

**RE-EMERGENCE OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS
IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH**

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*On the sixtieth anniversary of the opening
of the Second Vatican Council
we pause to remember!*

Historian, Giuseppe Alberigo, offers a good summary of the context within which the Synod of Bishops was re-born in our day:

“Pope John XXIII had decided that the first topic the Council would work on would be the liturgy. This was the aspect of the Church’s life in which renewal had already made the most progress, and the preparatory project for it was the only one that had found a consensus among the bishops, who had already been sensitised by the liturgical movement. So, from October 22 to November 13 (1962), the assembly discussed liturgical reform; votes taken on both the entirety of the schema and each individual chapter always showed a great majority in favour, in spite of the tenacious resistance of a minority stubbornly opposed to any innovation.

“Thus among these people, who had not even known one another before, a convergence of sentiments and viewpoints gradually manifested, giving rise to a completely unexpected and spontaneous majority, a very large number of votes that tended to converge on the major topics of the Council. It was a gradual process, without any planning or management; the Council Fathers were simply becoming aware of their role and of the vast and unforeseen horizons of the Council itself. Their favourable response did not concern the proposed text on liturgical reform alone; it also expressed the conviction that the time of fear, the era of the Church as a secure fortress, were over. The adoption of the vernacular languages, at least for some parts of the liturgical

celebrations, was the most evident innovation, if not the most important. It was a way of re-establishing contact with the common people, of proposing the gospel message in a comprehensible way. The discussion brought forth significant elements of theology that had been overlooked until then; that is, the local Church or diocese, gained its centrality as an authentic Christian community in which the profession of the faith transcends the level of the individual to become a communitarian act around the altar of the bishop, who reacquired his dimension of authentic successor of the apostles” (Giuseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006, 25-26).



On 1 December 1962 – just one week before the close of the first period on 8 December – the Council Fathers had turned to the schema on the Church:

“It began to seem that the success of the Council would depend strictly upon the Church’s manner of defining itself. This was all the more true in that the liturgical reform had foreshadowed some significant ideas about the Church that corrected the excessively institutional and juridical approach of recent centuries” (Alberigo, op cit, 29).

Cardinal Ottaviani, head of the Theological Preparatory Commission that had prepared the schema on the Church, introduced the schema on the floor of the Council.

Despite Ottaviani’s claims concerning the outstanding competence of those who prepared that schema, six of the fourteen Fathers who spoke that morning, “called for revisions so complete as to be tantamount to outright rejection of the text as it stood. One of the

speakers, Bishop De Smedt,¹ summed up his criticism in three epithets: the schema, he said, was guilty of triumphalism, clericalism, and legalism” (Ralph Wiltgen S.V.D., *The Rhine Flows into the Tiber: A History of Vatican II*, Rockford, ILL: Tan Books, 1967, 56-57).

A very specific criticism of the schema was offered by the Maronite Bishop Michael Doumith of Sarba, Lebanon, a member of the Theological Commission. Doumith severely criticised the chapter on the bishops:

“He said that, just as a mother gives her child a toy with a thousand warnings not to break it, so, too, ‘they give us, with a thousand cautions, a concept of the episcopacy.’ He could not erase from his mind, he said, the painful impression that bishops, according to the schema, were no more than functionaries of the Pope” (Ibid).

Doumith’s intervention raised one of the most significant issues at the Council: Does the bishop derive his authority from the sacrament conferred at consecration or from the Pope?



When the Council Fathers gathered for the Second Session on 29 September 1963, they quickly moved to continue the debate on the schema on the Church. This debate began on 4 October 1963. It continued until 16 October. A major focus was how authority is to be exercised within the Church. Strong opinions were held and expressed on the floor of the Council.

¹ Bishop De Smedt (1909-1995) was Bishop of Bruges, Belgium. He was a close friend and co-operator with Joseph Cardijn.

The debate seemed to have no end in sight. An intervention was needed. On 30 October 1963 the Fathers were asked to take a straw vote on five questions:²

“The results of the voting on now five questions put to the fathers were dramatic:

“1. Should the schema assert that episcopal consecration is the supreme grade of the sacrament of Orders? The Vote: 2,123 affirmative, 34 negative.

“2. Should the schema assert that every legitimately consecrated bishop in communion with the other bishops and the Roman Pontiff is a member of the Body of Bishops? The vote: 2,154 affirmative, 104 negative.

“3. Should the schema assert that the so-called Body or College of Bishops in its evangelizing, sanctifying, and governing task is successor to the original College of the Apostles and, always in communion with the Roman Pontiff, enjoys full and supreme power over the universal church? The vote: 2,148 affirmative, 336 negative.

“4. Should the schema assert that the aforementioned power of the College of Bishops, united with their head, belongs to it by divine ordinance [and therefore not by papal delegation]? The vote: 2,138 affirmative, 408 negative.

“5. Should the schema assert that it is opportune to consider the reinstatement of the diaconate as a permanent grade of sacred

² This straw vote was initially scheduled for 16 October 1963 but was postponed. The postponement pointed to both the procedural complexities of the Council as well as the deep theological divisions, especially in the understandings of the Church. See Alberto Melloni, “The Beginning of the Second Period: The Great Debate on the Church” in Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A Komonchak, editors, *History of Vatican II -Volume III*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 64-105.

ministry, according to needs in different parts of the church? The vote: 2,120 affirmative, 525 negative” (John O'Malley S. J., *What Happened at Vatican II*, Cambridge, MASS: The Belknap Press, 2008, 183-184).



The foregoing is the context within which the debate on the schema concerning bishops began. Cardinal Marella³ presented the schema in the conciliar assembly on 4 November 1963. From the outset, the schema was attacked – especially the chapter entitled “Relationships Between Bishops and the Roman Curia”.

Wiltgen records a telling moment:

“Following the example of many Council Fathers, I left my seat halfway through the meeting and went to the coffee shop which the Council Fathers had christened ‘Bar Jona.’ (Coffee shops in Rome are known as bars.) This one was set up in a sacristy, and inside I had to elbow my way through noisy groups of bishops and periti drinking coffee and soft drinks. Archbishop D’Souza, of Bhopal (formerly of Nagpur), whom I met that day in the coffee shop, assured me that criticism of the schema would increase as the days went by. ‘No one has anything to fear from giving us bishops more power; we are not children,’ he said” (Ralph Wiltgen S.V.D., *The Inside Story of Vatican II: A Firsthand Account of the Council's Inner Workings* (pp. 158-159). TAN Books. Kindle Edition).⁴

³ Cardinal Marella (1895-1984) was born in Rome, ordained priest 1918 and made cardinal by Pope John XXIII in 1959. He work in the Vatican diplomatic corps and the curia. He had been Internuncio in Japan during World War II.

⁴ Ralph Wiltgens SVD published *The Rhine Flows in the Tiber: A History of Vatican II*, in 1967. Wiltgen has updated that original book, now published as *The Inside Story of Vatican II: A Firsthand Account of the Council's Inner Workings*.

On Wednesday 6 November 1963, there was a memorable intervention from His Beatitude Maximos IV Saigh. He offered a solution to the overly-centralized government of the Church. His solution was based on the doctrine of collegiality:

“The collegial responsibility of the episcopate for the Church, he said, is not adequately exercised when the Roman Curia alone embodies the collaboration of the Catholic episcopate in the central government of the Church. The patriarch therefore offered a new solution: Since all the bishops of the world cannot be continuously gathered in a council, a limited group of them, representing their colleagues, should have the concrete responsibility for assisting the pope in the general government of the Church as an ‘authentic Sacred College of the universal Church’ (Joseph Famerée, “Bishops and Dioceses and the Communications Media (November 5-25, 1963)” in Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A Komonchak, editors, *History of Vatican II – Volume III*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000, 124-125).

John O’Malley notes:

“Maximos had called for an important structural change. His proposal was **the first effort at the council to create a practical implementation of collegiality.** (Emphasis added.) Thus the issue of how to reduce collegiality to concrete reality got put on the table of the commission. How to make collegiality work in practice? This was a crucial moment in the council” (John O’Malley SJ, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Cambridge, MASS: The Belknap Press, 2008, 191).



On Friday 8 November 1963, the debate became fiery. The seventy-six-year old – and almost blind – Cardinal Frings of Cologne, made his

intervention.⁵ Among other things, he said the Holy Office's "procedure in many respects is no longer suited to our age, harms the Church and is scandalous to many" (Joseph Famerée, op cit, 127).

Famerée continues:

"Applause broke out in the hall. Frings went on to demand that even in the Holy Office no one be condemned before having been heard and having the opportunity to correct himself. The number of bishops residing in the Curia should be lessened: The episcopate is not an honorific title. The same for priests: Many curial offices could just as easily be filled with lay people. (T)he archbishop had dared to say in plain language, on the platform of the Council, what many of the Fathers (to say nothing of numerous Christians) thought and expressed behind the scenes regarding the procedure of the Holy Office.

"Ottaviani's intervention was especially awaited, and it was with strong feeling and even a sob in his voice that he gave an improvised response to the accusation made by the Cardinal of Cologne before returning to his prepared remarks. He issued a 'very indignant protest in answer to the words spoken against the Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office, whose president is the Supreme Pontiff'. Applause came from the seats of the Italian and curial group" (Ibid).⁶

⁵ Frings was Archbishop of Cologne 1942-1969 and was known as a strong opponent of Nazism. Pope Pius XII made him a cardinal in 1946. Cardinal Frings' *peritus* – the 35-year old Joseph Ratzinger – helped write Frings' speech.

⁶ It is worth noting that Frings records in his memoirs of the Council that, the next day, Ottaviani embraced him and said, "after all, we both want the same thing!" (Ibid).

Ottaviani went on to say that, in his view, the collegiality of the apostles cannot be derived from the Scriptures. Collegiality, he argued, would diminish the primacy of Peter.⁷

O'Malley observes that this clash between Frings and Ottaviani

“dramatized the fundamental issue in the council—how the church was to operate in the future: continue its highly centralized mode of operation, with its top-down style of management and apodictic mode of communication, or somehow attenuate them by broader consultation and sharing of responsibility” (John O'Malley, op cit, 193).



Pope Paul VI repeatedly affirmed his intention to establish a synod – for example, in his address to the Curia 21 September 1964; his address to the Council Fathers 29 September 1963, 21 November 1964 at the closing of the third period of the Council.

Finally, in his opening address at the fourth and final period of the Council, Pope Paul VI made the announcement that the Synod of Bishops would be established.

The following day, 15 September 1965, Paul VI issued his Motu Proprio, *Apostolica Sollicitudo* establishing the Synod of Bishops.

The Motu Proprio is a brief document – about 1500 words. The general purposes of the Synod as set out in that Motu Proprio are:

- a) to promote a closer union and greater cooperation between the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops of the whole world;

⁷ One of Ottaviani's strong supporters, curial Cardinal Browne, “warned that the right of the college to ‘co-govern’ the entire Church along with the pope lessens the pontifical power of governing and contradicts the definition of the plenitude of power at Vatican I” (Famerée, op cit, 132).

- b) to see to it that accurate and direct information is supplied on matters and situations that bear upon the internal life of the Church and upon the kind of action that it should be carrying on in today's world;
- c) to facilitate agreement, at least, on essential matters of doctrine and on the course of action to be taken in the life of the Church.

The immediate reaction to *Apostolica Sollicitudo* was positive. However, a closer reading caused some concerns:

“Repeatedly stated in this Motu Proprio was that in every particular the Synod was subject ‘immediately and directly to the power’ of the pope. It was strictly an advisory body with no authority beyond what the pope conceded to it. ...

“Whatever the merits of *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, it was an expression of papal primacy, not of collegiality, a word never mentioned in the text. It was a preemptive strike by the center. No syllable in it could give a sleepless moment to Bishop Carli⁸ and his colleagues. The body described in *Apostolica Sollicitudo* could hardly have been further from what Maximos had proposed the previous year. With one stroke the text cut collegiality off from grounding in the institutional reality of the church” (John O’Malley, op cit, 252-3).



Even though Pope Paul VI does not explicitly mention collegiality in his Motu Proprio, we cannot escape the fact that the Synod of

⁸ Bishop Luigi Maria Carli (1914-1986). Ordained priest of Comachio, Italy 1937, bishop of Segni, 1957 and archbishop of Gaeta, 1973. Carli was a member of the minority that formed the “International Group of Fathers”. Archbishop Lefebvre was also a member of this group. Their purpose was to lobby passionately for positions held by the minority.

Bishops was – in large measure – re-born out of the overwhelming desire for collegiality expressed by the Fathers of the Council.

If the Synod of Bishops does not provide an experience of authentic collegiality, it will be seriously deficient.

Pope Francis has made us aware of the deeper possibilities of the Synod with his emphasis on “synodality”. He sets out the vision and the challenge clearly in his Address at the Commemorative Ceremony for the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015:

“A synodal church is a listening church, knowing that listening ‘is more than feeling.’ It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. Faithful people, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: we are one in listening to others; and all are listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), to know what the Spirit ‘is saying to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7)”.

