Marek Gilski, and Tadeusz Kałużny. 2024. *Unitatis redintegratio: Sobór Watykański II o ekumenizmie*. Sobór na Nowo Odczytany 3. Kraków: Wydawnictwo "scriptum"; Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II w Krakowie. Wydawnictwo Naukowe.

