

“Synod” in the Teachings of Church Fathers: Lessons for a Synodal Church Today

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Abstract

This article portrays the teachings of the Church Fathers on how Synods and Ecumenical Councils were done in order to arrive at the lessons for the Synodal Church today. It also affirms the teachings of the Church Fathers on the importance of Living Tradition of Synods and its processes which are passed on to generations of Christian Communities to settle internal disputes. It concretely cited how the Church Fathers handled crisis impinging on the understanding of faith, discipline, and morals through the Synodal processes. It examines the understanding of synods and Synodal Church by expounding the meaning of synod and ecumenical council. It highlights the early Church procedural conciliar; it elucidates the theology and power of ecumenical councils. It deliberates on the Church Father's processes of local synod and the decisions of the local synod leading to lessons for the Synodal Church today. The article ends with recommendations and conclusion.

Introduction

Synod is a gathering of bishops that helps the Church to move together in the same direction. The Church Fathers actualized dependable procedures and import the necessity of synods and passed them on to

their progeny through praxes. What the Church Fathers did not utter expressly in words, they disseminated in principles through the various synods and councils and the decisions embarked upon. Their times were precarious, novel, and momentous and they had to surmount various huddles in order to preserve the mandate of faith which Jesus Christ commanded them to pass on. As the community of believers were increasing in numbers, so were the misunderstandings in the process of comprehending the faith in Jesus Christ. In defeating many heresies through the decisions at various synods, the doctrines of the Church were expounded for more clarification and the faith of the people was deepened in Christ Jesus. The doctrinal teachings became didactical through the synods but could not force anyone to accept faith in the Lord Jesus. One may not hold on to one's opinions but must yield to the teachings of the elders of the Church having been appointed and charged with the responsibility of shepherding the flock.

The Church Fathers were men of faith and believed in the divine wisdom that governs the world. It was this wisdom that they used to direct the affairs of the Church in their times and taught their followers to trust and believe in the Holy Spirit who is the Principal Agent of Evangelization. Even though each bishop is autonomous in the governance of the diocese, the decisions of synods are something to be considered because the synods were convoked through the Power of the Holy Spirit and is active in each person and speaks through everyone.

In the contemporary times, Pope Paul VI revived the idea of the synod and established the Synod of Bishops in 1965 with the *Motu Proprio, Apostolica Sollicitudo*, a document that empowers the Church authority to call the Synod into session whenever it is advisable and designates the place where the meetings are to be held. The document also ratifies the election of members into the synod.¹ He wrote: “We

¹ Pope Paul VI, *Apostolica Sollicitudo, Apostolic Letter Issued Motu Proprio, Establishing the Synod of Bishops for the Universal Church, (September 15, 1965), no. 1-XII. <https://www.vatican.va>. Accessed : 03/05/2022.*

*erect and establish here in Rome a permanent Council of bishops for the universal Church, to be directly and immediately subject to Our (Roman Pontiff) power. Its proper name will be the Synod of Bishops. The Synod of Bishops has, of its very nature, the function of providing information and offering advice. It can also enjoy the power of making decisions when such power is conferred upon it by the Roman Pontiff; in this case, it belongs to him (Roman Pontiff) to ratify the decisions of the Synod.*²

What is Synod and what is a Synodal Church?

In the early Church, and specifically, in the first centuries of the Church's existence, "Synod" and "Council" were interchangeable. However, the gatherings of bishops from all over the regions and provinces together in a meeting were called Ecumenical Council and this began with the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.³ *Synod* is a Greek word: *σύννοδος* (*sinodos*) meaning "Assembly" or "Meeting" and is analogous with the Latin word "Concilium" meaning "Council". Thus, a synod is an ecclesiastical meeting of Church leaders set up by those who have the authority to consult on Church matters.

There are different applications of the term

1. When the bishops of the whole world are congregated under the presidency of the Pope, the synod is denominated ecumenical or general council. The general or ecumenical council is either *ordinary* or *extraordinary* general assembly. A synod of bishops gathers in extraordinary general session when dealing with

² Ibid.

³ Bernard L. Marthaler, et al. Eds., *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition, vol. 4, (New York: Thomson Gale, 2003), p. 298, s.v. "Councils, General, History of Ecumenical by F. Dvornik.

matters requiring a speedy solution. The ordinary general councils address particular topics affecting the good of the Church worldwide, and the issues to be deliberated are selected by the Pope through the general secretariat who elicits contributions from different Episcopal conferences. The assemblies since 1971 have met every three years.⁴

2. When the hierarchs of all the provinces of a nation assembled, the synod is called national, or, under certain circumstances, *Plenary*. However, if the bishops of an ecclesiastical province meet under the headship of their Metropolitan, the council is termed *Provincial*. This is referred to as *Special Sessions*. The synod summons bishops of a particular region to deal with regional issues.⁵
3. A diocesan synod is an assembly convoked by the bishop in which he gathers together the clerics of his diocese and all others who are bound to attend for the purpose of deliberating on issues that belongs to the pastoral care of the people in his diocese. All the clergy and laity of the diocese are bound by the decrees of the synod.⁶

Synodality (process of consultation) denotes a particular style of the Church that describes the people of God (the bishop, clerics and the lay faithful) journeying together in an assembly having been summoned by the Holy Spirit to testify to their communion by working together and discerning how to proceed in the work of evangelization.⁷

⁴ Bernard L. Marthaler, et al. Eds., *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition, vol. 13, (New York: Thomson Gale, 2003), p. 685, s.v. “Synod of Bishops” by J. A. Abruzzese.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ W. H. W. Fanning, “Synod: General term for Ecclesiastical Gatherings under Hierarchical Authority”, *Encyclopedia: Catholic Answers*, 1996-2022. <https://www.catholic.com.encyclopedia/synod> Accessed: 05/05/2022.

⁷ Francis, *Synod of Bishops*, “Synod 2021-2023”, <https://www.synod.va> . Accessed: 02/05/2022.

Synodality in the particular Church or general assembly renews and deepens the People of God's awareness of co-responsibility within the Church. A *Synodal* Church follows the rhythm of life, which is movement and pause, walking and meeting in *synodality, in a process of discussing and contacting one another*. A Synodal Church promotes the renewal of attitude of listening, consulting, dialoguing, discerning, welcoming, and exchanging of ideas and, above all, affirming the participation of all the members of the People of God. *The Church* is called to operate synodally at the local, regional and universal levels.⁸

Synod and Council in the Early Church

I. The earliest gathering of the People of God to discuss doctrinal matters and establish ecclesiastical policy was the meetings of the apostles and presbyters with St. Paul and St. Barnabas which is known as the Council of Jerusalem in 52 AD as recorded in Acts 15:1-30. It was not a gathering of all the bishops of the world but it discussed doctrinal issues of a lasting effect among the early Christians; emphasising that new converts were not obliged to observe the prescriptions of the Old Testament in order to be absorbed into Christian fold.⁹

II. The early bishops were inspired by the example of the apostles on the way they handled disputes regarding doctrinal matters. During the first eight centuries of the Church's subsistence, the bishops of different provinces gathered to reach decisions on theological and disciplinary matters and on themes that required clarifications or issues that disturbed the faithful members.¹⁰ For example, there is an extant

⁸ Antonio Spadaro, "Synodal Church", *La Civiltà Cattolica: Union of Catholic Asia News*, 2022. <https://www.laciviltacatolica.com/the-synodal-church>. Accessed: 02/05/2022.

⁹ Ibid., *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13, (p. 694), s.v. "Early Church Synod" by P. Joannou.

¹⁰ Ibid. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, (p. 298).

Letter of Clement 1, Clement of Rome (30-100 AD), the First Apostolic Father, the Pope of the time, which was sent to the Presbyters, and Elders, and the People of the Church in Corinth describing a synod that took place. The date of the letter is putatively 68 AD. The synod was to forestall the breaking forth of schism and sedition among the Corinthians. It was an Exhortation Letter which admonished the Christian community to remain steadfast in humility and in the faith because there are rewards of faith that come from God. The Christian community was admonished to obey God rather than the authors of sedition; to cleave to God and to those who cultivate peace with godliness than those who hypocritically profess to desire it. The Letter of Exhortation was sent through some faithful and discreet members known as Claudius, Ephebus, Valerius, and Fortunatus. These men were proved to be faithful witnesses among the faith community.¹¹

The letter of Cyprian of Carthage forwarded to Clement of Rome was written in the name of the local Church of Carthage, when the Christians in the community were looking forward to advice from the elder of the community. The response of Clement 1 who is mentioned in Philippians 4:3 as the close associate of St. Paul was read in many ancient Corinthian churches. The letter contains tones of evangelical truth making earnest appeals that penetrate the heart and conscience of the readers. The author promotes the best interest of the Church and imparted undying *koinonia* (Christian fellowship, unity, union) to the early Christians and continued to the later apostolic times and even to the contemporary times.¹²

¹¹ Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, “ *The Apostolic Fathers, Justine Martyr, Irenaeus*”, vol. 1, (Christian Classics Ethereal Library: 1885), p. 6-70. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.html>. Accessed: 29/04/2022.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Early Church Procedural Conciliar

1. *The Loci*

The places for the meetings/synods were the capitals of the Roman Provinces and were customarily convened by the bishops of the capital city to deal with different doctrinal issues and errors such as Montanism in the 3rd century (the principle of montanism alleged that the *Paraclete*, whom Jesus had promised was manifested to the world through Montanus, a prophet of the second century) and to settle the Easter date. In the second and up till the fourth centuries, conferences of bishops of different provinces took place regularly every year.¹³

2. *The Procedure*

St. Cyprian of Carthage conveys methods of proceeding of the assembly. The gatherings modelled on the rule of the procedure for the sessions of the Roman Senate.

- i. The presiding bishop assumed the role of the emperor.
- ii. The presiding bishop used the same words for the convocation of the council as were used in the imperial summons for the convening of the senate.
- iii. Instead of the Statue of Victory of Romans, the Bible was placed between the bishops and the emperor.
- iv. The conduct of the debate and responses of the delegates to the council of bishops followed the procedures of the Roman Senate.
- v. The Emperor had no right to vote because voting was the privilege of the bishops in the council.
- vi. The Principal Senator in the council (*Princeps Senatus*) was given to the Pope as the First Bishop among other bishops or his representative.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid. vol. 4, (p. 299).

¹⁴ Ibid.

This adaptation of senatorial procedure to the ecumenical councils preserved the autonomy of the bishops in doctrinal matters and guarantee to the Roman See as the first bishop and confer credence to the conciliar proceedings.¹⁵ The erstwhile Roman custom was observed in the convocation and in the direction of the ecumenical councils in the third century.¹⁶ The Council of Trent (1545-1563 AD) which handled doctrinal challenges and Protestant Reformation issues re-established the composition and convocation of general councils. The Council was convoked by Pope Paul III (d. 1549 AD). The right to vote at the council was given to the bishops, the General of Religious Orders and the representatives of Monastic Congregations. The discussions and decisions were on Religious matters; justification; and Reformations within the Church.¹⁷

Theology of General or Ecumenical Councils

This theology looks at the implications of the General or Ecumenical Council as lived by the Church Fathers.

1. The Code of Canon Law confirms the teaching of the Church Fathers that the Roman Pontiff convokes an Ecumenical Council, presides over it or sends representative, transfers, suspends, or dissolves a council and approves its decrees, determines the matters to be treated in a council, and establishes the order to be observed.¹⁸
2. According to *Lumen Gentium*, the Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter is the head of the visible body of Christ, that is the Church. This document, following the teaching of the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., vol. 4, (p. 302).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The Code of Canon Law, <https://www.vatican.va>, no. 338, par. 1&2.

Church Fathers, affirms that the Pontiff has the power of Primacy over all. He has full, supreme, and universal power over the Church. The bishops with the Roman Pontiff form a college; form an assembly under one head, expressing the unity of Christ.¹⁹

3. The supreme power in universal Church is exercised in a solemn way in an ecumenical council. A council is not an ecumenical unless the council is convoked and confirmed and accepted by the successor of Peter. The Roman Pontiff convokes these councils, presides over them in person or through his representative and confirms them. The bishops, living in all parts of the world, in their various metropolises exercise the collegiate power with the popes when the head of metropolis (the archbishop) calls the bishops together for collegiate action in the spirit of synodality.²⁰
4. This collegial union is apparent in the mutual relations of the individual bishops in particular churches with the universal Church. It is the duty of all bishops to promote and safeguard the unity of faith and maintain discipline which are common to the whole Church.²¹ The bishops receive their specific power and mission from God. They act as shepherds in service of their flock. The Roman Pontiff is the principal and foundation of the unity of the body of Christ. Without his office, there could not be a universal council, there would only be a meeting of local episcopate without the synergy, support, and authority of the supreme power.²²

¹⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 22. <https://www.vatican.va>. Accessed: 02/05/2022.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 23.

²² Bernard L. Marthaler, et al. Eds., *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition, vol. 4, (New York: Thomson Gale, 2003), p. 303-306, s.v. "Theology of General or Ecumenical Councils" by L. M. Orsy.

5. A local or particular synod concerns the regions or part of the Church. An Ecumenical or General Council concerns the issues of the whole Church. The pope acknowledges the universal council, confers the universal character expressly or tacitly by the reception of the decrees and decisions of a council as binding on the universal Church. The matters of faith and disciplines formulated and proposed for the approval of the pope must express the faith of the universal Church.²³
6. If the decisions of a local gathering of bishops are not approved by the Roman Pontiff as binding the whole Church, a council remains a particular one, regional, national or provincial.²⁴

The Power of an Ecumenical Council

The individual power of a catholic bishop is an Episcopal power over his diocese which is supernatural in nature that is given to him by Christ through the act of consecration. This is the power to sanctify, teach and rule the people of God. The collective power of the episcopate extends over to the universal Church when this collective power is exercised in a solemn way when there is an ecumenical council.²⁵ The manifestation of the supernatural power is reposed in the formulations of decrees, decisions, constitutions and other forms of juridical pronouncements. This is a blend of natural and supernatural powers which reflects the divine and human characters of the Church.²⁶

The power of an ecumenical council is a power that regulates the manner of worship in the Church, and directs the administration of the sacraments; the power to teach the faith and the power to govern the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Church. The established laws from the ecumenical councils are binding in conscience of the people. The disciplinary decrees have permanent values insofar as they express unchangeable truth. If the decrees are not on the immutable truth, then they are subject to change by later councils or by the pope.²⁷ From the foregoing argument, an ecumenical council has full power over the Church and is the supreme council in the Church which exercise its power in a collegiate way through the collective power of the bishops in union with the Roman Pontiff.²⁸

When there is a crisis of understanding of the faith or a moral necessity for an ecumenical council to be convoked, this council is the highest manifestations of the unity and diversity of the Episcopal body. An ecumenical council is not a body distinct from the Church; rather, it is an organ of the Church. It is the part of the greater unity of the whole Church, the mystical Body of Christ. Through this council, the faith of the Church is authentically expressed and the teachings of Christ are made manifest for God's people. The council is a great manifestation of the continuing gift of renewal that God offers to humanity.²⁹

The First Four Ecumenical Councils

1. NICAEA 325 AD

This council was convoked by Emperor Constance 1 (d. 350 AD) under Pope Sylvester 1 (d. 335 AD). The Emperor, Constance 1, the bishops and delegates gathered in Nicaea in 325 AD for the First Ecumenical Council against Arius who had denied the divine nature of Christ. The agitation had spread and had impinged on other religious

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

issues and hence the need to involve the entire empire in order to address the stir through the participation of everyone in the empire.³⁰

2. *The Council of Constantinople I 381 AD*

This council was convoked by Emperor Theodosius I (d. 395 AD) under Pope Damasus I (d. 384) against the heresy of Methodius regarding the Person of the Holy Spirit. The council defined the nature of the Holy Spirit.

3. *The Council of Ephesus 431 AD:*

this council was convoked by Emperor Theodosius II (d. 450 AD) against Nestorius under Pope Celestine I (d. 432). The council defined the Motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary as *Theotokos* and voted six canons (decrees, laws).

4. *The Council of Chalcedon 451 AD*

This council was convoked by Emperor Marcian (d. 457) under Pope Leo I (d. 461). The council defined the Person of Christ as having two natures- human and divine and voted eight doctrinal canons (decrees, laws).³¹

Pope Gregory I (d. 604) affirmed that the first four Ecumenical Councils deserved the same respect as the Four Gospels.³² In the early church, the Christian emperors were recognized as representative of God on earth and had the responsibility to exercise material and spiritual role and had the duty to lead the people to God. They followed the established procedure of the Roman Senate in the council of bishops.³³ It was at the 16th Ecumenical council, the Council of Constance 1414-1418 AD which was convoked to end the Schism of

³⁰ Ibid., p. 299.

³¹ Ibid., p. 300-302.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

the Western Church that legislated that councils should be held at fixed intervals.³⁴

From the first ecumenical council in 324 AD up till the 21st, which is the Second Vatican Council 1962-1965, the council Fathers voted on decisions concerning the understanding of the Sacred Scripture and the Living Tradition of the Church, on original sin, the issue of Justification and the sacraments including decrees on the reformation of the Liturgy.

Development in the Ecumenical Council

Many doctrinal and disciplinary problems were handled in the early church by the Church Fathers and the Church's work and mission is ongoing. It was in the 21st ecumenical council (Vatican II) that the representatives of other churches and lay men and women attended the council sessions as observers. The council came to be known truly as ecumenical council in number of attendance and by broad representation of various Christian traditions.³⁵

Church Fathers and the Local Synods

The Local Synods

The practice of convoking ecumenical councils developed from the practice of local synods in order to make important decisions. The local synods were recommended to hold twice a year in the fifth canon of the Council of Nicaea 1 325 AD. The Metropolis or the Western Church or Patriarch of the Eastern Church convoked bishops under their jurisdiction to deliberate on disciplinary and doctrinal issues.³⁶

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

The Church Fathers wrote Theses and taught by examples. In their pastoral expertise, pastoral consultations among the bishops were a regular occurrence especially among the bishops of Asia, Palestine, and Gaul particularly on doctrinal matters. For example, yearly synods were held in Cappadocia and in Asia Provinces which were laden with various heresies. There were instances of frequent, yearly gathering of bishops in synodality in the 3rd centuries in all the established provinces.³⁷ The frequent synods were needed to preserve the integrity of faith and to emphasize the obligation of observance of the canon and moral regulations and promote ecclesiastical unity. Hence, there was the necessity to organize regularly the gatherings of metropolitan; provincial; and regional synods throughout the universal Church.³⁸

Representation and Decisions in Synods

The bishops were not seen as the representatives of their different dioceses but were the bearers of the Episcopal gifts of grace through whom God communicated His presence and who were able to arrive at various decisions with the help of the Holy Spirit who was piloting the affairs of the Synods. The bishops made decisions in the name of the Church because they were acquainted with the problems which were pummelling the flock and were enlightened by the Holy Spirit to come up the solutions. The decisions were reached by voting and sometimes with unanimous acclamation. Their regulations were recorded as the Church's canons or laws.³⁹

³⁷ Methlader et al, (vol. 13) p. 694-695.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Sample of Local Synod by St. Cyprian of Carthage

There was a synod in early Northern African Church concerning absolution of *lapsi* and re-baptism of apostates under Pope Cornelius (d. 253 AD). There were series of synods organized by St. Cyprian of Carthage between 251 and 253 and a subsequent one in 254 AD. The issue was about the practice of readmitting to Holy Communion any *lapsus* who was in danger of death.

Between 249 and 250 AD, the emperor Trajan Decius (d. 251 AD) sent an edict which required the inhabitants of the Roman Empire to sacrifice to the gods. He also inaugurated empire-wide persecution of Christians. St. Cyprian who was the bishop of Carthage went into hiding. Many Christians including clergy complied with the edict and some obtained false written letter which attested to their fulfilment of the edict's demand. When St. Cyprian returned to Carthage in 251 AD, he had to resolve the prevalent problem of whether to admit those who lapsed and had repented and were in danger of death and wanted to return to the Christian fold. They were referred to as *lapsi*. Some bishops in the region re-admitted them while others did not.

St. Cyprian's response was to call a synod of bishops together with the clergy and the laity to discuss the issue. The synod confirmed the practice of readmitting to communion any *lapsus* who was in danger of death; it readmitted to immediate communion those people who performed penance; and it made decisions in favour of the people who were to perform penance until being readmitted to communion before death.⁴⁰

After the decisions were made, there were some people who opposed these resolutions and they were in two sides. On one side, those who

⁴⁰ Geoffrey D. Dunn, "Censuimus: Cyprian and Episcopal synod of 253", *Latomus*, T. 63, Fasc. 3 (July–Sept., 2004): p. 672-688.

followed Novatian who was the alternative bishop of Rome denied any reconciliation to the *lapsi*. On the other side, those who followed Fortunatus, one of the rival bishops which were set up in Carthage offered reconciliation to all of the *lapsi*. Hence, there were the two camps identified as laxists and rigorists.⁴¹

When there were too many dissents on decisions of the 251 AD synod, another synod was convoked by Cyprian in 252 AD to reconsider the decision of the previous synod. The lay people, presbyters and deacons together with their African bishops were in attendance and were present at the intervening synods that followed up till 256 AD.⁴²

At the subsequent synod in 252 AD, the bishops decided that they would offer immediate reconciliation to those *lapsi* who had performed penance for the past few years. The purpose was to equip the *lapsi* for the impending persecutions and prepare for the struggles which were approaching. St. Cyprian thought that the Christians ought to be equipped with the strength that comes from the Body and Blood of Christ. He believed that the shepherds must not abandon their sheep at such perilous times but gather them together. In the name of his fellow bishops, St. Cyprian confirmed the pastoral and priestly responsibilities of a bishop.⁴³

The Synod adjudged to “examine the cases of each one, and to grant peace to the lapsed, rather than furnish arms to those were about to fight...”⁴⁴ This decision as contained in the 53rd Epistle of St. Cyprian of Carthage is the letter expressing the decision of the entire African synod on the matter at the time.⁴⁵ The Synod reached an agreed policy

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Philip Schaff, ed. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 5, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, (Grand Rapids, MI: 1819-1893), p. 826. <https://www.ccel.org>. Accessed: 01/05/2022.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

but St. Cyprian accepted the freedom of bishops in the implementation of the decision. He admonished all the bishops to comply with the decisions. He admonished them that if they would persist in not following the agreed policy, they would give an account of themselves before God.⁴⁶

According to Geoffrey Dunn, St. Cyprian described the outcome of the synod through the use of the verb “*censere*.” In classical usage, it is used to express an opinion, a proposal or piece of advice, an order, a resolution or decree. *Censere* could be used by individuals or by deliberative bodies as a whole. Sometimes, it could refer to an opinion or recommendation that could be accepted or rejected. Sometimes it indicates a recommendation of which rejection would have serious consequences. Sometimes it amounts to an order to be carried out and sometimes the precise force of the matter is not obvious.⁴⁷

Geoffrey explains further that St. Cyprian's usage of the verb *censuimus* in the presence of 42 bishops in 253 AD translates into “We proposed” “We recommend”, “We advised”, “We resolved”, “We approved”, “We decided”, “We decreed”, “We have agreed”. The word *Censuimus* has a force of a decision. The synod has its own power of enforcement. The Synod's decision was for all the churches in the region as a resolution to the problem of the *lapsi*.⁴⁸ The synodal decisions could not be expressed as legislative or as an executive directive that were binding. The synod did not have the authority to impose the decision on individual bishops or to enforce the decree in different particular churches because each bishop has/had the freedom of acceptance.⁴⁹ St. Cyprian expected and hoped that every bishop would agree in principle and abide by the synod's decisions as morally

⁴⁶ Geoffrey D. Dunn, “*Censuimus*”, p. 681.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 683.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 686-688.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

binding. The synod issued a decree but was robed in the language of recommendation.⁵⁰

Lessons for a Synodal Church Today

1. The important lesson for us today is not on how to translate “*censuimus*” but that we consider the force or the *impact* of what was decided. The decision counted as nothing unless the individual bishops are *persuaded* to support the decision. St. Cyprian did not want the bishops to sidetrack the decisions. He did not want them to ignore the advice.⁵¹ St. Cyprian hoped that the bishops will dutifully fulfil their pastoral duties by *concurring in the implementation of the decisions of the Synod*.
2. The Post-Synodal consultations and letter-writings of the Epistle 50-53 of St. Cyprian of Carthage were the ways in which the bishops of Carthage promoted unity among the local churches. The Synod communicated the decisions to the bishops to be implemented and expressed the decision in a phrase that portrays respect and autonomy of the local churches. The synod had decided what to do but could not order it to be done. It could only appeal to the generosity and pastoral acumen of the *bishops to do what was necessary in order to fulfil the pastoral and moral obligations to the Christian communities*.⁵²
3. A bishop exercises his pastoral ministry in conjunction with other bishops through vigorous negotiation, debate, persuasion, and patronage. From the example of the early Northern African bishops in 253 AD, there was an episcopally-led Christian churches where bishops interacted with each other on the *basis of persuasions and not on power control*.⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

Recommendations

1. Whether it is a local or ecumenical assembly, a synod has three phases of development: listening, decision, and action. This means that when a synod is convoked, the participation of all God's people is expected to be activated through consultation in all the processes of preparation of the synod with the aim of listening to all the voices that are an expression of the People of God in the local Church. The all round participation gives a meaningful and balanced image of the local Church, reflecting different vocations, ministries, charisms, competencies, social status, and geographical origin.⁵⁴
2. In the synodal Church of today, Pope Francis encourages each particular Church to undertake a resolute process of discernment, purification, and reformation.⁵⁵ *The reformation appertains to the synodal and missionary conversion of the entire People of God.* This reformation of the Church requires making *a step forward in adopting a renewed synodal praxis* that is able to engage everyone. This requires, among other things, an updating of synodal structures, processes and procedures. It implies, in particular, a renewal of doctrine, the norms and the praxis of the synod of bishops, so that this collegial institution can express and animate a Church that is more synodal and missionary.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Antonio Spadaro, "Synodal Church", *La Civiltà Cattolica: Union of Catholic Asia News*, 2022. <https://www.laciviltacatolica.com/the-synodal-church>.

⁵⁵ Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation: Evangelii Gaudium*. On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's world, November 24, 2013. <https://www.vatican.va>. Accessed: 02/05/2022.

⁵⁶ Antonio Spadaro, "Synodal Church", *La Civiltà Cattolica: Union of Catholic Asia News*, 2022. <https://www.laciviltacatolica.com/the-synodal-church>.

Conclusion

“*Synod*” comes from the Greek word *syn-hodos*, meaning “the same road” or “the same path.” Synods were common in the first centuries of Christianity which gave the Church Fathers the opportunities to meet and discuss issues of importance for the life of the Church. Synod is not about meeting to produce documents or decrees, but an exercise of faith gingering the bishops to listen to one another, collaborate and forge a renewed form of life for the entire people of God. A synod is a process in which the bishops and the people of God come together to address a particular issue facing the people of God guided by the Holy Spirit for deeper evangelization in the history of revelation and salvation. It is therefore a religious meeting in which the deliberations are on theological issues. The purpose is to provide pastoral care and common pursuit for the Church with universal validity.

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