

“THE CHICKEN OR THE EGG?”: UNIVERSAL VS. PARTICULAR CHURCH

The Church in Germany is embroiled in “The Synodal Way,” a multi-year effort to engage laity in the future of the Church. Lost in the discussion is the degree to which the rancor may be due to the **unique** relationship between Church and state in Germany. Government funds (i.e. taxes) significantly support religious bodies, be they Catholic, Protestant or Jewish. The origin stems from **historical payments** known as “dotations” (i.e. endowments) made to compensate for valuable farmlands and properties confiscated over the centuries, whether during the Reformation or **Napoleonic** times. The Archdiocese of Munich alone received **\$665 million** in 2020? Dependence on these funds may factor into these proposals, as the Church is **pressured** to **conform** to modern sensibilities. Bishop Georg Bätzing of Limburg defends calling for broad reforms of Church doctrine, insisting that no departure from Catholicism is intended. Rather, “we want to be Catholic in a different way.” My translation– “we want Catholicism on **our** terms.”

During the German bishops recent *ad Limina* visit, Cardinal Ladaria of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith summed up the Synodal Way agenda in **blunt** terms: “abolition of compulsory celibacy, ordination of *virii probati*, (i.e. older married men) access of women to the ordained ministry, moral re-evaluation of homosexuality, structural and functional limitation of hierarchical power, reflections on sexuality inspired by gender theory, major proposed amendments to the Catechism of the Catholic Church.” **Hamburg**, we have a problem! The German “Synodal Way” should in **no way, shape or form** be confused with the Synod in this Archdiocese. Our process is fully in communion with the vision of the universal church for diocesan synods, as outlined in Canon Law. Any plans about Archdiocesan priorities are totally **in line** with magisterial teaching and church law, as we seek to form missionary disciples for a future filled with hope.

At the core of my frustration with the Germans is the relationship between the “universal” and “particular” church. The word universal is **not** to be construed as referring solely to the pope and curia, but rather the **entire college** of bishops in communion with the pope. The word particular refers to an individual diocese. In Vatican II’s **Dogmatic Constitution on the Church**, the bishop receives his office of government (*munus regendi*) directly from Christ through the sacrament of ordination (*Lumen Gentium*, 21). It is equally true that no local bishop exercises governance of a particular diocese unless he is **duly appointed** by canonical mission and remains in hierarchical communion with the college of bishops and its head, the bishop of Rome (cf. LG, 24). The bishop’s powers of teaching and government “can be exercised only with the consent of the Roman pontiff” (LG, 22). This is a **core principle** of Catholic ecclesiology.

Instead, Germany (and **Belgium** too!) **asserts authority** to make binding decisions at the level of their national episcopal conference. On the tension between the Vatican and the Catholic Church in Germany, I think of **Plutarch’s** (c. AD 46 - AD 120) **age-old question** “Which was first, the bird or the egg?” (*Symposiacs* Bk. II, Q. 3) Which is first, the universal or the particular church? Centuries ago, the church confronted Gallicanism, a movement originating in France in which the monarch limited the authority of the pope, asserting state power in certain areas of ecclesiastical governance. Later movements (Conciliarism) asserted the authority of a church council over that of the pope. What both shared in common is the **assertion of authority** in a body other than the Pope and the college of bishops in union with him. Theologically, we cannot conceive of a local (i.e. “particular”) Church absent a simultaneous reference to the universal Church of which the

local church is a part.

While one may speak of the Catholic Church in Germany, it is **by nature** linked and preceded ontologically by the universal church. The distinction between the “German Catholic Church” and the “Catholic Church in Germany” is deeper than **semantics**. A 1992 letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith noted that the universal Church “is **not** the result of a communion of the churches, but in its essential mystery it is a reality ontologically and **temporally prior** to every individual particular church” (no. 9, emphasis added). Vatican II taught that individual bishops “exercise their pastoral government over the portion of the People of God committed to their care, and not over other churches nor over the universal Church. But each of them, as a member of the episcopal college and legitimate successor of the apostles, is obliged by Christ’s institution and command to be solicitous for the whole Church” (LG, 23).

By **governing well** their own dioceses or jointly coordinating initiatives among dioceses of a nation, bishops effectively contribute to the welfare of the **entire** Mystical Body of Christ. Conversely, by **separating** from the **pack** so to speak, **grave harm** is done to the unity of the Church. **Vatican II** did much to **clarify** the role of the **individual** bishop. He is not a mere “branch Manager” of the “corporate” church structure, but exercises authority of **his own** from Christ, always in communion with the Pope and the others in the college of bishops. Similarly, our baptism incorporates us into the Catholic (universal) Church, not simply into our neighborhood parish or diocese. It is not easy steering a large ship and this is no time for Mutiny on the *Bounty*! As Catholics, like it or not, we’re all in this together!

- This Thursday December 8, we celebrate the **Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception**, a holyday of obligation. We will offer three Masses here: 7:00 a.m. | 12:00 Noon | 5:15 p.m. with Choir. I hope you can join us for one of these to honor our Blessed Mother.
- College football will **increase** the number of playoff teams to **12** by no later than 2026. It currently sits at **four**. While it may lessen the specter of meaningless Bowl games (an excuse to keep practicing!), it will increase the number of games the top teams play. My curmudgeonly (and naïve) question: “When will they study for finals?” When the Gophers won the National Championship in 1960, they played 10 games. Soon enough, it will be 16!
- Looking for a Christmas **stocking stuffer** for teenagers? Check out the **Bl. Carlo Acutis** comic book, just \$6.99. We were privileged to venerate his relics at the recent **Cor Jesu** Prayer gathering in November. This young Blessed (1991-2006) is a great example for youth.
- Philosophy or science? Since domesticated chickens are only **7,000** years old, don’t you think that the egg must have been first? 🐣
- **Plutarch’s** citation (cf. **§ 636a 2.3.2**) above notes: “for if we suppose that small things must be the principles of greater, it is likely that the **egg** was **before** the **bird**; for an egg amongst sensible things is very simple, and the bird is more mixed, and contains a greater variety of parts.” Your thoughts?
- Last Tuesday, I marveled as I watched the USA’s 1-0 **victory** over Iran in the **World Cup**. Though not a soccer fan, the skill level of these players amazed me; their stamina was incredible. Go U.S.A.!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,

Rector