

“A synodal Church sheds light on the Petrine primacy”

As the Church begins two years of reflection on the synodal process, Pope Francis stressed the need for unity in his address to the Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group.

10/10/2021

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I am pleased to welcome you to Rome where, for the first time, you are meeting for your annual session. I am grateful for your theological work in the service of communion between Catholics and Orthodox. I thank Cardinal Koch for his words of introduction. I was struck by what you said about your specific task: to seek together ways in which the different traditions can enrich one another without losing their identity. I also found interesting your statement about interpretation as *Gegensätze*. I liked that. Thank you. It is good to cultivate a unity enriched by differences that will not yield to the temptation of a bland uniformity, which is never good. In this spirit, your discussions center on appreciating how differing aspects present in our traditions, rather than giving rise to disagreements, can become legitimate opportunities for expressing the shared apostolic faith.

I also like your name: you are not a commission or a committee, but a “working group”: a group that assembles in fraternal and patient dialogue experts from various Churches and different countries, who desire to pray and study unity together. Your patron, Saint Irenaeus of Lyons – whom soon I will willingly declare a Doctor of the Church with the title *Doctor unitatis* – came from the East, exercised his episcopal ministry in the West, and was a great spiritual and theological bridge between Eastern and Western Christians. His name, Irenaeus, contains the word “peace”. We know that the Lord’s peace is not a “negotiated” peace, the fruit of agreements meant to safeguard interests, but a peace that reconciles, that brings together in unity. That is the peace of Jesus. For, as the apostle Paul writes, Christ “is our peace; who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of

hostility" (*Eph 2:14*). Dear friends, with the help of God, you too are working to break down dividing walls and to build bridges of communion.

I thank you for this and, in particular, for your recently issued study entitled *Serving Communion. Re-thinking the Relationship between Primacy and Synodality*. Through the constructive patience of dialogue, especially with the Orthodox Churches, we have come to understand more fully that in the Church primacy and synodality are not two competing principles to be kept in balance, but two realities that establish and sustain one another in the service of communion. Just as the primacy presupposes the exercise of synodality, so synodality entails the exercise of primacy. From this standpoint, the International Theological Commission has stated, significantly, that in the Catholic

Church, synodality in the broad sense can be seen as the articulation of three dimensions: “all”, “some” and “one”. Indeed, “synodality involves the exercise of the *sensus fidei* of the *universitas fidelium* (all), the ministry of leadership of the college of Bishops, each one with his presbyterium (some), and the ministry of unity of the Bishop of Rome (one)” (*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2018, No. 64).

In this vision, the primatial ministry is an intrinsic element of the dynamic of synodality, as are also the communitarian aspect that includes the whole People of God and the collegial dimension that is part of the exercise of episcopal ministry. Consequently, a fruitful approach to the primacy in theological and ecumenical dialogues must necessarily be grounded in a reflection on synodality: there is no

other way. I have frequently expressed my conviction that “in a synodal Church, greater light can be shed on the exercise of the Petrine primacy” (*Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015). I am confident that, with the help of God, the synodal process that will begin in coming days in every Catholic diocese will also be an opportunity for deeper reflection on this important aspect, together with other Christians.

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you for your visit and I offer my good wishes for a fruitful working session here in Rome at the Institute of Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum. Entrusting my ministry to your prayers, I invoke upon you the Lord’s blessing and the protection of the Holy Mother of God. And now, if you would like, we can

pray together the Our Father, each in his or her own language.

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