

Synodality and Renewal

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Cardinal Walter Kasper, in his address for the Online Study Day of the German Lay-Initiative “Neuer Anfang” (*New Beginning*), explains why the current commitments of the bishops to waive the application of Canon Law are only a “lazy trick” that would equal a collective resignation of the bishops and why synods can only be extraordinary intermissions and not synodal Church governments.

1. The Church needs Renewal and Reform

The following topic I hold personally dear to my heart. It is about true and false reform. It accompanied me throughout my entire life story. As a high school student, I grew up after World War II amid the reform debate of the time. Like many of my peers, I, too, was shaped by a word of Romano Guardini which he had already formulated after World War I in 1922, so exactly 100 years ago, and which now, after the catastrophe of the Third Reich and World War II, has become relevant anew: “A religious event of incalculable importance has begun: the Church is awakening in the souls.”

Hardly anyone would repeat that today. Today rather applies: The Church is dying in many souls. But back then, after the end of the war, when Germany was in ruins not only physically but also morally, it was the time of the late outburst of the church youth movement between the two world wars; it was the time of the Liturgical Movement and the Bible Movement. We were shaped - and I am still shaped - by the motto of a *new way of life in Christ*. Our concern was a renewal of the Church with Jesus Christ in the center.

In the lectures, we heard with interest about renewal movements in France, which had already at that time defined itself as a mission country and tried to counteract them with the *Mission de France* and the *Mission de Paris*. In 1947, the then Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Suhard, wrote the almost prophetic pastoral letter that has become famous: *Essor ou déclin de l'Église*, Growth or Decline of the Church. He could write it almost likewise today, 75 years later, and it would be as relevant today as it was then.

Spirit of Optimism and Enthusiasm for Reform 1959

So on January 25, 1959, we were inwardly prepared when we heard on the evening news, quite unexpectedly, that Pope John XXIII had announced that day in St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome the convocation of an Ecumenical Council and at the same time a Roman Synod as well as a reform of Canon Law. That hit like a bomb. The spirit of optimism and the enthusiasm for reform of that time can hardly be conveyed to today's young people, and even less can it be made comprehensible. It has shaped me to this day, and I don't know how I would get through the current crisis undamaged without these early, positive experiences.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was an awakening. With liturgical reform, the rediscovery of the meaning of the Word of God, and a renewed vision of the Church and its relationship with the modern world. With the *yes to religious freedom*, ecumenical awakening, and reconciliation with the Jewish people. These were all events of the century. It

is, therefore, simply wrong when I hear today that the Catholic Church is incapable of reform. No other church in the 20th century has presented a comparable reform as the Catholic Church did.

Even a quick glance at church history shows: It is one story of reform and renewal. The phrase *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, i.e., the church is always in need of reform and renewal, describes the reality of almost 2000 years of church history. For this reason, the last Council has taught us this principle several times. Explicitly, the Council states: "She (the Church) is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified; she always follows the way of penance and renewal." (LG 8; cf. UR 4; GS 21; 43; AG 37).

The Church, then, is not a petrified, rigid institution but the wandering people of God who are pressing forward in history, ready to repent and convert.

2. Distinguish True and False Reform.

But now the question: What does renewal mean? What does reform mean? It's important to say right from the start: Renewal does not mean innovation. Renewal does not mean trying something new for a moment and reinventing a new church. Renewal means, as already promised in the Old Testament, to make oneself new by the Spirit of God and to be given a new heart (Ez 36:26 f).

That's precisely what reform means. Reform means shaping the Church back into form - into the form Jesus Christ wanted and gave to the Church. Jesus Christ is the foundation stone, no one can lay another (1 Cor 3,10 f), and he is simultaneously the cornerstone that joins everything together (Eph 2:20). *He* is the measure, the Alpha and Omega of any renewal.

Church reform does not turn the Church into some substance that can be remolded and reshaped to suit the situation. True reform is not about being as contemporary as possible but about being as Christlike as possible. The Synod of Würzburg (1971-75) already stated:

"The crisis of the life of the Church is ultimately not due to difficulties of adaptation to our modern life and attitude towards life, but to difficulties of adaptation to the one in whom our hope is rooted, ...Jesus Christ with his message of the Kingdom of God" (Our Hope II,3).

The identity of the Church is given to us in Jesus Christ at all times and for all times. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8).

When we speak of Jesus Christ, we do not mean the so-called *historical* Jesus. We mean the exalted to heaven, the living Lord Jesus Christ. The historical Jesus is a construct we reconstruct from historical sources using our current historical methods. As Albert Schweitzer says in his famous work on the historical Jesus research, what comes of it is mostly the masters' mind.

Jesus, when he left this world, did not leave us a book or a code from which we are to pick out what Jesus wanted and said. He has promised us the Holy Spirit, *the* Spirit of truth, who brings to remembrance all He has said and done and guides us into all the truth (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:13). Therefore, the last book of the Bible, the Apocalypse or the *Secret Revelation of John*, tells us six times to listen to what the Spirit says to the churches as a legacy for the future (Rev 2:7 and others).

No Ideological Answers after Majority Votes

A synod is the intermission of the ordinary business of the church to take time to listen and share what the Spirit has to say to us today. More specifically, what He tells us about the corrections we need to make and the direction we should take. There can be no ideologically prescribed answers to these questions imposed by majority voting. Rather, the result must grow and mature in listening and praying together and in attentive conversation with one another.

Synods are spiritual events. Historically, they were a liturgical event in which, in the beginning, the Evangeliary is solemnly enthroned and, in the hymn "Come, Creator Spirit", the Holy Spirit is invoked. The Gospel of Jesus Christ interpreted presently in the Holy Spirit should preside; it should be the norm that everyone follows to bring the church newly into form.

Extraordinary Intermission instead of a Permanent Institution

Therefore, the Synod is an extraordinary intermission. Synods cannot be made institutionally permanent. The tradition of the church does not know a synodal church government. A synodical supreme council, such as is now taken into the prospect, has no support in all constitutional history. It would not be a renewal but an outrageous innovation.

Not a theologian, a political scientist recently expressed this somewhat maliciously, referring to such a Synodal Council as a Supreme Soviet. Soviet is an old Russian word that means precisely what we call a council in German. Such a Supreme Soviet in the Church would obviously not be a good idea. Such a council system is not a Christian idea but an idea coming from a completely different spirit or un-spirit. It would choke off the freedom of the *Spirit to blow where and when He wishes* and destroy the structure Christ intended for His Church.

3. Evangelical Criteria of Renewal and Reform

Now to the third question: How can we know what the Gospel tells us today? Exegetical research is undoubtedly important for this, but in many cases, it is not in unison but polyphonic. To answer this question, theology has developed the doctrine of *loci theologici*, the doctrine of the places of sources. Today we say the doctrine of the principles of the testimony of the Gospel.

This is already found in the Fathers of the Church and medieval theologians; for the first time, it was systematically developed by Melchior Cano (16th century). Apart from that, he was a strict Thomist and deeply opposed to all innovations. He listed ten such loci (places), seven actual (*loci proprii*) (Sacred Scripture, apostolic tradition, councils, etc.), and three foreign (*loci alieni*) (natural reason, philosophy, history).

Against the Dementia of the Church

This teaching is important because it tells us: If we want to interpret the Gospel in one accord, it is not enough to have the unanimity that we find among ourselves *today*; we also need unanimity with the faith of *earlier* times of the Church. In theological terminology, it is called a synchronic unanimity today and, simultaneously, a diachronic unanimity with the tradition. We must not be oblivious to history and think that we can start back at zero.

Such oblivion of history is one of the worst diseases a person can be afflicted with; we call it dementia. Also, as a church, we must not become demented and lose our identity. We may draw from the faith in which countless people have lived and died in the past. From the faith of many holy women and men, of many martyrs.

The Original Sin of the Synodal Way

Therefore it is good that the Synodal Way has reminded us of and taken up this teaching. But it is fatal that it thereby falls for a wrong interpretation, which means that the *loci alieni* are equal to the *loci proprii*. This is already absurd considering the word usage and utterly wrong if human criteria are equated with the Gospel. Such an equalization means a tectonic shift in the foundations of theology, which must then necessarily lead to an ecclesial earthquake.

If one reads the critical Objections of other Bishops Conferences to our Synodal Way, it is the very point of the issue, namely the accusation that in some respects, our texts do not follow the Gospel but our supposed human wisdom. The Synodical Way would do well to take this objection seriously.

It is the original sin of the Synodal Way that, right at the beginning, it has more or less put aside the letter of the Pope and his invitation to start from the Gospel and the primary mission of evangelization and took its own path with partially different criteria. This objection will be repeated and increased, and it will, if we do not heed it, break the Synodal Way's neck.

It is not enough to show goodwill. I do not deny it to anyone. But well-intentioned is often the opposite of right. It is about the truth of the Gospel. It is a matter of staying on track with the Gospel. This is precisely what every bishop has publicly promised at his episcopal consecration. We will have to give an account of this one day. We will not get away with purely tactical aspects. It is not for me to judge others; I can only say that I cannot see how, at the Last Judgment, I could represent single already decided statements as compatible with the Gospel.

4. Open Structure of a Synod

This brings us to the fourth point. Having spoken of the criteria, we must turn to the synod's structure as Jesus Christ intended for the Church. The earthly Jesus did not establish hierarchical offices, he has promised the Holy Spirit, and on Pentecost, He descended upon all: women and men, young and old, enslaved people and maids, Jews and Gentiles (Joel 3:1-5; Acts 2:17 f). Pentecost is, so to speak, the birth of the Church.

The sociological, cultural, and national differences do not matter; all Christians have the same dignity. But each has his charisma, task, and office (1 Cor 7:7). Just as the human body has different members with different functions that depend on and need each other, so is the Church (1 Cor. 12). Not everyone and not all can do everything - everything can only be done by everyone together.

This disposition as *communio*, a joint participation in the one Spirit, was constituted in the so-called Apostle Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15). It is the archetype of a synod as the Church's "community on the way". The apostles Peter, James, and Paul had their unique roles, but the whole community was involved. All contributed to the final decision on one accord. After that, the assembly of Antioch also had to agree. Expressed in theological terminology: The

decision in Jerusalem needed and found a reception. Therefore, the decisive factor was the interaction of all, which led to all of them being in one accord.

The Body without the Head would be headless, the Head without the Body a Skull

The Second Vatican Council speaks of the *wonderful unity of the shepherds and the faithful* (DV 10). The synod is comparable to an ellipse with two focal points in tension: The bishops, who were not new apostles after the apostles but perform apostolic duties - and the churchly community. Only where there is tension, there is life. The body of the church can do nothing without those who represent the head. But the head is nothing without the body of the church. The churchly community, therefore, has not only an advisory but also a participative function. The body without the head would be headless, the head without the body a skull, a torso. The community should hear what the bishop has to say, and the bishop, in turn, should listen to what the community has to say. Only the two together are the one people of God.

This touches on a crucial point, the relationship between bishop and community. The Church of the first centuries had to resist not only the ancient pagan religions and, in the persecutions of Christians, the imperial state religion. It was much more difficult to prevail against the then common and widespread mentality of Gnosis, which expressed itself in many sects. This confrontation was about the survival, life, and death of Christianity.

The Episcopate as the Cornerstone of the Early Church

Early Christianity established three criteria, three cornerstones, so to speak. The symbolum, the baptismal creed, which we still say today in the creed, the canon of the Sacred Scripture, and the episcopate. The episcopate thus became the cornerstone of the early Church, common to all churches of the first century in both East and West to this day. Whoever saws at this pillar breaks the neck of the Church.

I know no one wants that - but factually, it is happening. This is because the bishops can no longer factually exercise the ministry and authority entrusted to them. If, in the act of self-commitment, they voluntarily abandon this and declare to follow the decisions of the synod or the future Synodal Council.

Self-commitment as a Lazy Trick

I think this idea of a voluntary commitment is a trick - and, moreover, a *lazy* trick. Because, at best, the current bishops could commit themselves in this way for their own person, but not their successors. Imagine a civil servant who gets himself appointed and then renounces the exercise of his legal duties. He would be sure to face a process under civil service law. Ultimately, such a self-commitment would equal a collective resignation of the bishops. Constitutionally, the whole thing could only be described as a coup, in other words, an attempted putsch.

So: The episcopate does not work without a synod, and the synod does not work without a bishop. It has to strengthen and support the bishop and keep his back free. It can, at the same time, prevent the abusive and arbitrary exercise of the bishop's authority. A strong synod needs a strong bishop, and a strong bishop can only fulfill his leadership responsibility with a strong synod. The synodal structure is the ecclesiastical form of separation of powers in the Church.

5. The Freedom of the Spirit and the Prophetic Dimension

With a final fifth chapter, I would like to close to avoid the accusation that it is once again only about justifying and rescuing the hierarchical structure of the Church. That's not what this is about right now. It is about the constitutive tension between episcopate and synod. It means that the synodal system is not a closed but an open system. It cannot be constructed from one point, taken in hand, and in this sense, manipulated. As such an open system, it gives room to the freedom of the Holy Spirit. The Church is not just an institution. As a sacramental dimension, it is always an institution and event.

Recently, a church historian rightly reminded me that even though synods have contributed to renewal under challenging situations in church history, they have never been the actual source of renewal. This usually started from individuals, Christians taken by the Spirit, men, and women. Already at the first council, the Synod of Nicaea (325), a young deacon, Athanasius, took part as his bishop's secretary and played the decisive role.

Later, it was great, holy women and men in each case. After the Good Friday catastrophe, a woman, Mary of Magdala, aroused the intimidated apostles, gathered only behind closed doors, and first had to jolt Peter and John into action. Later, St. Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Joan of Arc, and many other great women are to be mentioned. Mostly they were founders of religious orders: Benedict of Nursia, Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis and Dominic, Ignatius of Loyola, Charles de Foucauld, and others.

In short, we must not disregard the prophetic-charismatic dimension. But no one can make himself a prophet. Anyone who tries to do that can only be a false prophet. Prophets are reviled and persecuted. Think of the lamentations of the prophet Jeremiah. Ultimately, the leadership of the Church rests with the Holy Spirit. In the end, we can only pray that such prophetic figures will be given to us again and again.

I am convinced we will find a renewal of the Church from the crisis we are in. I do not know who, not when, and how the Church will reawaken as the *Church in the souls*. I also don't know if I will live to see it myself. We cannot make the renewal, but it will come. God is faithful.

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