

“WHAT’S IN A WORD?”: SYNODS, COUNCILS AND CONTROVERSY

Every organization has its unique **language**, culture and unwritten rules– the Church is no different. People guard that nomenclature more closely than the United States Mint Police are watching Fort Knox! If you’re lucky enough to score a ticket to the Masters Golf Tournament in Augusta, GA, remember that you are a “patron” not a fan. If you dare lie down on the grounds or remove your shoes– hit the road, Jack! If you attend a symphony, you **do not clap** between movements. If you do, you’ll stick out like a sore thumb. And in Church, men don’t wear **caps**. It’s just that simple. When it comes to **doctrine**, the **rules** are not always as crisp, the delineation not as clear cut. One of the Church’s **greatest gifts** has been her **Ecumenical Councils**, twenty-one gatherings of Catholic bishops to discuss doctrine and pastoral practice. Through the centuries, the Councils have exercised an important magisterial role, setting the limits for what we believe, articulating dogma, correcting error, and promoting the faith in the world.

But if you think that the history of these councils is simple to understand, think again. Everyone seeks facile answers in real time. But life is not always like that. Even arriving at a **final list** of these councils is not without historical controversy. The ecumenical Councils are **more complicated** than most people realize; I hope to discuss them in greater detail in a series of columns. Let’s start by clarifying terminology, because language matters. Our word “**council**” comes from the Latin language, while “**synod**” is of Greek origin. This alone highlights a difference of culture and understanding. Prior to Vatican II, most people saw these terms as synonyms. Today, the *Synod of Bishops* is understood as a periodic consultative gathering at which the pope presides once every three years. Gathering all the world’s bishops is unrealistic, so a representative gathering (300 vs. 3,000!) makes sense. Dioceses can also call synods, just as Archbishop Hebda has done.

The word *synod* at its root means “together” + “journey,” an assembly of companions meeting for a purpose. The word *ecumenical* on the other hand, at its root means “where there are houses,” that is, “pertaining to the whole world.” It was deliberately used to **distinguish** such gatherings from the myriad regional councils that handled lesser matters. So far, so good. The problem surfaces when we are asked to look back centuries with any degree of confidence what the **assembled bishops themselves** thought about the **level** of authority attached. On a human level, we think all our decisions are important. But upon further reflection, we know that some are weightier than others. Thus, the **mindset at the time** is significant, as are the **intentions at the time**. For example, surely those brave soldiers fighting at the Battle of Verdun in 1916 did not think they were fighting in World War I. That name came only later, upon reflection.

For example, there is evidence to support that the council fathers gathering in **Nicaea in 325 A.D.** had the **self-awareness** to intuit that something significant was happening. Later, this would be recognized as the 1st Ecumenical Council. That the Creed they promulgated is **still used** each Sunday is a testament to that realization. They were forging history. In fact, Nicaea called itself “great” and “sacred”, while one manuscript actually uses the word “ecumenical.” Even locating the **actual texts** of these councils is extremely difficult. Prior to the printing press, all bets are off. There were many variants, copied by **sleepy monks at 4:00 a.m.** Which manuscript is the closest to the original decrees? That’s why God created scholars! Let **them** duke it out. Regular folks want to know **why** these councils mattered and **how** they **impact** our lives today. Fair enough.

One early council addressed that very question in its own documents, perhaps as a way of

explaining to the people their **rationale** for the meeting. The bishops at **II Constantinople** in 553 A.D. (#5 of 21) admitted rather refreshingly as to their desired outcome: “But also the Holy Fathers, who from time to time have met in the four holy councils, following the example of the ancients, by a common discussion, disposed of by a fixed decree the heresies and questions which had sprung up, as it was certainly known, that by common discussion when the matter in dispute was presented by each side, the light of truth expels the darkness of falsehood.” Bingo— that’s an excellent “elevator speech,” a brief summary of **why** they were doing **what** they were doing. The **light** of truth **expels the darkness** of falsehood. Being **clear** about what we believe is critical, even as we acknowledge that defining doctrine is a **laborious** process involving much prayer asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The **Council of Chalcedon** (451 A.D.) deliberately invoked earlier councils by name, calling itself “sacred, great and ecumenical,” effectively making “ecumenical” a technical term in the Church. That is, the pope and bishops were situating their decisions within the **living tradition** of the Church. Ecumenical Councils are a vital aspect of the Church’s living tradition. Recall, the Church is **not a museum**, but a living Body of Christ. As Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation taught: “Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.” (*Dei Verbum*, no. 9) Through Tradition, “the Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes.” (*DV* no. 8 §1) These councils are magnificent examples of how the Holy Spirit guides the Church through all the ages.

- Understandably, last Sunday’s **attendance** was affected by the bitter cold. Thus, I repeat my words of gratitude to all Cathedral parishioners who have generously supported the **Catholic Services Appeal**. The CSA supports vital outreach beyond our parish. On Follow-up weekend, **envelopes and pledge cards** are readily available on the tables by all the four main piers. Please use the four drop boxes to deposit your pledge. Remember, our Cathedral parish receives **50% of every dollar** collected in excess of our **\$72,000 goal**.
- Must be the red wine! A French nun fought off Covid-19 and recovered at the Sainte-Catherine Laboure care home where she lives. Oh, did I mention that **Sr. André** just turned **117 years-old**? She is believed to be the **second-oldest** living person in the world. The local bishop celebrated Mass for her birthday party. And while they did not have 117 candles— she did have a sip of **red wine** and Baked Alaska, her favorite dessert!
- It isn’t easy keeping a **100-year-old boiler** in working order. Our maintenance staff has done an amazing job, keeping us safe and warm. I ask for your help this week to **defray the costs** of February, a particularly brutal month! Envelopes are on the tables by the piers.
- Former New England Patriots Super Bowl champion TE **Benjamin Watson** has produced a documentary that aims to generate understanding about the abortion debate. Entitled “Divided Hearts of America,” the staunch **pro-life advocate** engages in discussion across the spectrum in hopes of finding a path forward.

Sincerely in Christ,

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Rector