

CONCILIARITY IN WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES TEXTS. INTERSECTIONS, INTERACTIONS, SPECIFIC EMPHASES

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Abstract. The Synod of Bishops on Synodality has placed the church as a synodal community at the core of Catholic theological reflection. The conciliar or synodal nature of the church is also a topic of ecumenical dialogue. This essay surveys the theme of conciliarity in some WCC texts over the past 50 years, arguing that discussions of conciliarity reflect the interrelation between contemporary ecclesial events and theological developments. This diachronic analysis also indicates that while for two decades conciliarity has been regarded as a hopeful model for achieving communion and collaboration between the churches, the concept has gradually lost its appeal. The twin concept of synodality emerged in the latest ecclesiological convergence texts with a different focus. The study reveals the shift from an understanding of conciliarity centred on the people of God and baptism to one increasingly focusing on ordained ministry. At the same time, the topic of synodality, which remerged recently in Catholic theology, indicates the reception of some ideas developed in ecumenical dialogue.

Keywords: Conciliarity, synodality, WCC, Faith and Order, Catholic Church, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, *episkopé*, primacy, *sensus fidei*.

The recently concluded Synod of Bishops on Synodality and the synodal process initiated by Pope Francis have placed the church as a synodal community at the core of theological reflection.² The conciliar/synodal nature of the church is

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² *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality* (Bolletino, 2021.09.07.); International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018) [=Synodality]; *Instrumentum Laboris. XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*. See also Pope Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating*



also an important theme of the ecumenical dialogue. This essay surveys the topic of conciliarity/synodality in some documents of the World Council of Churches, to argue that the focus on conciliarity stands at the intersection of various contemporary events and theological perspectives. On the one hand, Vatican II has influenced the ecclesiological dialogue within the WCC. Conciliarity has become a key concept of ecumenical ecclesiology, as attested by the final reports of the General Assemblies as well as by the Faith and Order studies and convergence texts. The importance assigned to conciliarity increased due to the contribution of Orthodox theology and the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. At the same time, while the topic of conciliarity faded in the Catholic Church during the decades following Vatican II, some of the insights of the ecumenical dialogue are echoed in recent Catholic documents and studies on synodality.

I will review here the main insights on conciliarity in WCC reports and in Faith and Order papers, as well as the particular emphases of the two Faith and Order ecclesiological convergence texts. I propose an exegetical, diachronic analysis of these WCC texts, focusing mainly on the changes that occurred over the past decades.

The period starting with the Final report of Uppsala (1968) can be described as the decade of conciliarity. Conciliarity will become a key concept in ecumenical ecclesiology, as evidenced by the Faith and Order studies (Louvain, 1971, Salamanca, 1973), the final reports of the WCC (notably Nairobi, 1975), the convergence texts (*The Nature and Mission of the Church*, 2005; *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, 2013) and the responses of the churches.

After a decade when it would be understood as a model providing hope for achieving a real communion and collaboration between the churches in the wake of Vatican II, the notion of conciliarity will gradually lose its appeal. The analysis of WCC texts also reveals the shift from an understanding of conciliarity centred on the people of God and baptism to one increasingly focusing on ordained ministry. During the last decade, the twin concept of synodality emerges in WCC documents, attesting an Orthodox influence, and the interpretation of conciliarity/synodality is revised as a result of the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue.

the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (2015.10.17.), AAS 107 (2015) 1139; *Synod23 – Relazione di Sintesi della prima Sessione della XVI Assemblea Generale Ordinaria del Sinodo dei Vescovi (4–29 ottobre 2023) e risultati delle Votazioni, Bollettino* (28.10.2023).

Conciliarity or synodality?

Notwithstanding their different etymologies, the Greek *synodos* and the Latin *concilium* describe essentially the same ecclesiological phenomenon, the gathering of the church (of its representative body) to settle with authority important matters of faith and/or practice. As indicated in the study authored by the International Theological Commission [ITC] on *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, the distinction between the two concepts is new in the Catholic Church. While Vatican II documents still use the two terms synonymously, the canonical distinction between the two is enshrined in the 1983 Code of Canon Law.³ The creation of the Synod of Bishops after the Council (1985) played a significant role in this differentiation. As a result of these changes, the term *concilium* (council) is used in Catholic terminology to denote occasional, exceptional, solemn, mainly universal gatherings of bishops to discuss major issues (such as Vatican II). The synod has a more permanent character, and is more comprehensive, since it presupposes the contribution of the entire people of God, including the lay faithful. This can be seen in the way the ITC study links synodality with the ecclesiology of Vatican II. Synodality is a particular manifestation of the life of the Church, of the people of God, which makes visible and tangible the intrinsic nature of the Church as community or communion whose members walk together, gather, and actively participate in the mission of evangelization.⁴

It is probably because of this conceptual distinction and the broader meaning of synod that when Pope Francis announced the Synod of Bishops and the synodal process, it was the neologism synodality that came to the fore, and not, as one might have expected, the Latin conciliarity.⁵

The WCC texts examined here have consistently used the notion of conciliarity, largely in the sense in which Catholic documents speak of synodality, even when its

³ Synodality 4. On the trajectory of the concept of synodality in the Catholic Church: Carlo FANTAPPIÈ, “Variazioni della sinodalità”, *Ephemerides Iuris Canonici* 62 (2022) 371–404.

⁴ Synodality 6.

⁵ The omission of the latter may also be attributed to the historical controversies which divided the Western Church, with the advocates of conciliarism placing the authority of the universal council above that of the Pope (especially after the Western schism). On the background to the crisis: Paul VALLIERE, *Conciliarism. A History of Decision-Making in the Church*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 137–148.

understanding reflects specific trends within the ecumenical movement. Moreover, ecclesiological texts will introduce the twin concept of synodality.

Conciliarity in the documents of the WCC

The final report of the Uppsala General Assembly (*The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church*, 1968) argues for the first time that ecumenical endeavors have to lead to truly universal, conciliar forms of common life and witness, and that the churches should work for a genuinely universal council, which can once again speak for all Christians.⁶ These objectives are a striking indication of the impact of Vatican II that came to a conclusion shortly before Uppsala. However, beyond this brief paragraph, the final report does not elaborate on the nature of conciliar forms, of the conciliar communion. In any case, by suggesting a universal council, it conceives the unity of the churches as their conciliar cooperation. Implicitly this means that within the universal church the individual churches are conceived as regional (or quasi-local) churches, whose communion is embodied by the universal council. The concept will play a major role in the subsequent ecclesiological texts and studies of the WCC.

⁶ *The Uppsala Report 1968. Official Report of the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches. Uppsala, July 4th-20th 1968*, edited by Norman GOODALL, Geneva: WCC, 1968 [henceforth Uppsala] 19: “[...] its regional councils and its World Council may be regarded as a transitional opportunity for eventually actualizing a *truly universal, ecumenical, conciliar form of common life and witness*. The members of the World Council of Churches [...] should work for the time when a *genuinely universal council* may once more speak for all Christians, and lead the way into the future.” (Uppsala 19). At the assembly, Roberto TUCCI SJ discussed extensively the ecclesiology and ecumenical principles of Vatican II, based on *Lumen gentium* and *Unitatis redintegratio*: “The Ecumenical Movement, the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church”, in *The Uppsala Report 1968*, 323–333. Uppsala took over the report of an ecumenical working group, drafted with significant Orthodox input, on *Councils and the Ecumenical Movement* (1968); Lukas VISCHER, “Drawn and Held Together by the Reconciling Power of Christ. Reflections on the Unity of the Church towards the Fifth Assembly of the WCC”, in *What Kind of Unity? Faith and Order Commission, Salamanca, 1973* (Faith and Order Paper no. 69), Geneva: WCC, 1974, 29–32 (29). See also: *Conciliarity and the Future of the Ecumenical Movement*, Commission on Faith and Order, Louvain, 1971, *ER* 24.1 (1972) 88–91 [henceforth Louvain] 4, 7.

The concept of conciliarity will be discussed in some detail in the Report of the Faith and Order meeting in Louvain (1971)⁷ and by the Salamanca Consultation (1973),⁸ and eventually consecrated at the General Assembly in Nairobi (1975).⁹ One can add here the German ecumenical study document on *Councils, Conciliarity and a Genuinely Universal Council*, published by the WCC in 1974.¹⁰

Over the following two decades the topic is less prominent. The theme of conciliarity will become again more conspicuous in the two comprehensive ecclesiological convergence texts, *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (NMC,

⁷ The Louvain-report (note 5 above) relies on the homonymous study of bishop Lesslie Newbigin, cf. Konrad RAISER, *The Challenge of Transformation. An Ecumenical Journey*, tr. Stephen G. BROWN, Geneva: WCC, 2018, 14–16. It was the Louvain Faith and Order meeting that Catholic theologians attended for the first time as full members (*Louvain 1971. Study Reports and Documents* (Faith and Order Paper 59), Geneva: WCC, 1971, 5–6). On the initiative of a joint working group of the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC, a joint theological commission drafted a study on Catholicity and Apostolicity, which was adopted by the WCC at its May 1970 meeting (*Louvain 1971. Study Reports*, 216). The appendices cover topics requiring further examination. Appendix 5 deals with the issue of conciliarity and primacy (*ibid.*, 151–153).

⁸ The Unity of the Church – Next Steps. Report of the Salamanca Consultation Convened by the Faith and Order Commission, WCC, on Concepts of Unity and Models of Union, September 1973, in *What Kind of Unity* (Faith and Order Paper 69), Geneva: WCC, 1974, 119–130 [henceforth Salamanca].

⁹ What Unity Requires, in *Breaking Barriers. Nairobi 1975: The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Nairobi, 23 November–10 December, 1975*, edited by David M. PATON, SPCK, London, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, 57–61 [henceforth Nairobi]; André BIRMELÉ, *Kirchengemeinschaft. Ökumenische Fortschritte und methodologische Konsequenzen*, Münster: LIT, 2003, 294–295; Odair PEDROSO MATEUS, “The Ecumenical Vision: An Overview of World Council of Churches’ Statements on Unity”, 19–20; see also Joint Lutheran/Roman Catholic Study Commission on the Gospel and the Church, *Facing Unity: Models, Forms and Phases of Catholic-Lutheran Church Fellowship* [1984], The Lutheran World Federation, 1985, 27–30.

¹⁰ *Councils, Conciliarity and a Genuinely Universal Council* (Faith and Order Paper no. 70), *Study Encounter* 10.2 (1974) 1–24; a study by the German Ecumenical Commission. The work of the commission was led by Old Catholic systematic theologian Werner Küppers from Bonn. Although it has no official character, by publishing it, the WCC considered it authoritative.

2005, following up on *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* of 1998 [NPC])¹¹, and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013),¹² and their reception (*What Are the Churches Saying About the Church*, 2021). While some insights are preserved throughout, changes and new emphases are also noticeable.

The church as conciliar fellowship. Conciliarity pertains to the nature of the Church and is rooted in baptism.

Early documents emphasise the conciliar forms of life and witness (Uppsala), the conciliar process, the coming together of Christians (Louvain). Conciliarity is thus understood as a local, regional, or global forum for deliberation and decision-making, an instrument used by the Holy Spirit for the reconciliation, renewal, and reformation of the Church, leading it towards the fullness of truth and love.¹³ Soon, however, the object of reflection will be the Church itself as the conciliar fellowship of local churches.¹⁴

Conciliarity describes a permanent feature of the life of the Church at all levels, in the individual churches as well as in the relationships between churches.¹⁵ It belongs to the nature of the Church as communion, it expresses the fraternal communion between churches. Conciliar fellowship is the medium through which the churches express their unity in the one Church. Its source and fundamental bond is the one baptism.¹⁶ This shows that conciliar communion is not understood primarily as a forum for consultation and decision-making bringing together ordained church leaders, but it is an attribute of the entire people of God.

¹¹ *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (Faith and Order Paper no. 181), Geneva: WCC, 1998; *The Nature and Mission of the Church – A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (Faith and Order Paper no. 198), Geneva: WCC, 2005.

¹² *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Faith and Order Paper no. 214), Geneva: WCC, 2013. On the process: Odair Pedroso MATEUS, “The Making of an Ecumenical Text: An Introduction to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*”. The document resulting from the repeated reworking of the NMC was adopted at the Faith and Order as the assembly in Penang in 2012. It proposes a significantly shorter discussion of *episkopé* and conciliarity.

¹³ Louvain 3 (*ER*, 88).

¹⁴ Salamanca A.III (*What Kind of Unity*, 121); Nairobi 3 (*Breaking Barriers*, 60).

¹⁵ Louvain 4 (*ER*, 88), cf. VISCHER, “Drawn and Held Together”, 30.

¹⁶ Salamanca, A.III (*What Kind of Unity*, 121).

These insights may still be found in the first ecclesiological convergence text: conciliarity is a fundamental feature of the life of the Church, rooted in common baptism (NPC 107, NMC 99). However, the emphasis on conciliarity and the reference to 1 Pet 2,9-10, which would ground conciliarity as a characteristic of the entire Church, are no longer found in the second ecclesiological text: the CTCV does discuss the priesthood of all believers in other contexts (18, 20, 41) but the quote from 1 Peter is not used to define conciliarity as a feature emerging from universal priesthood. According to the CTCV, synodality or conciliarity is a specific exercise of the ministry of *episkopé* (53). Citing the Orthodox-Catholic Ravenna Document (*Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority*, § 5),¹⁷ the CTCV introduces the concept of synodality, which comes closer to Orthodox terminology, while also noting that the meaning of the two terms is not identical. Synodality/conciliarity refers to the fact that by virtue of baptism, each member of the Church has his / her place and proper responsibility in the communion of the Church. Although the text does not rehearse the opening sentence of Ravenna 5 according to which synodality “primarily denotes a gathering of bishops exercising a particular responsibility”, the overall train of thought points into this direction, significantly more than the NPC or even the NMC. With regard to the significance of baptism the text emphasises in fact that each person has a particular place and role in the Church. CTCV 53 follows the definition of *episkopé* in the previous paragraph as one meant to co-ordinate the diversity of gifts or ministries, exercised “by persons chosen and set aside for such ministry”.

Conciliarity and the local church

Early documents assign a greater role to the local church in the implementation of conciliarity. Seeking unity must already be pursued at local level (the initiative belongs to the local churches).¹⁸ Conciliarity points towards the universal council but is not limited to it. Local churches also have an important role in the reception of synodal / conciliar decisions.¹⁹ The ecclesiological convergence texts still discuss the

¹⁷ Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, *Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church. Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority* (Ravenna Document), 2007.

¹⁸ Salamanca, A.III (*What Kind of Unity*, 123).

¹⁹ *Councils*, 11 (III.3) The study also discusses the forms of reception (5–6, p. 16).

church as the communion of the local churches,²⁰ but do not emphasise the agency of the local church with regard to the ministry of *episkopé* and to conciliarity. The CTCV only stresses that those who exercise the ministry of *episkopé* have the duty to respect the integrity of the local churches, giving a “voice to the voiceless” and maintaining unity in diversity (54).

Conciliarity characterizes all levels of the life of the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, from the smallest eucharistic community to regional bodies, and, in some churches, it even engages the whole Christian community. In the eucharistic community, conciliarity is a bond of love and faith between the members of the community and the minister presiding at the celebration. It excludes divisions, domination, and discrimination.²¹ The CTCV takes over from NMC 99 the idea that the entire Church is conciliar, at all its levels (local, regional, and universal), and rehearses the importance of eucharistic fellowship, but no longer mentions the exclusion of division, domination and discrimination based on Gal 3,28.²²

Eucharistic fellowship and ordained ministry

In early documents, the conciliar community is intimately linked with eucharistic communion. Thus Louvain emphasises that the churches should seek to widen the possibilities of eucharistic fellowship.²³ This also requires clarifying the issue of ordained ministry. Through history, Eucharistic fellowship has also expressed the reception of universal councils. Salamanca and Nairobi stress that conciliar communion grounded in the one baptism is inseparable from eucharistic communion.²⁴ The source of conciliar communion is the encounter of present-day disciples with the ever-present Christ, experienced in eucharistic communion.²⁵ This also involves the mutual recognition of ordained ministry

²⁰ NMC 64–66; CTCV 31–32.

²¹ NPC 107, NMC 99, cf. Gal 3,28.

²² The exclusion of domination and coercion appears though in the description of the proper exercise of authority in the church, understood as a service of love, practised in the spirit of Phil 2,7-8, Mark 10,41-45, Luke 22,25 and John 13,1-17, cf. CTCV 49.

²³ Louvain 10b (*ER*, 90); *Councils*, 20–21 (V.3).

²⁴ Salamanca, A.III.2 (*What Kind of Unity*, 122); Nairobi 5 (*Breaking Barriers*, 60–61).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

(which, in its turn requires clarifying the related questions). Churches should aim to move from imperfect to full conciliarity including eucharistic communion.²⁶

In later documents, eucharistic communion is the central locus of conciliarity. However, eucharistic fellowship that would bind the churches together does not appear as an imperative, but among the open questions, or is dropped altogether in this context.²⁷

Mutual recognition of the churches and the aim of the ecumenical endeavour

According to Salamanca and Nairobi, in conciliar fellowship “each local church possesses, in communion with the others, the fulness of catholicity, witnesses to the same apostolic faith and therefore recognizes the others as belonging to the same Church of Christ and guided by the same spirit”.²⁸ Conciliar fellowship presupposes the mutual recognition of church members and ministries. This goes beyond the minimalism of the Toronto Statement. In effect, churches of different denominations are regarded as local churches between which communion is achieved. This idea is later reflected in the Rahner-Fries theses.²⁹ The goal of mutual recognition is also spelled out in the Canberra Final Report: “The goal of the search for full communion is realized when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness. This full communion will be expressed on the local and the universal levels through conciliar forms of life and action. In such communion churches are bound in all aspects of their life together at all levels in confessing the one faith and engaging in worship and witness, deliberation and action”.³⁰

²⁶ The integrating role of the church ministry contributes to this. *Councils*, 12–13 (III.5–6).

²⁷ NMC, after §81: some churches link Eucharistic communion to the full agreement in faith and to communion in life. CTCV no longer mentions it in this context. Eucharistic fellowship is mentioned explicitly as a goal to be fostered by the Faith and Order commission and the WCC (Preface and Introduction), and in a footnote to §37 on the tasks to be agreed on regarding “the fundamental aspects of the life of the Church”.

²⁸ Salamanca, A.III. (*What Kind of Unity*, 121–122); Nairobi 3 (*Breaking Barriers*, 60).

²⁹ Theses III, V and VIII: Heinrich FRIES, Karl RAHNER, *Einigung der Kirchen - Reale Möglichkeit*, Freiburg: Herder, ⁵1983, 54–69, 109–122, 139–156.

³⁰ The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling [henceforth Canberra] 2.1, 3.2; see also BIRMELE, *Kirchengemeinschaft*, 296–298.

The convergence texts, on the other hand, mention mutual recognition only marginally, as a remote goal, not as a self-evident expectation.³¹

The change also reflects a shift in the purpose of ecumenical endeavour. By envisaging a universal council, Uppsala implied that the unity of the churches could be conceived as their conciliar fellowship. The reception of the principle of conciliarity seemed to confirm the concern that churches would interpret conciliar fellowship as an alternative to organic unity.³² Louvain left the question open. The Salamanca and Nairobi report made it clear that conciliar fellowship and organic unity presuppose each other.³³

Nonetheless, ecclesiological emphases shifted during the following general assemblies.³⁴ Starting with Vancouver (1983), visible unity was linked to eucharistic communion, not conciliar fellowship, and based on the Lima Document (1982), attention focused on the reception of a common understanding of baptism, eucharist and ordained ministry.³⁵ With the Canberra Final Report (1991), the concept of *koinonia* becomes central.³⁶ Subsequently, conciliarity is mentioned only tangentially (with reference to conciliar forms of common life and action).

As opposed to earlier visions, the aim of achieving unity proper (as in organic unity) will gradually recede into the background. The emerging principle of reconciled diversity involves instead preserving confessional identities and legitimate differences. The ecumenical endeavour aims thus to achieve the communion of

³¹ NMC 66, following Canberra 2.1; briefly in the introduction of CTCV, as a distant goal.

³² Geoffrey WAINWRIGHT, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 116 (this is how the LWF interpreted conciliarity); M. Scot SHERMAN, *Ut Omnes Unum Sint: The Case for Visible Church Reunion in the Ecclesiology of Bishop J.E. Lesslie Newbigin*, doctoral dissertation, University of Wales, Lampeter, 2010, 213, 217.

³³ Salamanca, A.IV (*What Kind of Unity*, 123–124); Nairobi 4 (*Breaking Barriers*, 60). See also VISCHER, “Drawn and Held Together”, 31.

³⁴ On the changing ecumenical situation (the gradual distancing of Orthodox churches, the growing prominence of churches from developing countries in the WCC, which involved that traditional European theological debates became less relevant compared to social issues): BIRMELÉ, *Kirchengemeinschaft*, 298–300.

³⁵ Taking Steps Towards Unity, in *Gathered for Life*, edited by David GILL, Geneva: WCC, 1983, 43–52, PEDROSO MATEUS, “Ecumenical Vision”, 20–21.

³⁶ Canberra 2.1, 3.2; BIRMELÉ, *Kirchengemeinschaft*, 296–298. This idea of unity goes beyond the Toronto Declaration’s assertion that member churches of the WCC do not have to recognise each other’s ecclesial character.

local churches (NMC, CTCV).³⁷ Although the NMC closely follows the Canberra Declaration, it no longer spells out of the unity of the Church materialised in the koinonia of faith and eucharistic fellowship, speaking instead more generally of the goal of full communion.³⁸ The aim of a universal council disappears from the ecclesiological convergence texts.³⁹

Conciliarity and unity in diversity

The principle of unity in diversity is associated with conciliarity at least since Nairobi. Thus conciliarity expresses the unity of the churches in spite of their temporal, spatial and cultural distance. Unity does not imply uniformity, nor does it rule out the endurance of specific values.⁴⁰ At the same time, cultural, sociological, psychological, political, and historical differences should not undermine the integrity of the apostolic faith. Christ is the living Truth to which all the Churches aspire. The unity of the Churches is expressed in conciliar gatherings, notwithstanding their differences.⁴¹ The principle of legitimate diversity, of unity in diversity, will be retained by ecclesiological convergence texts.⁴²

Representativity and the role of laypersons

Documents that emphasise the importance of conciliarity also address the issue of representativity. The authority of the councils is linked to the work of the Holy Spirit in a representative body and to the reception of conciliar decisions.⁴³ The representativity of conciliar assemblies involves the representation of the

³⁷ PEDROSO MATEUS, “Ecumenical Vision”, 21–22; Erin BRIGHAM, *Sustaining the Hope for Unity: Ecumenical Dialogue in a Postmodern World*, Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012, 98.

³⁸ NPC 65–67; NMC 64–66, following Canberra 2.1.

³⁹ The NMC 72, 101–102 addresses the authority of ecumenical councils. The CTCV has a few references to the early councils (22, 30, note 27).

⁴⁰ Nairobi 4–5 (*Breaking Barriers*, 60–61): these have to be valued and defended.

⁴¹ Nairobi 5 (*Breaking Barriers*, 61); see further the reception of in the Lutheran/Catholic *Facing Unity: Models, Forms and Phases of Catholic-Lutheran Church Fellowship*, on the margin of the model of conciliar community and the reconciled differences.

⁴² NMC 60–63, CTCV 12, 28–30.

⁴³ Louvain 6 (*ER*, 89).

entire people of God. This requires clarifying who is entitled to speak on behalf of the local, regional, national church, or at international level, and what is the relationship between these ministries.⁴⁴

As conciliar fellowship is called to discern the truth, the question of authority, its sacramental and ecclesiastical implications, should also be addressed, just as the ways in which decisions are made at different levels.⁴⁵

The involvement of lay believers is emphatic. This results already from the definition given by Louvain: the conciliar community is a “coming together of Christians”,⁴⁶ not exclusively or primarily a body of ordained ministers exercising the ministry of *episkopé*. The involvement of the laity is also explicitly mentioned.⁴⁷ Salamanca also stresses the need to clarify the role of women.⁴⁸

Conciliar practice and attention to the challenges of the time

Conciliarity is expected to be manifested in the life of the churches. Early texts indicate that conciliarity is embodied in conciliar (synodal) consultation and decision-making.⁴⁹ Existing church councils or the WCC are not full-fledged conciliar bodies, because they do not enjoy the full unity in apostolic faith, ordained ministry and the Eucharist. The consultations also lack the universal character and authority of the early councils. However, ecumenical councils can provide a frame for the development of conciliar communion, expressing and anticipating the desire of member churches for full conciliar communion. Conciliar practice maintains the communion of churches and ensures that legitimate differences do not lead to division.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Salamanca, A.III.3 (*What Kind of Unity*, 122).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Louvain 3 (*ER*, 88).

⁴⁷ Louvain 4 (*ER*, 88).

⁴⁸ Salamanca, A.III.3 (*What Kind of Unity*, 122), also Nairobi 9 (*Breaking Barriers*, 62).

⁴⁹ Councils, 7 (II.1: local, regional, national, general councils (including the great councils of the Western Church), and ecumenical/universal councils).

⁵⁰ Louvain 6 (*ER*, 89), Salamanca, A.III (*What Kind of Unity*, 122); Nairobi 3, 6 (*Breaking Barriers*, 60–61). Anton HOUTEPEN proposed a rethinking of the functioning of the WCC, whereby the transitional conciliar community would be a communion of communions, allowing for real conciliar cooperation between representatives of the churches. To this end, the WCC should become a worldwide conciliar forum for the discussion and reception of the conventions, confessional statements, liturgical reforms, pastoral approaches of

The same early documents agree that conciliar practice should be renewed, with due attention to contemporary challenges.⁵¹ In this respect, the church must move beyond a narrow ecclesiastical worldview and find new forms of open encounter with the world. It must seek ways of living and speaking that can adequately express defined truth.⁵² This goal comes close to the programme of *aggiornamento* advanced by Vatican II. Attention to contemporary social challenges and the need to seek dialogue with the world, responding to changing circumstances is also emphasised in the ecclesiological convergence texts.⁵³ However, NMC 73 no longer links the response to the challenges of the times to conciliar gatherings. Social justice and the protection of the powerless, of those who do not have a voice in the Church are also reiterated.⁵⁴ To be sure, the two ecclesiological convergence texts essentially refer to the councils of the past.⁵⁵

The universal councils and conciliar reception

The significance and reception of the universal councils is also a matter of discussion. Conciliar practice bridges temporal distance and involves the re-reception of the early

individual churches and regional bodies (“Towards Conciliar Collaboration: the WCC and the Roman Catholic Communion of Churches”, *ER* 40 (1988) 473–487).

⁵¹ Louvain 4 (*ER*, 89), Salamanca, A.III.4 (*What Kind of Unity*, 121–122), cf. Nairobi 8 (*Breaking Barriers*, 61–62).

⁵² *Councils*, 15 (IV.1). Conciliar acts carried out in the spirit of fraternal dialogue are in themselves (not only by the outcomes achieved) part of the encounter and of the building of communion and serve the mission of the Church.

⁵³ NPC 100, NMC 73.

⁵⁴ The conciliar communion of the Church promotes the unity of humankind and demands a commitment to social justice on behalf of the marginalized and powerless. Louvain 4 (*ER*, 88), Salamanca, A.IV (*What Kind of Unity*, 124), Nairobi 2, 4 (*Breaking Barriers*, 59–60). Salamanca articulates the correction of power in the spirit of the Louvain Declaration: because authority is linked to power, the voices of the powerless, the marginalised and the oppressed must be heard, to allow everyone to express their identity (A.III.3, *What Kind of Unity*, 122). The one who presides has the duty to give a voice to the voiceless: NPC 109, NMC 101.

⁵⁵ NMC 92–93, 100, in the definition of the local church and among the forms of *episkopé*; further among the sources of authority (NMC 107); CTCV 30 and 53, with n. 27 (Nicaea). CTCV 30 adds the more recent condemnation of the apartheid as an implication of such foundational doctrine and an expression of “firm ecclesial teachings”. But this example is quite different from that of the councils that establish(ed) doctrinal issues.

councils.⁵⁶ However, the significance assigned to universal councils is debated. Already the early study on councils and conciliarity notes that the authority of the councils, the binding force of their decisions depends on what the churches consider to be the authoritative source of faith.⁵⁷ From an ecclesiological point of view, conciliarity involves a certain consensus within an existing, albeit incomplete, community, or it aims at the realisation of a new, deeper and more inclusive community.⁵⁸

Councils are manifestations of conciliarity through history.⁵⁹ They were commonly convened during crises, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to discern the apostolic truth, to overcome threats to the life of the Church and to achieve unity. The CTCV refers to doctrinal or moral dangers or heresies which threaten the apostolic faith.⁶⁰

The ecumenical character of universal synods is linked to the fact that they were convened by the leaders of the universal Church, their decisions were received by the entire Church, and thus promoted and maintained universal communion.⁶¹

The reception of the synods, according to the CTCV, is a recognition of their role in promoting and maintaining communion. The footnote reminding that the

⁵⁶ Louvain 7 (ER, 89).

⁵⁷ *Councils*, 13–14 (IV.1): some churches may regard Scripture as the sole source of faith, others also assign importance to tradition or to contemporary discoveries in matters of faith. The authority of the councils is also related to the question about the locus of the work of the Holy Spirit: the individual believer, the community, or ordained ministry. The study is merely descriptive: it does not state a preference or position regarding these issues. It also mentions a number of other factors at play when deciding on the binding force of conciliar decisions: the cooperation of the ministers of the Church, the representativity of the delegates, the appeal to the work of the Holy Spirit, the consistency with scriptural witness (the criterion of apostolicity), with the tradition of the Church or with the faith of the believers (*sensus fidelium*, *sensus ecclesiae*). *Councils*, 16 (IV.2). These are criteria for reaching *certitudo*, but not *securitas* in matters of faith. Therefore finding the truth requires permanent inquiry during the conciliar process. This also underscores the importance of conciliar reception.

⁵⁸ *Councils*, 18 (V.1).

⁵⁹ Synods express the unity of the Church at a given time. *Councils*, 4 (I.3).

⁶⁰ CTCV 53: they preserved the apostolic faith in the face of doctrinal or moral threats to the life of the Church or heresies. The document has three references to heresies. CTCV 30 repeats NMC 63 on the distinction between legitimate diversity and divisions (heresies and schisms) but names heresies twice. The third occurrence, in §53, appears in the context of conciliar practice.

⁶¹ NMC 100, cf. NPC 110.

background to the Council of Nicaea was the Arian Christological controversy, is meant to exemplify the importance of the councils.⁶² However, having to explain such basics of church history and history of theology indicates that following the denominational and geographical shift in the WCC, the meaning and authority of the universal councils is far from self-evident. This confirms the observation that churches hold different views on the doctrinal authority of the early universal councils.

Particular issues in the ecclesiological convergence texts

The ecclesiological convergence texts discuss conciliarity from a new perspective, in the context of *episkopé* and primacy, and they also reflect a certain reinterpretation of conciliarity.

The relationship between episkopé and conciliarity

The NPC has an ample discussion of the forms of *episkopé*, which includes conciliarity. The Church is held together by the ministry of *episkopé*, exercised in a communal, personal, and collegial manner.⁶³ Conciliarity is the communal dimension of *episkopé* and expresses the responsibility of the faithful resulting from baptism and the *sensus fidei*. All the baptised share in the responsibility of the Church for the apostolic faith and witness, participate in common consultations, through representative and constitutional structures. The *sensus fidei* plays an essential part in the discernment, reception, and expression of the faith, but the faithful also need to pay attention to those exercising the particular ministry of oversight.⁶⁴ In addition, the personal exercise of *episkopé* has the task of preserving the unity, holiness and apostolicity of the Church, discerning vocations, ordaining ministers for the ministry of the Word and Sacraments, and maintaining discipline.⁶⁵ Its specific

⁶² Note 27 on the ecumenical councils refers to further ecumenical documents.

⁶³ NPC 96 (“The interconnectedness of the life of the Church is maintained by a ministry of *episkopé*, exercised in communal, personal and collegial ways, which sustains a life of interdependence. By synodality (communality) we mean the “walking together” of all the churches; by collegiality, the “communion” of all those who exercise oversight in them”). Also the remark after §.93: while in some churches oversight is mainly synodal, in others the role primarily pertains to the bishop.

⁶⁴ NPC 98–100.

⁶⁵ NPC 102–103.

form, primacy, or the ministry of presiding in charity and justice, is inseparable from the communal and collegial dimension of the Church. It strengthens the unity of the Church and enables it to speak with one voice.⁶⁶ Collegiality is the communion of those who exercise oversight in the Church.⁶⁷ The collegial exercise of *episkopé*⁶⁸ is based on the scriptural witness of Christ's commissioning of the community of the apostles to proclaim the Gospel and to lead the Church. Collegiality is the collegial, representative practice of leading, consulting, judging and decision making.

The NMC, conversely, reflects a shift in the understanding of *episkopé*. It starts from its personal exercise, and it no longer refers to conciliarity or to the *sensus fidei fidelium* in relation with the communal dimension of *episkopé*.⁶⁹ Conciliar *episkopé* is understood as an expression of the collegial dimension of oversight.⁷⁰ On the other hand, persons who exercise the *episkopé* have to make sure that the entire community is involved in the life of the church and are expected to listen to the insights of the faithful.⁷¹ In the second ecclesiological text it is even clearer that the *episkopé* is the role of ordained ministers.⁷² The responsibility of Christ-believers resulting from baptism is no longer mentioned.⁷³

Primacy and conciliarity

The ecclesiological texts discuss the relationship between conciliarity and primacy starting from the early ecclesial practice.⁷⁴ The ecumenical councils

⁶⁶ NPC 103. See also the historical overview (92–93).

⁶⁷ NPC 96.

⁶⁸ NPC 104–106.

⁶⁹ NMC 94.

⁷⁰ NMC 92.

⁷¹ NMC 96.

⁷² CTCV 52 (compare BEM, M26). Beyond preaching the Word and celebrating the sacraments this includes preserving the apostolic faith and unity, handing down revealed truth, ensuring the communion of local communities, and supervising charities.

⁷³ The *sensus fidei* is related here to acknowledging the authority of ordained ministers: the community can thereby understand the Word of God, receive the guidance and teaching of the ordained ministers, testifying thereby to the authenticity of their leadership (CTCV 51). The *sensus fidei* is therefore not related here to the *episkopé* exercised by the baptized.

⁷⁴ NMC 101–104, taking over with slight changes NPC 107–109, adding a more detailed discussion of the primate. It also addresses the summoning and presiding over the conciliar

sanctioned the ministry of primacy, a personal exercise of oversight performed by the heads of the patriarchal sees; thus primacy is not opposed to conciliarity, which is a more communal and collegial service of unity.⁷⁵

The historical overview regarding the practice of the patriarchal churches points both to the legitimacy of the ministry of primacy and to the difficulties arising from its exercise.⁷⁶ Primacy, understood as presiding, cannot be separated from the communal and collegial dimension of the Church.⁷⁷ Despite jurisdictional difficulties (the rivalry between patriarchates, the claim of the Bishop of Rome to universal jurisdiction), ecumenical dialogue has allowed the churches to see in it a gift rather than a threat.⁷⁸ This positive perception evokes the understanding emerging with the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order [Santiago de Compostella] on “the universal service of Christian unity”.⁷⁹ The NMC quotes here the invitation addressed to church leaders and theologians by Pope John Paul II in the encyclical *Ut unum sint* to engage in fraternal dialogue with him

gathering and the way consensus can be reached, recognised and expressed, at all levels. CTCV 54–57 largely follows the NMC, with a few changes.

⁷⁵ NMC 102, CTCV 55 (dropping “communal”).

⁷⁶ NPC 92–93, 103, NMC 101–104, CTCV 55. The CTCV is more positive about primacy: in the early centuries, many churches recognised the jurisdictional and doctrinal authority of the Bishop of Rome, given the special relationship of Peter and Paul to the Church of Rome.

⁷⁷ Collegiality was reflected in the early requirement that the first of the bishops could take decisions only in agreement with the other bishops, while the latter could decide on important matters only in agreement with the bishop who exercised primacy (cf. *Apostolic Canons* 34). NMC 102, CTCV 55.

⁷⁸ NMC 103.

⁷⁹ NMC 103; a reference to the final declaration of Santiago de Compostella, which recommended Faith and Order to undertake a study of the universal ministry of Christian unity, and asked the WCC and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity to prepare a joint meeting on the occasion of the 1998 Jubilee, as a step towards conciliar communion, to express the *koinonia* already achieved (31.2–31.3). See *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostella 1993 (Faith and Order Paper No. 164), Geneva: WCC, 1993. See also Geoffrey WAINWRIGHT, “Ut unum sint in Light of ‘Faith and Order’ – or ‘Faith and Order’ in Light of Ut unum sint?”, in *Church Unity and the Papal Office: An Ecumenical Dialogue on John Paul II’s Encyclical Ut Unum Sint (That All May be One)*, edited by Carl E. BRAATEN, Robert W. JENSON, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001, 76–96 (78–93).

on a unanimously acceptable way of exercising the Petrine ministry (UUS 95-96). The CTCV no longer quotes the UUS, but paraphrases it (without any reference), asking the churches, provided that the present divisions could be overcome, to reflect on ways a ministry that promotes and supports the unity of the Church at the universal level could be understood and practised.

What do the churches say about the Church (and conciliarity)?

The CTCV was followed by a lengthy process of consultation. The Catholic Church issued its response in 2019, through the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity [PCPCU].⁸⁰ The responses of the other churches were published in the Faith and Order text *What Are the Churches Saying About the Church* (2021).⁸¹ This synthetic summary reflects some tendencies, without detailing the responses of individual churches.

Thus respondents appreciated the understanding of conciliarity expressed in the CTCV, emphasised the importance of conciliarity/synodality, valuing the role of conciliar structures and of synods in preserving the unity of the church. Several churches noted that they actually practiced conciliarity. The local ecclesial community, respondents argued, can only exist in communion with other churches. Responses also showed a growing openness to various forms of *episkopé* within the Church, at local, regional, or even universal level, with a view to promoting unity.⁸²

The churches placed great emphasis on the people of God and the importance of baptism.⁸³ The mission and unity of the church should be addressed based on the role of the people of God. Baptismal ecclesiology could open up new avenues for ecumenical dialogue, clarifying questions related to ordained ministry, conciliarity/synodality, primacy and some Christian anthropological assumptions. The role of the baptised in conciliar processes beyond the local church as well as their specific

⁸⁰ The Church: Towards a Common Vision (Faith and Order Paper no. 214, 2013). A Catholic Response.

⁸¹ What Are the Churches Saying About the Church? Key Findings and Proposals from the Responses to The Church: Towards a Common Vision (Faith and Order Paper no. 236), 2021. On the responses of the Orthodox Churches: Radu BORDEIANU, „The Church: Towards a Common Vision”, *Exchange* 44 (2015) 231–249.

⁸² What Are the Churches Saying 18.

⁸³ What Are the Churches Saying 17, 42.

responsibility for faith require further in depth studies. Some churches reported that the baptised were involved in decision-making structures.⁸⁴

The Catholic reception of the CTCV is essentially positive, and this includes its understanding of conciliarity, the emphasis on the ecclesiological significance of baptism and the ministry of the baptised. The results on *episkopé* and primacy are deemed insufficient. The synodal/conciliar exercise of the ministry of oversight is consistent with the way the Catholic Church addresses ecclesial, doctrinal, moral issues. It involves the participation of the whole people of God, at various levels. The co-responsibility of all the baptized and the emphasis on universal priesthood are also consistent with the Catholic position.⁸⁵ The response also appreciates the attention given to the specific role of ordained ministry and its threefold, personal, collegial and communal dimension. This latter aspect matches the initiatives and reforms of Pope Francis.⁸⁶ The discussion of the *episkopé* evokes the growing synodal experience of the Catholic Church at local, regional and universal level.⁸⁷ However, beyond acknowledging this convergence, the response of the PCPCU finds the understanding of *episkopé* and primacy deficient. The ministry of *episkopé* pertains foremost to the bishop (LG 23-24, 27). While acknowledging the progress, the Catholic response misses the recognition of the role of the head of the episcopal college in articulating doctrinal truth and in performing the ministry of strengthening his colleagues in oversight (cf. Luke 22,32).⁸⁸ The CTCV, following the Lima Document, speaks of the personal, collegial and communal exercise of oversight. The way consensus was reached at Vatican II indicates however that after the collegial discussion of various issues, consensus is formulated in agreement with the head of the college of bishops. The response emphasises that consensus does not produce truth: it is the truth that promotes consensus. The authority of the councils does not therefore depend on consensus. The Petrine ministry and the relationship between the bishops and the head of the episcopal college is a normative Catholic teaching. As opposed to that there is currently no consensus among the churches on the necessity or even desirability of a universal primacy. At the same time, several bilateral dialogues have recognised the importance of such ministry. The pastoral and ecumenical ministry of the conciliar and post-

⁸⁴ What Are the Churches Saying 19.

⁸⁵ A Catholic Response 8, as part of the general issues converging with the Catholic position.

⁸⁶ A Catholic Response 8.

⁸⁷ A Catholic Response 40 (as shown notably by Vatican II and the practice of local synods).

⁸⁸ A Catholic Response 41 (under the heading ‘The Authority of Ecumenical Councils’).

Vatican II popes, from John XXIII to Pope Francis, and the latter's advocacy of the synodal way testify to the pastoral nature of the universal ministry of unity.

From the perspective of the interactions between ecumenical documents and Catholic developments, it is worth considering that according to the Catholic response the CTCV (53) calls on the Catholic Church to deepen its synodal practice. Synodality and collegiality gained momentum after the ecclesiological shift of Vatican II. The response quotes Pope Francis' speech on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, reflecting on the central importance of synodality: the synodal Church is a listening Church, where mutual listening and learning are important.⁸⁹

The Catholic Church is also aware that the hope of Vatican II about decentralisation, collegiality and the exercise of synodality is not completely fulfilled. Therefore, the study of the ITC on Synodality offers guidelines regarding a renewed theology of synodality and provides pastoral orientation for its implementation. A commitment to the synodal principle promotes the exchange of gifts and experiences between local churches; this exchange is facilitated by the oversight of the Bishop of Rome, which is indispensable in an increasingly global and pluralistic world. Synodality is not only a particular style of exercising authority, of performing ordained ministry and cooperation between church structures, but a form of ecclesial behaviour that all Christians can appropriate. It implies a radical change in behaviour and action, a more inclusive attitude with regard to structures, involving e.g. consultation and cooperation in pastoral councils at diocesan and parish level.

The Catholic Church also recognises the ecumenical significance of synodality as this brings it closer to the churches that have practiced it. Synodality promotes cooperation between denominations. This also means that churches should refrain from making important decisions that could have a significant impact on other churches until they have been consulted. Synodal attitude, consultation prevents one-sided decisions that would cause division. The ecumenical significance of synodality is also confirmed by the study of the ITC: synodality is an invitation to Christians to walk together on the path to full communion, which reveals a church in which legitimate differences are given a place in the light of truth, in the mutual exchange of gifts.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Cf. note 2 in this paper. See also Synod23, Introduction; I.1.(a), (e), and esp. III.16.

⁹⁰ Synodality 9.

Synodal thinking can shed new light on the relationship between primacy and synodality. It challenges the Catholic Church to exercise the ministry of primacy in a collegial way at all levels of the Church. This applies within the parish, where the priest needs to exercise his ministry in collaboration with other priests and the faithful. And this is also true in the local church, where the bishop represents the principle of unity, but shares his responsibilities with priests, deacons and lay people, ensuring that the various gifts build unity. The response quotes Pope Francis' affirmation that the Pope is not above the Church, but within the Church, to lead the Church of Rome as the successor of Peter. The Bishop of Rome exercises the universal ministry of primacy as a principle of unity. Synodality on the other hand must be exercised in communion with the Bishop of Rome.

The Catholic Church is aware that other churches and ecclesial communities do not recognise the Petrine ministry. However, in the new situation created by the ecumenical movement, following the invitation in UUS 95, it must find a way of exercising it as a ministry of charity recognised by other Christians.⁹¹

Concluding remarks. Interactions and specific emphases

Conciliarity became a major theme of the ecumenical dialogue in the aftermath of Vatican II. The reappraisal of conciliar practice in the WCC and the awareness of the importance of the universal councils starting with Uppsala, can be seen as an influence of Vatican II. The churches recognised that conciliar practice had been part of the life of the Church for centuries.

Conciliar cooperation has become a model within the quest for unity. But its prominence has also led to a gradual shift away from the search for organic unity towards the conciliar fellowship of churches that would preserve their independence, in the spirit of reconciled differences. The fading of the goal of visible unity is also reflected in current receptive ecumenism, which is no longer concerned with the resolution of controversial issues and organic unity, but with the mutual enrichment of the traditions of each church in dialogue with other denominations, in the process of learning and in the exchange of gifts.⁹² The

⁹¹ A Catholic Response, 57–59.

⁹² Mary-Anne PLAATJIES VAN HUFFEL, “From Conciliar Ecumenism to Transformative Receptive Ecumenism”, *HTS Theological Studies* 73.3 (2017).

shift of the geographical and theological centre of the ecumenical movement from Europe/the global North towards the global South also contributed to this change.

In the WCC, mainly due to the Orthodox influence, the understanding of *episkopé* and conciliarity shifted from an interpretation centred on baptism and *the sensus fidei fidelium*, closer to Protestant theology (as reflected in the NPC), to an approach which understands *episkopé* primarily as a personal, specific, responsible role of ordained ministers, and links synodality to the ministry of those who hold authority in the Church (CTCV). The emphasis on the role of ecumenical councils in countering doctrinal dangers/heresies belongs to the same tendency.

The quote from the Ravenna Declaration in the CTCV points to the influence of the Catholic-Orthodox dialogue. On the other hand, through the Catholic-Orthodox dialogue, the Orthodox concept of synodality may have influenced Catholic theology as well. While defining conciliarity or synodality primarily as the gathering of bishops exercising specific responsibilities, the Ravenna Document applies it in a broader sense to all members of the Church (5).⁹³

The response of the Catholic Church to the CTCV underscore the interplay of theological ideas and ecumenical texts. Some of the insights of the ecumenical dialogue, notably the role of the baptised in conciliar practice are also echoed in the Catholic response to the CTCV (discussed in detail above) and more recently in the synodal documents of the Catholic Church.⁹⁴

⁹³ See Susan K. WOOD, “Walter Kasper on the Catholic Church”, *Ecclesiology* 14 (2018) 203–211 (209–210), in response to Kasper’s suggestion that synodality is primarily an episcopal characteristic. In the eucharistic communion of local churches in communion with the bishop, at the regional level in the communion of local churches, and at the level of the universal church (*Ravenna* 10, 17), the church includes the entire people of God gathered and on the move (they are therefore *synodoi*). Therefore synodality/conciliarity is an attribute of the people of God, before being one of the hierarchy (which does not deprive the bishop of his magisterial attributions, his oversight role, in the church, not over the church).

⁹⁴ For a Synodal Church 2, 12 (by virtue of baptism, all share in the task of evangelization), 13 (as a gift of the Holy Spirit received in baptism, the people of God cannot err in matters of faith). Synod23, I.7, Convergence (b): baptism, as the root of synodality, also constitutes the foundation of ecumenism. Through it all Christians participate in the *sensus fidei* and must be listened to carefully, regardless of their tradition. There can be no synodality without the ecumenical dimension.

The Catholic Church discover in the ecumenical dialogue a call to deepen its own synodal practice (2019). The synodal process started by Pope Francis undoubtedly took up this task. Two proposals formulated in the concluding synthesis of the Synod refer to the ecumenical practice of synodality. Thus the document envisages the possibility of involving Christians of other denominations in Catholic conciliar processes at all levels and inviting a larger number of delegates at the synodal assembly in 2024.⁹⁵ A further proposal envisions convening an ecumenical synod in the future, to address the common mission of Christians in the present world.⁹⁶ This is a less ambitious, but perhaps somewhat more realistic goal than the universal council proposed by Uppsala, but the chances to achieve it are uncertain.⁹⁷

Along conciliarity, other topics also reflect a convergence between ecumenical texts and Catholic documents on synodality: the responsibility for the poor and marginalised⁹⁸ and the need to protect the vulnerable in the Church.⁹⁹ The Synod also pays attention to the role of women in the mission of the Church.¹⁰⁰

Notwithstanding this convergence, it is clear that agreement does not cover all issues. Remaining differences include the role of the people of God, the understanding of the relationship between personal and communal or collegial *episkopé*, the meaning and necessity of primacy. Thus the discussion of primacy raised an important issue for Catholic theology. The NMC even quoted John Paul II's call for dialogue on primacy (UUS 95). But in this respect the rapprochement did not go beyond a few general statements on the legitimacy (not the necessity) of such a ministry.

⁹⁵ Synod23, I.7, proposal (m). Adopted with 319 votes (25 votes against). “Si desidera anche continuare a coinvolgere i cristiani di altre confessioni nei processi sinodali cattolici a tutti i livelli e invitare un maggior numero di delegati fraterni alla prossima sessione dell’Assemblea nel 2024.” Only the previously cited Convergence point (Synod23, I.7, Convergence (b)) had more voices against (28).

⁹⁶ Synod23, I.7, proposal (n).

⁹⁷ The proposal (adopted with 321 votes, vs. 23 nays) is formulated in an impersonal and noncommitting way: “È stata avanzata da alcuni anche la proposta di convocare un Sinodo ecumenico sulla missione comune nel mondo contemporaneo”.

⁹⁸ For a Synodal Church 5, 9, 29; Synod23, I.4.

⁹⁹ For a Synodal Church 2, 6 (against the abuse of power).

¹⁰⁰ Synod23, II.9 (although the passages regarding the ministry of women, in particular the perspective of (re)opening the diaconate to women, have received the highest number of votes against, more than e.g. the proposal to promote theological and pastoral discernment on the issue of polygamy and the accompaniment of people in polygamous unions coming to faith.)

As to the dialogue within the WCC, reaching convergence is a complex and difficult process. The documents reviewed here reflect some fifty years of ecumenical dialogue. During this time, several generations of theologians have succeeded each other, the composition of the WCC has changed significantly, and priorities, geographical and ecclesial paradigms have shifted. The ecclesiological convergence texts have been rewritten countless times. This points to a deeper difficulty, namely the near impossibility of formulating a lasting consensus. Not to mention the political and church political factors that influence the position of the member churches and of their representatives.

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