

Deliberation in a Church-Communion

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . .”

Piero Coda

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In this moment, the People of God is convened for a synodal process at every level. The upcoming Synod on synodality is a major opportunity that represents neither a break with the past nor a rash adventure risking to distort the Church's missionary witness to God's liberating, filial love in Jesus. Rather, it is a faithful, creative and enduring call to action in this challenging moment. Synodality can be seen as a 'process' opening onto the future with the guidance of the Spirit.

In this context, Cardinal Francesco Coccopalmerio's small book - *Ecclesial Synodality: 'Limited responsibility,' or Deliberation over Consultation?* - offers thoughtful reflection. It proposes a focused change from current canonical recognition of ecclesial synodal structures as merely consultative in nature to one that instead recognizes the value of these structures in deliberative processes.

I agree with both the theological reasoning and the canonical and pastoral implications of this proposal. On the one hand, it invites us to consider whether synodality is defined as the Church's typical mode of operation. On the other, it points to a specific reality and activity of Church mission: 'to seek, know and decide for the good of the Church' (pg. 14) through diverse synodal structures.

The Church: Communion Subject Discerning and Deliberating in the Spirit

We need to examine the theological reasoning that makes ecclesial synodal structures necessarily relevant, clear expressions of deliberation. These structures serve to express (insofar as is humanly possible) the identity and mission of the People of God.

¹ Francesco Coccopalmerio, *Sinodalità ecclesiale: "A responsabilità limitata" o Dal consultivo al deliberativo?* (Ecclesial Synodality: 'Limited Responsibility' or Deliberation over Consultation?) In conversation with Fr Lorenzo Prezzi and in memory of Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini (Vatican City: Vatican City Press, 2021).

Starting from the Council of Jerusalem (*Acts:15*) and on through Vatican II, the Church's own self-understanding is clear, despite countless twists and turns. By grace, the Church is called as a responsible communal 'subject' to follow Jesus under the guidance of the Spirit. The Kingdom of God at the service of the human family happens as 'seed and beginning'.

But what does this mean? The rule of the Church in its form and journey is Christ's grace. It is the commitment to follow Christ by shared discernment of steps needing to be taken. "*For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.*" (*Acts 15:28*). This was how the assembly deliberation in Jerusalem was communicated to us. The 'us' refers to the communal subject that discerns and decides. Reference to the 'Spirit' expresses our specific identity in following Christ, who promised that '*where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst*' (Mt 18: 20).

Equal Dignity, Diverse Roles

Two consequences follow from this:

First, Coccopalmerio emphasizes that dignity has a *specific characteristic*. The assembly of God's people is defined by the encounter in Christ of that which of God and that which is human and historical. This happens not only in the Eucharistic celebration, but also flows from the assembly's Eucharistic nature when making relevant decisions and discerning its discipleship journey and mission.

Secondly: the 'communal subject' convoked and sent forth by the Lord is not uniform and amorphous. '*It is a Body with many, diverse members*', to quote St. Paul. Radical equality comes from each one being a member of this Body. Each assembly member - according to Paul - is clothed in the same Christ. Thus, all possess equal dignity and sonship (conferred by baptism) before God and before every brother or sister. Its diversity is the fruit of the gift of Christ and his Spirit in the charisms and ministries that express different competencies and functions for the common good and in service to the mission entrusted by Jesus. Thus, the task of those within the assembly called by a specific sacramentally conferred grace, is to exercise a communal ministry of leadership. This ministry is carried out in the name and transparency of the one Lord and Teacher.

Shared Deliberation . . . How?

As mentioned previously, it is theologically appropriate to speak of the Church as a communal subject, and thus acknowledge its capacity (in the canonical sense) for *deliberation*: '*For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...*'

But how? And through what actions?

Current canon law defines '*tantum consultivum*' as a merely consultative vote by members in various synodal structures. Then, this is offered for deliberation, a deliberation reserved to those presiding in these given synodal structures, with one exception: An *Ecumenical Council*. In an Ecumenical Council, decisions are made by majority vote and should be in accordance with the vote of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. This vote is freely expressed by him as head of the College of Bishops, and without which the College as such cannot act (cf. canon 341 §1). This process is as old as the Church itself. And it adequately expresses - also in regard to deliberation -- the specific identity of the Church as communal subject.

Yet this is not true for the other synodal structures. Why is this? Cardinal Coccopalmerio proposes what he himself defines as an 'unusual idea', but one that truly goes to the root of

the problem: '[It is the idea] that canon lawyers have a sudden fear of adopting such a deliberative framework [for synodal structures outside an Ecumenical Council], and thus choose to keep consultative frameworks in order to ensure synodal structures do not go ahead *without* their shepherd. If instead deliberative voting was established, it could be very easy to interpret this in a similar manner to civil society and assume a majority vote is sufficient for valid decision making, even if the majority might lack the shepherd's vote of agreement' (p. 80).

Already in the third century, Cyprian of Carthage had written on the communal nature of the Church in Christ with a triplicate *nihil sine* ["nothing without..."] using these words: '*nothing without the bishop, nothing without the council of priests, nothing without the consent of the people*' (Ep. 14, 4). When the logic of 'nothing without' is shattered, the Church's specific identity and mission are broken as well.

Development of two perspectives

On the one hand, after Vatican II there is need for *increasing awareness* around the reality that all together in the Church constitute a unique and articulate communal subject. On the other, it is necessary to *codify the deliberative activity* of this 'subject' so that it is a clear expression of ecclesiality. Cardinal Coccopalmerio writes: 'In ecclesial deliberation, every member of the faithful who deliberates as a communal subject carrying out an act of will and expressing this by a vote, counts towards the forming of a majority. But unlike in civil society - because in the Church it is truly a belonging to a 'communal subject' - majority vote would not enough. Rather, it is essential for majority votes to also encompass the agreement of the pastor, freely expressed as head (and this is ecclesial deliberation)' (p. 78).

I, too, believe the moment has come for this step and we cannot forget Pope Francis' words: 'A synodal Church is what God desires for the third millennium.' It will not come in the next year or two. Rather it will be through a journey open to the future. It will most certainly be a long and demanding journey requiring trust and arduous work. In order to grow in awareness of this expression of the Church, a commitment to renewed formation of the entire Church is needed. Discipleship and communal discernment according to the mind of Christ, starting from those called to preside and serve in charity, will also be fundamental.