

The Bishop of Rome and Christian Unity, 18 March 2025 (16:00 – 17:15 Rome/Geneva time)

Elizabeth Newman
Baptist World Alliance, Response

I will engage three proposals from *The Bishop of Rome* study document: 1) a theological interpretation of our current relationship, 2) the question of primacy not as a problem but an opportunity and 3) synodality as an ecumenical journey.

First, the document invites us not only to “reflect on [our] doctrinal differences of the past, but also *interpret theologically [our] current relationships*.”¹ The study document notes that the International Baptist-Catholic dialogue, Phase II, *The Word of God in the Life of the Church* does “not address primacy directly,” but offers instead “an overview of the disagreements.”² True, the dialogue does describe disagreements, particularly concerning interpretations of key Biblical texts that mention Peter (Matthew 16:18-19, Luke 22:31- 32 and John 21:15-19). As the dialogue document states, while these Biblical passages “show an interest in the leadership of Peter in the community of the early church, Baptists doubt that they provide a basis for the principle of an ongoing ‘Petrine office’ or ‘Petrine ministry’ which is to persist beyond the situation of the earliest community.”³

This disagreement, however, is situated within a wider Baptist Catholic *affirmation* not included in *The Bishop of Rome* study document. That is, “Christ is the head of the church. Under this supreme headship, the New Testament shows a certain primacy of leadership exercised by the apostle Peter among the Twelve, a role which is rooted in the intention of Jesus.”⁴ The international dialogue thus states that Baptists can acknowledge with Catholics that the historical connection of Rome with “the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul was a factor in affirming a particular role for the Church of Rome and its bishop in maintaining fidelity to the witness of the apostles.”⁵ While affirmation of this historical reality does not lead to agreement about a ministry of primacy, it nonetheless provides a point of unity for our relationship today. That is, the life, witness and leadership of the apostle Peter is crucial for the faithfulness of the church. This conviction can be further embraced by Baptists when it is acknowledged, as *Dei verbum*

¹ *The Bishop of Rome, Primacy and Synodality in the Ecumenical Dialogues and in the Responses to the Encyclical Ut Unum Sint, A Study Document of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), §10, 122.

² Ibid., §28, 20.

³ Baptist World Alliance and Catholic Church, “The Word of God in the Life of the Church: A Report of International Conversations between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance, 2006-2010,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2012): §198. Also available at: <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/alleanza-battista-mondiale/dialogo-internazionale-tra-la-chiesa-cattolica-e-l-alleanza-batt/documenti-di-dialogo/testo-del-documento-in-inglese.html> The dialogue addresses four topics: 1) the authority of Christ in Scripture and Tradition, 2) Baptism and the Eucharist (Lord’s Supper), 3) Mary as Model of Discipleship and 4) The Ministry of Oversight (*Episkope*) and Unity in the Life of the Church.

⁴ Ibid., §197.

⁵ Ibid., §199.

states, that the “living teaching office of the Church...is not above the word of God, but serves it...”⁶

In this light, it is significant that the 2024 Synod on Synodality ecumenical prayer service was held at the historical site of Peter’s martyrdom. The sixteen fraternal delegates (including a delegate from the Baptist World Alliance) helped lead the opening procession. Reading Scripture together before the site of Peter’s martyrdom was a powerful “gesture and symbolic action,”⁷ of the kind proposed in the study document. Though Baptists and Catholics are at the early stages of reflecting together on a ministry of primacy,⁸ such ecumenical liturgical gestures offer a witness to our shared history with the apostles, and specifically to Peter’s “primacy of leadership.”

Second, the study document invites us to see the question of primacy for the whole Church not “only as a problem but also as an opportunity for a common reflection on the nature of the Church and its mission in the world.”⁹ In this light, further reflection on a “symphonic articulation” of the communal, collegial and personal dimensions of the church is promising.¹⁰ Baptists affirm with Catholics that *episkope* [oversight] is exercised in communal, collegial and personal ways in the church in a network of dynamic relationships.¹¹ Yet these relations are understood differently. Whereas, as our joint document states, “Catholics tend to think of individual oversight first and so give greater accent to its personal character, as embodied in the ministry of bishops,” Baptists emphasize the communal in terms of “the gathered church, whether ‘gathered’ locally, in a regional area of a country or nationally.” *Episkope* (oversight) is exercised by the local church whose members appoint the pastor and deacons according to what they discern to be the calling of Christ, “in order to ‘watch over’ (‘oversee’) the body...with fidelity to the word of God.”¹² Given this emphasis, as theologian Henk Bakker states, Baptists may contribute to “the practice of congregational discernment within the worldwide church, since they are keen in upholding the voice of the simple folk who walk in the footsteps of Christ.”¹³

At the same time, it can sometimes be challenging for Baptists to listen “to more voices than those present in the local church [congregation].”¹⁴ Baptists confess that the “local church is

⁶ Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (18 November 1965), §10, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html

⁷ *The Bishop of Rome*, §11, 123.

⁸ *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*, §199.

⁹ *The Bishop of Rome*, §2, 118.

¹⁰ *The Bishop of Rome*, §12, 123.

¹¹ *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*, §173.

¹² *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*, §174.

¹³ Henk Bakker, “Discerning Churches,” in *Seeds of the Church, Towards an Ecumenical Baptist Ecclesiology*, edited by Teun van der Leer, Henk Bakker, Steven R. Harmon and Elizabeth Newman (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

wholly church but not the whole church.”¹⁵ And Baptists do have structures connecting the local church to a wider communions of faith and mission: regional associations, national unions and most notably the Baptist World Alliance. Within these structures “some individuals are appointed who exercise a personal *episcopate* which will be accorded varying degrees of ‘authority’ within their own sphere.”¹⁶ The question of primacy provides an opportunity for Baptists to consider more fully the personal dimension of the whole church: unity embodied in a person.

In our lived experience, many Baptists already acknowledge the Bishop of Rome as a spiritual figure. Many also pay close attention to how he watches over the Catholic church, as they realize it can shape their self-understanding as well. For example, Pope Francis’ emphasis on encountering those of the periphery has resonated with a Baptist concern for the dispossessed. Likewise, Pope Benedict’s insightful discussion of how true freedom differs from freedom as license has been equally welcome amongst Baptists who have emphasized the gift of Christian freedom.¹⁷ There is, thus, some reception of the Petrine ministry as gift for the sake of Christian unity.

Third, the study document refers to synodality as an ecumenical journey, one that “is not only a question of structures and ecclesial processes at the institutional level, nor captured by specific synodal events, but also a *modus vivendi et operandi of the whole Church*.”¹⁸ Scripture describes this unity as flowing from and made possible by the unity between the Son and the Father through the gift of the Spirit. As the study document emphasizes, this unity is at once a unity of truth, love and life.¹⁹ It presupposes an ontology of communion, where relation is intrinsic to being.

Synodality as an ecumenical journey thus invites us to imagine concrete ways to live and witness together. Three recommendations seem particularly promising.

First is the role of pilgrimages²⁰ as a way of continuing to promote communion and communication. The pilgrimage to the catacombs (2023 Synod on Synodality) was a witness to our shared communion with the early church.

¹⁵ Baptist World Alliance, *Constitution and Bylaws*, Article 1, Spiritual Commitment and Values (adopted July 10, 2024), 5, https://baptistworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/BWA-Constitution-and-Bylaws_Adopted-July-2024-FINAL.pdf

¹⁶ *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*, §174.

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI/Joseph Ratzinger’s understanding of freedom is referenced in the most recent international Baptist-Catholic dialogue, Phase III: “The Dynamic of the Gospel and the Witness of the Church Today The Report of an International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance: 2017–2022,” §10, forthcoming.

¹⁸ *The Bishop of Rome*, §23, 130.

¹⁹ *The Bishop of Rome*, §10, 122.

²⁰ *The Bishop of Rome*, §29, 133.

Second is the possible implementation of an ecumenical “conciliar fellowship” (as recommended by the Groupe des Dombes). Regular meetings among Church representatives at the worldwide level could be a rich way to extend ecumenical synodality.

Finally, and more generally, Ecclesial movements such as Focolare can provide inspiration for how to practice an ecumenical synodality. Chiara Lubich, the Movement’s founder, said: “If you love Jesus forsaken, you must detach yourself from your way of thinking.”²¹ Jesus forsaken involves the willingness to remain lovingly present with others even, or perhaps especially, in the midst of doubt, division and suffering. For Lubich, Jesus forsaken and unity are two sides of the same coin.

²¹ Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings* (New City Press, 2007), 315