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THE ROLE OF CANON LAW IN A SYNODAL CHURCH IN AN ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE

Keynote address
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Introduction

Dear participants, I greet you all and am grateful to be with you for this conference. Our theme invites us to consider a question of great importance: *how can canon law serve a Church growing in synodality and in communion with other Christians?*

Since this address is intended as an introduction, I would like to approach that question by raising further questions rather than attempting to offer a comprehensive account. This seems more consistent with the attitude of listening which, according to both Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV, is a defining characteristic of the Church's synodal style. Well-formulated questions can guide our reflection from the outset and help us chart the path ahead. This, indeed, is one of the principal aims of this address.

As General Secretary of the Synod, I regard this conference as a valuable step in preparation for the Ecclesial Assembly of 2028. Therefore, in keeping with the listening phase, rather than offering immediate – and perhaps premature – answers regarding the role that canon law might play, from an ecumenical perspective, in a future and authentically synodal Church, I will raise a number of *questions* that seem central to our theme and that may help us deepen our reflection together.

Before moving forward, however, we need first to consider where we currently stand in the long process set in motion by the Second Vatican Council, particularly in the present effort to strengthen the synodal character of the Church. In this context, canon law clearly has an important role to play. At the same time, we need to discern the tasks and challenges that lie ahead.

With this in mind, I will divide my address into three parts: (1) ecumenism and synodality; (2) the role of canon law in the Church; and (3) the purpose of this conference and directions for the future.

1. Ecumenism and synodality

First of all, I would like to recall some key points regarding the importance that the Catholic Church attaches to ecumenism and its intrinsic relationship with the synodal nature of the Church.

The ecclesiological shift brought by the Second Vatican Council in the Catholic Church's understanding of other Christian Churches and communions is well known. However, an important step had already been taken at the very beginning of the Council, when observers from other Christian Churches and ecclesial communions were invited to participate even before the Council had approved any document. This indicates that the highest authority in the Catholic Church wished to include representatives of these Churches and communions and enter in dialogue with them – an initiative that continues to inspire us today.

The focus on ecumenism remained an important thread of continuity throughout the years of the Council. Pope Saint Paul VI expressly identified ecumenical rapprochement as one of the fundamental purposes for which the Council had been convoked.¹

In the post-conciliar period, the Council was received in different ways, and its *novus habitus mentis* with regard to ecumenism also found expression in canon law. When Pope Saint John Paul II promulgated the Code of Canon Law in 1983, he highlighted four elements that constitute the newness of the Second Vatican Council and, consequently, also the newness of the Code, since the latter is to be interpreted in light of the Council. These four elements are among those that characterise the true and authentic image of the Church. Three are explicitly presented as constitutive of the Church's doctrine, namely: those concerning all the faithful; the hierarchy; and ecclesial communion. The fourth is identified as “the commitment of the Church to ecumenism”,² thereby highlighting ecumenism as an essential dimension of the Church's self-understanding and mission.

Saint John Paul II also emphasised ecumenism when, some years later, he promulgated the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches. Quoting the Conciliar decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (n. 24), he underscored the special task of the Eastern Churches in full communion with the Roman Apostolic See to foster the unity of all Christians, particularly of the Eastern Christians, through fidelity to their ancient traditions.³

The commitment to ecumenism is not merely an area of concern for the Catholic Church; it constitutes a fundamental ecclesial responsibility. The Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* already expressed it in these terms: “The attainment of union is the concern of the whole Church, faithful and shepherds alike.”⁴ This duty has been consistently reaffirmed by the Popes. Saint John Paul II wrote that the quest for Christian unity is not a matter of choice or expediency⁵, but a duty. Pope Benedict XVI also emphasised this obligation⁶. More recently, Pope Leo XIV stressed that, in order to carry out the ministry of Christian witness credibly, “we must walk together to reach unity and reconciliation among all Christians”.⁷

Although several Church documents speak of the particular duty of bishops to promote ecumenism⁸, they also regularly recall that this is a responsibility shared by all the faithful.⁹

¹ St Paul VI, *Speech at the opening of the second session of the Council*, 29 September 1963, 6.

² St John Paul II, Ap.Const. “*Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*”.

³ St John Paul II, Ap.Const. “*Sacri Canones*”.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, Decree “*Unitatis Redintegratio*” (UR), 5.

⁵ St John Paul II, Enc. “*Ut unum sint*” (UUS), 49.

⁶ Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, 18 January 2012.

⁷ Leo XIV, Ap. Lett. “*In Unitate Fidei*”, 12.

⁸ See for instance the Codes of Canon Law or the *Vademecum The Bishop and Christian Unity: An Ecumenical Vademecum*, published in 2020 by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

⁹ *Ecumenical Vademecum* (2020), 3; see also UUS, 31: the commitment to ecumenism, “far from being the responsibility of the Apostolic See alone, is also the duty of individual local and particular Churches”.

Ecumenical commitment, therefore, is neither the task of bishops or other ministers alone, nor solely that of theologians and Church leaders participating in international dialogues.

Having recalled the Catholic Church's commitment and duty to promote Christian unity, we may now ask: *what is the relationship between ecumenism and synodality?*

In his 2015 address commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis stated: "The commitment to build a synodal Church – a mission to which we are all called, each according to the role entrusted to him by the Lord – has significant ecumenical implications." He then expressed his conviction that "a careful examination of how, in the Church's life, the principle of synodality and the service of the one who presides are articulated will make a significant contribution to the progress of relations between our Churches."¹⁰ These affirmations offer a valuable indication of the direction that canon law should take in addressing the relationship between synodality and ecumenism.

From the beginning, therefore, the synodal journey invited the Catholic Church to look beyond her own borders, and, more specifically, to seek dialogue with Christians of other confessions, both at every level of the consultation process and during the synodal assemblies themselves.¹¹

Synodality was defined as "the walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God's Kingdom, in union with all humanity."¹² In this sense, synodality can be understood as a constitutive dimension of the Church. As Pope Francis stated: "*Synodality*, as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself."¹³ Referring to saint John Chrysostom, Pope Francis considers *Church* and *Synod* as synonymous: "the Church is nothing other than the journeying together of God's flock".¹⁴

The very theme of the recent Synod, "*For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*", announced in the *Preparatory document* published in 2021, reflects an ecumenical perspective. The concept of "communion" should not be interpreted in a restrictive sense as referring solely to communion within the Catholic Church. Rather, it also encompasses communion with other Christians, with whom the Catholic Church already shares a real, though still imperfect, communion.¹⁵

The *Preparatory document* clearly envisaged a Church open to a broader communion embracing all those who received the one Baptism in Christ. This was reflected in the participation of the fraternal delegates, which was in almost every respect equivalent to that of the members of the synod.¹⁶ Bishops were, in fact, encouraged to extend their listening beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church. The mission of the Church, which is directed towards the salvation of all humanity, calls for the visible unity of all Christians. The absence of full communion remains a source of scandal both within the Christian community and in the eyes of the world.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Address at the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2025.

¹¹ General Secretariat of the Synod, *Vademecum for the synod on Synodality. Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches First Phase [October 2021 – April 2022] in Dioceses and Bishops' Conferences Leading up to the Assembly of Bishops in Synod in October 2023*, 5.2 The Main Question for Consultation, n.7 Ecumenism.

¹² *For a Synodal Church. Communion, Participation, Mission*, Final document of the XVI Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (FD), approved by Pope Francis on 24 November, 2024, 28.

¹³ Pope Francis, *Address...*, October 17, 2025.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ UR 3.

¹⁶ *How to be a missionary synodal Church*, Instrumentum laboris for the Second session (October 2024), 24.

Synodality requires spiritual renewal (FD 28). Such renewal is realised, among other ways, through a renewed practice of listening: first to the Holy Spirit and, consequently, to one another, since all the baptised share in the gift of the Holy Spirit. This concerns all Christians. All Christians participate in the *sensus fidei* through Baptism. “Therefore, they should be listened to carefully, regardless of their tradition [...]. There can be no synodality without an ecumenical dimension.”¹⁷ Baptism is the basis of synodality; it also is the foundation of ecumenism.¹⁸

Listening, dialogue, discernment and the formulation of recommendations with a view to decisions and actions characterize synodal assemblies. This attitude is closely related to the exchange of gifts – gifts that are received through Baptism. All the baptised are enriched with gifts to share, manifestations of the Spirit given for the common good (cfr. *1 Cor* 12, 4-7).¹⁹ *Unitatis Redintegratio* spoke already about the exchange of gifts between Christians of different confessions. For this reason, the *Final document* refers to the exchange of gifts as “of crucial significance in the journey towards full and visible unity among all Churches and Christian communions. Moreover, it represents an effective sign of the unity in the faith and love of Christ that promotes both the credibility and the impact of the Christian mission (cf. *Jn* 17:21).”²⁰

The fundamental elements of listening to the Holy Spirit and discernment must now take concrete form and be put into practice. We therefore welcome this conference focusing on the transition “From listening to practice”.

2. The Role of Canon Law in the Church

Canon law should always have in mind the salvation of the souls, as mentioned in the last canon of the Latin Code of Canon Law. This entails a concern for the salvation of individuals, but it also has a broader communal and social dimension. When promulgating the Code of Canon Law in 1983, Saint John Paul II wrote: “[...] it is to be hoped that the new canonical legislation will prove to be an efficacious means in order that the Church may progress in conformity with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, and may every day be ever more suited to carry out its office of salvation in this world.”²¹ This statement points to the close relationship between ecclesiology and canon law: among the means through which the Church fulfils its mission are the norms of canon law. The spirit of the Second Vatican Council was one of openness. As we know, unlike previous councils, the Second Vatican Council did not pronounce any anathema and sought an “*aggiornamento*” (update) of the Church in her relationship with the world. Both elements underscore that the Church journeys through history, living in the eschatological tension between what is already present and what has yet to be fully realised.

Such a perspective necessarily entails development: the Church is called to grow and move forward. The mission of salvation that she is called to fulfil in this world likewise entails development. If canon law is to accompany this development, its norms must also be capable of evolving. Indeed, when the 1983 Code of Canon Law was promulgated, one of the points recalled from the outset was that, throughout the centuries, the Catholic Church has continually renewed and reformed its laws.²²

¹⁷ *A Synodal Church in Mission. Synthesis Report of the XVIth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, 28 October 2023, 7b.

¹⁸ Cf. UR 3: “For men who believe in Christ and have been truly baptized are in communion with the Catholic Church (...).” See also FD, 23.

¹⁹ Cf. FD 57.

²⁰ See FD 122.

²¹ Saint John Paul II, Ap.Const. “*Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*”.

²² Saint John Paul II, Ap.Const. “*Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*”.

At the same time, canon law continues, in essence, to be called to fulfil that twofold providential role that has characterized – or should characterize – its service from the beginning to the present day. On the one hand, its mission is to contribute, through the means proper to it, to ensuring the unbroken continuity of faith and essential discipline in accordance with the apostolic tradition. On the other hand – and no less importantly – it is also called to promote the Church’s missionary activity by helping to present her teaching in a truly living form, that is, in a language that can be understood by the people of our time. Both functions are, of course, equally important in a synodal Church with an ecumenical orientation.

New ecclesiological emphases and contemporary needs may shed new light on the laws of the Church. The outcomes of the synodal assemblies of 2023 and 2024 can help us to read existing laws from the perspective of a more synodal Church. Some current norms already leave room for a more synodal interpretation. The consultative role assigned to various bodies within the Church may appear restrictive. It should, however, be understood in relation to the duties of those who exercise pastoral authority, while keeping in mind that that Church is constitutively hierarchical.

Those who exercise ordained ministry are obliged to listen to those who participate in the consultation and cannot act as though the consultation has never taken place. As the *Final* document emphasizes, they “will not depart from the fruits of consultation that produce an agreement without a compelling reason”.²³ In other words, the consultative role of ecclesial bodies and the corresponding responsibilities of Church authorities need to be held in the right balance.

In a similar way, the current norms can be examined in light of the ecumenical commitment: how might they be interpreted in such a way as to foster ecumenical engagement and Christian unity? One simple example is the invitation of fraternal delegates to existing synodal bodies: nothing prohibits a pastoral diocesan or eparchial council to invite such delegates. The same applies to a pastoral parish council. An episcopal conference in the Latin Church could likewise meet regularly with other Christian church leaders exercising their ministry or office in the same territory; in a Synod of Bishops of an Eastern Catholic Church, other persons who are not members can be invited to expedite certain matters.²⁴ Such practices may be especially useful for promoting common action on issues of importance in a particular country or society, or for considering questions concerning relations between the faithful of the respective Churches.

Alongside a renewed reading of exiting norms from a synodal and ecumenical perspective, the synodal assemblies expressed the conviction that, if spiritual renewal is an essential element of synodality, a reform of structures is also necessary.²⁵ Such reform, in turn, requires a renewal of the norms of canon law.

If structures are to be reformed so as to become more synodal and ecumenical, it will be necessary to reflect on the criteria that should guide such reform, particularly the theological and ecclesiological principles on which it should be based.

3. The purpose of this conference and directions for the future

This conference can represent a further step in this direction. What, then, might its purpose be? In recent years, two conferences have been held on “*Listening to the East*” and one on “*Listening to the West*”, all focusing on synodality in the different Christian Churches and communions. Pope Francis described synodality as “walking together”; ecumenism also

²³ FD 91.

²⁴ CCEO, can.102, §3.

²⁵ FD 28, see also the Ecumenical Vademecum, 6.

can be considered as a process of walking together: listening to one another in order to know one another better, sharing our concerns and joys, and seeking ways of acting together and drawing closer to one another. This time, the conference focuses on ways of putting synodality into practice, particularly through the institutions and procedures by which it takes concrete form. These dimensions are, of course, inseparable from their underlying ecclesiological foundations.

In the spirit of an exchange of gifts, we want not only to listen to one another once again, but also to learn from one another. Synodal learning implies precisely this: learning together from one another. “The richness of the participation of Fraternal Delegates from other Churches and Christian Communions at the synodal Assembly invites us to pay more attention to the synodal practices of our ecumenical partners, both in the East and in the West. Ecumenical dialogue is fundamental to developing an understanding of synodality and the unity of the Church. It urges us to develop ecumenical synodal practices, including forms of consultation and discernment on questions of shared and urgent interest, as the celebration of an ecumenical Synod on evangelisation could be. It also invites us to mutual accountability for who we are, what we do, and what we teach. What makes this possible is our unity under the one Baptism that offers us the dynamism of communion, participation and mission and which gives life to our identity as the People of God.”²⁶

The synodal assemblies recognised that the understanding and configuration of synodality differ among the various Christian confessions. Catholic synodality is characterised by three essential dimensions: attentive listening to the entire People of God, episcopal collegiality, and the Petrine ministry. These three elements are inseparable; if any one of them is lacking, the result would no longer correspond to the Catholic understanding of synodality. The Orthodox Churches understand synodality in a strict sense, as the expression of the collegial exercise of authority proper to the bishops alone, as happens, for instance, in a Holy Synod. In a broader sense, synodality refers to the active participation of all the faithful in the life of the Church. The practices found in other Christian communities were also considered. The first synodal assembly, in 2023, therefore already concluded that this field required further study.²⁷ The synodal assembly of 2024 likewise drew attention to a variety of synodal institutions and configurations found in the Eastern and Western traditions.²⁸ This present conference seeks to contribute to this continuing reflection.

It will be important to proceed in a spirit of mutual listening and exchange of gifts, while remaining attentive to the legitimate diversity among the different traditions. Christian unity cannot be envisaged from a single perspective alone. Such legitimate diversity is already present within the Catholic Church through the Eastern Catholic Churches. At the level of canon law, the diversity is immediately visible in the existence of two Codes of canonical legislation. This itself reminds us that the Catholic Church cannot be identified simply with its Latin component. The existence of two Codes and two legal systems attest to the legitimacy of different ways of structuring ecclesial discipline within the particular ecclesial traditions – not for the sake of diversity itself, but because legitimate traditions have a right to exist and need not to be forced to conform to an identical model.

From a canonical perspective, synodality in an ecumenical perspective means recognizing and ensuring the effective functioning of the diversity of institutional forms and ecclesial processes, so that such diversity is not eliminated but placed at the service of communion. The existence of two different law systems within the Catholic Church confirms

²⁶ FD 138.

²⁷ *Synthesis Report* 7g.

²⁸ See FD 28.

the possibility of a form of synodality capable of accommodating the diversity of Christian traditions. This is an aim that can already be pursued today.

Looking further ahead, Saint John Paul II went even further when he promulgated the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches. He stated that the laws of that Code could be abrogated or changed by the supreme authority of the Church for just reasons; the most serious of which would be the full communion of all the Eastern Churches with the Catholic Church.²⁹ The Pope thus expressed his awareness that, in the journey towards unity, the laws of the Catholic Church cannot simply remain unchanged and be imposed upon other Eastern Churches. In other words, they would have to be adapted to the new situation of Christian unity. The different components of the Church would certainly need to establish together their laws, with due respect for their respective traditions and their legitimate diversity. What is said here with regard to the Eastern Churches would also need to be considered in relation to the Churches and Christian communions in the West. Since unity will not be achieved from one day to the next, every step that can be taken in this direction represents a significant contribution to unity. It would therefore be an important step forward if we were to arrive at a deeper mutual understanding of the synodal institutions and processes present in our different Churches and Christian communions.

One of the achievements of the synodal assemblies of 2023 and 2024 was the recognition that primacy, collegiality and synodality are intimately interconnected. Collegiality cannot exist without primacy, nor primacy without collegiality. Likewise, synodality entails both collegiality and primacy, while both primacy and collegiality are to be understood within a synodal perspective. I have already quoted Pope Francis as saying that synodality is the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself.³⁰ The Pope went on to say: “[...] inasmuch as the Church is nothing other than the “journeying together” of God’s flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord, then we understand too that, within the Church, no one can be “raised up” higher than others. On the contrary, in the Church, it is necessary that each person “lower” himself or herself, so as to serve our brothers and sisters along the way.”³¹

Against this background – the mutual relation between primacy, collegiality, and synodality, together with an understanding of ministry as service to the People of God – a number of questions arise that may be of particular interest:

- How does synodality work in your Churches? How is it related to the role of a “*primus*” within the synodal body?
- What does this imply at the different levels of ecclesial life?
- Which understanding of representation underlies the different institutions: does a person represent the group that elected or delegated him or her? What is the theological basis for such representation, and how is it expressed in practice?
- Does a bishop represent his own faith in a higher body/synod, or the faith of the local Church over which he presides? In the latter case, how does he proceed to identify the faith of his local Church?
- Who decides the agenda? Which aspects of Church life are dealt with by synodal institutions: doctrine, finances, practical matters? At what levels of the Church are they discussed and decided, and by whom?
- What happens when no agreement is reached?

²⁹ Saint John Paul II, Ap.Const. “Sacri canones”.

³⁰ Pope Francis, *Address...*, October 17, 2025.

³¹ *Ibid.*

- Could you also explain what does *not* work in your Church?

Looking to the future, a number of ecclesiological and canonical questions will require further study. For instance:

- How can we develop a theological account of synodality that is based not only on Christology but gives due attention to Pneumatology, within a Trinitarian foundation? How are we to hold together the sacrament of Baptism received by all and the sacrament of Holy Orders received by some of the faithful?
- Which canonical principles need to be safeguarded? Which forms might be adopted with respect to the cooperation of laypeople in Church life? Can we envisage a bishop/Church leader discussing topics of a synod beforehand, for example, with his pastoral council? Could councils and synodal institutions in the Church regularly include fraternal delegates from other Christian communities, particularly when addressing the pastoral challenges of our time, in which a united Christian witness in society can be especially significant? Could the same apply to matters concerning relations among faithful belonging to different Churches?
- One of the synodal Study Groups was entrusted with exploring “the link between synodality and primacy at the various levels (local, regional, universal) in their mutual interdependence”. This dimension certainly needs to be explored more deeply and developed further.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we should strive for a conversion of relationships and structures, so that they may become ever more authentic and ever more closely conformed to the Gospel. In this way, the witness of the People of God in history can be strengthened, bearing witness to the way in which God the Father has revealed himself in Jesus through the Holy Spirit.³²

³² See FD 50.