

History of the Synod



The Synod of Bishops is a permanent institution established by Pope Paul VI, 15 September 1965, in response to the desire of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council to keep alive the spirit of collegiality engendered by the conciliar experience.

Literally speaking the word "synod", derived from two Greek words *syn* meaning "together" and *hodos* meaning "road" or "way", means a "coming together". A Synod is a religious meeting or assembly at which bishops, gathered around and with the Holy Father, have opportunity to interact with each other and to share information and experiences, in the common pursuit of pastoral solutions which have a universal validity and application. The Synod, generally speaking, can be defined as an assembly of bishops representing the Catholic episcopate, having the task of helping the Pope in the governing of the universal Church by rendering their counsel. Pope John Paul II has referred to the Synod as "a particularly fruitful expression and instrument of the collegiality of bishops".

Even before the Second Vatican Council the idea was growing for a structure which might provide the bishops with the means to assist the Pope in some manner to be determined, in his governing of the universal Church.

His Eminence, Silvio Cardinal Oddi, then an Archbishop and Apostolic Pro-Nuncio in the United Arab Republic (Egypt), on 5 November 1959, made a proposal to establish a central governing body of the Church or, to use his words, "a consultative body". He stated: "From many parts of the world there come complaints that the Church does not have a permanent consultative body, apart from the Roman congregations. Therefore, a kind of 'Council in miniature' should be established and include persons from the Church worldwide who would meet periodically, even once a year, to discuss major concerns and to suggest possible new paths in the workings of the Church. This body would extend over the whole Church as the episcopal Conferences bring together all or part of the hierarchy of a country or countries. Other bodies, like C.E.L.Am. (The Latin American Episcopal Council), for example, extends its activity for the benefit of the whole continent."

On 22 December 1959, His Eminence, Cardinal Alfrink, Archbishop of Utrecht, wrote: "In clear terms the Council proclaims that the government of the universal Church is by right exercised by the college of bishops with the Pope as its head. From here it follows that, in one sense, the care of the universal Church is the responsibility of every bishop taken singularly, and also, in another sense, that all bishops participate in the governing of the Church worldwide. This can be done not only in calling an Ecumenical Council, but also in the creation of new institutions. Perhaps some permanent Council of specialized bishops, chosen from the Church, could be given the charge of a legislative function in union with the Supreme Pontiff and the cardinals of the Roman Curia. The Roman Congregations would then maintain only a consultative and executive power."

However, it was Pope Paul VI who gave force to these ideas, while he was still Archbishop of Milan. In a talk commemorating the death of Pope John XXIII, he made reference to an "ongoing collaboration of the episcopate that is not yet in effect, which would remain personal and unitive, but given the responsibility of governing the whole Church". After his election as Pope he kept returning to the

concept of collaboration within the episcopal body—the bishops in union with the successor of Saint Peter—in a talk he gave to the Roman Curia (21 September 1963), at the opening of the second session of the Second Vatican Council (29 September 1963) and again at its closing (4 December 1963).

Finally at the conclusion of a discourse beginning the last session of the Council (14 September 1965), Pope Paul VI himself made public his intention to establish the Synod of Bishops in the following words: "The advanced information that We Ourselves are happy to share with you is that we intend to give you some institution, called for by this Council, a "Synod of Bishops", which will be made up of bishops nominated for the most part by the episcopal Conferences with our approval and called by the Pope according to the needs of the Church, for his consultation and collaboration, when for the well-being of the Church it might seem to him opportune. It goes without saying that this collaboration of the episcopate ought to bring the greatest joy to the Holy See and to the whole Church. In a particular way it will serve a useful purpose in the daily work of the Roman Curia, to which we owe so much recognition for its most valuable help, and for which, as bishops in their diocese, We also have permanent need in Our apostolic concerns. News and norms will be made known to this assembly as soon as possible. We did not wish to deprive Ourselves of the honor and pleasure of making you aware of this brief communication so as to personally bear witness once more to Our trust, esteem and fraternity. We place this beautiful and promising innovation under the protection of Mary, the Mother of God."

On the next day, 15 September 1965 at the beginning of the 128th General Assembly, the then Bishop Pericle Felici, General Secretary of the Council, promulgated the *motu proprio Apostolica sollicitudo* with which the Synod of Bishops was officially instituted.

The principal characteristic of the Synod of Bishops is service to the communion and collegiality of the world's bishops with the Holy Father. It is not a particular organism with limited competence as that of the Roman Congregations and Councils. Instead, it has full competence to deal with any subject in accordance with the procedure established by the Holy Father in the letter of convocation. The Synod of Bishops with its permanent General Secretariat is not part of the Roman Curia and does not depend on it; it is subject directly and solely to the Holy Father, with whom it is united in the universal government of the Church.

Though the institution of the Synod of Bishops is permanent in character, its actual functioning and concrete collaboration are not. In other words, the Synod of Bishops meets and operates only when the Holy Father considers it necessary or opportune to consult the episcopate, which at a synodal gathering, expresses its "opinion on very important and serious subjects" (Paul VI, *Address to Cardinals*, 24 June 1967). The task of every synodal Assembly shares in the collegial character which the episcopate can offer to the Holy Father. Through the Holy Father's acceptance of the advice or the decisions of a given Assembly, the episcopate exercises a collegial activity which approaches but does not equal that manifested at an Ecumenical Council. This is a direct result of various factors: the ensured representation of the whole episcopate, the convocation by the Holy Father and "the unity of the episcopate, which, in order to be one, requires that there be a Head of the College" (John Paul II, *Pastores Gregis*, 56), who is first in the episcopal order.