



## Dialogue *Ad Intra*: The Relevance of *Lumen Gentium* and *Christus Dominus* for a Synodal Church

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**Abstract:** In order to outline the Council's understanding of the "dialogue *ad intra*," the article will first provide a brief introduction to the concept of dialogue within the Church as set out in selected conciliar documents. To illustrate the Council's ecclesiological framework for promoting dialogue, an outline of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* will follow. As documents such as *Lumen gentium* and *Christus Dominus* were the result of compromises between opposing theological factions at the Council, they sometimes offer inconsistent ecclesiological concepts, which affect later understanding of dialogue within the Church. Therefore, the ecclesiological concepts of "apostolicity" and "true equality" of all the baptised will be examined in terms of their implications for ecclesial counselling, decision-making, and accountability procedures. The final passage will present a proposal for resolving the tensions between opposing concepts of dialogue within the Church, in light of the Church's understanding of itself as a "complex reality." (LG 8)

**Keywords:** dialogue *ad intra*, synodality, counselling, accountability, Church as "complex reality," *Lumen gentium*, *Christus Dominus*

Reflecting on the Second Vatican Council's teaching on "dialogue within the Church" primarily involves referring to its ecclesiology, as presented in *Lumen gentium*. In contrast to *Gaudium et spes*, which addresses the "dialogue *ad extra*" by dealing with the "Church in the Modern World," *Lumen gentium* addresses pivotal dimensions of the ecclesial "dialogue *ad intra*."

This basic distinction regarding the Church's ways of doing dialogue was inspired by Cardinal Léon-Joseph Suenens, archbishop of Mechelen, Belgium. In a letter addressed to Pope John XXIII in April 1962, Suenens argued that a council preoccupied with internal Church affairs would disappoint the expectations of the world (cf. Suenens 1991, 72–78). Suenens did not mean that questions such as collegiality and ecumenism were unimportant. However, he wanted to distinguish between the inner life of the Church (*ad intra*) and the Church's relationship with the outside world (*ad extra*).

This distinction had a lasting impact on the Council's subsequent work. Most of the documents adopted by the Conciliar Fathers can be categorised accordingly. *Christus Dominus* for instance, the Council's decree on the ministry of bishops, could be considered a kind of "implementation regulation" or "application manual"

for Chapter III of *Lumen gentium*, which focuses on the college of bishops and its pastoral office.

To outline the Council's understanding of the "dialogue *ad intra*," it might be helpful to start with a brief introduction to the concept of dialogue within the Church, as set out in selected conciliar documents. To illustrate the Council's ecclesiological framework for promoting "dialogue within," an outline of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* will follow. As documents such as *Lumen gentium* and *Christus Dominus* were the result of compromises between opposing theological factions at the Council, they sometimes offer inconsistent ecclesiological concepts, affecting later understanding of dialogue within the Church. Therefore, the ecclesiological concepts of "apostolicity" and "true equality" of all the baptised will be examined in terms of their implications for ecclesial counselling, decision-making, and accountability procedures. Finally, in light of the Church's understanding of itself as a "complex reality" (LG 8), a proposal for resolving the tensions between opposing concepts of dialogue within the Church will be presented.

## 1. "Dialogue *Ad Intra*" in the Second Vatican Council's Documents *Lumen Gentium* and *Christus Dominus*

There is good reason to suggest that "dialogue" is a key concept for understanding the Second Vatican Council. In his famous speech at the opening of the Council on October 11, 1962, Pope John XXIII encouraged the conciliar fathers to "look at the present, at the new conditions and forms of life introduced in today's world, which have opened new paths for the Catholic apostolate." (John XXIII 1962, 4) From its very beginning, the term "dialogue" seems to appropriately describe the Council's efforts to engage with the modern world, other religions, cultures, and lived realities and contexts.

The progression of the Council's work until its closure in December 1965, which was carried out in preparatory groups, theological commissions, plenary sessions, and private circles, provides an impressive example of the Church's dialogues both *ad extra* and *ad intra*. Nevertheless, one might ask whether this practice is somehow reflected in the Council's documents.

In the *Lumen gentium*, which was adopted on November 21, 1964, the term "dialogue" appears only once, in referencing the "dialogue between the laity and their spiritual leaders." (LG 37) In the English translation of *Christus Dominus*, which was adopted on October 28, 1965, the term "dialogue" appears twice. The first instance refers to the bishops' duty to engage in dialogue with representatives of human society (CD 13). The second instance encourages bishops to maintain good dialogue with the priests of their diocese (CD 28).

In *Christus Dominus* (nos. 13 and 28), the term “dialogue” translates the Latin term *colloquium*, whereas in *Lumen gentium* (no. 37) it translates *commercium*. While the term *colloquium* may be understood as an oral talk on ideas, *commercium* may refer to an intellectual exchange of ideas or opinions. Such an understanding aligns with that of ordinary language (Merriam-Webster 1993, s.v. “dialogue”; Fowler and Sykes 1976, s.v. “dialogue”).

The relevance of the Council’s decree *Christus Dominus* to the topic of “dialogue within the Church” lies in its efforts to concretise the more general statements in *Lumen gentium* on the ministry of the bishops. The decree sets out the specific decision-making processes to be followed in a particular diocese to adopt a dialogical approach to administration. Consequently, the decree stipulates the establishment of councils at all levels of the Church to support bishops in their decision-making processes (CD 25–27). On the level of the global Church, the decree recommends establishing regular encounters between the bishops in synods and bishops-conferences (CD 36–38). The aim of such meetings is to engage in dialogue on topics that are of importance across dioceses.

However, for the Council, dialogue is more than a tool to achieve consent on a specific topic or a cultural asset of humanity that the Church must appreciate and adopt. The Council provides a thorough theological rationale for the Church’s engagement in dialogue, arguing that a Church that does not engage in dialogue is contrary to the will of God. The reason for that is the structure of God’s revelation. In this respect, *Dei verbum*, the Council’s declaration on divine revelation, says: “The invisible God ... out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends ... and lives among them..., so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself.” (DV 2) *Gaudium et spes* explains that when God engages in dialogue with us, he not only speaks but also waits for our free consent and obedience (cf. GS 17).

In revelation, God engages in dialogue with humanity to foster communion, both with God himself and among humanity. God’s engagement in dialogue is rooted in his internal life. Through the dialogical nature of his revelation, the Triune God communicates Himself, because he is a dialogical community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Council’s decree on Ecumenism is able to state that the Triune God is the “highest exemplar and source” both of the dialogue within the Church and its unity (UR 2).

If God acts in this way, the consequences for the community of believers are obvious: the Church must engage in dialogue. This has an impact on its relationships with other religions and with society, as well as on internal issues. *Gaudium et spes* states that within the Church, dialogue is an expression of the Catholic and ecumenical community:

[T]he Church stands forth as a sign of that brotherhood which allows honest dialogue and gives it vigour.

Such a mission requires in the first place that we foster within the Church herself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony, through the full recognition of lawful diversity. Thus, all those who compose the one People of God, both pastors and the general faithful, can engage in dialogue with ever abounding fruitfulness. For the bonds which unite the faithful are mightier than anything dividing them. (GS 92)

To be a “sign of brotherhood” requires cultivating mutual respect, reverence and harmony within the Church. This involves recognising plurality and legitimate differences in practising the Catholic faith. The aim is to initiate an increasingly fruitful dialogue between all members of the one People of God—both clergy and laity—in order to deepen the understanding of God’s revelation and encourage Christian practice. The act of engaging in dialogue on the shared faith proves that the bond uniting believers is stronger than the issues that divide them: “Let there be unity in what is necessary; freedom in what is unsettled, and charity in any case.” (GS 92)

The invitation to dialogue has certainly had an effect within the Church during the decades since the closure of the Council, as evidenced by the numerous changes that have taken place in ecclesial practices. In response to traditional decision-making processes, awareness of shared responsibility among the faithful has grown. This has fostered a growing sense of community among many laypeople and clergy, enabling them to interpret the Council’s message about the Church as the People of God as being relevant to their own lives. In this perspective, dialogue between all members of the Church today appears to be without any alternative.

To better understand the meaning of “dialogue” in the historical context of the Council’s documents, it may be helpful to consult an important ecclesiastical document on “dialogue,” which was issued while the Second Vatican Council was still in progress.

## 2. “Dialogue” According to Pope Paul VI’s Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*

On August 6, 1964, Pope Paul VI issued the encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (cf. Ernesti 2014, 3–20). This document is almost entirely devoted to the topic of “dialogue.” In it, the Pope states that dialogue “must be readily conducted with all men of good will both inside and outside the Church.” (ES 93) In fact, however, *Ecclesiam suam* is largely devoted to dialogue *ad extra*, i.e. with the “modern world.” Dialogue is addressed to ideologies, non-Christian religions, and non-Catholic denominations. Nevertheless, the dialogue *ad intra* is not missing and covers the last passages of the encyclical (ES 113–15).

The Pope sees dialogue rooted in the relationship between God and humanity. “It finds its expression in prayer; and prayer is a dialogue. Revelation, too, that

supernatural link which God has established with man, can likewise be looked upon as a dialogue. In the Incarnation and in the Gospel, it is God's Word that speaks to us." (ES 70) The Pope continues: "[T]he whole history of man's salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which marvellously begins with God and which He prolongs with men in so many different ways." (ES 70) Accordingly, dialogue within the Church is based on the idea that divine revelation is dialogical in nature: God addresses human beings and requests their affirmative response.

Immediately after having expressed his desire for dialogue within the Church, however, the Pope reminds readers of the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church. The sacramental authority of the ordained ministry, he stresses, requires faithful obedience. "By obedience We mean the observance of canonical regulations and respect for the government of lawful superiors, but an observance and respect readily and serenely given, as is only to be expected from free and loving children." (ES 115) A spirit of criticism, in turn, contradicts the spirit of fellowship, harmony, and peace in the Church, the Pope states. "It completely vitiates dialogue." (ES 115)

While the Council was still in progress, Pope Paul VI expressed that he was quite at ease with the status of dialogue in the Church: "We rejoice and find great consolation in the fact that this dialogue, both inside and outside the Church, has already begun. The Church today is more alive than ever before." (ES 117) Consequently, he encourages all the faithful to engage in dialogue: "We bless and encourage all who, under the guidance of competent authority, take part in the Church's vital, health-giving dialogue." (ES 116)

More than a year before the Council closed, the Pope clearly understood dialogue to be an essential aspect of the Church's identity. The practice of dialogue is not just a method, but a vital way of being Church and of witnessing to the Triune God. Dialogue binds together individual experiences and the shared knowledge of humanity with Christian doctrine and tradition of faith. It aims at an ever deeper understanding and a more appropriate practice of God's will for humankind.

Overall, the encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* provides a useful key to understanding the Council's ecclesiology, encouraging the Church to engage in dialogue both *ad extra*, as addressed particularly in *Gaudium et spes*, and *ad intra*, as set out in *Lumen gentium*, *Christus Dominus*, and other documents of the Council.

### 3. Opposing Ecclesiological Concepts Within Conciliar Documents

Regarding Pope Paul VI's emphasis on the hierarchical structure of the Church in *Ecclesiam suam*, one might ask: While "dialogue" in ordinary language is generally understood to presuppose equality between partners, any "vertical" dialogue within the Church is fundamentally called into question due to its hierarchical structure.

This tension requires a more in-depth theological reflection on the respective roles of ministers and laypeople within the Church.

To be comprehensive, such reflection would have to encompass the theological concept of sacramental ordination and its implications for the relationship between clergy and laypeople. The following preliminary remarks must suffice for this purpose.

When considered as “ekklesia,” the Christian Church can be seen as a community of people who have faithfully responded to the call of the Triune God. As the “people of God,” the Church is not the result of human organisation, but of divine initiative (cf. *LG* 2–4; *GS* 32; *AG* 5).

This basic understanding of being Church should have consequences for its organizational structures. According to *Lumen gentium* and subsequent documents, God’s initiative is effectively represented by the ordained ministry (cf. *LG* 28; *PO* 12). The college of bishops continues the vocation and mission of the apostles in a visible, permanent, and effective way (cf. *LG* 18–27).

This hierarchical concept is constitutive for the Catholic Church. Obviously, it raises the question of where dialogue fits within the Church. Although spiritual dialogue can occur anywhere within the Church, matters relating to ecclesiastical administration and decision-making appear to be confined to specific estates within the Church. “Horizontal” dialogue on decision-making may occur within these estates, e.g., among bishops, priests, and laypeople. But what about “vertical” dialogue?

Clearly, two ecclesiological concepts are in opposition here. On the one hand, we have the idea that all Christians are equal. This equality is rooted in baptism. On the other hand, we have the concept of the ecclesial ministry, which represents Christ as the founder of the Church and its counterpart until the end of history (cf. *LG* 28). Insofar as Christ is the ultimate source of authority and power in the Church, his primacy is effectively represented by the ordained ministry. As the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are both distinct forms of participation in Christ’s priesthood, they differ “in essence, not merely in degree,” as the Council states (*LG* 10).

This statement by the Council has sparked much debate in the post-conciliar era. What is the exact meaning of the Latin term *essentialis differentia*? This debate cannot be summarised here (cf. Drilling 1987, 81–99; Coffey 1997, 209–36; Guarino 2013, 559–76). However, in light of recent events—and in particular regarding the cases of sexual and spiritual abuse within the Church that have been uncovered during the last few years—one aspect of the theology of sacramental ordination should be highlighted. Although, according to Christian faith, Christ alone is free from sin, his representatives are not immune to failure. Nor does sacramental ordination prevent one from sinning. This should be borne in mind when establishing offices and performing ecclesial functions. Any ideal image of ecclesiastical ministry must recognise that those who hold office will not always live up to it. How, then,

can procedures of accountability be introduced in the Church and decision-making methods be enhanced in accordance with the Gospel?

#### 4. Dialogue and Decision-Making in the Church as Challenges for Ecclesiology

Regarding *Lumen gentium* and *Christus Dominus*, one might conclude that the Council's ecclesiology legitimises dialogue and decision-making that extend beyond the horizontal level. In particular, a “vertical” type of dialogue could help to bridge the gap between the clergy and the laity. But which forms of dialogue should be pursued? What should their purpose be? Is the aim merely to consult, or to make the Church more accountable and efficient in its decision-making? Does the ecclesiological concept of “synodality,” as it was promoted by Pope Francis and continued by Pope Leo XVI, contribute to answering such questions?

The concept of “synodality” encompasses a variety of aspects of the life of the Church, ranging from a particular style of being Christian to specific decision-making processes within the Church (cf. International Theological Commission 2018, no. 70). In its document on *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, the International Theological Commission put forward a proposal to recognise both the hierarchical structure of the Church and the possible fallibility of its ministers. The International Theological Commission's document outlines the various stages of decision-making within the Church, ranging from listening and consultation to dialogue and counsel.

The responsibility for decision-making ultimately lies with the bishops, the document affirms:

The synodal process must take place at the heart of a hierarchically structured community. In a diocese, for example, it is necessary to distinguish between the process of *decision-making* through a joint exercise of discernment, consultation and co-operation, and *decision-taking*, which is within the competence of the bishop, the guarantor of apostolicity and Catholicity. Working things out is a synodal task; decision is a ministerial responsibility. (International Theological Commission 2018, no. 69)

In this way, we face a three-stage process: everyone should be heard, some should discuss the matter and draw up a draft resolution, and in the end, the superior makes the decision.

This procedure of decision-making within the Church was affirmed in the final document of the Synod on Synodality, adopted on October 26, 2024. The document, which is entitled “Communion, Participation, Mission,” was promulgated by Pope

Francis as part of his ordinary magisterium. While acknowledging the bishops' responsibility in decision-making, this document emphasises the importance of dialogue within the Church. It promises:

A wider distribution of tasks and responsibilities and a more courageous discernment of what properly belongs to the ordained ministry and what can and must be delegated to others will enable each ministry to be exercised in a more spiritually sound and pastorally dynamic manner. This perspective will surely have an impact on decision-making processes, enabling them to have a more clearly synodal character. (CPM 74)

According to the Synod, “synodality” is not so much a decision-making procedure in the Church, but rather an experience to be lived and a shared process of discernment.<sup>1</sup> The communion and unity of the Church require a discernment process carried out by the faithful as a community. This process is supported by the presence of the *sensus fidei* in each member of the community as it is rooted in baptism. Despite differences in their understanding of the Christian faith, the *sensus fidei* preserves the unity of the Church. The reason for that is that “the *sensus fidei* aims to reaching a consensus of the faithful (*consensus fidelium*).” (CPM 22) Arguing in this way, the Synod references a document of the International Theological Commission, issued in 2014, according to which such consensus constitutes “a sure criterion for determining whether a particular doctrine or practice belongs to the apostolic faith.” (International Theological Commission 2014, no. 3)

The *sensus fidei fidelium*—a kind of spiritual perception, intuition and discernment—is the fruit of the presence of the Holy Spirit in each baptised believer, a presence that enables them to recognise what is an authentic echo of the voice of Christ in the teaching of the community. The Holy Spirit enables the Christian faithful to identify what is, or is not, in accordance with the truth of the Gospel. The expression of the *sensus fidei* through all the members of the Church is an essential element of the discernment, reception and practice of the Christian faith at a given time (cf. Theobald 2016, 207–36; Famerée 2016, 167–85).

By involving people with a variety of experiences and perspectives, including believers and non-believers,<sup>2</sup> clergy and laity, those who are responsible in the Church can deepen their understanding of God's revelation to humanity. Furthermore, in

<sup>1</sup> In this regard, the meaning of “synodality” is similar to that of “communio” in ecclesial contexts. Having stated that “the ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents,” the “The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod” goes on to say that: “[T]he ecclesiology of communion cannot be reduced to purely organizational questions or to problems which simply relate to powers. Still, the ecclesiology of communion is also the foundation for order in the Church, and especially for a correct relationship between unity and pluriformity in the Church.” (Second Extraordinary General Assembly 1985, part C.1)

<sup>2</sup> According to the Christian faith, the effectiveness of the Holy Spirit is not confined to the Church but extends to all of humanity (cf. NA 2; GS 42).

order to strengthen the Church's mission, ecclesial practices and decision-making processes can be critically assessed in light of secular experiences. These practices and processes can then be modified, if necessary, to promote the Church's credibility.

Such discernment should always be performed with respect for the Church's tradition, in order to preserve its continuity with the apostolic tradition and to benefit from the rich experiences of the past. At the same time, the Church should consider adopting effective decision-making and accountability practices from the secular world, provided they serve its mission and enhance its credibility. In light of the concept of synodality and a renewed understanding of apostolicity, the Church will not find such adoption alien to her nature.

## 5. Dialogue Within the Church Based on "True Equality" and a Renewed Concept of Apostolicity

One of the most significant contributions of the Second Vatican Council to ecclesiology was its rediscovery of the collegial nature of the Church. Collegiality primarily affects the office of the bishops as successors of the apostles (cf. *CD* 2). In the long term, however, collegiality has inspired the Church as a whole to become more synodal. While synodality is not new to the Church, going back to the earliest centuries of its history, today's reflections on synodality invite the Church to embrace a new way of being.

The synodal approach to understand the nature of the Church sheds new light on the importance of dialogue within the Church. It is undeniable that "synodality" is different from deliberative procedures in democracies. As it is anchored within the collegiality of the bishops, the concept of synodality is deeply shaped by the hierarchical structure of the Church.

Nevertheless, synodality is also about participating in spiritual authority, which is rooted in baptism. Being baptised makes every Christian a full and equal member of the Church, a child of the same God the Father and a brother or sister of Jesus Christ, inspired by the same Holy Spirit (cf. *SC* 6; *LG* 7; *UR* 22; *AA* 3). Synodality—"walking together," as Pope Francis put it—is possible when there is mutual respect, listening, and dialogue between all Christians.

Regardless of their role or position, all baptised individuals are equal in dignity and in their participation in the threefold office of Jesus as king, priest, and prophet (*LG* 13, 34–36; *AG* 2, 15; cf. *CIC* can. 204 § 1; de Mey 2018, 155–80). Based on this doctrine, the Council's decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* puts forward a new understanding of the apostolic nature of the Church. The opening paragraphs of the decree emphasise that all Christians fulfil an apostolic ministry by virtue of their baptism. Stating that "the apostolate of the laity derives from their Christian vocation," (*AA* 1)

the decree rejects the idea that laypeople only participate in the clergy's apostolate. Rather, their vocation derives directly from Christ.

This ecclesiological concept broadens the traditional concept of apostolicity within the Church. Apostolicity is not confined exclusively to the ministry of bishops. Rather, it encompasses every individual member of the Church.

In *Lumen gentium* and *Ad gentes*, the Council acknowledges the participation of all baptized persons in Christ's threefold ministry as king, priest, and prophet (cf. *LG* 12, 34; *AG* 2, 15). Their participation is not delegated by the clergy. Participating in Christ's threefold office gives every baptised person a spiritual authority. Such authority obliges their fellow Christians to listen to their understanding of the Christian faith. Moreover, *Lumen gentium* states that the laity, "by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, [are] permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church." (*LG* 37)

Because baptism puts all Christians on an equal level (*vera aequalitas*: cf. *LG* 32; *CIC* can. 208), dialogue within the Church appears not only to be legitimised, but also to be demanded when it comes to fostering the mission of the Church, to improve its organisational structures—and also to counter failures in administration or in the exercise of spiritual care. Accordingly, the recent abuse crisis required interventions from responsible clerics and laity, without arousing suspicion that the ecclesial hierarchy was being undermined.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the knowledge and experience of laypeople could help to reveal the psychological and systemic origins of failures within the Church.

## 6. Dialogue and Counselling in a Church Conceived as a "Complex Reality" (*LG* 8)

Could dialogue between laypeople and clergy help prevent failures or the abuse of power within the Catholic Church? Could intensified dialogue within the Church, between those in positions of authority and those affected by their decisions, lead to more appropriate decision-making in administrative and financial affairs?

Again, the Council's decree *Christus Dominus* comes into play (cf. Tavard 2008, 361–81). At the diocesan level, *Christus Dominus* recommends that every bishop initiate "dialogues" (*colloquia*: *CD* 13, 28) and seek *unanimous consensus* (*unanima consensus*: *CD* 25) with the auxiliary bishops, his vicar general, and his advisers. These individuals and institutions support the bishop within the episcopal curia in the exercise of his office. In addition, *Christus Dominus* provides for the establishment of

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<sup>3</sup> Regarding the cooperation between the episcopacy and the laity in Germany, see Ansoerge 2025, 183–96.

pastoral councils in each diocese. These councils should examine, deliberate on, and draw practical conclusions about all matters concerning pastoral work (CD 27).

Clearly, such councils do not function as a control mechanism for how a bishop exercises his office. Instead, their purpose is to support and advise the bishop in his decision-making. *Christus Dominus* specifically emphasises the autonomy of bishops in appointing persons to ecclesiastical offices (CD 28).

Regarding such prescriptions, one might ask what impact “dialogue” has on decision-making when it is conditioned by the hierarchical structures of the Church? Does counselling have any binding force in the execution of episcopal power? Respecting *Codex Iuris Canonici*, it seems that this is only the case in financial matters (cf. CIC can. 1277, 1292 § 2) and regarding a vote of the college of consultors (CIC can. 382 § 3). In all other matters, the bishop has the authority to make decisions alone.

Furthermore, it must be considered that the fact that diocesan bodies and council members are appointed by the bishop raises the question of how independent they can be, or whether they can maintain a critical distance from the bishop.

Thus, one might ask: to whom is a bishop accountable at a diocesan level when administering the episcopal office? According to canon law (CIC can. 381 § 1), every bishop holds almost unrestricted rights and powers within his diocese. But what would happen if a bishop failed to administer his diocese properly? Clearly, the relevant Roman dicasteries are overwhelmed by the task of reviewing bishops’ ministries worldwide whenever a complaint is submitted to them. Could structures of accountability then be introduced within the local Church, i.e. at a diocesan level? (cf. Wijlens 2022, 413–39)

This question touches on a fundamental issue of ecclesiology: the possibility of separating powers within the Church. The theological challenge consists of nothing less than justifying the introduction of secular ways of administration in the Church while preserving its spiritual character.

A helpful text could be *Lumen gentium*, which describes the Church as a “complex reality” (*realitas complexa*) composed of heavenly and earthly elements:

[T]he society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element. (LG 8)

The text continues by introducing an analogy:

For this reason, by no weak analogy, it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature inseparably united to Him, serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the visible social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies it, in the building up of the body. (LG 8)

From a Christological perspective, the reference to the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ means that neither nature competes with the other. It would be wrong to say that the more Jesus is God, the less he is human—and vice versa. The truth is that the human individual Jesus and the way he lives are identical with his divine nature as the eternal Father's Son: Jesus' manhood is his deity (cf. Pannenberg 1968, 335). Pope Leo the Great expressed this in his letter to Flavian, Patriarch of Constantinople, on June 28, 449, writing that the human and divine natures in Christ "each do what is proper to them in unity with each other." (Denzinger 2012, no. 294)

Regarding the Church, one might conclude: Provided that the institutional structures of the Church serve its divine mission, there is no fundamental conflict or competition between its divine and human dimensions. Consequently, the use of sociological tools to analyse the Church's visible reality is permitted without, as some fear, reducing it to a purely worldly institution.

Furthermore, one might argue that the Council's ecclesiological reference to the hypostatic union of human and divine natures allows for the establishment of proven structures for decision-making, accountability, and control within ecclesiastical structures. Secular ways of procedure that promote the welfare of people do not contradict the Gospel, one might argue; rather, they correspond to the divine will to save all human beings, as revealed by Jesus. Consequently, proven ways of decision-making in secular societies should be taken into serious consideration when they serve the spreading of the Gospel. In any case, these procedures do not contradict the sacramental nature of the Church as set out in *Lumen gentium*.

It should be noted that the rich history of religious orders provides compelling examples of shared decision-making and accountability within the Church. These models could be applied throughout the Church, rather than uncritically adopting secular administrative procedures (cf. Moulin 1953, 106–48; 1965, 25–54; Sweeney 2002, 171–80; Roest 2019, 37–55).

Introducing ways of shared decision-making and accountability in the Church should always respect the cultural framework that conditions the way in which church procedures may be structured. The final document of the Synod on Synodality recognises and appreciates the particularity of the context of each local Church, along with its history and tradition, and admits a great variety of ecclesial structures. This respect may result in different paces of adoption: "A synodal style allows local Churches to move at different paces. Differences in pace can be valued as an expression of legitimate diversity and as an opportunity for sharing gifts and mutual enrichment." (CPM 124)

## 7. Conclusion: Dialogue as “Exchange of Gifts” in the Final Document of the Synod on Synodality

For Pope Francis, the ecclesiological concept of “synodality,” i.e. “walking together,” means listening to the perceptions of Christians who live in different cultures and contribute their specific experiences in practising their faith to the global Church. The Pope understands “dialogue” as “conversation in the Spirit,” which involves a mutual “exchange of gifts.”

Accordingly, the term “dialogue” is used frequently in the final document “Communion, Participation, Mission” of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to describe the process of “listening” and “exchange of gifts.” In this understanding, the term encompasses both “dialogue *ad extra*” and “dialogue *ad intra*.”

Three ways of “listening” are suggested throughout the final document for practising dialogue within the Church: listening to the Word of God, listening to the world, and listening to fellow Christians. It is clear, therefore, that “dialogue within” is an integral dimension of the Church. Nevertheless, the question arises as to the purpose of dialogue. And what does “synodality” mean in this context? Does it affect the decision-making process in any way? Or is this process left exclusively to the clergy?

The third part of the final document describes and outlines the three phases of the synodal process: first, ecclesial discernment; secondly, care for decision-making processes; and thirdly, commitment to accountability and evaluation of decisions (CPM 79). This pneumatological approach to synodality provides a framework for communication and dialogue, leading to the “exchange of gifts” in the fourth part of the final document (CPM 109, 120–123). The Synod maintains that practising this dialogical style can be understood as an expression of the prophetic ministry of the people of God in a world that is increasingly shaped by mistrust and violence (cf. CPM 47–48).

While such a statement may be convincing, one might ask what the long-term outcome of listening to the Word of God and exchanging perceptions and experiences might be. This question is particularly pertinent when it comes to decision-making within the Church on issues that some consider to be of extraordinary urgency. I only mention the acknowledgement of the wide range of sexual orientations among human beings in ecclesial doctrine and practice, or the equality of the sexes with regard to admission to sacramental ordination.

When the delegates to the Amazon—Synod in October 2019 expressed the need to ordain married men in order to ensure the regular celebration of the Eucharist in the Amazon region (cf. Amazon Synod 2019, no. 111), Pope Francis disregarded this appeal. It seems that, to him, the celibacy of priests was more important than the Christian communities’ desire to celebrate the Eucharist regularly.

So, what does “conversation in the Spirit” ultimately mean when it translates into “dialogue within the Church”? Does it have any effect on decision making in the Church?

To this day, the tension between the opposing ecclesiological concepts set out in the Council’s documents remains unresolved. Further study and theological reflection are required, particularly with regard to *Lumen gentium* (Part III) and *Christus Dominus*. Such studies should aim to develop an ecclesiology that recognises the significance of revelation in opening dialogue between God and humanity.

At the same time, theological reflection should outline how the Church can be organised to effectively promote the spread of the Gospel in today’s multifaceted societies. In a globalised Church, dialogue must respect cultural diversity while remaining faithful to the apostolic tradition, which forms the basis of the Church’s unity. In my view, a proper understanding of *Lumen gentium* (no. 8) could help to foster dialogue between all baptised people and encourage new approaches to decision-making within the Church, helping it to better serve the spread of the Gospel.

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