



## COMMUNION OF SYNODAL CATHOLIC CHURCHES

### *Synodal: Our Model of the Church*

"Models of the Church" may mean images of the Church that give some sense of its character. One such model is that of the Church as "The Pilgrim People of God," on the journey together - like the archetype of the ancient Hebrews of the Book of Exodus. Another model is that of a great ship - often used by the Church Fathers - that reminds us of both the Ark of Noah, which carries all to safety; and the boat of the apostle Peter, which carries Jesus and the disciples on a journey to a distant shore. These images of the Church have no "better" or "worse," but are simply archetypes that convey the mission and ministry of the Church. There are other models as well.

"Models of the Church" also refers to the various forms of governance (called polity) in the realms of Christian ecclesial structure. There are four different models of Church governance in the Christian world:

An **EPISCOPAL MODEL** is based upon bishops as leaders. In some Churches, the bishops are elected, while in others they are appointed. Some Churches have a polity in which the clergy and laity participate in the legislation of the Church - called general synods. The administrators of the Church are the bishops, with authority concerning the communities and clergy of the jurisdiction. In this model, ordination has a permanent sacramental character. Examples of this model are the Episcopal Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church, as well as a number of Eastern Orthodox Churches.

A **PRESBYTERAL MODEL** does not have bishops. It is governed by a board that oversees the ministry of the clergy, and provides clergy for the communities of the jurisdiction. Communities are governed by some combination of self-governing boards and regional boards, composed of laity and clergy. Congregations are generally autonomous, but belong to a synod or regional conference. Clergy belong to a governing board that has jurisdiction over them - a kind of order of clergy. Clergy are appointed by a governing board, after a process of "call" is completed by a congregation. In this model, ordination is an office of the Church. One example of this model is the Presbyterian Church.



A CONGREGATIONAL MODEL is governed by a conference of congregations. Clergy may be credentialed and licensed (and ordained) by a clergy board of governance. Congregations are autonomous, but belong to a conference. Clergy may belong to an association, but the local congregation is the determinant of clergy ministry. No board appoints the pastor of a congregation. In this model, ordination is an office in the Church. One example of this model is the Baptist Church.

The SYNODAL MODEL is *the* ancient model of Church in which many voices participate in the direction of the Church. (The word "synodal" comes from Greek, while its counterpart "conciliar" comes from Latin.) In synodal polity, the voices of the bishop, laity and clergy participate on the local level of diocese in the life and direction of the Church. On a larger level - such as an international level - the bishops have traditionally come together in an "ecumenical council" to give voice and vote to the direction and governance of the Church. Their voices are balanced by the voices of the patriarchs, such as the Bishop of Rome, who is *primus inter pares* or first among equals, and generally recognized as a point of unity for the universal Church. The bishops are wise to listen to the *sensus fidelium*, which is the lived experience of the faithful Catholic people who exercise their faith in everyday life. The Communion of Synodal Catholic Churches espouses this ancient tradition of synodalism, as re-energized in the work of the Second Vatican Council and seeks to practice it in its life and ministry for others.

Just as the word "democracy" requires elements of free speech, voting rights, a free press, an educated population, etc., so too the word "Catholic" requires elements of the authority of the bishop, the traditional seven sacraments, the understanding of the Eucharist as both the Sacrifice of Christ and Sacred Meal, Marian devotion, etc. The Communion of Synodal Catholic Churches fulfills the definition of "Catholic" by its inclusion of all these elements.

#### COMPLETE CHURCH AS THE BODY OF CHRIST

The Church is complete when the bishop is present and united with the people and clergy, which happens especially at the Eucharist. This understanding of the Church is "holographic." What is meant by this is that each Diocese of the Communion is not simply a branch or piece of the Church; it is the Church, whole and complete. Whether the bishops are gathered together as a general synod with the clergy or people; or, the bishop is simply gathered with the people and clergy for the simple celebration of the Eucharist, an ordination or a diocesan synod: the Church is fully constituted.

