

## **POPE FRANCIS ON THE SYNODAL MODEL RECOVERY OF COLLEGIALITY**

In *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis speaks of the difficulties that episcopal conferences have faced in the recent history of the Church. He points out that the second Vatican Council speaks favorably of national bishops' conferences stating that, "like the ancient patriarchal Churches, episcopal conferences are in a position 'to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit'." (*EG.*, 32. See *De Ecclesia, Constitution on the Church*, 23.). However, he goes on to state that this vision for episcopal conferences has not been fully realized because the "juridical status of episcopal conferences which would see them as subjects of specific attributions, including genuine doctrinal authority, has not yet been sufficiently elaborated." (*EG*, 32. In a footnote Pope Francis cites *Apostolos Suos*, AAS 90 (1998), 641-658). Francis points out that, to some extent, the reason that episcopal conferences have not reached their full potential is because the papacy and the central structure of the universal Church have not heard the call to pastoral conversion. (*EG*, 32.) To this he adds, "Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach." (*EG*, 32).

From the very beginning of his pontificate Pope Francis made it clear that he was going to follow a more collegial and inclusive model of church leadership, one more in line with Vatican II's notion of collegiality. In his mission to reform the church Pope Francis has chosen to use the synodal process. (Massimo Faggioli, *Catholicism and Citizenship*, 65). The adoption of the synodal process follows the intention of Vatican II. (Massimo Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis*, 68). With the implementation of the synodal model to discuss church teaching and its pastoral implications, it became clear that Pope Francis' leadership style and his management of the church were going to be quite different from what it had been under John

Paul II and Benedict XVI. On October 8, 2013 Francis announced that in October 2014 the church would convene an extraordinary general assembly of bishops on the topics related to the family and evangelization. Soon after, it was announced that this would be followed by an ordinary general assembly of the synod of bishops in October 2015 on the same topics. Pope Francis shared his reflections on the discussions and outcomes of both synods in his apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* published on April 8, 2016.

The synodal process achieves two objectives. First, it admits a new voice into the discussion of the Church's beliefs and their pastoral implications. In addition to the statements of the pope and the Roman Curia, the voices of Catholics living the faith in diverse and pluralistic cultures are heard. The real questions, concerns, anxieties, doubts, and objections of the people of God become a part of the process. Pope Francis is not afraid to let the people be active participants in the theological process. He does not want to turn the people of God into a passive audience. (Faggioli, *Catholicism and Citizenship*, 65). Secondly, in the synodal process the institutional Church no longer pretends that the Church is in absolute agreement on everything, but admits that there can be disagreements on the important issues such as pastoral care in the family and marriage, on the diaconate, and celibacy. Francis is open to addressing these disagreements in a process that is synodal and leads to spiritual discernment. (Faggioli, *Catholicism and Citizenship*, 65).

Also, through the adoption of the synodal process Pope Francis is deliberately intending to emphasize the global dimension of the Catholic Church. The universal church is a global church. In reassessing its understanding of its theological and magisterial traditions the church needs to consider and consult the church as it exists in diverse cultures throughout the world. The recent Pan-Amazon Synod held in Rome from October 6 to 27, 2019 to address the needs of

indigenous Catholics living in the Pan-Amazonian region illustrates the global church in action.

By its very nature the synodal process is calling for a re-evaluation of the acceptance of the Roman model of the institutional church as the norm for the universal church. The Roman model of the church can no longer be viewed as the exclusive paradigm for the universal church.

Synodality means decentralization.

By implementing the reform of the church through the introduction of the synodal model Pope Francis is calling into question the normativity of three mainstays of the church of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, 1. the centralization of the authority of the church in the pope and the Roman Curia; 2. the relationship between the people and the magisterium; and 3. the universalization of the Roman-European model of the church.