

A Response to “Forum I” of the German Catholic Synodal Path

An Open Letter to the Catholic Bishops of the World

“Let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully” (Jeremiah 23:28)

“You have one instructor, the Messiah” (Matthew 23:10)

To my brothers in the episcopate and most especially to the bishops of Germany, greetings in Christ Jesus.

I. The Authority of the Lord Jesus Christ

The Gospel according to Matthew reports that, at the end of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, “the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:28–29; cf. Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32). Jesus’s disciples would come to recognize that his unmatched authority (*exousia*) stemmed from his identity as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). He spoke not on his own authority, but only as the unique Son sent from the eternal Father (John 7:16–18; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10). As Jesus himself says, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt. 11:27).

Jesus’s filial authority was gloriously vindicated by the Resurrection, after which he solemnly granted the Eleven a share in that authority, commissioning them to proclaim his teaching: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18–20).

In the days before Pentecost, while the disciples awaited the Holy Spirit, Matthias was selected to replace Judas in the college of the Twelve (Acts 1:8, 21–26). This underscores the significance of those whom the Lord Jesus had chosen to “sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:30). It also shows that the authority the Apostles received from Christ could be handed on.

Paul too speaks of his own apostolic authority in no uncertain terms. He has gained this authority directly from God (Gal. 1:1), as representatives of the Twelve acknowledge (Gal. 2:9), and he praises the Thessalonian believers for the fact “that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word” (1 Thess. 2:13). Like the Jerusalem Apostles, Paul regards this authority as communicable. According to Acts, at the conclusion of Paul’s missionary journey, he and Barnabas “appointed elders [*presbyterous*]...in each church” (Acts 14:23). Later, en route to Jerusalem, Paul warns the elders of the Ephesian church (*tous presbyterous tēs ekklēsias*, Acts 20:17) against “distorting the truth” to gain followers (Acts 20:30). He reminds them that “the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [*episkopous*]” and shepherds is not their own but “the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son” (Acts 20:28). It is evident that they bear genuine authority for which they will be held to account (Acts 20:26–27).

Yet the authority of the apostles and their successors is not their own. It is a share in the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Truth (see John 14:6). Every successor of the Apostles must resist the temptation to imitate the “senseless prophets who follow[ed] their own spirit” in Ezekiel’s time, promoting their own opinions and ideas (Ezek. 13:3). Every successor of the Apostles must also resist the temptation to imitate the prophets and priests of Jeremiah’s time, who adjusted their teaching according to the preferences of the people (Jer. 5:30–31). Jesus Christ is “the faithful witness” (Rev. 1:5), and to bear his authority is to bear faithful witness to “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). The disciple is not above the Teacher (Matt. 10:24), so every teacher of the Christian faith—and bishops above all—must all be able to say with our Teacher, “My teaching is not mine but his who sent me” (John 7:16).

Mindful of the sacred responsibility to bear witness to him who sent me, I write this letter out of love for Jesus Christ and for the Universal Church that is the Bride of Christ. Like bishops in previous generations throughout the history of the Church who wrote to their brother bishops when important theological discussions were taking place, I send this letter to you. Most of us outside Germany are aware through the media of the German Catholic Synodal Path and the outspokenness of some bishops in calling for radical changes to Church teaching and practice. Some may also have seen the “Fundamental Text” that has emerged from “Forum I” of the Synodal Path. I offer this response for your prayer and reflection and to encourage other bishops to bear witness boldly to the truth of the Gospel, to Jesus Christ who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

II. “Forum I” of the German Catholic Synodal Path

The German Catholic Synodal Path proposes to undertake four “forums,” each considering a specific topic of concern to the Church in Germany. Forum I addresses the question of “power and separation of powers in the Church” by means of a lengthy and detailed “Fundamental Text” (*Grundtext*).¹ Justice demands the recognition that the members of the Synodal Assembly have identified several matters of genuine and pressing concern.

First and foremost, the Synodal Assembly rightly expresses distress over the scandals of clerical sexual abuse and its coverup by some members of the hierarchy. The Fundamental Text correctly asserts that these scandals have engendered a true crisis of credibility for the Church. This remains an urgent concern that all pastors must share. The shepherds of Christ’s flock must be held accountable for the legal criminality, moral turpitude, and spiritual corruption of these atrocities, and they must also come to grips with the sinful self-referentiality that so often enabled them. Above all else, we priests and bishops must recognize, confront, and repent of the shocking deficiency in our love for Christ and the faithful in these actions. Too many priests and bishops have failed to heed Christ’s stark warning: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matt. 18:6). Too many listened to the whisperings of the devil rather than to the voice of Jesus Christ.

While the financial impact on the Church of the abuse scandals has been severe, this must not be the primary motivation for reform. To the degree that such consequences are just, they are not

¹ The *Grundtext* has been published online at https://www.synodalerweg.de/fileadmin/Synodalerweg/Dokumente/Reden_Beitraege/Online-Konferenz-210104-2-Synodalforum-I-Grundtext-1.pdf (accessed 18 March 2021). English translations in this letter are adapted from a previously circulated English version.

be lamented but should be received as from the hand of the righteous God. Instead, our greatest concern must be the restoration of the trust of those whom Christ has entrusted to the Church. We must commit ourselves to offering pastoral care to those who have been wounded and often devastated by the evil actions of clergy in the Church, to offering Masses in reparation for the sins of clergy and laity, to making public acts of sincere contrition and penance, and to genuine transparency. If the Church is unwilling to tell the truth with prudence and courage about matters of discomfort to her own leaders, why should the world trust the Church to tell the truth on matters of discomfort to the world—that is, in her echo of the Lord’s invitation to “repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15)? As Shepherds we must be the first to “repent and believe”!

The Synodal Assembly is also right to identify areas in which the implementation of the Second Vatican Council must continue to advance. The Council’s articulation of the role(s) of the lay faithful in the Church needs to be more fully realized. Likewise, eschewing both rationalistic historicism and uncritical fideism, the Church must continue to deepen her interpretation of both Scripture and tradition as bearers of God’s speech in human language. Furthermore, we must continue to pursue the Council’s vision for robust and responsible dialogue with the secular, pluralistic contexts in which many members of the Church find themselves. This dialogue must always be grounded in charity and truth, for only Jesus Christ, who is the truth, will set us free (John 8:31–32).

Some of the Assembly’s specific recommendations are likelier than others to garner headlines. The assembly notes in passing that many of those who leave the Church are displeased with Catholic teaching on same-sex relationships and marriage after divorce (*Grundtext*, pp. 7–8). While some members of the German hierarchy have already made headlines by openly calling for changes in practice (and therefore implicitly in doctrine)—calls that the Holy See explicitly rejected in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s *Responsum* of 22 February 2021, published on 15 March 2021—these matters are mainly reserved for Forum II of the Synodal Path.

Until the results of Forum II are published, it would be inappropriate to respond in detail to the Synodal Path on these matters. Meanwhile, I affirm my commitment, especially during this Year of *Amoris laetitia*, to accompany those who have suffered the trauma of broken family relationships (see Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia* §243) as well as “those who manifest a homosexual orientation,” so that they “can receive the assistance they need to understand and fully carry out God’s will in their lives” (*Amoris laetitia* §250). The Church has a sacred obligation to proclaim God’s love for every human being, a love so great that he sent his Son to save the world (cf. John 3:16–17; Rom. 5:8). The saving truth of the Gospel, as preserved and taught by the Church in all its integrity and purity (cf. *Dei Verbum* §§7, 9), is truly universal in scope.

The Fundamental Text for Forum I directly calls for critical reevaluation of St John Paul II’s determination that “the Church has no right to ordain women to the priesthood,” the “validity” of which must be tested by allegedly “new insights” from the past quarter of a century that call into question the “coherence of his argumentation” (*Grundtext*, p. 35). This question is slated to be taken up in more detail in Forum IV, but its ecclesiological foundations are laid in in the *Grundtext* of Forum I.

It would be both impossible and undesirable to respond line by line to the entire document, but more is required than a superficial reaction to the headline issues. These are only symptoms of the deeper maladies of the Fundamental Text and of the theological posture of the Synodal Path to which the document gives expression. The Synodal Assembly in fact proposes truly radical revisions of the structure of the Church and of her understanding of her mission.

At one level, the Fundamental Text's proposals depend upon a partial and tendentious account of the origin and nature of the ordained ministry, one that is at odds with the Church's definitive understanding of Christ's own institution of the Church. At a deeper level, while claiming to anchor itself in the Second Vatican Council, the Synodal Path exploits a selective and misleading interpretation of the Council's documents to prop up untenable views of the nature of the Church (*Lumen gentium*), her relationship with the world (*Gaudium et spes*), and her foundation on divine revelation (*Dei Verbum*), views that are impossible to square with a full reading of the Council. The result is a vision for the Church that risks abandonment of the only One who has "the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

III. The Sacrament of Holy Orders and the Structure of the Church

To justify the Synodal Path's desire to democratize the Church's governance and entertain the possibility of admitting women to the priesthood, the essential distinction between the priesthood of the baptized and the ministerial priesthood—clearly affirmed at *Lumen gentium* §10—is implicitly called into question. The Fundamental Text does affirm,

The special ministerial priesthood (*ordo*) is necessary for the sake of the common priesthood of all because it expresses the fact that the Church cannot proclaim the Word of God and celebrate sacraments by her own power, but that Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, makes the Church the means of God's universal saving will. (*Grundtext*, p. 23)

This is a welcome articulation, reminiscent of St John Paul II's comment that the exclusive ability of ordained priests to celebrate the Eucharist clarifies the character of the Eucharist as "*a gift which radically transcends the power of the assembly*" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia* §29; emphasis in original).

Nonetheless, the Fundamental Text fails to tie this "special priesthood of ministry" clearly to the Sacrament of Holy Orders, willed and instituted by Jesus Christ himself, and this failure gives every appearance of being intentional. In a telling passage, the Fundamental Text recounts the origins of the ordained ministry as follows:

The ecclesiastical office of governance develops in the New Testament in such a way that, on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20-21), "evangelists," "shepherds," and "teachers" (Eph. 4:11) serve the growth of the Body of Christ. In the Pastoral Epistles, there crystallizes the office of the "bishop" (*episkopos*, 1 Tim. 3:1-7), who works with deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13) and is associated with presbyters (Tit. 1:5-9), though in the wake of a severe pushback against women. From these beginnings developed the concept, which is distinct in Ignatius of Antioch, that a bishop presides over a local church, although for a long time other forms of governance, e.g., a presbyteral order, influenced the formative beginnings of the Church. In these processes of institutionalization, the approach described

by Paul remains formative: that it is the one Spirit of God who bestows the many gifts, some of which become permanent offices of governance, without being differentiable by a “more” or “less” in grace. (*Grundtext*, pp. 19–20)

The approach adopted here seems calculated to undermine the definitive and permanent character of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. “Processes of institutionalization” are explicitly distinguished from the action of the gift-giving Spirit. These “processes” and the hierarchical structure they produced are, one therefore surmises, so historically conditioned as to render them merely provisional. They could have been and still might be drastically different. Indeed, the Fundamental Text insinuates that they were tainted if not delegitimized from the beginning (within the Scriptural canon itself) by a creeping misogyny (“...though in the wake of a severe pushback against women”).

As any scholar of the New Testament or the early centuries of Christian history knows, the data relevant to “processes of institutionalization” are complex. Yet this very complexity makes the *de facto* universality of the episcopal office all the more striking. The distinguished historian Robert Louis Wilken writes of the first millennium of Christianity,

Wherever Christianity was adopted a structure was put in place, through the person of the bishop, that provided continuity with the Christian past and spiritual unity with Christians in other parts of the world. Ignatius [of Antioch] was prophetic in the early second century when he wrote that where the bishop is there is the Church [see *Smyrnaeans* 8.1–2]. *There is no evidence for enduring Christian communities without the office of the bishop*. Even in distant lands, when a king adopted the faith, one of the first actions was to send for bishops from more established regions.²

True, the early data concerning the episcopacy are complicated, but so too are the data pertaining to any number of theological questions that were settled only after protracted development and debate, including such central matters as the canon of Scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the doctrine of the Incarnation. As the Trinitarian and Christological controversies of late antiquity make clear, these are by no means simple matters. Indeed, on purely rational grounds, intelligent and well-informed students of the historical record may reasonably come to differing conclusions concerning the strength of patristic exegetical and theological arguments for conciliar dogmatic decisions. Nevertheless, the Church has always been gratefully confident that, having been entrusted with the precious mysteries of salvation, she can rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who the Lord Jesus promised would graciously “teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:26).

This confidence extends as well to the Church’s consistently repeated conviction that the bishops are the successors of the Apostles, a conviction vigorously reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council (see esp. *Lumen gentium*, ch. 3; *Dei Verbum*, ch. 2). *Lumen gentium* could hardly be more forceful in its restatement of the doctrine of direct episcopal succession from the Apostles *and* of this succession’s divine institution:

² Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 356–57; emphasis added.

[J]ust as the office granted individually to Peter, the first among the apostles, is permanent and is to be transmitted to his successors [the bishops of Rome], so also the apostles' office of nurturing the Church is permanent, and is to be exercised without interruption by the sacred order of bishops. *Therefore, the Sacred Council teaches that bishops by divine institution have succeeded to the place of the apostles, as shepherds of the Church, and he who hears them, hears Christ, and he who rejects them, rejects Christ and Him who sent Christ* [cf. Luke 10:16]. (*Lumen gentium* §20; emphasis added)

In striking contrast to *Lumen gentium*, the doctrine of direct episcopal succession from the Apostles is entirely omitted from the Fundamental Text. Apart from one passing acknowledgment of the pope's exercise of "the Petrine ministry" (*Grundtext*, p. 40) and one mention of Jesus's teaching his disciples the meaning of true greatness (*Grundtext*, p. 26), one looks in vain for *any* reference to the Twelve in the Fundamental Text. (Indeed, the document displays an astonishing paucity of references to the Gospels, which are according to *Dei Verbum* §18 "the principal witness for the life and teaching of the incarnate Word, our savior.")

In fact, the Fundamental Text seems to avoid discussion of the "teaching of the incarnate Word," speaking only of the "Church's" teaching. The notion that the Church has been entrusted with *specific teachings* by Jesus himself that must be preserved—what Vatican II refers to as the "Deposit of Faith" (*Dei Verbum* §10) or the "deposit of Revelation" (*Lumen gentium* §25)—is nowhere to be found.

While recognizing the need for intellectually responsible hermeneutics, the Second Vatican Council is insistent in its confidence in the historical veracity of the Gospel accounts of Jesus's teaching:

Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels just named, *whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts*, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up into heaven (see Acts 1:1). Indeed, after the Ascension of the Lord the Apostles handed on to their hearers what He had said and done. This they did with that clearer understanding which they enjoyed (John 2:22; 12:16; cf. 14:26; 16:12–13; 7:39) after they had been instructed by the glorious events of Christ's life and taught by the light of the Spirit of truth. (*Dei Verbum* §19; emphasis added)

It is this reliance on the Gospel reports of Christ's teaching that serves as the basis for the Second Vatican Council's approach to explaining the Church's ordained ministry.

The absence of references to Jesus's relationship with the Twelve in the Fundamental Text stands in sharp contrast with what is found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. For example, in *Lumen gentium* the Church's episcopal leadership is rooted in Jesus's activity in the Gospels:

This is the one Church of Christ . . . which our Saviour, after His Resurrection, commissioned Peter to shepherd [*Jn.* 21:17], and him and the other apostles to extend and direct with authority [*Cf. Mt.* 28:18f.] which He erected for all ages as "the pillar and mainstay of the truth" [*1 Tim.* 3:15]. This Church constituted and organized in the world

as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him. . . (*Lumen gentium* §8)

Echoing the Council’s teaching, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also affirms the central role of the Twelve in Jesus’s establishment of a basic structure for the Church:

The Lord Jesus endowed his community with a structure that will remain until the Kingdom is fully achieved. Before all else there is the choice of the Twelve with Peter as their head. Representing the twelve tribes of Israel, they are the foundation stones of the new Jerusalem. (§765)

Similarly, Pope Francis has explained,

To profess that the Church is apostolic means to stress *the constitutive bond that she has with the Apostles, with that small group of 12 men* whom Jesus one day called to himself, he called them by name, that they might remain with him and that he might send them out to preach (cf. Mk 3:13–19). (General Audience, 16 October 2013; emphasis added)

In the same homily, the Holy Father goes on to ground episcopal authority in the bishops’ connection to the Twelve: “When we think of *the Successors of the Apostles, the bishops—this includes the Pope for he too is a bishop*—we must ask ourselves if this successor of the Apostles prays first and then proclaims the Gospel” (ibid.; emphasis added).

As recently as 2016 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with the approval of the Holy Father, issued the letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, which clarifies the relationship between the hierarchical and the charismatic gifts. Relying especially on the teaching of *Lumen gentium*, the letter states,

In order to sanctify every member of the People of God and for the mission of the Church in the world, amongst the various gifts, “a special place” is held by “the grace of the Apostles to whose authority the Spirit Himself subjected even those who were endowed with charisms” [*Lumen gentium* 7]. Jesus Christ Himself willed that there be hierarchical gifts in order to ensure the continuing presence of this unique salvific mediation: “the Apostles were enriched by Christ with a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit coming upon them (cf. *Acts* 1:8; 2:4; *Jn* 20:22-23), and they passed on this spiritual gift to their helpers by the imposition of hands (cf. *1 Tim* 4:14; *2 Tim* 1:6-7)” [*Lumen gentium* 21]. The conferral of hierarchical gifts, therefore, can be traced back, above all, to the fullness of the sacrament of Orders, given at Episcopal consecration. (*Iuvenescit Ecclesia* §14)

Here we see a model for a deeply Catholic interpretation of the “crystallization” of the office of bishop in the Pastoral Epistles. It is not a merely provisional institutional configuration of the antecedent charismata of the Spirit, but, in its essential sacramental outlines, an articulation of how the *munera* of teaching, sanctifying, and governing conferred on the Apostles by Jesus himself are to be handed on. *Iuvenescit Ecclesia* thus reminds us that, in *Lumen gentium*, the Second Vatican Council grounds the hierarchical constitution of the Church squarely in the manifest intention of

Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit themselves. *It is therefore outside the competence of the Church, in Germany or elsewhere, fundamentally to alter it.*

With great sadness, we must acknowledge that clerical power can be and at times has been abused, with devastating consequences (see *Grundtext*, pp. 25–27). The divine source of this power only increases the horror of its abuse. But authentic Catholic reform must always seek inspiration above all from the world’s Savior, who instituted the Church’s hierarchical structure in wisdom and love. We must grow in humility, recognizing that all the good that we have comes from God (see Jas. 1:17). Our hearts and minds must be formed by Jesus Christ, for apart from him we can do nothing (John 15:5).

It is therefore unfortunate that the Fundamental Text assumes that the best or only way to reform the exercise of power is by *diffusing* it through a system of checks and balances. The assumptions behind such a system are worth bringing to light. Are the clergy and laity members of the one Body of Christ, seeking the same common good of eternal salvation, or are they separate interest groups who must pursue their own agendas in competition with one another? Is power always a question of self-seeking, or can it be purified by God’s grace in Christ? Rather than issuing a clarion call to holiness, as proposed by the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen gentium* 5) and reinforced by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, the document appeals to worldly models that are not shaped by Christ or guided by the Holy Spirit.

The Fundamental Text makes only brief reference (*Grundtext*, p. 26) to Jesus’s explicit teaching to the Twelve on how they are to exercise the power with which he invests them as leaders of his Church (Matt. 20:24–28; Mark 10:41–45; Luke 22:24–27). The disciples are indeed to “bind” and “loose” with divine authority (Matt. 18:18), and to “sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:30), but their authority is for the sake of service and should be exercised accordingly—a point emphasized by Vatican II and repeated in subsequent papal magisterium (see, e.g., St John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis* §§21–23). Jesus himself is the model: “You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:13–15).

Jesus’s example culminates in the crucifixion, by which he “give[s] his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). The cross, then, is the criterion of Christian power and authority. Examples abound in the early Church. One thinks of St Peter, whose exhortation to his fellow “elders” in 1 Peter 5 is predicated on his insistence upon sharing in the sufferings of Christ (see 1 Pet. 2:21; 4:1–2, 12–16). When St Paul reflects on his apostleship, it is precisely as one who is “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:10). Soon after the time of the New Testament, St Ignatius of Antioch will demonstrate the close relationship between episcopacy and union with Christ through martyrdom.

None of this means that the lay faithful cannot or should not help the clergy in the governance of the Church. But reform in the Church can never be accomplished by simply sharing out a power that remains, it would seem, oriented to self-interest and insufficiently grounded in Jesus’s gifts and expressed will. The Synodal Assembly is right to deny that the hierarchical gifts are to be distinguished from others in terms of mere ranking (marked by “more” or “less” grace). But it

remains true, as the Second Vatican Council taught and the papal magisterium has continued to affirm, that there exists a hierarchical configuration among the gifts, *precisely for the sake of the whole*. Pope Francis urges that “[t]he papacy and the central structures of the universal Church also need to hear the call to pastoral conversion” (*Evangelii gaudium* §32). The “greatest” must be the servant of all. The fact that not every Successor of Peter has succeeded in truly being *servus servorum Dei* does not invalidate the title, which beautifully captures the truth of the papal office and, indeed, of all ordained ministry. Christian power must be crucified through repentance and humble service of the faithful, again and again. It must be conformed to the self-giving love of Christ, in which we “look not to [our] own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4), together striving for a single goal: “the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). *In the purification of the Church’s structures of authority, there is no alternative to penance and the sincere pursuit of holiness.*

IV. The Church as Society and Sacrament

“The holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14) is the lodestar of the pilgrimage of God’s people on earth. On that pilgrimage, Scripture tells us that the Lord’s “divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3). The Church on earth is able to journey securely to her heavenly homeland because of this gracious provision. Yet the Fundamental Text construes the Second Vatican Council’s discussion of the Church on earth as *ecclesia peregrinans* (“the Church on pilgrimage”) to be a rejection of the traditional description of the Church as a *societas perfecta* on the grounds that the latter is a “static, self-contained, and self-sufficient image” that is “incompatible with the recognition that the Church is a learning Church” (*Grundtext*, p. 13). But this is to misunderstand the meaning of *societas perfecta*. A “complete society” (*societas perfecta*) as traditionally understood is one possessed of all the means necessary for the attainment of its proper end. The end of the pilgrim Church is eternal life, for the attainment of which the New Testament assures us that Christ has fully equipped the saints (cf. Eph. 4:12). While it may be well to eschew the easily misunderstood terminology of *societas perfecta* in some settings, it should be recognized that the Second Vatican Council clearly reaffirmed the substance of the expression: Jesus Christ “has bought [the Church] for Himself with His blood, has filled it with His Spirit and provided it with those means which befit it as a visible and social union” (*Lumen gentium* §9; emphasis added). These “means” are comprehensive: “the Catholic Church has been endowed with *all divinely revealed truth and with all means of grace*” (*Unitatis redintegratio* §4; emphasis added). Admittedly, Christians, including the Church’s pastors, often “fail to live by them with all the fervor that they should” (*ibid.*), sometimes grievously so. Yet the failings of members of the Church cannot be taken as license to imply that the gifts of the Church’s Head are deficient. On the contrary, our failings, which so painfully remind us that the Church is “at the same time holy and always in need of being purified” (*Lumen gentium* §8), should drive us to repentance and to a deeper return to the “divinely revealed truth” and “means of grace” that the Spirit of Christ has preserved in the Church so that she might be “in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (*Lumen gentium* §1).

The Fundamental Text does purport to consider the Church as a “sacrament” (*Grundtext*, pp. 16–18). Yet it interprets the Church’s quasi-sacramental character as “sign and instrument” in remarkably anthropocentric terms. “A sign (*signum*) must be understood and, to that end, must speak the language of its recipients. If it is not understood, it is not a meaningful sign, but only a

dead letter” (*Grundtext*, p. 17). To be sure, all members of the Church, including her pastors, must seek to communicate the saving message of Christ in a way that begins from common ground and is therefore intelligible. But this is only the beginning. Eventually, we are all confronted with the otherness of the transcendent God, whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways (cf. Isa. 55:8), but who has spoken to us and invited us, through the renewal of our minds (cf. Rom. 12:2), to become practiced *in dominico eloquio*—in the Lord’s way of speaking (cf. St Augustine, *Confessions* 9.5.13).

Similarly, the Fundamental Text claims that “what is to be useful as a tool (*instrumentum*) must be easy to grasp and efficient, designed for its effectiveness and able to be used without causing harm” (*Grundtext*, p. 17). But this badly misconstrues the traditional way of speaking of sacramental instrumentality. The Sacraments—and much less the Church!—are not *our* “instruments.” They are *God’s* instruments, for he alone is the principal efficient cause of all the graces mediated through the Church and the Sacraments. The Church of Christ is “used *by Him* as an instrument for the redemption of all” (*Lumen gentium* §9; emphasis added). As *Lumen gentium* §1 teaches, and the Fundamental Text recognizes (*Grundtext*, p. 16), the “redemption” that the Church signifies and mediates as God’s sign and instrument consists in “a very closely knit union with God and...the unity of the whole human race.” History bears somber witness to the difficulties of realizing human unity in a world wounded by original sin (see *Gaudium et spes* §§77–78). The peace and harmony with one another for which we were created are now available only, as *Lumen gentium* §1 insists, “in Christ,” that is, through the Paschal Mystery of the Son of God. Human unity is to be found in “a very closely knit union with God,” a sheer gift of grace that exceeds the natural limits of humanity. As Pope Francis has reminded us, “The Church is born from God’s wish to call *all people* to communion with him, to friendship with him, indeed, *to share in his own divine life as his sons and daughters*” (General Audience, 29 May 2013; emphasis added). Every baptized person becomes a “new creation” filled with the Holy Spirit, crying out, “Abba, Father” (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 4:6). The Church’s sacramental character as *signum et instrumentum*, therefore, surpasses merely sociological categories.

V. The Church and the World

In Sacred Scripture, the term “world” can function in more than one way, sometimes within the same book of the Bible. In John’s Gospel, “the world” can refer to creation as such (John 1:10), which remains the object of God’s matchless love and recipient of divine life through Christ (e.g., John 3:16–17; 6:33, 51), but it can also denote humanity precisely in its fallen condition, having turned away from God through sin (e.g., John 7:7; 14:17; 15:19). Both of these meanings of “world” are recognized in *Gaudium et spes*, the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Most of the time, *Gaudium et spes* uses “world” to refer simply to “the whole human family along with the sum of those realities in the midst of which it lives; that world which is the theater of man’s history, and the heir of his energies, his tragedies and his triumphs; that world which the Christian sees as created and sustained by its Maker’s love” (§2). But the Council proceeds immediately to acknowledge that this same world has “fallen indeed into the bondage of sin, yet [is] emancipated now by Christ, Who was crucified and rose again to break the strangle hold of personified evil, *so that the world might be fashioned anew according to God’s design and reach its fulfillment*” (ibid.; emphasis added). Later, we read that the Council “cannot help echoing the Apostle’s warning: ‘Be not conformed to this world’ (Rom. 12:2). Here by the world is meant that spirit of vanity and malice which transforms into an

instrument of sin those human energies intended for the service of God and man” (*Gaudium et spes* §37). It is in this sense, too, that the Epistle of James uses the term: “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?” (Jas. 4:4).

The tension between these two meanings of “the world” is operative at every level of human existence. *Gaudium et spes* notes that, as a result of sin, “all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness” (§13). As a result, the Church must remain cognizant that her message of repentance and salvation will not be appreciated by all. We must be prepared to be misunderstood, to be mocked, to be vilified. Our Lord warned us, “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets” (Luke 6:26). In this, we follow in our Lord’s footsteps: “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!” (Matt. 10:24–25; cf. John 15:18).

At the same time, the Church must obey her King who taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:44). The struggle of the “Church militant” is a battle *for* every human being for whom the Savior spilled his blood. It is the battle to receive and to hand on the love that God has revealed in Christ: “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11). In charity, the Church “fights,” not against human opponents, but against the lies of the evil one, against the sin to which he tempts us, and against the divisions he sows (cf. 2 Cor. 10:3–5; Eph. 6:10–17; 1 Pet. 2:11).

Now, the rich tradition of dialogue with the world and of ecclesial inculturation that we find throughout the centuries, which is robustly articulated and developed in Vatican II and in recent papal magisterium, encourages us to preserve this dynamic understanding of the “world” and the Church’s relationship to it. We must be attentive to the “signs of the times” and listen sympathetically to the many voices that speak from outside the Church’s communion. At the same time, we must remain confident in our conviction that Christ crucified and risen is the sole source of salvation. He is “the key, the focal point and the goal of man, as well as of all human history” (*Gaudium et spes* §10). The Church must humbly accept and penitently respond to the world’s criticisms when she fails to live up to her own teaching, as in the case of the sexual abuse scandals. But she must also be prepared to withstand the world’s contempt for her fidelity to the Word of God. She is not to be conformed to the world but to serve as a leaven in it (*Gaudium et spes* §40). We are in the world but not of the world, sent into the world consecrated by Jesus in the truth (John 15:18–19; 17:15–19).

Is this tensive dynamism to be found in the Synodal Assembly’s Fundamental Text? An attentive reading of the Fundamental Text in its entirety makes it difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Synodal Assembly hopes to bring about a Church that, far from being prepared to suffer the world’s contempt for her fidelity to Christ, will be preeminently conditioned by the world and comfortably accepted by it as one respectable institution among others. The Church, in the Assembly’s view, seems to be equally beholden to *both* “the demands of the Gospel *and* the standards of a pluralistic, open society in a democratic constitutional state” (*Grundtext*, p. 2; emphasis added). On the one hand, “the demands of the Gospel” are never specified with any

precision. On the other hand, the Fundamental Text calls for the Church and her message to be measured against the “standards” of the *saeculum*, the modern world, whose “enlightened and pluralistic society” (*Grundtext*, p. 9) the document embraces with unmixed enthusiasm.

It is true that the Text notes that “inculturation is not a one-way street,” that the “Church always has a prophetic-critical mission toward its social partners,” that “the signs of the times are to be interpreted in the light of the Gospel,” and that “uncritical acceptance of contemporary standards would be just as one-sided as their wholesale rejection” (*Grundtext*, pp. 2–3, 11). Yet, these admissions notwithstanding, *the Fundamental Text evinces virtually no appreciation of how the specific demands of the Gospel, as proclaimed by the Church in faith and charity, can and do prompt the acute opposition that the New Testament consistently posits between the spirit of the world and fidelity to Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the text ignores the cost of discipleship as articulated by Christ in the Gospel.*

VI. The Church and the Word of God

When Jesus prays to his Father for the Apostles, he connects the rejection they will encounter with the message that he has entrusted to them: “I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world” (John 17:14). So that Christ’s followers might have firm confidence in the “word” that the Father has entrusted to them through Christ, the Holy Spirit has faithfully preserved it in the Church. “In His gracious goodness, God has seen to it that what He had revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide *perpetually in its full integrity* and be handed on to all generations” (*Dei Verbum* §7; emphasis added). It is “handed on” in sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture, which “form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church” (*Dei Verbum* §10). It is faithfully and definitively interpreted by the Magisterium: “the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ” (*Dei Verbum* §10).

The Synodal Assembly, in contrast, reimagines the role of the Church’s Magisterium as one of dialogue moderation (*Grundtext*, pp. 13–14). This posture towards teaching authority, even that of the Holy Father himself, was illustrated by His Excellency Bishop Bätzing’s reaction to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Father’s response to a dubium concerning the possibility of blessing same-sex unions. He commented that the Synodal Path is attempting “to discuss the topic of successful relationships in a comprehensive way that also takes into consideration necessity and the boundaries of the Church’s doctrinal development. The points of view that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith proposed today must and will of course be admitted into these conversations.”³ The decision of the CDF—which is an expression of the ordinary papal magisterium (cf. *Donum veritatis* §18)—thus only adds “points of view” that will enter into the Assembly’s consideration. To be sure, the pope and the bishops can, should, and do listen to the voices of the faithful and consult with faithful experts in relevant fields. Nonetheless, in the end

³ “Der Synodale Weg, den die Deutschen Bischofskonferenz mit dem Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken auf den Weg gebracht hat, ist deshalb bestrebt, gerade das Thema gelingender Beziehungen in einer umfassenden Weise zu diskutieren, die auch die Notwendigkeit und die Grenzen kirchlicher Lehrentwicklung bedenkt. Die von der Glaubenskongregation heute vorgebrachten Gesichtspunkte müssen und werden selbstverständlich in diese Gespräche Eingang finden.” Source: <https://www.dbk.de/presse/aktuelles/meldung/bischof-baetzing-zur-heutigen-veroeffentlichung-der-kongregation-fuer-die-glaubenslehre> (accessed 15 March 2021).

the bishops, in communion with the pope, alone bear the responsibility of teaching authoritatively, “endowed with the authority of Christ” (*Lumen gentium* §25). This is by no means to say that bishops’ personal views and opinions should reign supreme. That would be a worldly way of looking at the question. Rather, bishops have no business teaching their own views and opinions. Like St Paul, they must teach only that which they also received (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3). Like their Lord, they must be able to say, “My teaching is not mine but his who sent me” (John 7:16).

Yet the Fundamental Text’s reinterpretation of the *munus docendi* (office of teaching) corresponds to its even more disturbing subscription to an explicit, radical doctrinal relativism:

Even for it [theology], there is *no one central perspective, no one truth* of religious, moral, and political evaluation of the world [*Weltbewährung*], and no one way of thinking that can lay claim to final authority. Even in the Church, legitimate views and ways of life can compete with each other *even in core convictions*. Yes, they can even at the same time make the theologically justified claim to truth, correctness, comprehensibility, and honesty, and nevertheless be contradictory to each other in their statements or their language. (*Grundtext*, p. 14; emphasis added)

This is a remarkable claim if only for its incomprehensibility. It is difficult to know how to comment on it, for such a candid rejection of the law of non-contradiction is already its own *reductio ad absurdum*. Despite lip service to the authority of Scripture and tradition (*Grundtext*, pp. 11–12), it is evident that the Synodal Assembly’s interpretive approach is sufficiently malleable to strip them of any truly decisive content. Divine revelation is thus held captive to endlessly Protean hermeneutics of “dialogue” (see *Grundtext*, p. 37), which should be contrasted with the authentic understanding of dialogue articulated by Vatican II and developed by the post-conciliar popes (see especially St Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, ch. 3). Yet, despite the absolutization of process entailed by its account of “dialogue,” the Assembly believes itself not only competent but duty-bound to make binding decisions for the Church (*Grundtext*, p. 31), overrunning the “blockading discourse” (*Diskursblockaden*) of those who might oppose its judgments (*Grundtext*, p. 15).

In the end, the Synodal Assembly leaves us wondering: has God spoken to his people or has he not? The dogmatic tradition of the Catholic Church, expressed so penetratingly by the Second Vatican Council, leaves no room for doubt. God has truly spoken to his people. His speech has been perfected in the incarnation of his eternal Word, “Christ the Lord in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion” (*Dei Verbum* §7). This revelation has been reliably handed on in Scripture and tradition, “in its full integrity” (*ibid.*) and “in its full purity” (*Dei Verbum* §9). God has provided for this trustworthy preservation of the Gospel in order to safeguard the coherence of his saving revelation. Pope Francis explains, “Since faith is one, it must be professed in all its purity and integrity. Precisely because all the articles of faith are interconnected, to deny one of them, even of those that seem least important, is tantamount to distorting the whole” (*Lumen fidei* §48).

As already discussed at length, the Second Vatican Council unequivocally requires us to hold that this handing on of divine revelation is guaranteed by the succession of bishops from the Apostles, over whom the Lord Jesus “placed Blessed Peter . . . , and instituted in him a permanent and visible

source and foundation of unity of faith and communion” (*Lumen gentium* §18). Accordingly, far from there being “no one central perspective” on Christian faith, the teaching of the Successor of Peter is to be accorded “religious submission of mind and will” by all of the faithful (*Lumen gentium* §25). It is difficult to detect any hint of such submission in the Fundamental Text.

Far from seeing the papal magisterium as a source of “blockading discourse,” the Church recognizes it as a precious gift from the Church’s Bridegroom, in whose name the Holy Father speaks as his Vicar. In the words of Pope Francis, “The Successor of Peter, yesterday, today and tomorrow, is always called to strengthen his brothers and sisters in the priceless treasure of that faith which God has given as a light for humanity’s path” (*Lumen fidei* §7). The papal magisterium as such is not the “priceless treasure”; rather, the treasure is God’s Word as handed on in Scripture and tradition. This faithful transmission is the purpose of the papal magisterium, but the Synodal Assembly calls into question whether the Church (including the papal magisterium through the centuries) has in fact succeeded in faithfully preserving and teaching God’s Word.

VII. Christ Crucified, Our First Love

Just after his election, in his homily to the Cardinal Electors in the Sistine Chapel (14 March 2013), Pope Francis spoke as follows:

We can walk as much as we want, we can build many things, but if we do not profess Jesus Christ, things go wrong. We may become a charitable NGO, but not the Church, the Bride of the Lord. ...

This Gospel continues with a situation of a particular kind. The same Peter who professed Jesus Christ, now says to him: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. I will follow you, but let us not speak of the Cross. That has nothing to do with it. I will follow you on other terms, but without the Cross. When we journey without the Cross, when we build without the Cross, when we profess Christ without the Cross, we are not disciples of the Lord, we are worldly: we may be bishops, priests, cardinals, popes, but not disciples of the Lord.

My wish is that all of us, after these days of grace, will have the courage, yes, the courage, to walk in the presence of the Lord’s Cross; to build the Church on the Lord’s blood which was poured out on the Cross; and to profess the one glory: Christ crucified. And in this way, the Church will go forward.

My brothers, in closing, I offer this letter and these questions for our prayer and reflection. Are we willing to speak of the Cross? Do we have the courage to walk in the way of the Cross, bearing the world’s contempt for the message of the Gospel? Will we ourselves heed the Lord Jesus’s call to repentance, and have the courage to echo it to an unbelieving world? Are we “not ashamed of the gospel” (Rom. 1:16) and its offer of freedom from sin through the death and resurrection of Christ, and of an intimate relationship with his Father in the love of his Holy Spirit? Will we stay attached to the vine, Jesus Christ, and bear fruit, or will we continue to wither (John 15:5–6)?

Have we, like the church in Ephesus whom the risen Jesus addresses, “abandoned the love [we] had at first” (Rev. 2:4)? If so, let us heed the exhortation and warning of the Ruler of the kings of

the earth: “Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent” (Rev. 2:5; cf. 1:5). My brothers, let us remember Christ crucified. Let us remember our first love.

In the love of Jesus Christ,

+Samuel J. Aquila
Archbishop of Denver

May 13, 2021
The Ascension of the Lord