Voices of Synodality from the Orthodox East contribute to the Great Debate

This hefty volume is a significant contribution to the steadily increasing quantity of publications being made available to resource the global process of study and reflection launched by Pope Francis which is intended to turn the Roman Catholic Church into a thoroughly synodical community. Over the past few years *Ecclesiology* has been providing articles and Editorials (the latter all free to view) on synodality from various ecumenical perspectives. The ecumenical dimension is judged to be vital to the synodical journey of the Catholic Church because other Christian traditions – Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant – have had long experience of practising a synodical polity, in their various ways. Some of these traditions (e.g. the [Presbyterian] Church of Scotland) are currently examining their legacy of synodality and governance and aiming to improve it. Others churches would benefit from some self-examination in the light of the energy and insight that Pope Francis and the Roman Catholic Church are putting into this initiative. In the Church of England and the Anglican Communion as a whole, synodality has become politicised and polarised; it needs to be reformed and purified and its character as a spiritual pathway reclaimed. At the present juncture, synodality is a challenge and an opportunity for all Christian Churches.

It was, therefore, an excellent initiative when, in July 2021, the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity of the Catholic Church proposed to the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops that conferences on the theory and practice of synodality within the various Christian traditions should be held. As a result of this initiative, four international and ecumenical conferences were held at the Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas (the Angelicum), Rome, in November 2022 and January 2023. They focused on the theology and practice of synodality in the Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, ‘Mainline Protestant’ (including Anglican) and Free Churches respectively. This volume is the impressive result of the first two conferences and reproduces, after revision and editing, their proceedings. A second volume, containing the

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proceedings of the second pair of conferences (I gave the Anglican keynote at the first of these) is in preparation and expected to be published soon. In the case of the first couple of conferences, more than 100 theologians, historians, and canonists, including bishops, clergy, laity and religious, took part. Both sets of conferences, together with the two tomes of proceedings, testify to a massive logistical and organisational effort on the part of the Angelicum. In this volume each keynote paper is followed by several shorter responses which generally cover the implications for women (outspoken voices here), laity, young people and religious communities within Orthodoxy. The expert Roman Catholic auditors provide a useful ‘Synthesis Paper’ after each half.

The Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches have endured much adversity over the centuries, but they have not experienced the traumas that, in the West, helped to stimulate ecclesiological reflection and the emergence of synodical or conciliar structures. They obviously did not pass through the catastrophic ‘Great Schism of the West’ that erupted in 1376 when the papacy split into first two then three rival claimants, with nations and their rulers, dioceses and their parishes, taking opposing sides. Thus the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches did not experience (or benefit from) the upsurge of ecclesiological and conciliar thinking that was triggered by the schism, nor were they, of course, involved in the Council of Constance that successfully unified the papacy and thus Western Christendom in 1417. Neither were those churches affected directly by the sixteenth-century Reformation which also proved to be a battleground of conciliar research and debate. Nevertheless, as this volume abundantly shows, the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches have a history, a tradition and a practice of conciliarity (or synodality) which they trace back to the beginnings of those churches and found upon the Canons of the early Councils.

I have been using the terms ‘synodical’ and ‘conciliar’ more or less interchangeably, but are they in fact synonymous? Pope Francis has endorsed the language of ‘synodality’. This has the double advantage of neither reviving the ghost of the Conciliar Movement of the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, when scholars and civil rulers (both of whom were also within the Church, of course) came to the rescue of a dysfunctional and fragmented papacy (an episode that Roman officialdom understandably does not wish to recall), nor getting any wires crossed with the General Councils of the Catholic (Western) Church, not least the Second Vatican Council. Naturally, the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches are at home with the Greek-language origins of ‘synodality’ (syn + hodos) and nearly every chapter reiterates the etymology. The non-Greek-speaking Churches have their own translations of this New Testament notion, but they seem equally comfortable with the language of
‘conciliarity’, which also basically means ‘coming together’, but perhaps lacks the element of dynamism and progression that we have in hodos (way). Some writers here seem to think that there was no need for Pope Francis to coin the term ‘synodality’ at all.

In this expansive volume, the elephant in the room is the Russian Orthodox Church, which is only occasionally mentioned and that not favourably, given the support of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow for President Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. The struggles within pan-Eastern Orthodox synodality are not glossed over. The wound caused by the absence of four autocephalous Orthodox Churches, including the Russian, from the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Churches in Crete in 2016 is mourned. As the 1700th anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325 approaches, the legacy of councils, including Nicaea, is viewed without illusions. That council probably created more problems than it solved and led to a protracted period of extreme theological and ecclesiastical turbulence and confusion.

In a guarded and courteous way, the contributors make it emphatically clear, with a view to the role of the papacy, that primacy cannot be the source of the Church’s synodical life. True synodality is not an expression of ‘universalistic ecclesiology’. It must arise from the life of the Church itself, as led by its bishops. By ‘the Church’, the Orthodox mean the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Church families. It may be helpful to note that the Oriental Orthodox Churches – Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, Eritrean and Indian – are those Orthodox Churches that accept the first three Ecumenical Councils – Nicaea, Constantinople and Ephesus – but reject the Council of Chalcedon, AD 451, and its Christology, together with its successors (though the Assyrian Church of the East does not accept the Council of Ephesus, AD 431, either). In modern times rapprochement has taken place between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion respectively with the non-Chalcedonian Churches on some divisive questions of Christology with credal implications. These Churches are headed variously by a Patriarch, Catholicos or Pope.

Both the Eastern and the Oriental Orthodox contributors insist that the Church of Christ is inherently synodal, indeed that ‘The Church in herself is a Synod ... established by Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit’, as the Holy and Great Council of 2016 affirmed, following St John Chrysostom who stated: ‘The Church and Synod are synonymous’ (p. 424, n. 4). The Orthodox Alexander Schmemann and the Roman Catholic Hans Küng, among others, had said the same, Küng naturally using the language of conciliarity. The writings of the late John Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon, are gratefully deployed throughout, which is not always the case among the Orthodox. Following Zizioulas, synodality is seen as a dynamic, epicletic process, orientated to the
eschaton and centred on the celebration of the Eucharist, and in no way as an institutionally-hidebound bureaucratic or merely political imposition on the spiritual, sacramental life of the Church. Synodality is a primary manifestation of the nature of the Church as communion (koinonia). It presupposes eucharistic communion (let those Anglicans who cling to the illusion that you can still have synodality when you do not have eucharistic communion between bishops and churches take note). The eucharistic synaxis is the prototype of every form of synod. This point is critical because to participate in the Eucharist is to participate in Christ's reconciling work, both passively, as it were, as a recipient of his reconciliation, and then actively, as a witness to it and (again, as it were) an apostle and minister of it. The semi-mystical term sobornost, beloved of the Russian Orthodox thinkers in exile, is sometimes used here to indicate the spiritual and sacramental unity of synodality beyond all ecclesiastical and hierarchical distinctions. Because synodality is an expression of the Church as communion, it pertains to every expression of the Church, the local (diocese) as well as the national and the universal (though the Eastern, as distinguished from the Oriental, Orthodox contributors confess that synodality is stunted at the diocesan level where the bishop rules supreme). The authority of a synod is not automatic; it does not inhere in the synod itself, because there is a need for a process of reception by the whole Church over time, to validate or perhaps not, the decisions of a council. Synods may be composed solely of bishops or of bishops with clergy and laity. They may be legislative (to take an example from outside Orthodoxy: the General Synod of the Church of England) or purely consultative (e.g. the Lambeth Conference) or a mixture of both. However, it is admitted that 'almost all theological questions related to delegation and representation in the Orthodox Church are disputed questions' (p. 185).

The Oriental Orthodox contributors point to several aspects of their polity that are distinctive of their tradition and practice within Orthodoxy. They note that their tradition does not recognise ecclesiology as a distinct theological discipline. As for all Orthodox (and not only for them), the Church is a lived reality and a liturgical event, rather than a branch of dogmatic theology. The Orientals are also spared the tensions and divisions that afflict the synodality of the Eastern Orthodox. They point out that lay participation in synods is normative among them, including the participation of women (though, as in all Orthodoxy, women are not allowed to perform any sacred, liturgical functions, though in some Oriental Orthodox Churches they may apparently preach). Interestingly, the Patriarch of Antioch, the head of the Syrian Orthodox Church, is seen as occupying the throne of St Peter, as well as of St Ignatius of Antioch (martyred AD?110), and as their successor. The Catholicos
of the Assyrian Church of the East is also referred to as ‘Peter’. In classical Anglicanism, all bishops were regarded as successors of Peter and the apostles, until the notion of ‘the Petrine ministry’, for a soft form of papacy, was devised and became an almost unchallenged shibboleth of ecumenical dialogue.

This work is a mine of information – almost an encyclopedia – about the history, traditions, practices, sensitivities and sense of ecclesial identity of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches as they interface at the present time with the Roman Catholic Church on the challenge and opportunity of a comprehensive synodality. I look forward to its forthcoming companion volume *Listening to the West* and to having it reviewed in this journal.

*Paul Avis*

Editor-in-Chief of *Ecclesiology*; Honorary Professor,
School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

dr.paul.avis@gmail.com