

## The Bishop of Rome: *Key Points for Religious Communities*

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*In 2024, the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity [published a study document](#) on the role of the bishop of Rome, focused on ecumenical relations. In this article, Nathan Smith highlights several points from the document relevant to religious communities.*

In working with Evangelical Christians, the primary ecumenical partner for Glenmary Home Missioners (where I serve as Director of Ecumenism) and the predominant Christian demographic in the United States and many regions throughout the world, it is common to find differing interpretive perspectives on a host of Scriptural passages. A common point of dialogue, even contention, comes from varied readings of Matthew 16:17-19. Does Christ, in hearing Peter's profession of His Lordship, really give him the "keys to the kingdom"? Who's to say that Peter has any special status, let alone those who came after him? Could not another reading, taken from only two chapters later, suggest that the "binding and loosing" is provided to the whole Church (Matt. 18:18), that is, any Christian who professes the confession that Peter exemplified through the revealing of the Father? One's response to this question will not only answer the question of Petrine primacy but will ultimately shape one's vision of the Church, even down to the smallest congregation. Thus, the question of how one understands Christ's response to Peter is not ancillary but central to ecclesiology, and so becomes a primary ecumenical question today.

It is this complicated and multilayered topic that the new study document from the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, The Bishop of Rome, seeks to engage and it is because of the relevance of this topic, which is only more pointed within a globalized world, that its release is so timely. The study document, numbering roughly 150 pages, seeks to "offer an objective synthesis of recent ecumenical developments" on the topic of the Petrine ministry and its relation to synodality, a theme central to not only the current

pontificate but numerous ecumenical dialogues related to a future Church reunited. Its release, coming in the Spring of 2024, is also significant in that it aligns both with the 25th anniversary of the release of the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, where Pope John Paul II called for other Christians to provide their own thoughts on how the Petrine ministry might be a point of unity rather than not, as well as the ongoing synodal process of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, where the topic of a synodal church is central.

The Bishop of Rome (BR) is a wide-ranging document focusing on everything from responses to *Ut Unum Sint* to theological questions surrounding the Petrine texts in Scripture and the function of oversight, to whether this ministry is given *de iure divino* or *de iure humano* (from God or simply as a human, historical development). For those unfamiliar with the ongoing conversation, the BR is helpful not only for understanding the range of issues presented but the ecumenical concerns of various Christians related to the topic. The BR points out that within these dialogues, clarity on the importance of authority exercised at all levels in the spirit of service (*diakonia*) is highlighted, along with it being “inextricably linked” with the cross and *kenosis* (BR 42). Conversely, due to the new questions posed by globalization, other dialogues are beginning to have a “growing sense of the necessity of a ministry of unity at the universal level”. This comes, as stated by the 2018 Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) dialogues, due to the “new situation because of the apparent inability of the instruments of communion at the worldwide level to both resolve the presenting issues themselves and to find agreed upon processes... to contain conflict so that it does not lead to further impairment of communion” (ARCIC 2018, 77; BR 84). These pressing issues frame the question that guides BR, which is the relationship between the primacy and synodality, and leads the document to what, for some, is its most controversial sections. It is here that careful attention must be given to what the document, and some dialogues, are suggesting and the argument that forms this view.

Growing from the previously-mentioned topic of whether papal primacy should be understood as *de iure humano* or *de iure divino*, that is from human or divine pronouncement, the Malta Report of the international Lutheran-Catholic dialogue notes that the two have been “too sharply separated” (BR 52) and called for a recognition that any pronouncement of divine nature is always and at once mediated through history. This line of thinking led the Lutheran-Catholic dialogues in the USA to suggest papal primacy as being both *de iure humano* and *de iure divino*. Framing the topic in this manner moves the argument to consider the relationship between the “essence” of primacy and its “historical contingency”. The latter approach focuses on questions not of dogmatic pronouncements made, particularly around the validity of the Petrine office, but how we should interpret them in light of history (BR 59). This approach does not diminish the dogmatic truth of papal primacy or to bring it into question, but instead considers the historical factors which shaped its interpretation and practice. Thus, the BR has in view specifically the need to read

Vatican I in light of Vatican II (BR 66), and the belief, following the aforementioned Lutheran-Catholic dialogues, that the latter “developed the teaching” of the former, “giving a more balanced account of the relations of the pope to the bishops and of the bishops to the people of God” (BR 66). The earlier and more conciliar emphasis is, the document rightly highlights, further developed within the “broader principle of synodality,” which can be understood as a living relationship between the “all, some” and “one”, the people of God, the bishops and the pope.

The BR ends with four suggestions: first, the aforementioned “re-reception” of Vatican I, taking into consideration the historical context and integrating its teachings in a “*communio ecclesiology*” (BR 178); second, and not covered in this brief overview, a clearer distinction between the Pope’s primatial role and his being the patriarch of the West; third, a greater development of the theology of synodality as it is expressed *ad intra*, that is amongst the people of God within the Catholic Church, the *sensus fidelium*, the Bishops and the Pope, as well as *ad extra*, that is with the Catholic Church’s ecumenical partners; finally, “the promotion of ‘conciliar fellowship’ through regular meetings of Church leaders at a world wide level” (BR 181). Perhaps of greatest interest, especially to religious communities in the work of ecumenism, is the BR’s encouragement to, through its third suggestion, the practice of unity on-the-way, as it were. As Pope Francis has encouraged often, how might the disunited churches, the truly “whole people of God”, practice this synodal-primatial relationship even before full communion is realized? How might this synodality *ad extra* provide a way of unity for the here and now? Also, in what ways might the broader church learn from the synodal, ecumenical expressions present within the charisms of religious communities, for whom this topic of authority and synodality has been perennial?

Some religious communities already have such structures in place. Let me give two examples that I am aware of – no doubt there are many others, whether they are explicit (as in the case of Glenmary) or more implicit in the charism (as is the case of the Rule of Benedict).

Within Glenmary Home Missioners this question of *ad extra* synodality can be seen in a commitment within mission efforts to adopt all the people where we serve, prayerfully listening to their needs and concerns and taking these into consideration through “mission needs assessments.” The assessments provide Glenmary’s Executive Council greater clarity and insight for decisions they will make that will have an effect on the broader community. Fr. William Howard Bishop, Glenmary’s founder, provided this synodal vision when he wrote, “Adopt all the people of your mission area as your own. Christ died for every one of them.” (Mid-Winter Letter 1948). This synodality *ad extra* can also be seen with St. Benedict’s own Rule when he encourages the reception of guests “as Christ” and the asking of a guest for a blessing (Rule of Benedict 53).

Although not dealing with *ad extra* ecumenical relations, the Rule also has an interesting synodal practice regarding primacy, which comes in chapter 3 of the Rule where the brothers are called for council regarding “any important matter”. There, the abbot assembles the whole, all are called including the “young” to whom the Lord also “reveals... what is better”, and decisions are made by the abbot in the “fear of God” (Rule of Benedict 3).

This *ad extra* approach to synodality practiced by these and other religious communities may provide examples of the kind of ecclesiology called for by the Bishop of Rome text. At various points the BR encourages the use of “receptive ecumenism”, the learning and receiving from the expressions of the Church of Christ in another, for living out this primatial-synodal relationship. Could this act of receptive ecumenism be directed to the *ad extra* synodal functioning of the Catholic Church’s own religious communities? Learning from the *ad intra* for the practice of the synodal *ad extra*? In so doing might what happens in the out of the way, rural mission regions of Glenmary, in their listening to, praying with and serving in mission alongside their Evangelical and Pentecostal partners provide a model for a whole diocese as they seek to do the same with those non-Catholic Christians in their own community? Similarly, might the humility of the Benedictine charism invite a contemplative listening to one's ecumenical partners within various parochial settings, receiving them as Christ himself? It is here that one might see that what is presented notionally within the Bishop of Rome might be lived out and experienced in the real, bringing us closer to communion with our ecumenical partners and providing, within the Catholic Church, a fresh understanding of the relationship between the primatial gift and the synodal being of the Church.

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