

The Bishop of Rome and Christian Unity

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Presentation of the study document “The Bishop of Rome: Primacy and Synodality in the Ecumenical Dialogues and in the Responses to the Encyclical Ut Unum Sint”

My intention is not to comment on the content of the various proposals of the document, but to suggest two keys of interpretation, that is: *overcoming oppositions* and *differentiation*.

The first key of interpretation that I would like to suggest is that ecumenical reflection on primacy has made it possible to overcome certain false oppositions.

- The first concerns the *relationship between primacy and synodality*. As the document points out, instead of conceiving this relationship in a dialectical way, several ecumenical dialogues have preferred to understand synodality in a broader sense, as a dynamic articulation of three dimensions: communitarian, collegial and primatial. This threefold approach was proposed for the first time by the Commission *Faith and Order* in 1927 and was taken up in the *Final document* of the recent Synod on synodality.

- A second dichotomy concerns the *relationship between de iure divino and de iure humano*. Several ecumenical dialogues emphasise instead the distinction between the theological content of the primacy and its contingent expression, between its doctrinal essence and its historical form.

- A third false opposition concerns the *relationship between the local Church and the universal Church*. Ecumenical dialogues have made it possible to take better account of the simultaneity of these two dimensions. Above all, they have emphasised that, in most Christian communions, it is not the local or universal levels that are most relevant for the exercise of primacy, but the regional level.

- A further false opposition, the fourth one, concerns *the first and second millennia*. The document shows that the usual contrast between the first two millennia is too simplistic. Indeed, the reunified Church cannot be based exclusively on the re-establishment of the institutions of the first millennium without taking into account the developments of the second millennium and without meeting the challenges of the third millennium.

- A fifth and final dichotomy concerns *the ‘primacy of honour’ and the ‘primacy of jurisdiction’*. The document *The Bishop of Rome* emphasises that in the first millennium the ‘primacy of honour’ did not simply mean ‘honorific precedence’, but implied real responsibility and authority.

These are five dichotomies that the ecumenical reflections on primacy have made it possible to relativise or even to overcome.

The second key of interpretation that we are proposing is the notion of differentiation. The document proposes several perspectives for a primacy conceived not only as a ministry of unity, but a *differentiated* ministry of unity. The five concrete proposals of the Dicastery can be indeed understood in the light of this notion of differentiation.

First: to re-receive the teachings of the First Vatican Council through the application of the methodology of differentiated consensus. Second: the differentiation between the different

responsibilities of the Pope, in particular between his patriarchal ministry in the Western Church and his primatial ministry of unity in the communion of Churches. Third: the ‘differentiated’ constitution or ordering of the Catholic Church, in particular by promoting the regional or continental dimension. Four: the implementation of an ‘ecumenical synodality’, a synodality *ad extra*, which should also be differentiated according to the dialogue partners. Lastly, the search for a differentiated model of communion between the Bishop of Rome and other Christians, a communion that would be realised in a differentiated manner with the Eastern and the Western Christian Communions – and also differently within the East and within the West.

In short, it can be said that the document *The Bishop of Rome*, and specifically its final proposal, illustrates how the overcoming of a number of traditional oppositions opens up new perspectives for a primacy conceived above all as a ministry of unity – a *differentiated ministry of unity*, in other words, an ecumenical primacy in a synodal Church.