



DIRK ANSORGE

Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule Sankt Georgen, Frankfurt am Main, Germany

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2160-1388>

CATHOLICITY ON TRIAL: ECCLESIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE GLOBAL CATHOLIC CHURCH

KATOLICYZM WYSTAWIONY NA PRÓBĘ: REFLEKSJE EKLEZJOLOGICZNE NAD JEDNOŚCIĄ I RÓŻNORODNOŚCIĄ W KOŚCIELE POWSZECHNYM

ABSTRACT

During the period of European colonialism, the Catholic Church underwent a process of global expansion which was characterised by a tendency towards uniformity dominated by the Latin Church and its capital, Rome. However, the end of colonialism and the subsequent Second Vatican Council saw the Church become inculturated into diverse religious and social contexts, making the issue of unity and diversity within the Catholic Church imperative. The key questions are: how much unity is necessary, and how much diversity can be tolerated, to preserve the unity of the Catholic Church on a global scale? Focusing on ecclesiological reflections, this essay analyses the *Final Document of the 16th Ordinary Synod of Bishops* in terms of its attitude towards unity and diversity within the Catholic Church. What possible consequences might the Synodal Journey of the global Church have for its institutions and structures? Since, according to *Lumen Gentium*, the Church is a complex reality consisting of institutional and spiritual elements (LG 8), the relationship between the truth of the Gospel and the identity of the Church can be examined from a sociological perspective in order to develop a comprehensive

W okresie europejskiego kolonializmu Kościół katolicki przeszedł proces globalnej ekspansji, który charakteryzował się tendencją do ujednoczenia zdominowanego przez Kościół łaciński i jego stolicę, Rzym. Jednak koniec kolonializmu i następujący po nim Sobór Watykański II doprowadziły do inkulturacji Kościoła w różnych kontekstach religijnych i społecznych, co sprawiło, że kwestia jedności i różnorodności w Kościele katolickim stała się sprawą najwyższej wagi. Kluczowe pytania brzmią: ile jedności jest konieczne i ile różnorodności można tolerować, aby zachować jedność Kościoła katolickiego w skali globalnej? Koncentrując się na refleksjach eklezjologicznych, niniejszy artykuł analizuje *Dokument końcowy XVI Zwyczajnego Synodu Biskupów* pod kątem jego stosunku do jedności i różnorodności w Kościele katolickim. Jakie możliwe konsekwencje może mieć synodalna podróż Kościoła globalnego dla jego instytucji i struktur? Ponieważ zgodnie z *Lumen gentium* Kościół jest złożoną rzeczywistością składającą się z elementów instytucjonalnych i duchowych (LG 8), relację między prawdą Ewangelii a tożsamością Kościoła można zbadać z perspektywy socjologicznej, aby uzyskać

understanding. The article argues that the sacramental structure of the Church (LG 1) justifies the implementation of “secular” elements into its structures, when enabling it to fulfil its mission of spreading the Gospel into different cultures more effectively.

kompleksowe zrozumienie. W artykule argumentuje się, że sakramentalna struktura Kościoła (LG 1) uzasadnia wdrożenie elementów „świeckich” do jego struktur, umożliwiając mu skuteczniejsze wypełnianie misji szerzenia Ewangelii w różnych kulturach.

At the end of September 2024, the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops formally adopted its *Final Document* on “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission.” The document was immediately recognized by Pope Francis as an expression of his ordinary Magisterium. Its contents directly address the subject of “Unity and Diversity in the Global Church.”

To be more precise, one should employ the term “Global *Catholic* Church.” This global Catholic Church was represented at the Synod by nearly 400 delegates from around the world. Rather than by the black-robed clergy, the diversity of cultural traditions in which the global Catholic Church is inculturated was illustrated by the colourfully dressed women from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The following essay will present some ecclesiological reflections on unity and diversity in the universal Catholic Church. Firstly, it will recall the existence of a plurality of legal structures within the Catholic Church (1). After that, some reflections on the *Final Document* of the 16th Ordinary Synod of Bishops will be presented (2). Based on this document, the third step will outline some of the consequences of the synodal journey of the universal Church for its institutions and structures (3). The fourth step is devoted to what I consider to be a central issue for ecclesiology, that is the relationship between truth and identity (4). Finally, I will draw some conclusions for ecclesiology in general (5).

1. Unity and Diversity in Legal Structures

A few decades ago, I had the opportunity to study theology for two semesters with the Benedictines on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. One of the most exciting experiences during this time was a series of meetings with clerics and monks from the so-called Eastern Churches or Oriental Churches. During these meetings, I soon learnt that there are churches which are in communion with the Pope and those which are not. It is noteworthy that a total of 23 Eastern-Catholic Churches acknowledge the Pope as the supreme authority of the universal Church, including their own.

Like the Orthodox Churches, these Catholic Churches of the East celebrate Holy Mass according to liturgical traditions, which differ significantly from those practised in Western Churches. Furthermore, the Eastern Catholic Churches adhere to a distinct Code of Canon Law, the *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium* (CCEO). The promulgation of this Code by Pope John Paul II occurred in 1990,

marking a period of seven years after the promulgation of the *Codex Iuris Canonici* (CIC) for the Western Church, otherwise designated as the “Latin” Church.

The *Code for the Eastern Catholic Churches* differs from the Code for the Latin Catholic Church, at times to a considerable extent. To take one example, the Code opens up the possibility of married clergy working in parishes (c. 373). Compared to the Latin Code, it prescribes different ways of making decisions in the Church. The practice of synodality, which is not yet well-established in the Western Church, but which has a long and stable tradition in the Eastern Churches, is structured in great detail in the CCEO (c. 322, § 1-4).

The CCEO refers to the Oriental Catholic Churches as Churches “*sui iuris*.” The term *sui iuris* is an innovation of the Code for the Oriental Churches. According to c. 27, a “Church *sui iuris*” is “a community of Christian believers gathered together by a hierarchy according to the norm of law and recognised as such, expressly or tacitly, by the supreme authority of the Church.” Chapter II of the CCEO deals with Churches *sui iuris* and Rites (cc. 27–41), containing definitions for both “Church *sui iuris*” and “rite”: “A rite is the liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary patrimony, culture and circumstances of history of a distinct people, by which its own manner of living the faith is manifested in each Church *sui iuris*” (c. 28 § 1). The chapter offers more developed and detailed norms regarding ascription to these Churches (cc. 29–38).

The CCEO denotes the relative autonomy of these Churches and opens the possibility of preserving their patrimonial heritage. Chapter IV of the CCEO (cc. 55–150) recognizes in the patriarchal, major archiepiscopal and metropolitan Churches an intermediate level between the local bishop and the bishop of Rome. Such intermediate level is unknown in the Latin Church. The Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches attributes to the patriarchal Churches, within their territories, the highest degree of autonomy in self-government (cf. cc. 78 and 110). A lower degree of autonomy is attributed to major archiepiscopal Churches (cc. 151–154) and metropolitan Churches (can. 155–176).

Chapter VII of the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* establishes the norms for the election of bishops in the patriarchal churches (canons 181–187, § 1). These norms delineate a comprehensive scope of participation for the relevant electoral body. Chapter IX addresses the assemblies of hierarchs of Churches *sui iuris* (c. 322), which bear a resemblance to episcopal conferences in the Latin Church.

As a systematic theologian rather than a canon lawyer, my intention is not to present legal analyses of the various canons in the two existing Codes of Canon Law. From an ecclesiological perspective, it is a noteworthy fact that the Catholic Church is endowed with two distinct legal codes within a single entity. This suggests that the plurality of legal structures is compatible with the unity of the Catholic Church.

Another significant sign of plurality within the Catholic Church is the existence of different forms of liturgy celebrated in the Eastern and Latin traditions. Even within the Western liturgical tradition there exists a plurality of rites to

celebrate Holy Mass. In 2007, when Pope Benedict XVI promulgated his Apostolic Letter *Summorum Pontificum*, he distinguished between an “ordinary” and an “extraordinary” rite of the Eucharist. By this act, the Pope acknowledged the legitimacy of a plurality of liturgical forms of the Eucharistic – a concept analogous to that of the Ambrosian and Mozarabic rites which persist in being practised in Milan and Toledo to the present day.¹ The existence of a plurality of liturgical rites within the Catholic Church underscores its capacity to embrace diversity without compromising the unity of the Church.

2. Catholicity as Diversity within Unity

The *Final Document* of the 16th Ordinary Synod of Bishops revisits the theme of unity and diversity within the Catholic Church. In Part I of the document, the subject of Eastern Churches is addressed: “The whole Church has always been comprised of a plurality of peoples and languages as well as of local Churches. In turn, these local Churches have always possessed their own rites and disciplines as well as their own distinctive theological and spiritual heritage; so too, their own vocations, charisms and ministries at the service of the common good.” The Synod asserts that such diversity does not pose a threat to the unity of the Church. This is because “unity in diversity is realised by Christ, the cornerstone, and the Holy Spirit, the source of all harmony. This unity in diversity is precisely what is meant by the catholicity of the Church. The plurality of the Churches *sui iuris*, of which the synodal process highlighted the richness, is a sign of this very catholicity” (no. 38).

In the opening paragraph of the *Final Document*, the subject of “unity” is addressed by reference to the unifying agency of the Holy Spirit. God “continues to build among his People a unity that establishes harmony amidst differences” (no. 1). The *Document* acknowledges the plurality and diversity of cultural traditions in which the Church is embedded. It is asserted that such diversity does not pose a threat to the Church’s unity because it is based on a “shared baptismal identity.” This identity, in turn, “is rooted in the diversity of contexts in which the Church is present and finds unity in the one Father, one Lord, and one Spirit” (no. 4). Ultimately, the document posits that the model for unity and diversity in the Church is founded on the harmony between unity and diversity in the triune God.

The *Final Document* acknowledges the importance of valuing diverse forms of liturgy as a manifestation of synodality, underscoring the necessity for an inculturated form of liturgical celebration: “Deepening the link between liturgy and

¹ It is noteworthy that in his *motu proprio Traditionis custodes* of 16 July 2021, Pope Francis declared that the 1970 liturgical books in the versions promulgated by Popes Paul VI and John Paul II are “the only expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite” (Art. 1). Concurrently, the pontiff promulgated the abrogation of all preceding norms, instructions, grants and customs, including, notably, *Summorum Pontificum* (Art. 8). The terms “ordinary form” and “extraordinary form of the Roman Rite”, which were introduced in 2007, are now deemed obsolete.

synodality will help all Christian communities, in the diversity of their cultures and traditions, to adopt celebratory styles that make visible the face of a synodal Church” (no. 27). It is noteworthy that the document does not prohibit the introduction of innovative styles of liturgy; rather, it is an encouragement to do so, with the aim of expressing the various cultural forms and traditions associated with the practice of Christianity and the Christian faith within the context of a global Church.

However, the Synod did not stop here. Instead, it encourages further study of innovative ways of “preaching within liturgical celebrations.” What does it mean? The document’s invitation may be interpreted as a vote in favour of allowing non-clergy to preach not only in Vespers and other services but also in Eucharistic liturgies.² And indeed: On a global scale, there is a significant number of well-educated catechists or nuns in the female orders who are both capable and willing to preach the Gospel appropriately.

A special chapter of the *Final Document* is entitled “Unity as Harmony” (no. 34–42). This title recalls a famous book title by Hans Urs von Balthasar: “Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism.” The book was originally published in 1972, a period which witnessed vigorous debates within the Catholic Church concerning the reception of the Second Vatican Council. In addressing the issue of unity and diversity within the Church, von Balthasar adopts a resolutely theological perspective. The argument is rooted in the New Testament’s conceptualisation of the Church as “unity in plurality.” In the final analysis, the Church can be regarded as an “icon of the Trinity”, von Balthasar argues (cf. Forte 1991). The plurality inherent within the Church derives from unity and ultimately reverts to it. Such reversion is not a case of dissolution, but rather, a revelation of unity as it has always existed in the trinitarian life of God: a communion of love.

The *Final Document* argues likewise: It perceives plurality and diversity within the Church as an expression of the mutual relationship of the three divine persons in God. “The Church”, the document states, “can witness to the power of relationships founded in the Trinity” (no. 34). Consequently, differences within the Church and between Christian communities must not be erased. Quite the contrary, the document states: “Differences that are found in every Christian community with respect to age, vocation, sex, profession and social belonging provide an opportunity for an encounter with otherness that is indispensable to personal growth and maturity” (ibid.).

Palpably, the *Document* offers a positive evaluation of plurality and diversity within the Church. At the same time, it praises the unity of the Church. Not surprisingly, belief in one God calls for a community of believers united by a common faith and prayer. Regarding the diversity of cultural conditions that prevail in

² This has been a recurring demand in the German Church throughout its “Synodal Path.” Cf. *Women in ministries and offices in the Church: Decision of the Synodal Path adopted by the Synodal Assembly on September 9, 2022*, https://www.synodalerweg.de/fileadmin/Synodalerweg/Dokumente_Rednen_Beitraege/beschluesse-broschueren/Englisch/SW-5_Women-in-Ministries-and-Offices-in-the-Church_Foundational-Text.pdf (access: 06.02.2025).

the Church, it is evident that a careful discernment is necessary when evaluating whether a specific expression of the Christian faith or a particular manner of prayer aligns with the established traditions of the Church. This is, however, a task that falls within the purview of theologians.

When it comes to the moral behaviour of believers, the issue quickly becomes complicated. Among others, the document addresses the subject of polygamy: Referring to traditions in African culture, some bishops and other delegates from the continent strongly argued in favour of accepting polygamy as a legitimate form of living marriage within the Catholic Church for converted pagans. Understandably from a Western standpoint, the majority of the Synod's delegates were hesitant. Pointing to the inherent dignity of every individual human being, they asserted the exclusive nature of Christian marriage. A Canonical Commission has been established to work on innovations needed regarding ecclesial norms in Christian marriage. In addition, discernment concerning the pastoral accompaniment of people in polygamous marriages has been entrusted to the Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (cf. no. 8).

In matters of ethics, and due to the influence of differing cultural conditions, compromise in moral issues is frequently an inevitable consequence. The question therefore arises as to how the "Catholic way" of moral behaviour can be clearly identified. In addressing this subject, the discussion delves into the intricate concept of "natural law" in ethics, along with its interpretation by the Magisterium of the Church. The central question is whether a single, uniform approach to Christian behaviour is universally mandated. Or is there a legitimate plurality of moral options that can all be justified in Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God? It is noteworthy that despite their divergent perspectives on moral issues, all parties regularly claim to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Consequently, the evaluation of divergent perspectives is a matter that demands careful consideration and a nuanced approach.

3. Diversity in Moral Issues and Ecclesial Structures

It is evident that at present there are several moral issues that are the subjects of heated controversy between Catholic Church members. These issues encompass not only the protection of life at its inception and its termination, but also the issue of sexual orientation. A notable movement has emerged among Catholic Christians in Europe, one that seeks to embrace homosexuality as a valid expression of the human condition and a fundamental element of God's creation of humankind. In contrast, there are those who maintain an unwavering condemnation of homosexuality. It is important to note that both positions claim to be authentic manifestations of the Catholic faith. The question that arises from this is how such divergence should be valued from a theological perspective.

Furthermore, the subjects of ecclesial structure, the accountability of ministers, and the modes of responsibility and decision-making are the focus of vigorous debate among various stakeholders within the Church. In the context of the abuse-scandal, some argue for the establishment of accountability procedures in ecclesiastical decision-taking to prevent future abuse. Conversely, others contend for the unassailable authority of the episcopacy, thereby excluding the involvement of laity in decision-taking processes. Thus, the question arises: Does the authority of the bishop, of the episcopal college and of the bishop of Rome in regard to decision-taking really constitute an inviolable right as it is “grounded in the hierarchical structure of the Church established by Christ”, as the *Final Document* states in no. 92?

How to interpret this phrase? The term “established by Christ” is open to interpretation. Does it refer to the Church in a general way, or more specifically to the hierarchical structure of the Church? Is the “assembly of the faithful” (*congregatio fidelium*) the outcome and consequence of Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom of God and the Apostles’ testimony of his resurrection – or did Jesus found a hierarchically structured “Church” with the Pope as its leader on earth?

From an exegetical perspective, these questions can only be answered in a nuanced way (see Denaux, 1996; Collins, 1996). It is highly likely that Jesus expected the kingdom of heaven to arrive in the near future. Even on the way to the cross, it is highly probable that Christ anticipated the imminent arrival of the reign of God. Against this background, there are good reasons to doubt that Jesus wanted to establish something like a “church.”

On the other hand, there are traces of continuity between the disciples’ movement around Jesus and the later assembly of the faithful, who regarded him as the incarnate son of God. The growing gap between Jesus and the majority of Jews, who did not recognise his divine mission, led to the formation of organisational structures within the Christian community. These structures were modelled on the Jesus movement. “Vocation” and “mission” became fundamental elements of church ministry. Despite the high regard in which charisms were held, a hierarchical ministry structure based on the apostles was quickly established.

Can the establishment of a church and the introduction of a hierarchical structure within the Church be legitimised as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit? Certainly, we may consider the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as the birthday of the Church. However, such an interpretation does not provide answers regarding any detail of the organisation of the Church. For instance, how can the Church avoid the pitfalls of becoming a hierarchical structure that is immune to criticism? Criticism that is offered in loyalty to the Church often suggests new ways of preaching the gospel and of integrating the innovative work of the Holy Spirit within ecclesiastical structures. According to Christian doctrine, the role of the Holy Spirit encompasses the steadiness and disruption of ecclesial structures. The Spirit provides stability and facilitates transformation, innovation and progress within the Church, enabling it to fulfil its mission ever more effectively.

With due acknowledgement of the hierarchical structure inherent within the Catholic Church, the Synod recognises that even the authority of bishops is “not without limits: it may not ignore a direction which emerges through proper discernment within a consultative process, especially if this is done by participatory bodies” (no. 92). From this, the Synod concludes in a somehow idealist way: “It is not appropriate to set the consultative and deliberative elements involved in reaching a decision in opposition to each other: in the Church, the deliberative element is undertaken with the help of all, and never without those whose pastoral governance allows them to take a decision by virtue of their office” (ibid.).

At this point, the *Final Document* draws an important and far-reaching conclusion by recommending “to carry out a revision of Canon Law from a synodal perspective, clarifying the distinction and relation between consultation and deliberation and shedding light on the responsibilities of those who play different roles in the decision-making process” (ibid.). This proposal addresses a pivotal aspect of the interplay between unity and diversity within the Catholic Church. The fundamental question that arises is concerned with the extent to which a universally valid canon law can allow for local practices within the one and unique Catholic Church.

Certainly, it would be impractical to increase the number of Canon Laws within the Church. Such a proliferation of Codes would run the risk of undermining the unity of the Catholic Church. The question therefore arises of whether it would not be preferable to establish legal opportunities for a range of practices within a single, unified Catholic Church. This approach, it could be argued, would provide a valuable contribution to the establishment of a synodal church, as has been proposed by Pope Francis and the XVI Ordinary Synod of Bishops.

To illustrate this point: Is it really impossible to imagine that within one section of the Church, where the prevailing cultural context is characterised by a patriarchal structure, the implementation of hierarchical systems for decision-making and decision-taking may be deemed appropriate, while, in other sections of the Church, participatory procedures for deliberation and governance may be more suitable for facilitating decision-making and decision-taking?

During a meeting of Catholic parish priests in Rome in April and May 2024,³ it became evident that practices of consultation, participation and shared decision-making are not commonly implemented within the Catholic Church. Instead, there are significant disparities in ecclesial practices across the world. This variety can be attributed to the influence of different cultural contexts and historical traditions. In order to preserve unity within the Church, one might be tempted to enforce uniform practices and disciplines relating to liturgy, moral issues and church administration. Nevertheless, a more pluralistic approach that embraces diverse practices while being guided by a common canon law might be a more

³ Cf. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/info/2024/02/03/240203a.html> (access: 06.02.2025).

appropriate and inclusive solution than imposing a single way of ecclesial practice on the whole church.

Again, the *Final Document* gives some guidance. In no. 124 it calls for the recognition and appreciation of the particularity of the context of each local Church, together with its history and tradition: “A synodal style allows local Churches to move at different paces. Differences in pace can be valued as an expression of legitimate diversity and as an opportunity for sharing gifts and mutual enrichment. This common horizon requires discerning, identifying and promoting concrete practices which allow us to be a synodal Church on mission.” (no. 124).

The metaphor of “pace” used in the document refers to the possibility of recognising different stages of being church. In concrete terms: Why not allow the ordination of women deacons in one part of the Church, while in other parts sacramental ordination is still reserved for male Christians? To answer such questions from a systematic point of view, fundamental questions of theology must be addressed. At issue is the relationship between divine revelation and human culture, between truth and identity.

4. Truth and Identity

Even a brief examination of the complex history of the Church discloses that the ethical behaviour of the faithful, liturgical rites or ecclesial structures do not stem exclusively from divine revelation. Rather, they are the result of human orientation in a particular cultural context at a particular time (cf. Doyle 2012; Cartledge/Cheetham 2011; Bevans 2002 and 2018). This underscores the necessity for a nuanced examination of the interplay between cultural context on the one hand and ethical behaviour, forms of worship and prayer, liturgical rites, and ways of administration within the Church on the other hand.

Theologically speaking, such interplay is a consequence of the incarnational dimension of divine revelation and the sacramental nature of the Church as articulated in the opening passages of the council’s declaration *Lumen Gentium*. Nevertheless, it is crucial to elucidate what the sacramental nature of the Church means concretely for the debates mentioned above and referred to in the *Final Document*, such as the participation of the laity in decision-taking or the admission of women to ordained ministry. Other issues could be readily identified, given the heterogeneity of Catholicism across different geographical regions. Notable examples of such variances in perspective include the subjects of homosexuality and polygamy, which have been previously mentioned.

In any case, it would be erroneous to assume that the insistence on concrete administrative structures within the Church, on a particular form of the liturgy, on a certain concept of humanity, or on specific modes of ethical conduct is merely an expression of a given understanding of divine revelation. Rather, I would argue that an additional factor must be considered. In the context of the Church’s daily

life, a particular interpretation of divine revelation serves as a marker of identity for individual Christians, for certain Christian communities or for the Church as a whole.

From a sociological perspective, the presence of identity markers within communities is a natural and unavoidable phenomenon. These markers form the basis of both individual and collective identification and a sense of belonging. They determine who is included and excluded from a community.

This also applies to the Church. The concept of a Trinitarian God, or the Incarnation, is a distinguishing feature of Christianity when juxtaposed with non-Christian religions. Similarly, the acceptance of the primacy of the Pope is an identity marker for Catholic Christians.

The preceding examples illustrate that the ecclesiastical community currently experiences considerable discord with regard to the identification of legitimate markers of identity. For a number of African bishops, the acceptance of homosexuality as an authentic result of God's creative work would entail a renunciation of the Catholic faith. Regarding the practice of polygamy, they do not share similar concerns. For a considerable number of Catholic Christians, the exclusion of women from the ordained ministry is incongruent with the spirit of the Gospel and the manner in which Jesus treated women. Moreover, passionate debates about the most appropriate way to celebrate the liturgy often divide Catholic communities.

As with other institutions, the Catholic Church is characterised by two types of identity markers: those that are generally accepted as indisputable, and others that are subject to varying degrees of evaluation in different cultural contexts. It falls to theological discourse to differentiate between identity markers that are regarded as fundamental and those deemed culturally contingent. The latter may be subject to change in line with the ongoing development of culture. The required discernment poses a challenge to theologians and those responsible for governing the Church. They are called upon to maintain accordance with divine revelation, bearing in mind that all interpretations of revelation are influenced by culture. In addition, the continuity of contextually conditioned teaching and ecclesial practice with the Church's tradition must be preserved (cf. DV 10), bearing in mind that this tradition is multifaceted.

Another question that must be posed is whether it is possible to accept a variety of identity markers simultaneously within the Catholic Church. To what extent can the unity of the Catholic Church be maintained while allowing for plurality and even diversity in discipline and practice without compromising its integrity and unity? The question must be clarified: does divine revelation and ecclesial tradition allow for, or even demand, such plurality and diversity? Could there be a scenario in which women are ordained deacons or priests in some dioceses, while this practice is not observed in others? Similarly, could a situation be envisaged in which bishops are elected by a mixed electoral body in certain regions of the Church, while in others they are appointed by the Pope?

Cultural traditions, social structures and different modes of participation in decision making provide a prefigurative framework for understanding ecclesial governance in different cultural contexts. In addition, taking a closer look at the history of the Church often reveals surprising examples of ecclesiastical regulations that seem completely impossible in light of recent developments and which may inspire current attempts to enhance the Church's mission.

5. Conclusion: Unity and the “Complex Reality” of the Church

What degree of uniformity is necessary to preserve the identity of the Catholic Church? To what extent should plurality within the Church be embraced in order to respect cultural diversity? An exclusive focus on theological arguments, I would argue, hinders a comprehensive understanding of the significant challenges currently facing the global Church. Beyond that, it is necessary to consider the function of doctrine and discipline for the Church as a social body.

Arguing in this way, it is important to acknowledge that the approach delineated herein does not aspire to reduce doctrine and discipline to social instruments. Instead, it highlights a functioning of doctrine and discipline that is frequently overlooked in theological debates. It may be beneficial to consider that the subjects which are occasionally discussed with great fervour do not merely represent divergent interpretations of divine revelation. Instead, they function as markers of identity in the social struggle for demarcation and recognition.

The rationale behind this argument is the idea that we should admit that a particular interpretation of doctrine and discipline is not merely the consequence of theological reflection. Rather, it functions to delineate and differentiate both individual and collective identities. In this sense, interpretations of faith can serve as identity markers, thus foreshadowing the manner in which individuals perceive and engage with the tenets of belief, affiliation and behaviour within the Catholic Church.

A careful examination of the history of theology supports this interpretation. Theological debates were often influenced by biographical, cultural and political factors. Consider, for example, the Christological debates between the “Alexandrians” and “Antiochians” in the 5th century. Similarly, the theological debates between Dominican and Franciscan theologians in the Middle Ages were deeply inspired by the spiritualities of their respective orders. The examples could easily be multiplied.

It is imperative to acknowledge that the establishment and reliance on identity markers by Christian communities does not inherently compromise the legitimacy of doing so. The fundamental tenets of the Christian faith must not be disregarded, as this could result in a loss of Christian identity. Thus, insisting on specific theological positions, liturgical customs, or regulations for ecclesial administration is

by no means to blame. Nevertheless, it must be prepared for criticism and modification.

When struggling for the truth of Christian doctrine, we must ask: Does a particular discipline, ecclesial norm or moral behaviour stem from divine revelation, or does it serve as a means for Christians to navigate their faith within specific cultural contexts? Notwithstanding the fact that, due to the incarnational nature of revelation, Christian faith is never free from cultural conditions, a primary task of theologians is to examine whether a doctrine or discipline is the authentic content of divine revelation or the result of historical development and cultural conditioning.

Obviously, the term “authentic” must be considered carefully. In a first approach, one might understand “authentic” as qualifying the ultimate goal of theological reflection in responding to divine revelation and Christian tradition. In practising the Christian faith, “authenticity” is the result of an interplay between the various figures within the Church, including the Magisterium, theologians and “ordinary” Christians. This is a dynamic process that will not be brought to a definitive end until the return of Christ.

In this process, theologians have a specific responsibility. To provide a proper theological discernment on what is “authentic” in expressing the Christian faith, it is imperative for them to possess a comprehensive understanding of the historical development of the Church and the evolution of Christian dogma. This understanding enables them to distinguish between the cultural context of the divine revelation and its transmission by the Church on the one hand, and its universal significance on the other.

Correspondingly, the Synod on Synodality states: “For discernment to be truly ‘ecclesial’, it should make use of the appropriate means. These include an adequate biblical exegesis to help interpret and understand biblical texts while avoiding partial or fundamentalist interpretations; a knowledge of the Fathers of the Church, of Tradition and the teachings of the Magisterium, according to their varying degrees of authority; the contributions of the various theological disciplines; and the contributions of the human, historical, social and administrative sciences. Without these latter, it is not possible to grasp the context in which and with a view to which discernment takes place” (*Final Document*, no. 85).

The Synod asserts that theological expertise alone is insufficient in contributing constructively to the ongoing journey of the Catholic Church on its synodal path. Instead, it is argued that a detailed analysis of the cultural conditions that shape each particular Church is necessary. The same applies to the universal Church. Regarding the ecclesiological dimension of discernment, the Synod welcomes “human, historical, social and administrative sciences” to carry out this task.⁴ In other words: Proven ways of decision-making in secular contexts are to be taken

⁴ One might recall that already the Dominican theologian Melchior Cano, in his famous *Loci theologici* (posthumously published in Salamanca 1563), listed “natural reason”, “philosophy” and “human history” among the sources of the Christian faith.

seriously into consideration, without fear of violating the spiritual nature of the Church.

Although not alluded to explicitly in the *Final Document*, the theological rationale underpinning this approach is articulated by the Second Vatican Council in its Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, which asserts that: “The society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element” (LG 8). This statement permits the use of sociological tools to analyse the visible reality of the Church without reducing it to a merely secular phenomenon.

The Council not only underlines the intimate connection between the visible and the spiritual elements in the Church but also relates both to the incarnation of the divine Word in Jesus Christ. From a Christological perspective, the reference to the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ signifies that neither nature is in competition with the other. As put by Pope Leo the Great in a letter, addressed to Flavian, Patriarch of Constantinople, on 28 June 449: The human and the divine nature in Christ “operate what is proper to each in unity with the other” (cf. DS 294).

Analogously, it can be contended that when the Church employs joint decision-making and even decision-taking processes, which are well-proven in secular society, such procedures are not in contradiction with its sacramental nature as expressed in *Lumen Gentium*. It is crucial to acknowledge that, under the condition that the institutional structures of the church serve its divine mission, there is no inherent conflict between the divine and the human nature of the church. Accordingly, there is no opposition between sociological and theological perspectives on the Church. Quite the contrary: In light of the “sacramental nature” of the Church, it could be argued that the introduction of secular structures of consultation, participation and shared decision-making is a mandatory requirement for the Church. Consequently, structures of learning and joint decision-making that have been approved within secular institutions could serve as a model for the implementation of similar structures within the Church.

This statement does not advocate unreservedly for adopting secular decision-making procedures within the Church. Nor does it claim that democratic decision-making alone provides the prerequisites for the Christian faithful to exercise their charisms fruitfully. However, the rich history of religious orders provides convincing examples of shared decision-making and accountability within the Church. These models could be put to good use throughout the Church without uncritically adopting secular procedures of governance.

The Christian doctrine that in Christ there is no contradiction between his divine and human natures allows for the assumption that the introduction of secular decision-making processes within the Church does not inherently contravene its spiritual dimension. Consequently, introducing secular ways of decision-making

and decision-taking does not suggest that the spiritual dimension of the Church is being diminished or even abandoned. The pivotal criterion for such an introduction would be its alignment with the Gospel and the Church's doctrine of faith – a criterion that will certainly spark debates among Christians.

The discernment of essential elements from contingent ones is, however, a task that requires careful consideration – from theologians as well as from the Magisterium. Fulfilling this task will also serve the unity of the Church, regardless of her internal plurality and diversity, and help her to fulfil her mission (cf. John 17:21).

Bibliography

- Balthasar, H.U. von (1987): *Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism*. San Francisco, Ignatius Press.
- Benedict XVI (2007), Apostolic Letter *Summorum Pontificum*. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20070707_summorum-pontificum.html (access: 06.02.2025).
- Bevans, S.B. (2004): *Models of Contextual Theology. Revised edition*. New York, Orbis.
- Bevans, S.B. (2018): *Essays in Contextual Theology*. Boston, Brill.
- Cano, M. (2006): *De Locis Theologicis*. Ed. by J. Belda Plans (Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, vol. 85). Madrid, CEE.
- Cartledge, M.J. / Cheetham, D. (eds.) (2011): *Intercultural Theology: Approaches and Themes*. London, SCM Press.
- Denaux, A. (1996): *Did Jesus Found the Church?* In: *Louvain Studies* 21, 25-45.
- Doyle, D.M. (2012): *The Concept of Inculturation in Roman Catholicism*. In: *US Catholic Historian* 30, 1–13.
- Forte, B. (1991): *The Church – Icon of the Trinity. A Brief Study*, Toronto: Pauline Books.
- Francis, *Final Document of the XVI General Assembly of the Ordinary Synod of Bishops “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission.”* https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf (access: 06.02.2025).
- John Paul II: *Codex Iuris Canonici*. Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983.
- John Paul II: *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium*. Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990.

Słowa kluczowe: eklezjologia, jedność Kościoła, pluralizm, synodalność, katolickość i różnorodność, *realitas complexa*

Keywords: ecclesiology, unity of the Church, pluralism, synodality, catholicity and diversity, *realitas complexa*