

## What is a Church synod or council?

Outline by Robert Fastiggi, Ph.D. Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, Michigan USA

Sources:

The International Theological Commission [ITC] *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018): [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_index-doc-pubbl\\_en.html#Documents](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_index-doc-pubbl_en.html#Documents).

XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops Second Session (2–27 October, 2024) *Final Document: For A Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* [FD]: [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_index-doc-pubbl\\_en.html#Documents](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_index-doc-pubbl_en.html#Documents).

Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann, eds., *Compendium of Creeds, definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012) [D-H].

### I. What does the word synod mean?

ITC (2018)

4. Since the first centuries, the word “synod” has been applied, with a specific meaning, to the ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels (diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal or universal) to discern, by the light of the Word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by.

The Greek σύνοδος [synodos] is translated into Latin as *synodus* or *concilium*. *Concilium*, in its profane use, refers to an assembly convoked by some legitimate authority. Although the roots of “synod” and “council” are different, their meanings converge. In fact, “council” enriches the semantic content of “synod” by its reference to the Hebrew *qahal* (קהל), the assembly convoked by the Lord, and its translation into Greek as ἐκκλησία [ekklesia], which, in the New Testament, refers to the eschatological convocation of the People of God in Christ Jesus.

In the Catholic Church the distinction between the use of the words “council” and “synod” is a recent one. In *Vatican II* they are synonymous, both referring to the council session[5]. A precise distinction was introduced by the *Codex Iuris Canonici* of the Latin Church (1983), which distinguishes between a particular (plenary or provincial) Council[6] and an ecumenical Council[7] on the one hand, and a Synod of Bishops[8] and a diocesan Synod[9] on the other hand[10].

5. In the theological, canonical and pastoral literature of recent decades, a neologism has appeared, the noun “synodality”, a correlate of the adjective “synodal”, with both of these deriving from the word “synod”. Thus people speak of synodality as a “constitutive dimension” of the Church or *tout court* of the “synodal Church”. This linguistic novelty, which needs careful theological clarification, is a sign of something new that has been maturing in the ecclesial consciousness starting from the Magisterium of *Vatican II*, and from the lived experience of local Churches and the universal Church since the last Council until today.

### II. Is there any Scriptural support for the holding of a Church synod?

The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:1–29: The Apostles gathered to decide whether or not the Gentile Christians needed to keep the Jewish cultic laws.

Council of Jerusalem, ca. 48–50 AD [New American Bible Revised Edition]

1\* Some who had come down from Judea were instructing the brothers,<sup>a</sup> “Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice,<sup>b</sup> you cannot be saved.”\*

2Because there arose no little dissension and debate by Paul and Barnabas with them, it was decided that Paul, Barnabas, and some of the others should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and presbyters about this question.

3They were sent on their journey by the church, and passed through Phoenicia and Samaria telling of the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.

4When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, as well as by the apostles and the presbyters, and they reported what God had done with them.

5But some from the party of the Pharisees who had become believers stood up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and direct them to observe the Mosaic law.”

6\* The apostles and the presbyters met together to see about this matter.

7\* After much debate had taken place, Peter got up and said to them, “My brothers, you are well aware that from early days God made his choice among you that through my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.<sup>c</sup>

8And God, who knows the heart, bore witness by granting them the holy Spirit just as he did us.<sup>d</sup>

9He made no distinction between us and them, for by faith he purified their hearts.<sup>e</sup>

10Why, then, are you now putting God to the test by placing on the shoulders of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?<sup>f</sup>

11On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus,<sup>g</sup> in the same way as they.”\*

12The whole assembly fell silent, and they listened while Paul and Barnabas described the signs and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles through them.

13\* After they had fallen silent, James responded, “My brothers, listen to me.

14Symeon\* has described how God first concerned himself with acquiring from among the Gentiles a people for his name.

15The words of the prophets agree with this, as is written:

16‘After this I shall return<sup>h</sup>

and rebuild the fallen hut of David;

from its ruins I shall rebuild it

and raise it up again,

17so that the rest of humanity may seek out the Lord,

even all the Gentiles on whom my name is invoked.

Thus says the Lord who accomplishes these things,

18known from of old.’

19<sup>i</sup> It is my judgment, therefore, that we ought to stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God,

20but tell them by letter to avoid pollution from idols, unlawful marriage, the meat of strangled animals, and blood.<sup>j</sup>

21For Moses, for generations now, has had those who proclaim him in every town, as he has been read in the synagogues every sabbath.”

22Then the apostles and presbyters, in agreement with the whole church, decided to choose representatives and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. The ones chosen were Judas, who was called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers.

23This is the letter delivered by them: “The apostles and the presbyters, your brothers, to the brothers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia of Gentile origin: greetings.

24 Since we have heard that some of our number [who went out] without any mandate from us have upset you with their teachings and disturbed your peace of mind,  
 25 we have with one accord decided to choose representatives and to send them to you along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,  
 26 who have dedicated their lives to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
 27 So we are sending Judas and Silas who will also convey this same message by word of mouth:  
 28<sup>k</sup> ‘It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities,  
 29 namely, to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage. If you keep free of these, you will be doing what is right. Farewell.’”<sup>l</sup>

### **III. What is the significance of the Council of Jerusalem for future Church synods?**

The 2024 Final Document points to the Council of Jerusalem as providing a model for how the Holy Spirit guides the Church

81. In order to promote relationships capable of sustaining and orienting the mission of the Church, a priority must be made to exercise the evangelical wisdom that allowed the apostolic community of Jerusalem to seal the result of the first synodal event using the following words: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). This is discernment that can be qualified as “ecclesial,” since it is the People of God that undertake it in view of mission. The Spirit, whom the Father sends in Jesus’ name and who teaches everything (cf. Jn 14:26), guides believers in every age “to all truth” (Jn 16:13). Through the Spirit’s presence and enduring action, the “tradition which comes from the apostles progresses in the Church” (DV 8).

### **IV. What are the different types of synods or councils?**

Note: The Council of Trent, in its 1563 *Decree on Reform*, canon 2, said that provincial councils should be held every 3 years and diocesan synods every year. This, though, was rarely followed.

The 1983 Code of Canon Law (*Codex Iuris Canonici*) [CIC]

#### **Diocesan Synod CIC, 460–462**

Can. 460 A diocesan synod is a group of selected priests and other members of the Christian faithful of a particular church who offer assistance to the diocesan bishop for the good of the whole diocesan community according to the norm of the following canons.

Can. 461 §1. A diocesan synod is to be celebrated in individual particular churches when circumstances suggest it in the judgment of the diocesan bishop after he has heard the presbyteral council.

§2. If a bishop has the care of several dioceses or has the care of one as the proper bishop but of another as administrator, he can convoke one diocesan synod for all the dioceses entrusted to him.

Can. 462 §1. The diocesan bishop alone convokes a diocesan synod, but not one who temporarily presides over a diocese.

§2. The diocesan bishop presides over a diocesan synod. He can, however, delegate a vicar general or episcopal vicar to fulfill this responsibility for individual sessions of the synod.

**A Provincial Council** (e.g. a Provincial of the bishops of Michigan under the Archbishop of Detroit, the Metropolitan)

Can. 440 §1. A provincial council for the different particular churches of the same ecclesiastical province is to be celebrated whenever it seems opportune in the judgment of the majority of the diocesan bishops of the province, without prejudice to can. 439, §2.

**A Plenary Council** (e.g. the three plenary councils of the US bishops held in Baltimore in 1852, 1866, 1884. The 1884 Council of Baltimore organized a committee for the establishing of a catholic university and another committee was organized to prepare a catechism, which was realized in The Baltimore Catechism.

Can. 439 §1. A plenary council, that is, one for all the particular churches of the same conference of bishops, is to be celebrated whenever it seems necessary or useful to the conference of bishops, with the approval of the Apostolic See.

**An ecumenical council:** a council in which all the Catholic bishops of the world are called together or a council that the Roman Pontiff confirms as having ecumenical status and authority. The Catholic Church recognizes 21 councils as ecumenical: from Nicaea I (325) to Vatican II (1962–1965)

Can. 337 §1. The college of bishops exercises power over the universal Church in a solemn manner in an ecumenical council.

§2. It exercises the same power through the united action of the bishops dispersed in the world, which the Roman Pontiff has publicly declared or freely accepted as such so that it becomes a true collegial act.

§3. It is for the Roman Pontiff, according to the needs of the Church, to select and promote the ways by which the college of bishops is to exercise its function collegially regarding the universal Church.

Can. 338 §1. It is for the Roman Pontiff alone to convoke an ecumenical council, preside over it personally or through others, transfer, suspend, or dissolve a council, and to approve its decrees.

§2. It is for the Roman Pontiff to determine the matters to be treated in a council and establish the order to be observed in a council. To the questions proposed by the Roman Pontiff, the council fathers can add others which are to be approved by the Roman Pontiff.

Can. 339 §1. All the bishops and only the bishops who are members of the college of bishops have the right and duty to take part in an ecumenical council with a deliberative vote.

§2. Moreover, some others who are not bishops can be called to an ecumenical council by the supreme authority of the Church, to whom it belongs to determine their roles in the council.

**Synod of Bishops:** established by St. Paul VI after Vatican II.

Can. 342 The synod of bishops is a group of bishops who have been chosen from different regions of the world and meet together at fixed times to foster closer unity between the Roman Pontiff and bishops, to assist the Roman Pontiff with their counsel in the preservation and growth of faith and morals and in the observance and strengthening of ecclesiastical discipline, and to consider questions pertaining to the activity of the Church in the world.

Can. 343 It is for the synod of bishops to discuss the questions for consideration and express its wishes but not to resolve them or issue decrees about them unless in certain cases the Roman Pontiff has endowed it with deliberative power, in which case he ratifies the decisions of the synod.

Note: there have been 16 ordinary general synods of bishops held since 1967; 3 extraordinary general; and 11 special ones.

### **Synods of Bishops in the Eastern Catholic Code of Canon Law**

ITC (2018)

The *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* (1990) mentions, on the one hand, the Ecumenical Council (CCEO 50), on the other the Synod of Bishops (CCEO 46,1), the Synod of Bishops of the Patriarchal Church (CCEO 192), the Synod of Bishops of the major archiepiscopal Church (CCEO 152), the Metropolitan Synod (CCEO 133,1) and the Permanent Synod of the Patriarchal Curia (CCEO 114,1).

### **V. What local or regional councils have been important in Church history?**

Synod of Elvira, Spain ca. 300–303 [D-H, 117–121]: dealt with the indissolubility of marriage and clerical celibacy.

First Synod of Arles of 314 [D-H, 123] dealt with the baptism of heretics.

Synod of Serdica, ca. 343 [D-H, 133–135] affirmed the primacy of the See of Rome.

Synod of Rome, 382 [D-H, 152–180]: affirmed many important Christological and Trinitarian teachings.

3<sup>rd</sup> Synod of Carthage of 397 [D-H, 186]: affirmed the Canon of Scripture.

15<sup>th</sup> Synod of Carthage of 418 [D-H, 222–230]: affirmed important teachings on original sin and grace.

### **VI. What local synod caused problems?**

The Monophysite Synod of Ephesus of 449, which was described by Pope St. Leo I as a “robber council.”

The 1786 Synod of Pistoia (Tuscany, Italy), which, among other errors, rejected worship of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Pope Pius VI, in his constitution, *Auctorem Fidei* of 1794, condemned the errors of this Jansenist inspired Synod [D-H, 2600–2700]